

# **THE ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS SECOND FORUM OPENING STATEMENT**

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**Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey**  
(April 6, 2009, 9:00 am - Istanbul)

Prime Minister of Spain, Dear Colleague, Mr. Zapatero,  
UN Secretary-General Mr. Ban Ki-moon,  
High Representative Mr. Sampaio,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentleman,

First, I would like to say welcome to our country and Istanbul and to salute you with heartfelt feelings.

The Alliance of Civilizations was initiated with the announcement of the United Nations Secretary-General in July 2005. Within a period of four years, the Alliance has attained a comprehensive character; it has become institutionalized and it has established a structure which presents the most serious and concrete approaches in its field and produces projects and solutions.

I thank my dear friend José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who took the lead in this initiative, shared its co-sponsorship with us and successfully hosted the First Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations.

I also thank High Representative Mr. Sampaio, who has become the face and voice of the Alliance and contributed to the development of the initiative, with his broad vision and valuable efforts.

Furthermore, I owe a debt of gratitude to UN Secretary-General Mr. Ban Ki-moon, who has placed this initiative under his auspices and been generous with his support since the very beginning. Indeed, the Secretary-General's contribution and leadership has played an important role in the rapid progress of the Alliance of Civilizations in such a short period of time.

Distinguished guests,  
Dear participants,

On behalf of my country and nation, I would like to express my great pleasure in hosting the Second Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations in Istanbul.

No doubt, this land has witnessed occasional conflicts, wars and sufferings throughout history, just like all other places in the world. But let me state with great happiness that this land has been rather the home of peace, tolerance, a culture of coexistence, mutual compassion and respect.

Istanbul is the most obvious example of this. Istanbul not only connects two continents, namely, Europe and Asia; Istanbul is not only located at the intersection of Asia, Europe and Africa; Istanbul has also its proper place in the world as a city which embraces and harmonizes cultures, civilizations, races, religions and languages in the melting pot of history.

Istanbul, named as the 2010 European Capital of Culture, continues to convey messages of compassion and tolerance throughout the world, as it has always done in history.

You can see the original version of the first written treaty in history at the Istanbul Archeology Museum, just a few kilometers away from here. This pact, a copy of which is on display outside the Security Council chamber in the United Nations building in New York, was signed in Kadesh in 1279 BC, ending a war between the Hittite and Egyptian civilizations and starting an era of mutual help and cooperation.

When you leave this hall, you may see in neighbouring districts ancient places of worship of the three divine religions, namely, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, some of them well over a thousand years old.

The Eyüp Sultan Tomb and Mosque, the Neve Shalom Synagogue and the Hagia Irene Church have stood together in Istanbul for many centuries with mutual respect and tolerance.

Not only Istanbul alone, but almost every city in Turkey today sustains the traditional symbols of peace, harmony and tolerance that have been in existence here throughout history.

Churches which were constructed in Mardin in the first and second centuries still stand today. Mardin is the only city in the world where an Orthodox Church and a Catholic Church share a common structure.

The Church of St. Peter, considered to be the very first church in the world, still stands tall among many mosques and synagogues in the city of Hatay.

The Etz Ahayim Synagogue in Bursa has been open for worship, next to the Grand Mosque, since the 14th century.

The Church of Ahtamar in Van, Prophet Abraham's Fish Lake in Şanlıurfa, the Sümela Monastery in Trabzon and Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi's Tomb in Konya all but sum up the history of humanity.

The Hagia Sophia in İznik, House of the Virgin Mary in İzmir, considered among the most holy places of Christianity, and the St. Nicholas Church in Antalya are but a few living examples of our 2,000-year culture of coexistence.

Our cities such as Mardin, Hatay, Şanlıurfa, Van, Diyarbakır and Trabzon are each a monument to tolerance, attracting world wide attention.

I also would like to sincerely state the following :

There have also been provocative acts in Turkey, as in many countries around the world, aiming to harm this climate of brotherhood and friendship. But our society, moulded in a culture of tolerance and dialogue for thousands of years, has never allowed such divisive acts to prevail and has always chosen to stand together against those plots aiming to undermine our friendship.

On the basis of these experiences in Turkey, I would like to express our distinct pleasure in being able to convey messages of peace to the world.

We, as Spain and Turkey, believed that peace and dialogue are possible and set off with that conviction. We believed strongly that the Christian world could understand and embrace the Muslim world and treat it with tolerance, that the Muslim world could do the same with Jews, the West with the East, and vice versa. We believed that prejudices can carry great danger in a globalizing world.

We said that we could not allow societies to have insufficient knowledge about each other and harbour misconceived or biased opinions of each other in an era in which modern communication has turned our world into a small village. To those who claimed that the conflict of civilizations is inevitable, we said "No, an Alliance of Civilizations is possible."

We know the scale of difficulties we are facing. We know very well how difficult it is to dispel prejudices. We also know very well that it will take time to remove feelings of enmity which are rooted deep in history.

Nevertheless, we have started with good will and sincere feelings and we believe wholeheartedly that our small steps will open the door towards major initiatives.

Turkey's political philosophy has always been based not on making enemies, but on gaining friendships. The principle of "Peace at home, peace in the world," formulated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of our Republic, is the basis of our foreign policy.

Dear friends,

Distinguished guests,

The problems that we face today on the basis of religion, culture and civilization are the result of a long history.

Polarization, doubts, fears, entrenched prejudices and alienation have all occurred under the impact of deep historical, political, cultural, economic and social dynamics. Similarly, their solution will require a long-term effort. As these are our problems, we should jointly seek their resolution in cooperation and collaboration.

We are only at the beginning of the 21st century. We have begun this century with the themes of conflict and polarization based on religious and cultural differences, but we still have every opportunity at our disposal to record it as an era of peace, harmony and tolerance in the pages of history.

We should aim to solve today's problems today, rather than postpone it till tomorrow. It is our fundamental debt to succeeding generations to prepare a future which is free from problems, peaceful and harmonious.

Obviously, such an approach will require determined policies.

First, we should fight the underlying causes of problems, rather than their superficial symptoms.

We must better grasp the factors which feed extremist tendencies and radicalization and do what is required to dispel them without hesitation.

We should invest in the future. We should prevent today's reactions, anger and disappointments from being passed on to the future. Towards this end, we should focus on the young generation, strive to ensure that young people from different religions and cultures can better understand each other and prepare them for a bright future.

As cooperation is essential, we should expand its scope and establish a network which goes from the state down to the local level.

We should think about steps that can end the concept of "us" and "them", which has somewhat become a symbol of polarization.

Where the "I" prevails, everybody else is the other, another and foreigner. Today, the main task of humanity is to turn the "I" into "we" and give priority not to conflict of interests, but to joint interests and common values.

Intolerance causes conflict, and conflict causes division. So the first step we should take in this respect is to develop understanding and tolerance, strengthen dialogue and communication, and underline sharing and solidarity.

Man is the enemy of the unknown. A smiling face, a warm touch and a hand sincerely extended build firm bridges from one heart to the other. In this direction, we should reflect on how to gain hearts and minds. We should see clearly that wars, conflicts, acts of violence and particularly terrorist attacks are not only destructive today, but that they are also aimed at stealing our future.

We should take sweeping steps to enlighten the dark future of children whose homes are destroyed, whose parents or relatives are killed, whose playmates are massacred, who are deprived of play, toys, basic food and the rights to education and healthcare, in every corner of the world, by those wielding power.

We should understand that issues which are delayed, neglected or ignored because of political and diplomatic concerns will re-appear tomorrow as much bigger problems.

We should now realize that:

No country or community can exist in the era of globalization by insulating itself from others.

It was proven by bitter experience that we cannot provide our countries and our people with peace and welfare by ignoring the issues of Iraq, Afghanistan, the Middle East and Africa.

The tragic experiences that we have had to endure have demonstrated that terrorism is now an international issue and that it is aimed not at any one country, but the whole of humanity. We saw that those who attacked New York, Madrid, London and Istanbul targeted not only people living in these cities, but all of humanity.

Those who see terrorism today as an issue for other nations might face the same problem tomorrow. We therefore have to take steps today and establish a firm culture of solidarity.

Dear guests,

It is true that the Alliance of Civilizations was initiated with the co-sponsorship of Turkey and Spain and then placed under the auspices of the United Nations. However, at a stage when the number of countries and institutions represented in the Group of Friends has reached 100, we should now acknowledge that each of us is now a co-sponsor of this initiative.

With its rapidly and constantly increasing number of members, the Group of Friends is the engine of this initiative. We are all members of a family which works for global harmony and peace. Like a family based on the unity of solidarity and destiny, we are drawing strength from same source.

I must say that no one has a monopoly on efforts for dialogue on cultural and religious issues. However, it is important to avoid the feeling of competition, to use our limited potential in the most productive way, to work on the basis of concrete, result-oriented projects and thus to prepare a world which is free from prejudice and founded on compassion and tolerance.

Following up the First Forum in Madrid, the Second Forum in Istanbul will undoubtedly establish another milestone for the Alliance and contribute to shaping the future. As the initiative progresses and the projects that we have developed are completed and renewed by others, we will naturally gain flexibility and be better prepared for potential crises in the days to come.

The elements that unite us outnumber the elements that divide us.

Harmony, mutual compassion and tolerance are innate to human nature. What we need to do is to activate this nature. We should keep in mind that, in the history of humanity, harmony has always brought welfare, whereas conflict has always brought deprivation.

In concluding my speech, I would like to share with you the following lines by Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi, the voice of Anatolia's call for compassion, tolerance and peace:

“Come, whatever you are, come!  
Whether a heathen, fire worshipper or idolatrous, come!  
Ours is not a house of despair,  
Come even if you have broken your penitence a hundred times...”

I wish success to the Second Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations, welcome our guests once more, and salute you with compassion and respect.

Thank you.