

CHECK AGAINST DELIVER



ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

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ADDRESS

to the VI Ministerial Conference of the Community of Democracies

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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- I feel honoured and privileged to be addressing the VI Ministerial Conference of the Community of Democracies and would like warmly to thank our hosts, Her Excellency President Dalia Grybauskaitė and Minister Azubalis, for their most kind invitation.

- Allow me also to greet Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Baroness Catherine Ashton, as well as all distinguished participants.

Excellencies,

- Democracy is what brings us together today.

- The ongoing four-wave transition of democratization clearly shows that democracy stands for what human beings most value: their absolute right to dignity.

- Human dignity is related to human agency, the ability of individuals to choose their own actions as well as aspiring to being treated with respect and enjoying a decent life. It lies at the very core of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is the most basic reason for promoting rights, development and peacemaking.
- Furthermore, human dignity encompasses social, economic and cultural conditions that enable political self-determination.
- Political self-determination is a process such as the one in which the citizens for instance of Tunisia and Egypt are engaged and such as other peoples in the Arab world are firmly striving for.
- The idea of democracy as a universal commitment was a preeminent product of the twentieth century. Let us hope that it will become the main achievement of our twenty-first century.

Excellencies,

- The centrality of free public discussion and deliberative interactive processes through which democracy functions and on which its success depends is clearly underlined by the great Indian Harvard Professor Amartya Sen. He calls it “public reasoning” and uses it as a powerful argument to broaden the view of democracy far beyond the indispensable freedom of elections and ballots.

- Within this broadened view, democracy unveils a plurality of virtues including, for instance, “the intrinsic importance of political participation and freedom in human life; the instrumental importance of political incentives in keeping governments responsible and accountable; and the constructive role of democracy in the formation of values and in the understanding of needs, rights and duties”.
- From this wide framework, the role to be played by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) in helping build democratic societies and/or contributing to strengthen older democracies becomes crystal clear.

Excellencies,

- Most of the States here represented belong to the Group of Friends of the Alliance, a growing community of more than 125 members that are part of one of the biggest UN global platform for intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation, connecting governments, law makers, local authorities, organizations from civil society, the media and individuals devoted to promote trust and understanding between diverse communities and, in the process, to mitigate tensions and conflicts and counter the forces that fuel exclusion, polarization and extremism.

- As you know, the UNAOC combines both a universal scope – shown by its inclusive and global perspective focused on promoting “democratic governance of cultural diversity” at large – and a specific priority mission aimed at bridging relations between Muslim and Western societies, where events of the past decade have heightened the sense of a widening gap and lack of mutual understanding.

- Because of its focus on good governance of cultural diversity, the UNAOC seeks to develop as a new potential soft-power tool at a time when cultural diversity is challenging our democracies and has become an issue of security, stability and sustainable peace.

- This is why members State of the Alliance have been invited to develop their own National Plans for Intercultural Dialogue and Cooperation and to engage in Regional Strategies. Both are policy tools covering education, youth, media and migration fields of action aimed at promoting good governance of cultural diversity taking into account local, regional and national needs and concerns.

- To give you two examples: in December 2009, a Regional Strategy for South-Eastern Europe was adopted in a regional Conference in Sarajevo and in November 2010 a Regional Strategy for the Mediterranean was endorsed in Malta. Both Action Plans are now about to be implemented through a close cooperation between governments and actors from civil society.

- As we all know, in our globalizing times all societies are confronted with a number of common threats. Further to economic, social and environmental challenges, our ever increasing multicultural societies face the problem of how to recognize or respect the particular cultural identities of citizens on the basis of equality and universality of human rights.

- In my view, the challenge of democratic governance of cultural diversity, as I like to formulate it, is endemic to liberal democracies because they are committed to equal representation of all.

- This is the first point I wanted to make here to stress the unique role of the UNAOC with regard not only to democratic transitions but also to older democracies, both confronted with the challenge of devising a new intercultural citizenship.

- My second point concerns the role of intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for building consensus to enhance cohesion within societies and prevent conflicts within and among societies. This is at the core of the UNAOC approach.

- Because of its promotion of dialogue, respect and tolerance, the UNAOC has a relevant part to play in capacity building, defusing tensions and managing conflicts.

- Let us not forget that the great majority of conflicts today has a cultural dimension and is constructed along ethnic and social fault-lines. Most conflict-prone and post-conflict societies face serious challenges because states are unable to protect, care for and empower their citizens and fail to provide for their survival, livelihood and dignity.

- But peace-building and the prevention of tensions and conflicts require more than ensuring physical security and providing for basic needs, such as jobs and poverty alleviation. It demands building or restoring social relations and trust, in particular after conflict. For that, it is essential to focus efforts on addressing grievances, repairing dignity and removing injustices to support reconciliation within a broader context of inclusive development and social integration.

- My third point regards the connections between cultural diversity, human security, peace and development. Exploring further the key question of how advancement of the aims of the Alliance can contribute towards sustainable development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals will be at the centre of the 4th Global Forum of the Alliance which will be held in Doha, Qatar, from 11 to 13 December.

Excellencies,

- In a nutshell there are multiple ways in which the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and the Community of Democracies are complementary and can develop synergies.
- Both are promising examples of soft-power initiatives that are greatly needed in times such as ours that are marked by great uncertainty because of mounting tensions and conflicts that no hard-power tools are able to mitigate.
- This is why I want to conclude by strongly calling upon you all for greater investment of the international community in soft-power tools and a more committed engagement in a new agenda for human security, development and peace worldwide.
- Many thanks.