

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY



**ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS**

**Lecture on**

**“The Alliance of Civilizations, a dialogue that delivers”**

**by**

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Your Royal Highness, Prince Turki

Your Royal Highnesses

Excellencies

Ladies and gentlemen

- Let me just start by expressing my heartfelt thanks to His Royal Highness, Prince Turki, who is kind enough to honour me with his friendship, for his most generous hospitality as well as for the invitation extended to me to address this distinguished audience.
  
- I am here in my capacity as the United Nations' High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations.
  
- As you may know, the Alliance of Civilizations is an initiative that was put forward in 2006 by Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero and Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan in the aftermath of the Madrid and London terrorist attacks at a time when the world politics was dominated by the global war on terror.
  
- This idea was then backed by the Secretary-General who appointed a High Level Group of 20 personalities to write a report with recommendations which was presented in November 2006.

- Since then this UN political initiative has progressed considerably and today it has more than a hundred members. I am pleased to say that Saudi Arabia joined the Alliance in September last year.
  
- Now what is the Alliance of Civilizations all about, you may ask.
  
- Summing up, I would say that the Alliance of Civilizations deals with “good governance of cultural diversity”, an emerging issue of political and policy agendas in our globalizing world.
  
- What do I mean by that?
  
- This means that in order to foster a culture of peace, prevent conflicts and build human security and development, we need to address cultural diversity as the fourth pillar of sustainable development.
  
- By issuing this statement, I am not at all making the case for the culturalisation of political conflicts. Indeed political problems have to be solved by political means. But it is also quite clear that some protracted political problems, although they bear on land, natural resources, such as water and oil, or occupation, invasion or security, end up very often by becoming conflicts about a fractured national consciousness and about an unsolved and ever greater complex relationship between culture, religion or ethnicity.

- For this reason, soft power has a role to play in major politically harsh conflicts because, after all, reconciliation as part of peace-building depends highly on cultural and identity issues, narratives and stories built and exchanged about conflicts, stories that influence their resolution or contribute to their perpetuation.
  
- Just take the conflict in the Balkans, apartheid in South Africa or the case of East-Timor, three different examples but all of them showing the role of cultural and public diplomacy as a soft power tool to build sustainable peace among people.
  
- Take also the 60 year-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict and see how much we should invest in soft power to influence the behaviour of the belligerent parties in order to get the desired outcome of peace.

Ladies and Gentlemen

- As you may know, the Alliance of Civilizations has three main aims:
  - a. to address widening rifts among communities and between societies, particularly the so-called West-Islam divide, by reaffirming a paradigm of mutual respect among peoples of different cultural and religious traditions;

- b. to help build bridges between societies by countering the stereotypes and misconceptions that deepen patterns of hostility and mistrust and by promoting dialogue and understanding;
  - c. to help counter the rise of extremism.
- So, by achieving these goals, the Alliance aims at contributing to develop “good governance of cultural diversity”.
  - In order to de-globalize the above mentioned goals of the Alliance and turn these general aims into local deliverables, the Alliance is developing two major tools: National Plans and Regional Strategies for Intercultural Dialogue.
  - Only National Plans for intercultural dialogue, prepared and implemented by member States in close collaboration with their civil society’s organizations at grass-roots level, will allow the introduction or strengthening of good governance practices and to develop, in due time, valid policies guaranteeing the right to diversity and a culture of peace and human rights for citizens.
  - Education, youth, migration, and media are the fields of action for these strategies.

- Let me stress that in the face of the diversity of national circumstances, such Plans cannot be devised in line with a single model. So each country should move at its own pace, according to its needs and local circumstances.
- The Alliance does not impose anything on countries. On the contrary it invites its members to take ownership of the aims and to devise its own strategy to achieve these goals.
- But, on the other hand, intercultural dialogue depends on international law and covenants, regional decisions and policies, and national legal frameworks outlining basic human, civic, economic, social and cultural rights.
- Therefore, the full use of this broad legal framework makes a difference because intercultural dialogue can only take place in an environment where a person is guaranteed safety and dignity, equality of opportunities and participation, where different views can be voiced openly without fear, where there are shared spaces for exchanges between cultures to take place.

## Ladies and Gentlemen

- All countries in the world face the challenge of good governance of cultural diversity. This is not only about integrating migrants or minorities. This is all about preparing the hearts and minds of all individuals and peoples for the fact that globalization forces us to live in a global village where we are permanently confronted with identity dilemmas and diversity issues.
- The increasing diversity of our societies – be it ethnic, linguistic, religious or cultural – is generating growing anxiety among populations, driving communities apart and putting governments under mounting pressure.
- There are many examples all around the world of our current difficulties in living together but there are also countless cases of cross-fertilization between cultures and religions, as well as success stories of people interacting in mutual respect and harmony.
- But I am deeply convinced that people have more in common with each other than divisive differences and, given the opportunity, they will explore their common interests, spark collaborations and stimulate ideas that address the major challenges of today.
- However, over the past years economic, social, cultural and religious fault-lines that divide our societies have fuelled growing tensions among

communities and have encouraged the misguided view that cultures are set on an unavoidable collision course leading to a clash of civilizations.

- It is no longer possible to ignore that to bridge divides, overcome conflicts and promote better understanding among peoples we need to engage in dialogue. To counter stereotypes and misconceptions that deepen patterns of hostility and mistrust, we need to address the sources of the tensions that help drive communities apart.
- First, tensions flare up when individuals or groups feel that their values and identity are under threat. For instance, recent waves of migration, particularly in Europe, have often led to feelings of resentment and hostility against migrants.
- Tensions also arise when the rights of minorities and their place in society are at stake. Almost all societies in the world are confronted with the challenge of balancing the rights of cultural communities and the need to maintain social cohesion.
- In times of intercultural tensions, it is important not only to uphold the rights of minorities who are often victims of harassment and discrimination. It is also crucial to make the case for migration and remind ourselves of all the benefits it brings to our societies.

- But, Ladies and Gentlemen, first and foremost, it is absolutely vital to invest in education for diversity, for cultural literacy and to massively engage in developing intercultural competences and skills not only among youth but also as a life-long learning process on how to live together.
- We need education on human rights. Education on intercultural understanding, dialogue and respect for others. Education about history and the image of the others on textbooks.
- We need youth policies based on equal opportunities. We need to engage civil society at large, youth, religious leaders and the media.
- We need education on religions and beliefs and both intra-and inter-religious dialogue.
- We cannot afford to hide the various symptoms of a looming crisis within and among almost all societies that puts at risk the fundamental values and principles of respect for human dignity, human rights and freedom, tolerance and dialogue.
- There is a sense of urgency.
- Urgency because inaction can only aggravate the malaise whereas small changes in circumstances can produce big shifts in behaviour. This is exactly what we need: to generate a mind shift among divided communities.

- We need to raise awareness among policy and decision makers for the need to invest in public policies as they relate to cultural diversity and to intercultural and inter-religious dialogue.

Your Highnesses

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

- I would like to stress how important are all initiatives aimed at bringing people together, calling for constructive dialogue and recognizing the inestimable value of diversity – diversity of peoples, of cultures and of faiths.
- So I would like to pay tribute to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, His Royal Majesty, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, for his efforts in promoting dialogue among religions.
- I must confess that I tend quite often to quote His Majesty's remarks in an interview to an Italian newspaper – La Repubblica – that “we can remove mistrust and suspicions from our minds through the principle of dialogue, one that underscores human commonalities that find their expression in all religions, beliefs and cultures”.

- In a way, this is exactly the major challenge the Alliance faces: to take appropriate action – mainly in the areas of education, youth, media and migrations - that combines diversity of cultures, religions and civilizations with the fact that we all share the most basic attributes, recognized by all the great religious traditions.
  
- This is why to prevent polarization, confrontation, conflict and intolerance and to develop a culture of peace, understanding, tolerance and respect, we need universal values grounded on the common humanity shared by every man, woman and child on earth, regardless of linguistic, racial, religious and other differences.
  
- In my view, this is also why the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights has a decisive role to play because it is clearly based on the recognition of a common humanity and provides a minimum solution to deal with its miseries.
  
- Despite its imperfections, with this Declaration we ensure more rights for everyone than before; with it, the preservation of diversity and the right of difference are better assumed; and, in this way too, the safeguard of what unites us and is common to us is further strengthened.

- This is also why I think that, as someone has put it, “many different kinds of music can be played on the Declaration’s thirty strings” and this is precisely what we are looking for in order to preserve diversity and at the same time build bridge between peoples, cultures and religions and make the world a better place to live in.
  
- So let us jointly face our current difficulties of living together and use them as a window of opportunity to open up new avenues for better understanding and strengthened cooperation. Let’s give a chance to a dialogue that delivers.

Many thanks