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ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

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THE ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

LISBON FORUM 2012 – “The Arab Season: from change to challenges”

Opening

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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to the 2013 Lisbon Forum, an event co-organized by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe.
- This Forum is part of our Regional Strategy for the Mediterranean. This year as in 2012, it will be focused on the major ongoing transformations occurring in a number of Arab countries with three aims: to take stock of the major changes that occurred over the past year; to gain a better understanding of the challenges, unresolved issues and dilemmas that these societies are facing; to hold an informed debate on the possible policy options for enhancing dialogue and cooperation in the Mediterranean, taking into consideration the current situation in the region but also the international context.
- As a platform for inclusive dialogue aimed at contributing to reinforce trust and understanding among peoples with different cultural backgrounds, the UN Alliance of Civilizations' particular focus is on improving relations within and among the so-called "Western" and Muslim societies and on addressing persistent tensions and divides.
- To achieve these goals, the Alliance develops a three-pronged approach in its four main fields of action - education, youth, media and migration – with a view to "breaking down walls", "building bridges" and "sharing spaces". Therefore, deconstructing prejudices and stereotypes, correcting misjudgments and countering ignorance-based fears and intolerance are key operational principles of the Alliance.
- Against this backdrop, I am proud of this annual collaboration with the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe.
- By the way, let me share with you a thought that came to my mind yesterday on my way back from Shanghai where the Alliance held regional consultations for Asia-South Pacific – as the Alliance's membership has grown and definitely gone global, there is a rising need to consolidate its regional footing in order to increase its capacity to deliver on the ground. This means that further to its Global Forums, holding regional consultations on a regular – probably annual – basis might be the way forward in the future while making the Global Forums biennial.
- In this context, in future the Lisbon Forum could be reshaped and also become the venue for our regional consultations for the Mediterranean. But this is indeed just a thought that the next High Representative for the Alliance may want to explore further with the North-South Centre and the Council of Europe.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- It is well known that uncertainty generates fears and that both grow when major changes occur, bringing turbulence and instability into societies. Of course this uncertainty affects first and foremost domestic publics, but it also impacts neighbors and people right across the world because societies are more interdependent than at any other time in history.
- Today's transformations in the Arab world are no exception to this human condition.
- At a time when there are such great expectations but also so many perplexities with respect to the ongoing changes in North Africa and the Middle East, it is more necessary than ever to reinforce dialogue between the two shores of the Mediterranean, to develop further exchanges at all levels of society and to create new opportunities for cooperation.
- Only dialogue, exchange of experiences and a nuanced, multi-perspective analysis of worldviews will allow for a better understanding of what has happened and is happening in the Arab world in the variety and complexity of the ongoing transformations.
- The point really is to comprehend better what is going on and therefore confront ignorance, thus preventing oversimplifications, misunderstandings and religion-related biased views from building new walls around the Mediterranean as well preventing wide old divides.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- Let me share with you a few observations on the so-called "Arab Spring" as I see it from the UN Alliance of Civilizations perspective.
- First, the major ongoing changes are complex and embrace various dimensions in a geo-strategic context that impacts on domestic processes. What is at stake is not only a process of democratization, but also a whole range of transformations – social, economic, religious and cultural – that are unfolding.
- Therefore, in these countries, transitions to democracy are at the core of a wider process of change, full of contradictions, competing demands and expectations, reflecting and at the same time shaping it.
- As these democratizations are not independent of a broader "process of finding an identity, developing a sense of belonging and indeed building a state" (Cesare Merlini and Olivier Roy), instability and uncertainty over the outcome of these transformations are more than natural.

- Second, regarding the political process, in my view, the point is to institutionalize the democratization process so that a smooth transition to a more open political system can take place. The real issue is not necessarily the secularization of the public space, as western commentators sometimes seem to stress but rather the institutionalization of democracy.
- Third, I don't think that there is a one-size-fits-all solution for every society, or a ready-made result for each protest movement that has shaken most of the North African countries. However, these uprisings are not isolated phenomena and some common trends seem to emerge and to shape these changing societies.
- Among these trends, I would like to focus on the centrality of Islam, as my fourth point.
- On the one hand, it is important to stress, as Olivier Roy does in a recent article, that the Arab Spring took place outside the debate on Islam. The protest movements did not express a "conflict between liberal secularist and conservative Islamists; neither Islamism nor Secularism was on the demonstrators' agenda".
- On the other hand, it is essential to underscore that after the Arab Spring the Islamists are part of the game. "They find themselves in a pluralist political scene and accept this pluralism. They accept elections. They accept the concept of a constitution drafted by an elected body instead of, say, chanting "the Koran is our constitution". But they cannot give up the idea that Islam should have some centrality. They cannot become secularists. If they become secular they will disappear. So the issue for them is to recast the centrality of Islam into a more democratic, open and realistic political space".
- "That said, - concludes Olivier Roy - there is no agreement over what is and is not negotiable beyond the centrality of Islam".
- Furthermore, two additional points should be stressed: on the one hand, the situation varies indeed from country to country and it is not the same for instance in Egypt or in Tunisia; on the other hand, it is crystal clear that a struggle for political and religious authority is taking place in these societies with deep divisions among Sunnis – traditionalists, secularists, reformers, Sufi mystics – and also between Sunnis and Shiites.
- However, it seems to me that Olivier Roy is right when he points out that "there is a consensus, even among many non-believers, that Islam is part and parcel of society, culture, and political life. But this centrality is expressed more in terms of identity than of sharia. (...) The Islamists want to reconnect Islam to a concrete society and to reconcile it with patriotism. Islam is the national identity in the same way that Catholicism was, until recently, the national identity in Italy, for instance. And precisely because it is a matter of identity, it remains quite vague and symbolic. It is a reference, not a legal system".

- So the main issue here is religiosity – it is not that “religious reformation is a prerequisite to democracy, nor is it about theology”. The topical questions are about the role religion plays in people’s life, how it shapes behavior and values, how people experience their faith and their relationship to religion.
- It seems that in this field of religiosity also there is an important ongoing transformation towards a process of individualization of faith and diversification of the religious field. The interesting point is that this individualization of faith also means “the possibility to choose, change and adapt as well as potentially more acceptance of other choices”.
- This new emerging view on religion as the expression of an individual human rights rather than a collective right of a community brings to the table very challenging questions such as that of apostasy, conversion and, in particular in Egypt, the question of the religious minorities.
- But this individualization also “provides the common ground between religious transformation and a quest for democracy, even if, by definition, the political parties that represent a religious constituency may clash in a parliamentary setting with more secular parties”.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- I decided to focus my introductory remarks on the centrality of Islam in the Arab Spring because a key issue in relations between the so-called “West” and the “Mena region” is religion, either defined as a faith or reduced to a culture – as Olivier Roy, the author I decided to follow here today, puts it.
- However, there are many other very important issues that will be discussed over these two days, namely the ongoing reforms of the political systems, judiciary, local self-government and indeed the Constitutional reforms; freedom of expression, countering hate speech and discrimination and the role of new IT and social media; and the centrality of women’s rights.
- I look forward to being briefed about the outcomes of the various working sessions as well as to hearing concrete proposals for joint actions.
- As I draw to a close, let me stress again the key role of dialogue and cooperation to bring closer peoples around the Mediterranean at a time of big challenges for all of us.
- The “Arab Season” initiated in December 2010 opens up an unprecedented opportunity for our entire region and offers a major and widely under-exploited potential to achieve a turning point in our history. Imparting a fresh boost to the closer integration of our region from a political, social, cultural and

economic point of view is an ambition to which globalization and shifting powers give no alternative but achievement.

- It is a shame for our region that we cannot stop Syria's bloody and destructive civil war that grows more violent and divisive by the day. This conflict is alarming in various ways: because of rising retaliatory violence, sectarian killings and creeping fundamentalism within the Syrian society; because it is sustained and influenced by outside parties and a variety of groups; but also because of its capacity to ignite tensions in neighboring countries and to change the balance of power in the whole Euro-Mediterranean region.
- Furthermore, the protracted conflict between Israel and Palestine resembles an entrenched, pervasive deadlock with no other tangible result than an ingrained hatred of any compromise for a solution.
- The two-state solution is in real danger now that new illegal settlements were announced that risk completely cutting off East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank .
- It is a shame for our entire region that we cannot put our act together to have these plans rescinded and lead the parties involved to resume negotiations and intensify efforts towards a comprehensive, just and lasting peace and urges the parties to refrain from provocative actions.
- After the historical decision by the General Assembly to accord Palestine Non-member Observer State status in the United Nations, the next step should be to give new impetus to our collective efforts to the resumption of meaningful negotiations in order to realize the legitimate right of Palestinians to their own independent, sovereign, democratic, contiguous and viable State of Palestine that lives side by side with a secure State of Israel.
- This goal too, should be part of the Mediterranean Spring.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- I thank you all for making time to be here and for your attention.
- I wish you good work.
- Many thanks.