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ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

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Address to the Conference on
"Education for Intercultural Understanding and Dialogue"

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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- First of all, let me express my deep appreciation to the Danish Government for hosting this timely conference on “Education for Intercultural Dialogue and Understanding”.
- Secondly, I want to extend my warm thanks to the co-sponsors for having involved the Alliance of Civilizations in the preparation of this initiative even if we were not part of the process inaugurated in Rabat three years ago.
- May I take this opportunity to stress that this Conference is the perfect example of the kind of constructive multi-stakeholder partnership and cooperation that the Alliance is seeking to promote and facilitate? Thanks for showing the way forward!

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- It is a great pleasure to be here today. Not only because I see so many friends that this is something of a reunion, but also because we will address the topic of Education for Intercultural Dialogue and Understanding.
- Education is about a basic human right and is part of what the mass of people want in every country on earth – life in dignity. Dignity in their ability to give a meaningful opportunity for their children, dignity in the respect that others give them, including their cultures and their religions.
- Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is quite clear in this regard – “Everyone has the right to education” (n.º1) and “Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups” (n.º2).
- This is what the present Conference is all about. I am more than happy to learn that the outcome of its three working sessions will be set out in one single document.

- I can assure you that I will do my best to put it high on the Alliance's Agenda and that we will use it as a Road Map on Education for the National Strategies for Intercultural Dialogue that Governments have been asked to design and implement at domestic level.
- Let's say that this is my commitment and the Alliance's future task.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- We all know what Education for Intercultural Dialogue and Understanding means. We all know what is at stake and the kind of the challenges we are facing.
- Take the "Danish cartoons case", take the "Fitna Film", and now "The Jewel of the Medina". But you may recall similar controversial cases, such as Godard's "Je vous salue Marie" (Hail Mary) in the eighties or, more recently, Mel Gibson's "The passion of the Christ", just to give you a few examples.
- I do not want to focus either on the serious incidents that some of these affairs have provoked all around the world or on the animated but polarized debates that followed.
- What I want to stress here are three things.

- Firstly, the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and the right to freedom of religion or belief are two fundamental, universal and indivisible rights. They can only be fully enjoyed in an environment that guarantees freedom and pluralism.
- Therefore, respect for cultural, religious, ethnic and social diversity has to be developed if we want to live together among different communities. Only a sound human rights education can promote responsible behavior and thus avoid practices - such as stereotyping and insulting ethnic, social or religious groups - that cause social unrest and have serious damaging consequences for social cohesion.
- Now the question one may ask is – Aren't these two freedoms rival rights?
- Let's face it: though indivisible, to a certain extent these rights are competing. It is because they are rather competing, that we need to find a balance to turn them into complementary rights.
- However, I do not think that this balance can be set invariably for all places and situations in the same way as I do not think that the problem will be solved by introducing greater repressive legislation. This is my second point.
- My third point is twofold.

- On the one hand, freedom of expression is a universal human right but it cannot be defined in universal terms.
- Moreover, freedom of expression is not absolute. International human rights law affirms several limitations on exercising it. For instance, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights draw a clear limit on it setting out that “any advocacy of religious hatred which constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law”.
- These limitations are set to protect individuals in order to guarantee that every person will have all his or her human rights protected.
- On the other hand, there is the tricky question of where to draw the boundaries between the right to freedom of expression and advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence.
- In my view, to identify at which point exactly these thresholds are reached we need to take a contextual approach with due regard to local conditions, history, culture and political tensions. This is a fundamental point.
- Now an additional problem concerns the use of new communication technologies and the role of the media. As we all know, they can be used either to exacerbate tensions and to globalize local conflicts, or to promote tolerance and diffuse tensions.

- This is why it is so important to promote voluntary development of self-regulatory mechanism in media such as press-councils, professional ethical associations and media ombudspersons.
- This is also why I think that Internet governance and human rights is one of the themes that should be brought into the International agenda in the near future.

Excellencies,

- Balancing the right to freedom of expression and the right to freedom of religion is a central value for promoting peaceful coexistence in today's multicultural societies
- To achieve this goal, the only secure path is: education. Education for human rights. Education for citizenship and respect for others. Education for Intercultural Understanding and Dialogue. Education on Media Literacy. Education about religions and beliefs and both intra- and inter-religious dialogue.
- All these are indispensable strategies if we want to make the world a better and safer place to live together as equals in dignity.

Many thanks and good work