



United Nations Alliance of Civilizations



Benghazi, Cairo, Tunis, Sanna'a and beyond: a wake-up call for bold action

by Jorge Sampaio, UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations

The Alliance of Civilizations is a unique initiative within the UN system. Its primary mission is to forge collective political will and to mobilize concerted action at institutional and civil society levels, aimed at improving understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures and religions and, in the process, helping to counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism. The Alliance's particular focus is on improving relations within and among Western and Muslim societies and on addressing persistent tensions and divides.

Because of its mission statement and objectives, the recent deadly tragic events in Benghazi, but also incidents in Cairo, Sanna'a, Tunis - and they are spreading - matter to the Alliance in various ways.

Indeed this range of incidents may be different in nature with the killings in Benghazi likely to constitute a vicious terrorist attack. But this is a matter for criminal investigation and prosecution as the Libyan authorities promptly pointed out.

Terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, committed by whomever, wherever and for whatever purposes, should be strongly and unequivocally condemned as it constitutes one of the most serious threats to peace and security. In response to the impact of international terrorism upon peace and security, all countries should take additional steps to adopt and fully implement the universal anti-terrorism conventions and protocols. In this regard the only point that I would like to stress is that, as far as possible, international action should focus on the development and implementation of forward-looking strategies rather than only being responsive to or reflective of individual acts or series of terrorists attacks. But we all know that there is still a long way to go in this complex area, which is well beyond the field of action of the Alliance of Civilizations.

Looking now at the string of countries where these protests broke out – Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Tunisia, four countries whose peoples fought for freedom and democracy and which are now undergoing profound political and social transformations -, I would like to make a twofold point. On the one hand, extremism remains a threat to all democracies, in particular religious extremism used for political ends. Much more joint efforts have to be done to address it at international, national and local level. On the other hand, what strikes me is that no high level political dialogue within the Euro-Mediterranean framework – a Euro-Med Summit or Ministerial meeting – was held since the democratic changes started in region. No initiative was taken so far to create a permanent international forum of political dialogue and cooperation to support democratization in the MENA region.

As an open process, full of challenges, uncertainties and crossroads, democratization and democracy are also a learning process that relies upon dialogue and consensus building and require skills and competences, namely in the areas of dispute management, mediation and conflict resolution. Exchanges and cooperation on all levels are always useful for better delivery on the ground but, first and foremost, they help to build trust and confidence among the community of international leaders and decision-makers as well as to develop closer ties and better understanding between peoples.

As increasing interdependence and growing diversity are shaping today's world in which, paradoxically, power is diffusing and politics diversifying, far more dialogue and cooperation are needed to forge a new pluralistic order – one that preserves stability and a rules-based international system amid increasing diversity of cultures, ideologies and worldviews.

These recent events remind us of the political challenges ahead that all countries are faced with in order to tolerate political and ideological diversity, to strike the right balance between global governance and local distribution of power as well as shared responsibility in order to effectively tackle many of today's challenges. They also show that, ultimately, the question the global community has to face is how to build a new and more just global order made up of pluralist, inclusive and tolerant societies that respect each other and cooperate across divides, divergence and dissent.

In this regard I dare to think that in the end the UN Alliance of Civilizations is an appropriate platform to host this kind of co-partnership and enhanced dialogue. A partnership developed in close connection with other UN agencies which would pave the way for working further with new ruling governments, new parliaments and public administration, with emerging civil society, youth, media and religious leaders on National Plans and Regional Strategies for intercultural dialogue, human rights, democracy, pluralism, tolerance and peace. In any case, I think the recent events show the need for bold UN action to further engage all parties and partners in dialogue and cooperation.

Last but not least, I would like to focus on these events from the perspective of fighting religious intolerance and religious hatred that constitute incitement to hostility and violence.

Allegedly, these violent protests were triggered by a provocative film trailer uploaded to YouTube that denigrates Islam and insults the Prophet Muhammad, thus offending the religious feelings of believers. There are many troubling questions about the production and the use of this video that should be fully investigated. But further to this, a number of general questions arise.

Firstly, the urgent question of further opposing intolerance or advocacy of religious hatred.

Since 9/11 incitement to religious hatred has increased in significance with Muslims being the targets of general blame. Another dimension of this change has been the escalation of religious intolerance by non-State entities and the corresponding role of the State in combating intolerance. Greater emphasis has to be placed on addressing this global challenge, namely by developing a better understanding of the emerging trends in religious intolerance, the impact of the use of social media to this end and the positive obligations of States to protect rights and freedoms by appropriate means.

It seems to me that there is a need to increase appropriate preventive measures and mechanisms at local, national and international levels to address religious intolerance and combat incitement to religious hatred, denigration of religions and religious symbols.

At the level of the foundational instruments within the UN system, both the Human Rights Committee and the Special Rapporteurs have been reminding States of the need to oppose intolerance and advocacy of religious hatred. It is well known that the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (the ICCPR) clearly identifies hate speech as the limit to which all forms of religious expression are subject. Namely its article 20 imposes a restriction on all activities amounting to the “advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence”. But it is also known that the key notion of “respect” for the beliefs and religions of others remains challenging. Thus my suggestion is to promote further UN joint reflection to examine what can be done in the present situation in order to strike a new balance between freedom of expression, non discrimination and hate speech.

Mass media and social media is another key area that has to be addressed to prevent incitement to violence and intolerance. Needless to remind that episodes and incidents involving a cultural and religious dimension that have a widespread impact leading to outright violence have multiplied in recent decades. The very complexity of the issues raised by these crises and the fact that they reflect tensions at the intersection of culture, religion and politics, means that it is sometimes difficult, within the UN system, to identify what course of action should be chosen to address them effectively.

The UNAOC has developed a rapid response media mechanism to address this kind of crisis. But this mechanism should be further expanded in order to include an early response and crisis management tools. It should reinforce its dimension of early warning both in terms of early detection of signs that a crisis is brewing and of real-time analysis about them (risk assessment). But it should also comprise an early response dimension i.e. initiatives by honest brokers to defuse tensions (preventive action) as well as crisis management once disruptive actions and unrest occur that need to be addressed by means of soft power tools through facilitation of dialogue and mediation. An informed debate on this issue in order to explore ways for the Alliance to engage in this field bringing added value to the existing mechanisms by complementing or reinforcing them should be launched in a near future.

Secondly, much greater effort has to be made in terms of long-term strategy for education and awareness building. This involves a variety of topics such as: media literacy – how to develop people’s critical abilities when it comes to information provided by media and social media; education for human rights, pluralism and tolerance; cultural literacy – how to acquire intercultural skills and competences to live at ease in a landscape of differences and diversity; dispute management.

To counter abuse of free speech to offend the religion and religious beliefs and symbols of others in a sustainable way, more long term, strategic action is needed in the field of formal, informal and non formal education for a culture of tolerance and peace at all levels, based on respect for human rights and diversity of religious and beliefs. Education for responsible citizenship is also necessary to speak out against intolerance and protest against abuse of free speech without being trapped in the cycle of violence.

As Kairat El-Shater reminds in the statement issued by the Muslim Brotherhood, “in the new democratic Egypt, people have the right to voice their anger over productions like the anti-Muslim film that led to the current violence. However, they should do so peacefully and within the bounds of the law”. The Ennahdha Party in Tunisia issued a similar statement recognizing that in democracy, people are free to protest but in a peacefully way.

For me the way forward is clear: more action is needed to foster a domestic environment of religious tolerance, peace and respect. Furthermore, it is crystal clear that we need to increase international efforts to enhance a global dialogue for the promotion of a culture of respect for others, with tolerance and peace at all levels. As we are living in globalizing times, we are all citizens of the world. A higher sense of responsible citizenship and responsible leadership has to be promoted because a conflict anywhere is a conflict everywhere, as these events clearly show.

At the coming ministerial meeting of the Group of Friends of the Alliance, to be held on 28 September, I will be proposing a set of concrete proposals to Ministers, and a special working meeting (Focal Points’ level) is convened on 18 October to discuss additional action in the euro-Mediterranean region. Furthermore, I will be consulting our civil society networks and youth in order to agree on how to enhance dialogue and cooperation on the ground.

A few days ago, the UNAOC in cooperation with the Maltese Government, the League of Arab States, the North South Center of the Council of Europe and the University of Malta, with the support of Brazil, organized the first regional SUMMER SCHOOL focused on “Building Peace in the Mediterranean”. It brought together young lawyers, journalists, political activists and IT pros who gathered to act towards peace-building. Against the current backdrop of anger, distrust, and intolerance, they are now calling for positive action and sustainable dialogue on human rights as a way of life, in a human dignity-based approach. Every individual has the human right to live in security, justice, equality, and dignity and without being discriminated or humiliated in their local and global communities.

In spite of the challenging and complex times we are going through, grass-roots, bottom-up initiatives like this one, focused on reinforcing the sense of our common humanity make me thinking that there is definitely hope for a better common future. But as the wake-up call resonating from Benghazi to Cairo, Tunis, Sana’a and elsewhere clearly shows to transform hope into achievements, bold action in urgently needed.