

INTERVIEW: Ahead of Baku Forum, UN official spotlights ‘soft power’ approaches to counter violent extremism

22 April 2016 – As the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) prepares for an upcoming global conference in Baku, Azerbaijan, the head of the UN body has stressed the need to leverage ‘soft power’ to curb the rise of violent extremism and prevent conflict.

Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, of Qatar, who held the presidency of the UN General Assembly for its 2011/2012 session and now heads up the UNAOC as the Secretary-General’s High Representative, said that the recent rise of violent extremism and terrorism worldwide only strengthened his work and mandate.

“As you know, the Alliance of Civilizations initiative came after ‘September 11’ and attacks in Madrid and London,” he told the *UN News Centre*, referring to terrorist acts in 2001, 2004 and 2005. He stressed that the establishment of UNAOC in 2005 was in response to fears that clashes of cultures, religions and civilizations are driving conflict.

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Given this situation, UNAOC’s work must be more visible than ever, he stressed, noting that his priorities also include addressing issues related to the growing migratory flows that are threatening international peace and security, and the spread of negative narratives, such as hate speech on social media.

Imperatively, his Office works with other UN organizations in the areas of peace and security, human rights, the rule of law and development. “We are almost everywhere on the UN agenda,” Mr. Al-Nasser said, noting that he can capitalize on his experience as a former General Assembly President.

The mandate of the Assembly is much broader, he said, dealing with all issues confronting the UN. “But when I was President, I focused on promoting dialogue, mediation and the culture of peace, and supported the work of the Alliance,” he recalled.



Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser speaks to the UN News Centre about terrorism, migration and social media. Credit: United Nations

His approach was to focus on 'soft power' tools set out in Chapter VI of the UN Charter, which urges pacific settlement of disputes, including negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, and judicial settlement, instead of Chapter VII, which allows military action as a means to restore international peace and security.

"Mediation is also soft power to prevent conflict by using different methods and ways than the Security Council and Chapter VII," he said.

The Alliance's [Global Forum Baku 2016](#), to be held in the Azerbaijani capital from 25 to 27 April, will bring together nearly 3,000 participants, including Heads of State and Government, political officials, civil society representatives, religious and youth leaders, who will share their perspectives and solutions under the main theme on "Living Together in Inclusive Societies: A Challenge and A Goal."

Under a sub-theme, the Forum will tackle head-on the issue of preventing violent extremism, a topic that is growing in importance and high on UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's agenda this year.

In January, Mr. Ban presented his [Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism](#) for consideration by the General Assembly. The Plan calls for a comprehensive approach encompassing not only essential security-based counter-terrorism measures but also systematic preventive steps to address the underlying conditions that drive individuals to radicalize and join violent extremist groups. It provides more than 70 recommendations to Member States and the UN system.

Mr. Al-Nasser said UNAOC's work and inputs will feed the Secretary-General's initiative.

The Forum is expected to adopt the Baku Declaration as an outcome, which would note the role of UNAOC in addressing the drivers of violent extremism through its programming in youth, education, media and migration.

The significance of holding the Forum in Baku is that “Azerbaijan is located at the crossroads between the East and West, a very important point of convergence of various cultures and religions,” he said.