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ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

WORKING PAPER FOR THE HIGH LEVEL GROUP

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Context

1. The end of the Cold War gave grounds to hope for a more peaceful world.¹ But hopes that tensions and violent conflicts would subside were short-lived. New sources of tension and conflict emerged. The gap between poor and rich, both within nations and among them, is inexorably on the rise, as is poverty itself. Destruction of the environment seems now to have tipped over to the point of no return. Proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons seems to have escaped effective control. International networks of organized crime have spread and strengthened. Violent conflicts within and across state borders have spread across the globe.
2. Post-Cold War conflicts from Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Palestine/Israel to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Darfur (and this is far from an exhaustive list) display a tendency toward greater brutality. In recent years we have witnessed genocide, urbicide, collective punishment, dispossession and destruction of material culture, deployment of chemical weapons and depleted uranium, and the use of heavy weaponry against civilian populations. Over the same period, there has been a sharp rise in the number of suicide bombings and shocking acts of violence against civilian populations in Europe, the United States, Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.
3. The main victims of this indiscriminate violence in its different forms are civilians. They have been, and continue to be, slaughtered across practically every region across the globe, with many turned into refugees, taken hostage, tortured, abused, humiliated, traumatized, and stripped of basic rights. Images of death, pain, and destruction flood us every day. Those images are extremely potent, as are the media that produce and disseminate them. Television and digital media in particular have immense power, and do not always use that power in the most responsible fashion. On their websites, terrorist groups have used graphic images of their crimes to no small effect. At the same time, media efforts to counter the negative dynamics of terror are insufficient.

¹ This paper grows out of discussions within the nascent structures of the Alliance of Civilizations initiative. In writing this paper, I have tried to do justice to a wide variety of views, comments, and suggestions expressed first in a brain-storming meeting held in New York on October 22, 2005, and then during the drafting process, either by including those views or by responding to them. The paper was written, and is being circulated, in order to open debate. It does not represent the views of any of the Alliance of Civilizations bodies. It is not a consensus paper. (Consensus is something we hope to achieve over the course of the coming year.) Responsibility for what is written here rests with the Director of the Secretariat.

4. The sorry state of the world cannot be denied. But it can be interpreted in many different ways. While there is broad agreement that we, as humanity, face grave problems, there is no agreement about what exactly the problem is or wherein its graveness lies. Given the complexity of our predicament, it thus comes as a surprise to see how effectively these global problems have been reduced to the conflict between “Islam” and the “West,” or even to the “Islamic” threat to “Western civilization.” Even though terrorism is only one of the problems we face, and even though less than one-fifth of terrorist acts committed last year can be attributed to “Islamists”; the public face given to the threat to “our way of life” has been pinpointed as “Muslim terrorism.” This obliges us to examine this perspective in this initial paper.
5. I do not want to imply that the conflict between “Islam” and the “West” is irrelevant or that the threat of Islamist terrorism is unreal. Nor do I want to relativize or otherwise minimize the seriousness of the threat of terrorism in general. The point I want to make is different. We need to see the conflict between “Islam” and the “West”, and the threat of Islamist terrorism, in perspective--that is, clearly. Only then will we be able to keep our opposition to terrorism unconditional, and unshaken, even in the face of horrific acts, overwhelming news, or effective propaganda. Once then will we be able to break the vicious circle in which we are now caught, where the blurring of the boundary between war and peace, combatants and civilians, legality and illegality, has led to the reproduction and escalation of extremism and exclusivism, hatred and intolerance, violence and terror.
6. The simplifying construct of the “Muslim threat” is so effective, in fact, because it is an element of a massive intellectual, political, economic, and military mobilization. The intellectual matrix of that mobilization is the slogan: Clash of Civilizations. That slogan was first promoted in academic guise as a description of looming global conflicts. In fact, it was from the start a prescription for policies the first fruits of which we must all now taste. As a device for generating antagonism between friend and enemy, the Clash of Civilizations formula was of necessity war-bound. Constructing friend and enemy, “us” and “them,” in cultural and religious terms defined the nature of the coming wars. Much as the Clash of Civilizations is about distribution of power and wealth, the pursuit of material interests became identity-based. As such, little room is left for negotiation and compromise; the ensuing conflicts are correspondingly extremist and exclusivist, bitter, brutal, violent, and destructive.
7. With the slogan of the Clash of Civilizations firmly in place as the intellectual underpinning of the war on terror, it soon provided shared mental terrain between the conflicting parties as well. Clash of Civilizations became the universal language of the day. However, at the very height of its triumph, weaknesses of the Clash of Civilizations paradigm have been revealed. Worldwide, anxiety and disaffection with the policies and politics of the Clash of Civilizations is growing, regardless of whether those politics and policies are expressed in the language of religion or secular eschatology. The sheer destructiveness of those policies has become increasingly apparent. There is nothing creative in the chaos they bring about. They are increasingly understood as literally dead-end policies and politics. The spread of freedom and democracy is promoted as an alternative to the global efforts to reduce poverty, lessen environmental degradation, ban nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, fight organized crime, and solve problems with lawful means. Whatever legitimacy those policies and politics may have claimed, and whatever credibility they may have enjoyed, they are losing. Conversely, the tactics of destruction and indiscriminate violence mobilized against such policies offer no constructive

alternative or hope for the future. These developments have sparked an important re-thinking in the West and in predominantly Muslim societies.

8. In the West, there is growing acknowledgement that improved understanding and better people-to-people contacts between Western countries and countries with predominantly Muslim populations are necessary but insufficient steps toward the goal of Islamic-Western reconciliation. The political and economic grievances shared across much of the Muslim world with regard to the occupation of territories with predominantly Muslim populations in Palestine and Iraq must be addressed if there is to be a marked improvement in Islamic-Western relations. This acknowledgement by Western intellectuals, policy-makers, and religious and political leaders of the need to address such grievances, which are shared across vast Muslim populations, has only begun to crystallize over the course of the past few years.
9. At the same time, in much of the Muslim world, there is growing acknowledgement that even those policies of some Western governments that are most objectionable to Muslim populations, are not responsible for many of the ills that affect Muslim societies today. Within the Muslim world there is heightened consternation that the religion of Islam is being invoked by charismatic leaders to both justify the use of violence against civilian populations and to attract new recruits to perpetrate such acts against Muslims and non-Muslims alike. How this and other dynamic intra-Muslim debates unfold will have a major effect on how Western nations and societies view and engage Muslims at home and abroad. There is increased sentiment within the Muslim world that Muslim political, religious, and intellectual leaders also bear a great deal of responsibility for the political, cultural, and intellectual stagnation that has gripped too many Muslim societies that were once thriving civilizations, and provided fertile ground for reductionist, exclusivist, and extremist tendencies to attract a following among frustrated populations.
10. As a result of these awakenings both in the West and in Muslim societies worldwide, there is a heightened sense of the need to improve Islamic-Western relations, a readiness to acknowledge the responsibilities that all have to bear for the current alarming state of those relations, and a genuine interest and sense of urgency to find a way to mend them. While acknowledging the tragic nature of the events that caused these upheavals in the West and in the Muslim world over the past five years, they have provided an unprecedented openness and demand for creative solutions, which the Alliance of Civilizations should pursue aggressively.
11. It is therefore an auspicious time to launch an initiative countering the paradigm of the Clash of Civilizations. It is an auspicious time for an initiative that aims at the affirmation of peaceful coexistence and cooperation, mutual understanding, and respect among civilizations. It is an auspicious time for an initiative such as the Alliance of Civilization that responds both to the threats to international peace and security posed by the Clash of Civilizations paradigm, and to the needs and hopes of those who reject extremism and exclusivism, either home-grown or exported to them from abroad.

Understanding the Nature of the Problem

12. The Alliance of Civilizations is an action-oriented initiative. But before we can move on to action, we need to make sure we really understand the nature of the problem we want to act on. Effective action is predicated on an effective understanding of the

problem at hand. The first step toward achieving the goals of the initiative should thus be analysis of the nature of the problem — that is, intellectual mobilization.

13. Many take for granted that the central problem in the world today is the conflict between “Islam” and the “West,” with the Middle East as its epicenter. It seems wise to tackle this preconception first, not because of the intellectual merits of this view, but because of its symbolic status and political urgency.
14. Here, we can already begin to think about what is wrong with a question commonly asked in the current environment of tension between the “West” and “Islam”: “What is wrong with Islam?” Such a formulation of the problem at hand is part of the problem itself. It is hard to imagine how, starting from such a premise, we could ever work towards an alliance of civilizations. The question we need to ask first is something different. We should think instead about what is so wrong with relations *between* “Islam” and the “West” that a question like “What’s wrong with Islam” can even be asked, let alone command respect. Two other premises linked with the perception of the conflict between “Islam” and the “West” require somewhat longer comment.
15. One premise linked with the perception of a conflict between “Islam” and the “West” is the assumption that tensions between the Western and Muslim worlds are fundamentally of a religious nature. If the root of the conflict is religious, then perhaps the tensions are due to an intolerant or violent nature of religion itself, either Islam or Christianity. Or perhaps the problem is one of a lack of understanding: either of *mutual* understanding between the two religions, Islam and Christianity, or of *our own* ignorance of, and ensuing misconceptions about, the other. Efforts to overcome a deficit of “mutual understanding” naturally lead to initiatives bringing together representatives of the two parties involved. The range of action that flows from this premise is broad: from interfaith dialogues to sport competitions. Such efforts are obviously of crucial importance and have done much — and can do more — good. The Alliance itself will work on such initiatives. But we need to be clear about their limits. When such initiatives fail to recognize and address the political and economic grievances involved, even if they influence and transform attitudes of the individuals involved, their effects on broader communal, societal, or international practices will remain limited.
16. If the current tense situation is perceived as stemming from our ignorance about the other, then we need to acknowledge the fact that essential information about that “other” is quite often already available. For some reason, it seems hard to induce people to consider that information seriously. This is partly because positive information about Islam or Christianity can be contradicted by acts committed in the name of either religion, and partly because humans tend to resist considering information that challenges deeply held and sometimes unconscious convictions about others. Prejudice is information-resistant, and that is one source of its strength. Finally, we cannot afford to assume that efforts to learn more about an other are inherently of good moral intent. If not coupled with respect or restrained by law, knowledge can even become an instrument of abuse, as testified to, for example, by desecration of Qur’an and sexual torture of prisoners in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantánamo Bay.
17. Assumptions that Islam or Christianity is bent to violence cannot, I would thus argue, be countered by providing a better explanation of the truth of the religion in question. Rather, we need to consider a different approach. It is important that we begin to devote more resources to the analysis of how religion is used and abused for political

purposes and secular gain. In particular, we should explore under what circumstances political grievances come to be articulated or misrepresented religiously, and under what conditions extremism is likely to be expressed in religious language, or fomented by religious authorities. We should pay more attention to how religion is used as a cover for the irresponsible and unaccountable exercise of political power.

18. The other common premise I would like to question is the view that tensions between the “West” and “Islam” are essentially a cultural problem. There is a serious problem here. Nowhere — not in the social sciences, not in the humanities — is there anything close to a consensus about what culture is. If no one knows what, exactly, culture is, then how can thinking about such an urgent matter as the tensions between the West and the Muslim world in cultural terms, lead to workable solutions?
19. That said, two strains of thought in the cultural approach to the tense and conflictual relationship between “Islam” and the “West” stand out: the presupposition that “culture” is an abstract and monolithic datum, and the assumption that a given datum of culture determines the way people act politically. Such cultural abstractions — the notion of the “Arab mind” or the “decadent and irreligious West” come to mind — can facilitate the denigration of another “culture” and the oppression or subjection of a culturally defined people. As we all know, such cultural abstractions were integral to modern colonialism. If we begin with the starting point of such a notion of culture, then the only way an alliance of civilizations could be achieved would be via the universal acceptance of a particular “culture.” There is also another common form of culturalism, one that has rejected the Enlightenment assumption that all societies are on a unitary path of development, the norms of which are defined by the experience of the “West.” This other form of culturalism is, rather, committed to the equality of cultures and the values of toleration. These views inform, most prominently, the politics of multiculturalism and interculturalism.
20. The politics of multiculturalism can indeed contribute to the peaceful coexistence of cultures and to the building of an alliance of civilizations. But in order to ensure such results, multiculturalism needs to acknowledge its limits. Because it can slip into relativism, benevolent culturalism can find it hard to formulate effective responses to — and even unwittingly support — malign forms of culture politics.
21. One of the most contentious topics that illustrates the complexity and sensitivity of cultural politics in “Islamic-Western” relations is the status of women. Representing one half of humanity and at the center of many debates over issues of “culture” and “values” both within and between “the West” and the “Muslim world”, the status of women will have to be taken up by the Alliance directly, yet with sensitivity to the twin dangers of cultural imperialism, which imposes one society’s values on another, and cultural relativism, which avoids all judgment and thereby drains the impetus for action on the other.
22. Culturalist politics can also be handmaiden to market-oriented “empowerment” schemes or even instrumental in opening the ways for exploiting the culture of the poor for the enrichment of the wealthy. Such culture-based approaches can, furthermore, turn a blind eye to political problems and facilitate the bracketing of power itself. As such, culturalist politics can indirectly contribute to the asymmetry of power that shapes our world. As an alliance of civilizations initiative, we need to keep all this in mind. If we bracket too neatly the issue of power, we will be at risk of paternalism. Paternalism can of course be well-intentioned and can deliver good and beneficial things and, as such, be met with gratitude. In the long run, however, paternalism breeds resentment and resistance. That is not the only problem.

23. Paternalism is perhaps the least of the problems that can ensue from bracketing the issue of power. If we turn a blind eye to the deep inequalities of power in the world today, we may in fact then be unable to perceive, and thus to effectively deal with, crucial mechanisms pushing us towards a clash of civilizations. If we leave out the question of power, we may be unable to adequately understand, and cope with, what could very well turn out to be a central cause of violence and religious extremism in the world today. This possibility should be taken seriously, because it tends to be neglected in discussions of the tensions between the “West” and “Islam” today.
24. It can plausibly be argued that the unrestrained use of overwhelming power in recent years is a crucial factor in the deterioration of relations between “Islam” and the “West.” Bosnia, Palestine, and Iraq have come to be seen across religious and cultural divides as symbols of unprovoked, illegal, morally wrong, and brutal destruction and humiliation of Muslims. That the Muslim communities in those places were not the only ones to suffer from the use of overwhelming power tends to disappear from view in discussions of tensions between the “West” and “Islam.” For, in fact, such a realization might undermine the plausibility of the view that what we have here is a clash of civilizations — a view that plays into the hands of the most extremist and violent on both sides.
25. Sometimes one has to peel off layer upon layer of obfuscating language to come to the simple recognition that those who resist dispossession and occupation might have some legitimate grievances. The turning of political concepts into civilizational values and the tools of messianism has disabled the kind of critical reflection that is so urgently needed today. In the vacuum left by the absence of political analysis, more and more simplistic culture talk has come to take its place. A vicious cycle ensues. The reduction of complex political problems to simplistic cultural, religious, or civilizational traits that allegedly characterize the parties involved, forces political reflection even further out of the picture.
26. One urgent question we need to raise is whether, and if so how, political dispossession creates extremism. We need to go on to consider how the collapse of public authority produces violence and terrorism. Such analysis should not be caught in politically expedient talk about rogue states, but should rather look into concrete empirical results of downsizing states as required by neoliberal development policies, and into the outcome of the outright destruction of the state, of which Iraq is an alarming example. Such analysis will have to come to terms with the common assumption that the spread of preordained forms of the free market is necessarily a beneficent and integrative force. One will have to consider whether market fundamentalism can in fact engender, or be conducive to, extremism and violence. Instead of deriving explanations of political problems from assumptions about religion and culture, we need to explore the emergence of the religious articulation of political issues and political usages of religion. Instead of ascribing violent inclinations to certain cultures, we will have to consider the conditions under which cultures of violence are created and spread.
27. Sound analysis will demonstrate the problematic nature of the very terms, “Islam” and the “West,” that we now so instinctively employ. Such analysis will surely bring to the fore the irreducible inner diversity, heterogeneity, plurality, and complexities — as well as internal dynamics — of Islam and Muslim states and societies, as well as within the West and Christianity. Such analysis will likely show how the meaning of the terms, “Islam” and the “West,” was articulated and rearticulated ever anew by a complex, shifting, and more often than not conflictual relationship with a very long history. The historical aspect of the analysis will have to focus on those

developments that caused divides and hostilities among civilizations. For example, it will have to look at the Greco-Persian wars, when the vocabulary and the *imaginaire* of the antagonism between Europe and Asia, and freedom and despotism was first articulated; it will have to turn to the Crusades and the process of making the Muslims the Enemy of Christendom and Europe; it could then move to the so-called age of explorations, when the notion of civilization emerged (in an often less than flattering context), and it will certainly have to look at the more recent twin developments of free trade and modern warfare; and at colonialism, decolonization, and the Cold War. Historical analysis should also recall those moments when Christian and Islamic worlds belonged to the same culture or civilization, and when Islamic and Christian cultures belonged to the same world. Both will require, and feed into, a retelling of the so-called master narratives, and both will hopefully engender critical introspection in both the Muslim world and in the West. Both will shed light on uses and abuses of history that play no small part in producing — or easing — tensions among civilizations.

28. Historically informed analysis of our present political predicament will, in sum, have to grapple with the discursive construction of the problem we face. This is an essential precondition of finding better ways to think about, understand, articulate, and act on, the huge current threats to humanity. For the twin paradigms — of the Clash of Civilizations on the one hand and “Islam vs. the West” on the other — have become a linguistic prison-house that ensnares our political imagination.
29. After carrying out such analysis, the Alliance of Civilizations initiative will be in a better position to understand the political function of placing the conflict between “Islam” and the “West” center-stage. It will be in a better position to avoid willy-nilly allowing problematic formulations of the problems at hand to set the stage for our own thinking. The Alliance of Civilizations will be more prepared to place the Middle East in the context of the broader Muslim world, and to think about the Muslim world in the context of, rather than isolated from, actual or potential problems and conflicts in other parts of the world.
30. To restate what has been already said above, isolating the problems of the Middle East from problems and conflicts elsewhere in the world, tends to reduce those problems to religious and cultural issues and, even if unwittingly, to translate those problems back into the tricky “conflict between Islam and the West” Paradigm. The Alliance of Civilizations initiative will aim, rather, to produce a clearer understanding of how different parts of the world, and different constituencies in those different parts of the globe, are affected by, cope with, and react to, growing inequalities of power and wealth, declines in health and education provisions, marketization and dispossession, environmental degradation, and rising crime and violence, all of which mark our world today.
31. The effort to produce such a holistic picture and comprehensive understanding of our contemporary predicament will require collaboration of intellectuals from all the main regions of the world. Only such collaboration will enable us to formulate the kind of meaningful political framework and agenda that, in turn, will allow us to suggest effective action on both political and civil society level. Without the framing of that political agenda and enactment of a plan of action, our program of analysis would be but an academic exercise. But without sound analysis of the problems at hand, whatever steps of action we undertake will come to naught, or to different effect than we had hoped. Such an intellectual mobilization is a crucial step towards our mission to affirm and promote the principles underlying the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, and to achieve its lofty goals.

Goals and Strategy

32. As has been noted here, the factors feeding Islamic-Western conflict are likely to be understood as based either on political and/or economic grievances on the one hand or on popular misperceptions, misunderstandings, and suspicions on the other. However, addressing either set of factors will require a holistic approach that engages actors across multiple sectors of society. While much of the fuel for Islamic-Western conflict would likely be drained by the resolution of the most vexing political issues (i.e. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iraq conflict), these steps and others can not be achieved by political leaders alone.
33. Concerted effort on the part of political, religious, academic, corporate, media, and youth sectors in the West and in predominantly Muslim regions will be necessary to establish the context within which such bold political action can take place and be supported by populations. Such cross-sectoral mobilization is also necessary to ensure that the necessary resources and “fruits” of political advancement are readily and abundantly available so that their impact is both concrete and lasting. Moreover, beyond the task of addressing grievances that feed Islamic-Western divisions today, a holistic approach that provides opportunities to all who want to contribute to Islamic-Western reconciliation is the best way to shift the broader context of Islamic-Western relations so that future differences, grievances, and missteps can be worked through in collaborative, non-violent, and equitable ways. In other words, generating the political will and popular momentum necessary for a substantial and lasting improvement in Islamic-Western relations requires the mobilization of key actors across multiple sectors.
34. The Alliance can serve as a catalyst for such broad-based action by developing and pursuing a methodology that is both comprehensive in its analysis and strategically targeted in its recommendations for action. The guidance of the High Level Group is essential to developing the methodology that will achieve these objectives.