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## PRESS RELEASE

### Politics, not religion, at the heart of growing Muslim-West divide, new report argues

(ISTANBUL, TURKEY 13 November) The key reasons for the growing divide between Muslim and Western societies are not religious, but political, concludes a report presented to Secretary-General Kofi Annan today in Istanbul.

On receiving the report, the Secretary-General said: “We need to get away from stereotypes, generalizations and preconceptions, and take care not to let crimes committed by individuals or small groups dictate our image of an entire people, an entire region, or an entire religion.

“We should start by reaffirming – and demonstrating – that the problem is not the Koran, nor the Torah or the Bible. Indeed, I have often said the problem is never the faith – it is the faithful, and how they behave towards each other.”

In its report, the High-level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations maintains that although religion is often cynically exploited to stir passions, fuel suspicions and support alarmist claims that the world is facing a new “war of religion”, the root of the matter is political.

Furthermore, the Arab-Israeli conflict has become a critical symbol of the deepening rift. Along with Western military interventions in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan the Group argues, this conflict contributes significantly to the growing sense of resentment and mistrust that mars relations among communities. The report also suggests that the repression of non-violent political opposition and the slow pace of reforms in some Muslim countries is a key factor in the rise of extremism.

The Co-chairs of the Group presented the report to the Secretary-General as well as to the Prime Ministers of Spain and Turkey, as co-sponsoring governments of the Alliance initiative.

In his address, the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, said: “At a time when the increasing polarization between major cultures and belief systems throughout the world urgently needs to be addressed, the presentation of this Report and its recommendations to the international community constitutes a hopeful and exciting step in efforts to sow the seeds of respect and understanding.”

The High-level Group – a panel of 20 world renowned experts (*see full list below*) – was appointed by Secretary-General Annan a year ago to explore ways of addressing the increasing polarization between Muslim and Western societies.

Speaking at the event, the Spanish Prime Minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, said: “We cannot stand idle in the face of claims that a clash of cultures and civilizations is inevitable. In



our efforts to counter them ... we can count on international law, on the UN, on human rights, and, above all, we can count on the equal dignity of all men and women and on our unique capacity for dialogue and conflict resolution. From now on, we will also count on the Alliance of Civilizations.”

In order to address the issues outlined in their report, members of the High-level Group offer a number of practical solutions, including:

- A High Representative to assist the Secretary-General in defusing crises that arise at the intersection of religion and politics and to oversee the implementation of the Report’s recommendations.
- A White Paper analyzing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict dispassionately and objectively, giving voice to the competing narratives on both sides, reviewing and diagnosing the successes and failures of past peace initiatives, and establishing clearly the conditions that must be met to find a way out of this crisis. In addition, the High-level Group called for the resumption of the political process, including the convening of an international conference on the Middle East Peace Process as soon as possible.
- A regional Middle East conference to be convened as soon as possible and involving all the relevant actors with aim of reinvigorating the peace process.
- Support for the expansion of political pluralism in Muslim countries. The High-level Group calls on ruling parties in the Muslim world to provide the space for the full participation of non-violent political parties, whether religious or secular in nature and calls on foreign governments to be consistent in their support for pluralism by, for example, respecting the outcome of elections.

The Report puts forward a range of concrete proposals in the areas of education, media, youth and migration to build bridges and promote a culture of respect and understanding among Western and Muslim communities, including:

- The development of film and television programs co-produced across religious and cultural boundaries and showing diversity as a normal feature of society.
- The establishment of a “Risk Fund” to offset the market forces that encourage mostly sensationalistic and stereotypical cultural representations.
- The creation of a Global Youth Solidarity Fund, to encourage young people to contribute to the implementation of all of the recommendations set forth in this report.
- The promotion of cross-cultural and human rights education to ensure that students everywhere develop an understanding of other cultures and religions.

***Further recommendations are included in the attached “Highlights of the Report”.***

The report comes at the end of a year-long process in which the Group had three main meetings – in Palma de Mallorca, Spain, Doha, Qatar and Dakar, Senegal – as well as a working session in New York. Their work was supported by extensive analysis and research



conducted and commissioned by the Alliance of Civilizations Secretariat in New York as well as through consultations with a wide range of multilateral agencies and international organizations.

**For more information about the Alliance of Civilizations, to download a copy of the report and to see interviews with High-level Group members, please visit: [www.unaoc.org](http://www.unaoc.org). Individual members of the group are available in Istanbul for interviews through Carlos Jimenez Renjifo (Tel: +32-475-782 802; [jimenez@unric.org](mailto:jimenez@unric.org)) or Emmanuel Kattan (Tel: +90 537 575 1355; [kattan@un.org](mailto:kattan@un.org)). For interviews following the launch, you may also contact Renata Sivacolundhu at UNHQ in New York (Tel: +1 212 963 2932; [sivacolundhu@un.org](mailto:sivacolundhu@un.org)).**

### High-level Group Members

**Professor Federico Mayor**

High-level Group Co-Chair and President of the Culture of Peace Foundation and Former Director General of UNESCO

**Professor Mehmet Aydin**

High-level Group Co-Chair  
Minister of State of Turkey and Professor of Philosophy

**Mr Ali Alatas**

Former Foreign Minister, Indonesia

**Ms Karen Armstrong**

Historian of Religion

**Mr. André Azoulay**

Adviser to His Majesty King Mohammed VI of Morocco

**Ms. Shobana Bhartia**

Managing Director of the *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi

**Dr Mohamed Charfi**

Former Education Minister of Tunisia

**Professor John Esposito**

Founding Director, Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University and Editor-in-Chief, Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World

**Professor Pan Guang**

Director and Professor, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences

**Mr Enrique V. Iglesias**

Ibero-American Secretary-General and Former President, Inter American Development Bank

**H.E. Hojjatoleslam Seyyed Mohammad Khatami**

Former President of Iran

**Professor Candido Antonio Mendes De Almeida**

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**H.H. Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al Missned**

Consort of the Emir of the State of Qatar and Chairperson of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development

**Professor Vitaly Naumkin**

President of the International Center for Strategic and Political Studies and Chair of Faculty of World Politics, Moscow State University

**Mr. Moustapha Niasse**

Former Prime Minister of Senegal

**Dr. Nafis Sadik**

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**Rabbi Arthur Schneier**

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