Highlights of the High Level Group Report

The global context

Political and technological developments during the twentieth century raised the hope and possibility for an unprecedented period of harmony between nations and a vast improvement in global well-being.

For many, this hope has been dashed by the persistence of inequalities, growing poverty, increased fear and insecurity.

Aspects of globalization have been experienced by many communities as an assault. For them, the prospect of greater well-being has come at a high price, which includes cultural homogenization, family dislocation, challenges to traditional lifestyles, and environmental degradation.

In this context, peoples who feel that they face persistent discrimination, humiliation, or marginalization are reacting by asserting their identity more aggressively.

Nowhere is this dynamic more prevalent than in relations between Western and Muslim societies.

Neither ancient history nor religious differences are responsible for present tensions between Western and Muslim populations. The root lies in the following political developments:

a. Western policies affecting Muslim countries

- The Israeli-Palestinian issue has become a key symbol of the rift between Western and Muslim societies and remains one of the gravest threats to international stability.

- Western military operations in Muslim countries contribute to a growing climate of fear and animosity that is spreading around the world. The spiralling death toll in Iraq and the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan help swell the ranks of terrorist groups.

- Moreover, the perception of double standards in the application of international law and the protection of human rights is increasing resentment and the sense of vulnerability felt by many Muslims around the globe.

b. Trends in Muslim societies

- The current predicament from which much of the Muslim world suffers cannot be attributed solely to foreign interference. An internal debate between progressive and regressive forces is playing out on a range of social and political issues throughout the Muslim world as well as on interpretations of Islamic law and traditions, generating deep divisions and, in some cases, leading to extremism and violence.

- In many cases, self-proclaimed religious figures have capitalized on a popular desire for religious guidance to advocate narrow, distorted interpretations of Islamic teachings. Such figures mis-portray certain cultural traditions, such as honor killings, corporal punishment, and suppression of women to make them appear as religious requirements.

- Resistance to reform and political repression have combined to deprive many Muslim countries of the impetus, hope, and energy needed to achieve economic and social progress.

Notwithstanding the critical state of relations between Muslim and Western societies described in the Report, the High-level Group firmly asserts that there is nothing inevitable or insurmountable in these conditions. Indeed, because the causes of current tensions are political – and not religious or cultural – they are also solvable.

Principal recommendations:

- The international community should seek a settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with a renewed sense of urgency. Progress on this front rests on the recognition of both the Palestinian and Jewish national aspirations and on the establishment of two fully sovereign and independent states co-existing side by side in peace and security.

- To support this process, the report recommends the development of a White Paper analyzing the Israeli-Palestinian landscape dispassionately and objectively, giving voice to the competing narratives on both sides, reviewing the successes and failures of previous peace efforts, and establishing clearly the conditions that must be met to find a way out of this crisis.

- The High-level Group calls for the convening, as soon as possible, of an international conference, to be attended by all the relevant actors, to reinvigorate the Middle East peace process. Without a just and dignified solution, all efforts – including recommendations contained in this report – to bridge the gap between Muslim and Western societies are likely to meet with limited success.

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- One of the contributing factors to the rise in extremism is the suppression of non-violent political movements in the Muslim world. Therefore, it is in the interest of Muslim and Western societies alike that ruling parties in the Muslim world provide the space for the full participation of peaceful political groups, whether religious or secular in nature.

- Many of the issues feeding tensions between Muslim and Western societies arise at the crossroads of politics and religion. Among them is the potentially destructive impact of inflammatory language sometimes used by political and religious leaders and the effect such language can have when amplified by the media. Therefore, the report urges leaders and shapers of public opinion to behave responsibly and do everything in their power to promote understanding among cultures and mutual respect of religious belief and traditions.

- In addition, the report recommends the appointment by the UN Secretary-General of a High Representative to assist in defusing cross cultural tensions, build bridges of understanding and create pathways toward reconciliation, especially in times of crisis.

- A Forum for the Alliance of Civilizations should be established under UN auspices to provide a regular venue for representatives of governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector to forge partnerships and to express commitments for action.

Beyond the political steps recommended in the Report, the High-level Group notes have reached into the hearts and minds of populations. To counter this, they recommend, in the fields of education, media, youth and migration a range of concrete proposals, including:

Media

- **Training in intercultural understanding for journalists**. Such training programs are aimed at widening understanding of critical issues – particularly those at the intersection of religion and politics – to encourage balanced coverage.

- **Development of media content to help promote intercultural dialogue.** Political, religious and cultural leaders should generate articles, op-eds and media statements that help defuse tensions between communities, taking advantage of heightened media interest during times of crisis.

Education

- **Critical review of educational materials**. Government and religious leaders should work together to establish review panels to ensure that education materials meet guidelines for fairness, accuracy and balance in discussing religious beliefs. Neither materials that denigrate other faiths, nor those accounts of the historical

past that ignore the contributions and collective achievements of other cultures and nations should remain unchallenged.

- **Media literacy**: Among the challenges of absorbing new technologies into healthy societies, few can be more important than educating citizens in media literacy. Development of media literacy programs in schools to help young minds differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources of information and become more critical about what they see and read in the global media.

Youth

- **Scaling up the number of youth exchanges.** High-level Group members urge the United States, the European Union and the Organization of the Islamic Conference to expand the number of youth exchanges under existing programs in order to increase cross-cultural understanding among young people.

- **Developing networks of youth oriented websites.** Religious leaders and civil society activists should create a network of websites that link youth to religious scholars who speak in constructive ways about the challenges facing young people today.

Migration

- **Developing media campaigns to combat discrimination.** The High-level Group urge American and European universities to expand research into the significant contributions of immigrant communities to American and European life. Such research would support media campaigns highlighting the social, cultural and economic contributions of immigrants and the benefits of cultural diversity.

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