

**United Nations Alliance of Civilizations
Group of Friends Meeting – Permanent Representatives’ Level**

New York, 4 June 2015

SUMMARY REPORT

Introduction

On 4 June 2015, United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) held its Group of Friends Meeting (Permanent Representatives’ Level) under the overarching theme *“The Role of Media in Building Bridges Between Nations”*. The United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, chaired the meeting. The event was open to civil society representatives, media, UNAOC’s partners and those member states and organizations, which are not formal members of the Group of Friends.

At the occasion of the event, the Children Choir of Peace from the British International School of New York presented a musical performance, featuring multiethnic songs. Young people conveyed an important message to the participants that the universal human expression like music helps to build bridges of understanding among different cultures and civilizations.

Opening Session

The **United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations** opened the meeting by welcoming all participants, including the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, noting close partnership and collaboration between UNAOC and the United Nations Department of Public Information.

Media, as one of the major pillars of UNAOC, provides a global platform for exchanging information, engaging between communities, while at the same time re-affirming the commitments of saying the truth and suggesting solutions. The necessity of embracing and respecting diverse cultures, promoting inclusive societies and cherishing common and shared values, are all driving forces for media, culminating into an investment for peace and security, sustainable development and human rights.

The High Representative suggested that there is always a space for free speech and expression; however, there is no merit in the freedom of insult, incitement to hatred and spreading the messages of enmity. While expressing views, one needs to observe articles 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, related instruments and relevant United Nations resolutions.

The High Representative referred to two types of activities in the field of media that UNAOC has been implementing so far: organizing training workshops for journalists in collaboration with senior media professionals and conflict resolution experts; and providing a platform to voices of credible individuals who put out messages that counter

hate speech and negative narratives. UNAOC collaborates with media practitioners to strengthen their capacity to promote mutual understanding and cooperation between different cultures and religions, raise awareness of obstacles hindering cultural dialogue, overcome stereotyping, and shape a proactive public opinion, favorable to the cause of tolerance and respect for religions.

The United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information opened her statement by recalling that today's world is becoming more complex and challenging than ever, with interdependence and connectivity leading to greater understanding in some instances, however, contributing to greater intolerance and division in others. Finding the way to collectively counter polarization and extremism, successfully promote tolerance and diversity, both within and between societies, is important and UNAOC, through its work in the field of media, aims to address these issues.

The Under-Secretary-General emphasized the role of media in fostering respect and amity between peoples and nations, and recalled its responsibility to act in ways that do not encourage hatred or discrimination. Increasingly, journalists face restrictions, threats, financial or logistical barrier as they attempt to carry out their daily tasks. In this regard, traditional and social media need support if they are to succeed in informing the public about the world around them, and doing so in ways that promote tolerance and respect.

The Under-Secretary-General invited everyone to brainstorm on practical steps so that responsible and thoughtful journalism could be promoted, and people could be engaged in true and meaningful dialogue. Steps could include, *inter alia*, building media capacity; advocating for the ranks of journalists to be broader and more diverse – more women and more minority voices can and should be heard; pressing for more pluralism; discouraging media from gratuitous attacks and insults; encouraging and acknowledging those media outlets, whose reporting and commentary are having a positive impact.

The **Ambassador of Spain** reminded participants of the UNAOC's latest activities, namely, that a) UNAOC, the PGA and the UNSG have recently co-organized a high level meeting on tolerance and reconciliation with participation of religious leaders; b) it establishes an Advisory Council whose members will advise the High Representative on issues of interfaith dialogue; c) UNAOC provided a noticeable contribution to the Intercultural Dialogue Forum held in Baku, May 2015.

Concerning the theme of the meeting, the Ambassador emphasized the need to promote culture of peace through media, given their enormous power of influence in a globalized world. Without jeopardizing freedom of expression and information, Spain supports training programmes for journalists and opinion-makers that are sending positive messages of coexistence and tolerance, thus counteracting those which promote radicalization. Regrettably, many social networks are misused by extremists and terrorists to radicalize youth and recruit them to commit terrorist acts. Therefore, it is important to counter those messages and replace them with peace and tolerance.

UNAOC should strengthen its role as a “soft power” instrument for the prevention of identity-based conflicts. Spain welcomed UNAOC's training programmes for media, Rapid Response Media Mechanism and media literacy projects, establishment of a network of universities for media literacy (in collaboration with UNESCO) and its publications on these topics.

The **Deputy Permanent Representative of Turkey** noted that since 2005, UNAOC has grown stronger with the support it enjoys from the increasing number of members of the Group of Friends, as well as with programmes and projects implemented within the four main pillars, namely youth, education, media and migration. Concrete projects in these areas that have a real impact on the lives of individuals are valuable tools to disseminate the guiding principles of the Alliance.

Media has always been a powerful tool in shaping perceptions of the world. While the media can be a useful agent for promoting values of mutual understanding and coexistence, it can unfortunately be misused for disseminating ideas that lead to misconceptions and stereotyping. While freedom of speech and expression are essential principles for sharing and receiving correct information, one needs to adhere to ethical principles and a sense of responsibility. These two concepts are not contradictory but complementary to each other. The curricula for journalists need to reflect the elements that will give the notions of human rights, freedom of expression as well as ethics.

Spain and Turkey expressed their appreciation for a cooperation and constructive approach taken by the members of the Group of Friends during extensive consultations on the UNAOC resolution 2015. Members have reached an understanding within the Group and the co-sponsors will start negotiations within the whole General Assembly membership as of June 15. All delegations of the Group of Friends have been invited to join the list of co-sponsors of the draft resolution.

Group of Friends: Views on the UNAOC's Role, Support and Recommendations

Delegations made a series of statements that may be summarized as follows:

- Members of the Group of Friends thanked the Government of Azerbaijan for its leading role in host the 7th UNAOC Forum in Baku, in April 2016. They also look forward to the upcoming meeting of the Focal Points, to be scheduled in Fall 2015.
- Many delegations have underlined the importance of free, diverse and independent media so that they promote and protect freedom of opinion and expression and thus play a constructive role in fostering intercultural dialogue. It would be also important for media to respect cultural differences while enjoying their freedom of press and expression.
- A number of delegations reminded everyone that media must serve the public and society at large, and not act in the interests of a particular political party, religion or ethnic group.
- Delegates noted that some media report mostly scenes of disorder and unrest, contributing to the rise of tensions and exacerbation of violence. Therefore, it is important that the media focus more on the messages of peace, tolerance and non-violence, help create a climate of trust, understanding and cordiality, and challenge stereotypes and xenophobic attitudes.
- Media play a vital role in improving communication about migration and promoting a better understanding and recognition of the benefits of migration to the host societies, as well as the migrants themselves.

- The fragile and dangerous situation in which many journalists operate need to be highlighted and respected. Increasingly, journalists are subject to hostile acts of every kind, including torture and killing. Therefore, it is essential to protect journalists and allow them to fulfil their important role at all times.
- A number of delegations highlighted activities of organizations and institutions that work in the field of media, e.g. Anna Lindh Foundation, Doha Centre for Media Freedom, Swedish Institute, UNESCO, United Nations Department of Public Information, Deutsche Welle Akademie, UNWTO, etc.
- Delegations expressed their full support to the UNAOC's project "Rapid Response Media Mechanism" and its database (Global Experts Finder) as a useful tool to give voices to various actors and narratives in times of cultural crises. They also referred to the UNAOC's project "Plural+ Video Festival" as another example of using social media to spread the messages of tolerance, diversity and inclusion.
- UNAOC has been encouraged to continue its projects in the field of media and implement more trainings, initiatives and public discussions around this pillar of its mandate. UNAOC could also focus on promoting pluralistic media coverage and journalist training on issues of cross-cultural sensitivities and contentions. It might also consider projects which would aim at advancing media and internet literacy, setting up networks of online activists to defend inter-cultural and inter-religious tolerance and understanding, as well as promoting citizen, and especially youth participation for fair media in support of peaceful coexistence.
- A number of delegations have expressed their support to the UNAOC resolution 2015.

Closing Session

In conclusion, the **United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations** thanked members of the Group of Friends for their valuable comments and support. He reiterated his commitment to continue to refine UNAOC's approaches in the area of media to amplify its voice and help build bridges between nations.

He advised the participants that UNAOC is actively working on developing new and innovative initiatives in the key areas of media and migration. Current themes of interest include: a) hate speech and the role of media in changing perceptions of certain migrant communities, b) use of technology in migration reporting and the impact of a multi-disciplinary approach through active collaboration between journalists, professionals and community members; c) youth and the positive use of social media. UNAOC is actively looking for more partners and collaborators on these important topics and welcomes expressions of interest from the members of the Group of Friends.

Annex 1: List of Speakers

The United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations

The United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information

Spain

Turkey

European Union

Qatar

Slovenia

Mexico

Morocco

Hungary

Armenia

Italy

Sweden

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Azerbaijan

UNESCO

IOM

Malaysia

Kazakhstan

Germany

Austria

Brazil

UNWTO