



United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Group of Friends Annual Ministerial Meeting

New York, 1 October 2015

SUMMARY REPORT

Introduction

On 1 October 2015, United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) held its Group of Friends Annual Ministerial Meeting, the main theme of which was the sustainable development agenda and UNAOC's potential contribution to it. In addition, the event coincided with the 10th anniversary of the launch of the Alliance of Civilizations initiative. All participants were to reflect on UNAOC's achievements and the path it should follow to promote peaceful, just and inclusive societies across the globe.

United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, chaired the meeting. It was open to civil society representatives, media, UNAOC's partners and those member states and organizations that are not formal members of the Group of Friends.

Opening Session

The **United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations** opened the meeting by acknowledging the growth of international support that UNAOC has received since its establishment. To date, 118 states and 26 international organizations comprise its Group of Friends. Members play a vital role in formulating the UNAOC's strategy and its implementation from programmatic and financial perspectives. Since 2005, UNAOC has received generous financial support from the following top ten donors: Spain, Turkey, BMW Group, State of Qatar, United Kingdom, Germany, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Portugal and Sweden.

The High Representative reminded participants that UNAOC has promoted understanding between nations and communities across cultural and religious divides, an objective that is fundamental for conflict prevention and the establishment of durable peace. The recently adopted 2030 development agenda and its 17 goals are attainable when people realize that cultural and religious diversity enriches societies. In order to reach the targets defined under each of those goals, it will be necessary to reinforce dialogue across civilizations and religions. He invited all members of the international community to help strengthen the culture of peace and work towards achieving the ultimate goal of living together in harmonious, inclusive and peaceful societies.

UNAOC, with its limited financial means, has developed a strategy of promoting its mandate through a range of high impact and cost efficient projects, which promote the UNAOC's objectives and also support the sustainable development goals. Examples of such projects include:

- Summer School, which is being implemented in partnership with EF Education First and, to date, has already engaged and trained up to 500 young people from 119 countries;
- Entrepreneurs for Social Change project, led in partnership with CRT Foundation and the Government of Italy, provides mentoring and financial support to young entrepreneurs from the Euro-Mediterranean region. To date, 60 young entrepreneurs from 23 countries took part in it;
- Since 2010, Fellowship Programme, supported by Germany and a number of other partners, has brought together over 200 young civil society leaders from the MENA and North America/Europe regions, engaging them in intercultural dialogue to broaden their understanding of culturally sensitive topics;
- Through its Youth Solidarity Fund, supported most recently by Australia, Finland and Spain, UNAOC has provided seed funding to 46 outstanding youth-led initiatives that promote long-term constructive relationships between people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds in 30 countries across Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America and MENA. As of now, the work of the supported organizations impacted over 700,000 people;
- The Intercultural Innovation Award (IIA) is a partnership with the BMW Group, through which UNAOC selects innovative and sustainable projects of non-profit organizations that promote dialogue and understanding. Over 600,000 people from 88 countries around the world have benefitted from the efforts of the NGOs, which have been selected to receive the award;
- Through its media programming, UNAOC continues to provide journalists, advocates, policy-makers and the general public with a more complete and nuanced understanding of current critical topics such as migration, education and youth. UNAOC collaborates with UNESCO on enhancing media and information literacy. Through the PLURAL+ Youth Video Festival, in partnership with IOM, UNAOC supports the development and distribution of youth-produced media on the topics of migration, diversity and social inclusion;
- PEACE App, developed in partnership with UNDP and with the support of MIT, is a contest that invites developers from around the world to create apps or mobile games designed to generate new opportunities for intercultural dialogue and conflict prevention;
- UNAOC and its partners developed a media friendly glossary on migration that serves for journalists as a useful tool for covering migration-related issues;
- In December 2015, UNAOC will launch its new Hate Speech project, through which it will explore the reasons why hate speech remains a pervasive element that contributes to violent extremism and the mistreatment of migrants.

The **President of the United Nations General Assembly (70th Session)** reminded participants that, since its inception, UNAOC has become a leading United Nations platform for intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation. UNAOC has consistently promoted tolerance, respect, dialogue and cooperation among different cultures, civilizations and peoples. There are many current challenges which must be addressed, including intolerance, discrimination, xenophobia, violent extremism, disregard for human life and dignity of people, demonstrated by groups that are fuelled by hatred based on religious, sectarian and ethnic differences. These terrorists are seeking to undermine our shared humanity, cultural heritage and the very values upon which the United Nations Organization is based. Over the coming period, the President of General Assembly intends to organize a General Assembly meeting dedicated to addressing some of those challenges. He reminded the audience that sustainable development cannot be achieved without peace and no peace may take place without sustainable development. Through its core initiatives – on youth, education, media and migration – UNAOC can make a significant contribution to realizing the new sustainable development agenda. The PGA encouraged members of the UNAOC Group of Friends and the High Representative to continue crucial work for a world of peace, tolerance and sustainable development.

The 71st **President of the Economic and Social Council** recalled that the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development goes well beyond the socio-economic indicators that characterized the Millennium Development Goals. It echoes the ambition always embodied by

UNAOC, which is to work for a more socially inclusive world as a condition for global peace. UNAOC has a great deal to contribute to implementing the ambitious 17 goals, and, in particular, goals 4, 8 and 11. Most importantly, we should pay attention to goal 16 on the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, in particular, target 7 on ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative institutions and decision-making at all levels. The work carried out by UNAOC to develop contacts among leaders of communities, civil society and the youth is fully in line with this task. UNAOC will be one of the key partners in the pursuit of sustainable development for all peoples of the world.

The **Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey** thanked members of the Group of Friends for their continued support of UNAOC since 2005. It remains a most prominent peace initiative, which also directly serves the development agenda. Used effectively, UNAOC stands as a bulwark against extremism, xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. The Minister invited all members of the international community to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the United Nations, to once again give support to and further promote the ideals and goals of UNAOC, which are the goals of the UN as well. He also referred to a link between peace, security and development, and suggested that implementation of the comprehensive post-2015 development agenda will also help in furthering the principles and aims of UNAOC.

The **Vice-Minister of External Affairs of Spain** welcomed new members in the UNAOC Group of Friends. He expressed his Government's support to UNAOC and the recently adopted General Assembly resolution of 6 July 2015, which suggested that the Group should continue strengthening UNAOC as an instrument within the United Nations system. UNAOC can be expanded as a conflict prevention and mediation tool. The Vice-Minister advised on the need to implement concrete projects in order to be able to respond to the growing challenges, which the world faces today. He also expressed gratitude to the Government of Azerbaijan for hosting the 7th Global Forum of UNAOC in Baku in April 2016.

Group of Friends: Views on the UNAOC's Role, Support and Recommendations

Delegations made a series of statements that may be summarized as follows:

- The Group of Friends Annual Ministerial Meeting served as an important opportunity to take stock of progress made since launching the Alliance in 2005 and to propose practical proposals on how to scale up its capacity to achieve the core objectives. Progress has been noted in the implementation of projects and activities carried out since the beginning of the High Representative's mandate in 2013. UNAOC managed to achieve a number of its goals, consolidating its previous results, promoting the values of observance and protection of human rights, conflict prevention, reconciliation and mediation. At the same time, UNAOC's full potential is yet to be released. Several delegations reminded that activities, which UNAOC and the Group of Friends carry out within the Alliance, have to be as concrete as possible with clearly defined goals. UNAOC was also advised to further expand its presence in Africa.
- Delegations welcomed the resolution of 6 July 2015, which provides an institutional status and political impetus for UNAOC within the United Nations system. It was noted that UNAOC could grow even stronger with better governance through more proactive interaction with the Group of Friends and its Focal Points. Several speakers noted the importance of the adoption and implementation of national plans and strategies for UNAOC; the League of Arab States is finalizing a united strategy for the Alliance of Civilizations.
- Delegations have voiced their concerns about rising global threats, such as terrorism and extremism, as well as the humanitarian crisis and tragedy of migration in the Mediterranean region. Addressing of these threats requires a holistic approach from political, security, economic, social and cultural perspectives by all members of the international community. In

this context, UNAOC could serve as an important forum for bringing together intercultural and religious actors in order to define concrete and urgent actions to confront regional challenges, combat intolerance and extremism, and uphold the values of mutual understanding. One of the delegations suggested that it is timely for the Alliance to send out strong messages, expressing its solidarity with all people who suffer from acts of terrorism, as well as its determination to stand against intolerance and violent extremism.

- A few delegations commented on the role of UNAOC as a necessary forum for states and civil society partners, young people, regional and international organizations to speak and exchange views freely, discuss best practices and forge cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence. The important role of religious leaders and parliamentarians in the work of UNAOC was raised. A number of international organizations reiterated their commitment to continue collaboration with UNAOC on projects or policy and advocacy initiatives (e.g., EU, IPU, LAS, PAM, OIC, OSCE, UNESCO, along with many others).
- Participants recognized an existing linkage between development and UNAOC. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development creates a great opportunity for UNAOC to continue promoting peaceful, just and inclusive societies, contributing to a more prosperous, equitable and sustainable future for people around the world. Several goals and targets of this agenda provide platforms for action under the UNAOC's umbrella. One of the delegations proposed that in order to contribute to achieving the 2030 Agenda, a progressive and universal strategy could be adopted to ensure that a culture of peace takes root in people's minds. Another delegation suggested that UNAOC can assist in reinforcing the recognition of the universality of human rights, promote good governance and rule of law that constitute a model of society that is a conducive environment for sustainable development.
- It would be important for UNAOC to continue paying an appropriate attention to its four priority areas (youth, media, education and particularly migration, given the current global challenges), which are crucial to promote and enable understanding of religious and cultural diversity, prevent conflict, foster tolerance and reconciliation. An increased role for UNAOC in mediation processes could make a positive difference in many conflicts where culture or religion comes to play.
- Delegations noted the upcoming 7th Global Forum in Baku, to be hosted by the Government of Azerbaijan on 25-27 April 2016. Proposals for convening side-events on themes relevant to UNAOC and its future work are being submitted to the Organizing Committee for consideration. Several delegations expressed an expectation that the Baku Forum will be an occasion to launch new additional projects and activities, reinforce cooperation with parliaments and religious leaders.
- A series of initiatives or new projects, related to UNAOC's area of work, are being led by the members of the Group of Friends, including, but not limited to, an annual celebration of the International Day of Tolerance on November 16; the establishment of a Regional Centre against Violent Extremism in Tirana, Albania; UNESCO's 9th Youth Forum on Youth Global Citizens for Sustainable Planet in Paris, France; an international conference on Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East, in Athens, Greece; an annual interfaith conference in Doha, Qatar; the hosting of a group of UNAOC fellows in October-November in the MENA region; a special session of PAM's 10th General Assembly in Tirana, Albania; and an international symposium on Interfaith Dialogue, Culture and Art in Bangkok, Thailand. In addition, joint initiatives with UNAOC are being explored, for example, on youth and counter-radicalization in the Mediterranean region with the objective of challenging the extremist narrative by offering alternative narratives and identity-building.

Closing Session

The **Secretary-General of the United Nations** seconded all previous speakers in recognizing an alignment of the new sustainable agenda with the mission statement of UNAOC that aims to build mutual respect among peoples towards a more peaceful, more socially inclusive world. He reminded everyone that we currently live in a time of unprecedented displacement, characterized by the humanitarian disaster in Syria. He applauded the solidarity of people in neighbouring countries – especially Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan – who have sheltered Syrians forced to flee their homes, and praised examples of humanity and signs of compassion in Europe, the destination of many refugees. In parallel to this, the world witnesses growing xenophobia on the part of too many groups and even leaders, disturbing divisions among communities and leaders, who are abandoning their responsibility. In this tense atmosphere, according to the Secretary-General, the mission of UNAOC is increasingly important.

The Secretary-General welcomed the focus of UNAOC on young people, who often are being deceived by violent extremism and, therefore, need help. At the same time, millions of youth are looking for a higher purpose, as they want to build peace and promote understanding, not intolerance. He referred to the recently adopted Amman Declaration, which focuses on youth and how they can respond to violent extremism. He acknowledged the key role that UNAOC plays in the United Nations Inter-Agency Network for Youth and Development, and its staff's contribution to the Guiding Principles for Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding. The Secretary-General recalled UNAOC projects for young people, namely the Summer School, the Youth Solidarity Fund and Entrepreneurs for Social Change, asking the High Representative and all of the members of the Group of Friends to intensify this effort.

The **Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan** reiterated his Government's support and attention paid to the issue of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, noting his country's location between the East and the West. Azerbaijan has already hosted a series of international events promoting intercultural and interfaith dialogue including the series of World Forums on Intercultural Dialogue (the Baku Process). Following the Minister's remarks, the **Head of the International Organizations Department of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan**, who is also a Secretary of the Organizing Committee of the 7th Global Forum of UNAOC in Baku, conveyed a message of a warm welcome to Azerbaijan. A short video about the host country, its capacity and established traditions to host large international events, was shown to the participants.

In the conclusion, the **United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations** thanked everyone for attendance and active participation in the meeting. He reiterated the value and importance of the Group of Friends members' insight, inputs and recommendations that improve UNAOC's programmes and activities. The High Representative appreciated a strong commitment of the membership to support UNAOC, promote the ideas of tolerance, respect and diversity in line with targets of the sustainable development agenda.

Annex 1: List of Speakers

(Reflecting the order of taking the floor)

United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations
President of the United Nations General Assembly (70th Session)
71st President of ECOSOC
Turkey
Spain
Albania
Finland
Bosnia and Herzegovina
Sweden
Hungary
Belarus
Egypt
Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)
Brazil
Parliamentary Assembly for the Mediterranean (PAM)
Qatar
Thailand
League of Arab States (LAS)
Kazakhstan
European Union (EU)
Lithuania
Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)
Estonia
Romania
France
Angola
Paraguay
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
Greece
Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC)
Republic of Korea
Russian Federation
Benin
Morocco
Malaysia
Pakistan
United Nations Secretary-General
Azerbaijan