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ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

UN HIGH REPRESENTATIVE

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Notes on the Alliance of Civilizations

for

a debate with students from the Islamic Azad University

Tehran,

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Mr. President

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Dear Students

- I am particularly delighted to join you this afternoon and I thank you very much, Mr. President, for inviting me.
- I was looking forward to seizing this opportunity to give you an overview of the Alliance of Civilizations' UN initiative, that I have the privilege to head since May last year.
- I know that the UN umbrella combined with the candid name of "Alliance of Civilizations" might raise sceptical thoughts in your minds....
- Am I wrong ? I wish I were, though to a certain extent I can understand this kind of reservation.
- However, let me face the challenge and see if at the end of this talk, at least, you go home with the Alliance's small voice of hope inspiring you with fresh thoughts ...

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1. Each time has its own opportunities, threats and challenges – some personal notes

Dear Friends

- Before making a couple of points on the Alliance of Civilisations, let me do something that I normally hate – go back to the past and recall a clip of my personal life.

- As you may know, I grew up in Portugal at a time when democracy, freedom of speech and ideas, and modernization were only dreams.

- In the sixties, Portugal was a country with no future, shaped by dictatorship, international and diplomatic isolation, a blocked and underdeveloped society and a colonial war covering extensive fronts in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea, where most of the young Portuguese men were grounded at the very beginning of their adult lives.

- Therefore, there was a deep sense of frustration particularly among younger generations. Sometimes this frustration developed into organized revolt and articulated dissent.

- Like others in my generation, as a college student of the Law School of the University of Lisbon, I became involved in student opposition against dictatorship and I led the Lisbon Students Union between 1961 and 1962. Following my graduation, I started my career as a lawyer and have indeed dedicated some time to defending political prisoners.

- As you might know, it was the bloodless, military led *coup d'état*, called the Carnation Revolution, on 24 April, 1974, that changed the political regime in Portugal with no direct use of violence.

- By the way, some of you might still remember the image shown around the world as an icon of the Portuguese Revolution – that of a military insurgent putting a red carnation, offered by the population as a non –resistance invitation! In the barrel of his gun!

- Now, why am I recalling past history?

- Well, just because more than 30 years after the Carnation Revolution, it is important to try to understand the reason why this is a success story.

- In my view, three main elements explain the huge success of these troubled times of fast-moving change: capacity for mutual understanding and dialogue; leadership; moderation.

- Together, these three permanent features of our society helped build democracy, fostered economic development and promoted a more inclusive society as well as ensuring stability and peace in the country.

- Now I would also like to underline that to build a better future we need to figure out the main challenges and opportunities of each age. This means that people's lives can not be frozen in the past. We need to get free from the burden of memorabilia and reminiscences from the past which only fuel the spiral of resentments and mistrusts. Overcoming this hurdle can fundamentally open new opportunities for the future.

- For my generation, the wonders we celebrated were more political than technological. We were interested in democracy, human rights, and civil liberties. We had in mind a future in which societies and nations would draw closer as democratic bonds grew stronger, respect for human rights, mutual respect and tolerance spread globally.

- Now returning to the present, which are the challenges, threats and opportunities of our times? What should we do in order to avoid missing a vision for the future?

- To my mind, it is crystal clear that globalization, growing competition of interests between various powers, increased polarization and growing cultural stereotypes against a backdrop of more tensions over a series of political issues bring major challenges to our societies, undermining stability and peace.

- We cannot afford to ignore them.

- And this is why the Alliance of Civilizations' UN initiative is so important!

2. *What is the Alliance all about ?*

- Now you make ask – but what is the Alliance all about ?

- Let's carry out an exercise. Let's go over the summer press, in the so-called "silly season", when the newspapers tend to be full of trivial news stories and there is often very little real news to report... actually all this seems to be past history, at least this year!

- Let's go over August...

- *"Violence in India is fueled by religious and economic divide"*

- *"Kashmir sees worst communal Hindu-Muslim tensions in decades "*

- *"Thailand's smile fades – in recent weeks the border between northern Malaysia and southern Thailand has seen an increase in inter-religious violence "*

- *"American-Islamic group seeks title change for the forthcoming movie "Towelhead", Reuters reported, because the term is considered a "racial and religious slur"*".

- *"Muslim headscarves test the limits of German Tolerance"*

- *Plans to release a novel – The Jewel of Medina - about Prophet Muhammad's child bride A'isha have been scrapped by US publishers Random House over fears it could spark violence.*
- *Pinocchio and Harry Potter translations into Arabic forbidden in Israel)*
- *“In Denmark, a lighter side of Islam – Muslim comic’s sitcom pokes fun across a wide spectrum”*
- *“Civilian casualties are mounting in the southern Philippines, where fighting between Muslim guerrillas and the army has killed up to 187 people in the past 10 days”.*
- *“Anti-Semitism on rise in Europe – attacks against Jews in Europe have sharply increased, says a report by a European anti-racism watchdog.”*
- *“Far-right mobilizes against Cologne Mega-Mosque”*
- *“Integrating Islam into the West – for all its good intentions, European multiculturalism fails to make a place for religion” (Spiegel on line)*
- *“Italy's fingerprinting of members of the country's Roma community is a direct act of racial discrimination, the European Parliament has said”.*

- *“Saudis launch Islamic unity drive - Saudi Arabia's monarch has urged Muslims to speak with one voice in preparation for interfaith dialogue with the Jewish and Christian worlds”*
- *“Turkey's Constitutional Court has voted not to ban the ruling AK Party, accused of undermining secularism”.*
- *“Tibet's spiritual leader has repeated his call for dialogue between Chinese and Tibetan leaders”.*
- We could go back in time and recall many other similar titles...but no need because this sample of news clearly shows what the Alliance is all about.

Dear Friends

- The Alliance deals with the kind of situations noted above, by promoting understanding between different, often hostile cultures.
- Nobody ignores that we are facing serious inter-cultural and inter-religious problems, that these problems pose huge challenges at all levels – at city level, national and regional level, and at international level.

- Let's face it: the current international difficulties and the increasing anxiety we all feel in living together in mutual respect have encouraged the misguided view that cultures are set on an unavoidable collision course leading to a clash of civilizations.
- We face growing tensions and increased polarizations and growing cultural stereotypes, with westerners seen by Muslims as patronizing and domineering, and Muslims seen by westerners as fanatical and intolerant.
- Therefore, it is essential to counter stereotypes and misconceptions that deepen patterns of hostility and mistrust within and among societies. This urgent task constitutes the *raison d'être* of the Alliance.
- As conflicts everywhere are conflicts anywhere, it is against this background of urgency that the Alliance of Civilizations has a role to play in promoting good governance of cultural diversity.

3. How the Alliance can make a difference ?

- Now the question is: “How can the Alliance make a difference?”
- To cut a long story short, I will say that it is because of its three *As*
– I mean, because of its *a*genda, *a*ims and *a*pproach.
- Firstly, the Alliance’s **Agenda** is focused on four main cross-cutting issues - education, youth, media and migration.
- Secondly, its main **Aim** is to bridge the world’s divides, in particular cultural and religious fault lines between societies;
- The Alliance’s **Approach** now: as a results-oriented initiative, what is required is practical action that can make a difference in people’s lives and influence people’s worldviews.

Dear Friends

- You might think: “Easier said than done!”. Indeed, you are right. Simply to talk about deepening mutual understanding, to promote mutual respect etc is important, for sure, but it has to be reflected in the way one behaves. Otherwise, it is all talk.

- This is why the Alliance is a results oriented initiative, aimed at doing practical things that can impact on people’s daily lives.

- Let me just give you some examples of projects promoted or developed by the Alliance.
 - SILATECH – It was established to address the critical and growing need to create jobs and economic opportunities for young people. The initiative promotes large-scale job creation, entrepreneurship, and access to capital and markets for young people, starting first in the Arab world, where the highest rate of youth unemployment exists. Silatech was founded in January 2008 by Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned with broad support from other regional and international leaders.

- THE AoC MEDIA FUND –It was created earlier this year, with the support of major Hollywood companies, to finance mainstream productions that challenge negative portrayals of minorities.
- The AoC Rapid Response Media Mechanism – With a view to promoting informed debates on sensitive international issues in the media, the Alliance has also developed an online resource of global experts who can provide analysis and commentary to journalists in times of intercultural crises.
- The AoC Clearing-houses – The Aoc has developed a website on the field of media literacy education which is becoming increasingly important within the broader field of cross-cultural relations and education for tolerance. It is now developing a new Clearinghouse on “Education about Religion and Belief” (ERB).
- The AoC Youth Solidarity Fund – It was launched by the Alliance to support youth-led initiatives that promote long-term constructive relationships between young people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.
- National strategies for Inter-cultural dialogue aimed at advancing the objectives of the Alliance of Civilizations at countries’ level;

- Let me also say a few words about a new project on which we are working hard and that I am sure you, as young people, will be quite interested in – it is called Café Salam.

- What is it ?

- Café Salam is a radical but simple proposal based on the idea that ordinary people have more in common with each other than divisive differences and that given the opportunity they will explore their common interests even across radical geo-political divides.

- What we propose is a small initial group of cafes based in the city centres of countries suffering from mutual incomprehension.

- Each café would be identical in format on the inside and be equipped with a number of split tables furnished with life size imaging, high definition telepresence screens providing both the visual and aural impression that you are sitting at the same table as the people in the linked cafés in other cities.

- There would be no other intervention or guidance or programme apart from let's say a "chart of usage" – ordinary people using the cafes could see their fellow citizens in other cities, speak with them, listen to music with them, gossip with them, argue with them or ignore them. No language would be determined, but the guiding principle is to create a collective respect for diversity and for dignity because dignity entails respect for diversity

- Anyway, with all these examples I just want to stress that, in my view, small changes in circumstances can produce big shifts in behavior. These micro-results oriented experiences can help generate the will to live together in mutual respect and appreciation of our ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious differences.

Dear Friends

- From my own long experience in politics and from my knowledge of the world, in its rich variety of cultures, religions, societies and communities, I would not hesitate to identify what the mass of people want in every country on earth from those who make decisions that affect their lives, whether those decisions are made at local, national, regional or global level.

- And this is two things – first and foremost, dignity. People want dignity in their existence. 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.

- Afterwards probably come human security and liberty.

- By “human security”, I mean several things - national security in the sense of freedom from fear of war; community security, in the sense of freedom from the fear of violence, impunity and injustice; personal security in the sense of freedom to enjoy a life in dignity (with income, jobs, housing, health and educational opportunities); and environmental security in the sense of freedom to enjoy good physical conditions in which to live and work;

- By “liberty”, I mean freedom to move, and speak and assemble; freedom to participate in the political process, at least to select those who make the decisions that affect our lives; freedom to enjoy equal opportunities, to live in dignity without discrimination.

- But dignity is really the one thing people won't give up. You can batter them, imprison them, but they won't give that up. Life in dignity is what people really seek.

- And this is all what the Alliance is about – it aims at promoting dignity, civility, hospitality and the sense of human brotherhood in general.

- Its effort simply reflects the will of the vast majority of peoples to reject extremism in any society and to support overwhelmingly their aspiration to live in peace, based on respect for equal human dignity.

- Many thanks