

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY



# ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

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ADDRESS

**on the occasion of the  
SYMPOSIUM ON THE RAPPROCHMENT AND HARMONY WEEK**

**Contribution of International Organizations to Human Rapprochement**

*Oman*

*5 February 2013*

Your Excellency, Dr. Habib Al Riyami, Secretary General of Sultan Qaboos High Center for Culture and Science,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- Let me begin by expressing my deep appreciation of and gratitude to the Sultanate of Oman for the kind invitation extended to me to visit this country and indeed to address this important International Symposium.
- It is no coincidence that this visit takes place during the first week of February when we are celebrating the World Interfaith Harmony Week, established by unanimity by the United Nations General Assembly through the adoption of a Resolution upon an initial proposal by H.M. King Abdullah II of Jordan in 2010.
- As you may know, this Resolution on “World Interfaith Harmony Week” reaffirms that mutual understanding and dialogue between all religions, faiths and beliefs constitute important dimensions of a culture of peace.
- Furthermore, the Resolution encourages all States to support, on a voluntary basis, the spread of the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill in the world’s Churches, Mosques, Synagogues, Temples and other places of Worship during the first week of February of every year, based on Love of God and Love of the Neighbor, or based on Love of the Good and Love of the Neighbor, each according to their own religious traditions or convictions.

Excellencies,

- You may ask – but why do we have this “World Interfaith Harmony Week” and for what? Why is the United Nations supporting and promoting such an initiative and others of the kind? Why is an international organization acting as an interface of religions, supporting faith-led efforts? Why are religions relying upon the United Nations to join their efforts in common initiatives?

- This is all about the topic I was asked to address in this Symposium in my capacity as the United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations. I feel very privileged and happy to have the opportunity to share with you some thoughts on these topical issues.
- Let me divide my address in three parts. In the first I will share with you some thoughts on the Alliance of Civilizations. In the second part, I will make some remarks about our times of change and of the paradigm shift in international life. In the third part I will focus on the rising importance of cultural and religious diversity in our 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***1. The Alliance of Civilizations in a nutshell***

- For those who are not that familiar with the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, let me remind you of a number of key facts.
- The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations was initiated by Mr. Kofi Annan in 2006 under the sponsorship of Spain and Turkey. Today it is supported by a community of more than 135 States and intergovernmental organizations and brings together a wide array of partners – civil society actors, religious leaders, scholars, youth, the private sector and media.
- Respect among human beings in all diversities of belief, culture and language as well as tolerance, are fundamental values at the core of the Alliance’s vision.
- It aspires to the ideal of a culture of peace and dialogue among all civilizations on the assumption that “differences within and between societies should be neither feared nor repressed, but cherished as a precious asset of humanity” (UN Millennium Declaration).
- Now regarding the mission of the Alliance, let’s assume that it is twofold: on the one hand, its primary mission is to forge collective political will and to mobilize concerted action at institutional and civil society levels aimed at improving

understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures and religions and, in the process, helping to counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism. On the other hand, the Alliance particular focus is on improving relations within and among Western and Muslim societies and on addressing persistent tensions and divides.

- To achieve its mission, the Alliance develops a multi-layered approach and it primarily operates as an international platform for cooperation and partnerships. The Alliance is all at once an inspirer, a catalyst, a match-maker and a convener.
- Its key policy instruments are National Plans and Regional Strategies for Intercultural dialogue and Cooperation.
- In my view, National Plans and Regional Strategies are fundamental to express the ownership of the Alliance's goals by countries and their commitment to build inclusive, tolerant and pluralist societies as well as to develop between them cooperative relations based on dialogue, better understanding and trust.
- I am more than happy to say that Oman has already developed and presented its National Plan. It is a comprehensive one, covering all aspects and dimensions recommended by the Alliance and in my view, it is an excellent framework for action at country level.
- Let me use this opportunity to pay tribute to His Majesty's vision and action in this regard and to thank the Omani authorities for their commitment to achieve the Alliance's goals in this country by reinforcing further ties between all citizens, promoting dialogue and tolerance and enhancing religious pluralism.
- Going back to the Alliance, let me add that it develops itself a number of programs and activities in its four main fields of action – education, youth, media and migration – that aim at achieving one of the following objectives: preventing intercultural tensions and crises; combating stereotypes, misperceptions,

discrimination and xenophobia; supporting innovative grassroots initiatives that contribute to foster dialogue, understanding, mutual respect, trust and cooperation across divides; raising awareness towards valuing diversity and making cultural and religious diversity as an asset rather than a liability.

- Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, this is my vision of the Alliance and how I have been implementing it in concrete terms for the last five years.
- With a modicum of immodesty, as permitted by the privilege of age, let me tell you that I am happy with the results achieved so far.
- Indeed the challenges ahead are big. But I am pretty sure that the Alliance is the right initiative at the right time.
- All in all, the Alliance is as a pretty new UN soft power tool to address cultural and religious diversity issues as a key dimension of sustainable development, global security and peace.

## **2. *Our times of change marked by a paradigm shift in international life***

Excellencies,

- We all know that forces of globalization are making our states, societies and peoples more interconnected and more interdependent than ever. So in a way we can say that we live in “one world” whereas, on the other hand, our 21<sup>st</sup> century world seems to be a “no man’s world”.
- This two-sided dimension of our world means two things: on the one hand, that many problems are nowadays transnational in scope and that they easily become global, at least as a public cause of contention. From this angle, we have never been

as “global” since we are in permanent connection with the “rest of the world”, following up events everywhere from anywhere.

- On the other hand, in spite of this global connection, there is an increasing emerging diversity and a broad diffusion of power. This means that instead of a more unified world, we have instead a mosaic of uncertain power balances, contested authority and divergent national interests that coexist, compete and are indeed likely to produce conflicts.
- As a result of interdependence, some issues - threats but also challenges and opportunities - that were formerly considered domestic are now redefined as international and their resolution requires a combination of efforts at national, regional and global level.
- Therefore the picture today is that the neat and clear boundaries between foreign policy and other policies are increasingly blurring. This is also the case with the frontiers between bilateral, multilateral and regional fields of diplomatic endeavour. This is a first big change.
- Another big change regards the number of actors in international relations. With globalization, the steady development of the so-called international community and the ever-growing complex transnational networks require a new approach and a new way of making diplomacy.

Excellencies,

- We are really living in a changing world at a juncture of many transitions which are more easily labelled as “post” (post-Westphalian era, post-Cold War or post-September 11) rather than presented as part of a new paradigm featuring the new era to come.

- This would explain why we are basically undergoing a transition era where “anomalies”, shortcomings and a sense of “disconnection” coexist with innovative emerging concepts, tools and practices, new players, forces and voices with a growing influence and a sense of a new emerging world order amid mounting tensions and crises and, mainly, huge uncertainty.
- I will not enter into details on the possible grounds for making the case for becoming a Westphalian or post-Westphalian optimist or, instead for sinking into despair. But, in my view, it is crystal clear that we are witnessing the birth of a new world which will bring a new model of governance and a new global order.
- In this new world, it seems to me that “governance” will gain an increased *glocal* dimension (as a result of an innovative combination between global and local dimensions) and that the relevance of soft power tools will be decisive because of the nature of the challenges that have to be addressed.

### 3. ***The rising importance of cultural and religious diversity***

- Regarding the various challenges ahead, let me focus now on cultural and religious diversity issues that have acquired an ever growing prominence in the political agendas at all levels for a number of reasons.
- Indeed, among these reasons we can mention some global trends such as: permanent migration flows which have changed the population make up of most of the countries around the world; new means of communication and the related expansion of media content; an emerging international system populated by numerous power centers as well as by multiple political cultures, various versions of modernity and competing conceptions of domestic and international order.

- Moreover, Samuel Huntington's prediction that after the end of the cold war we might witness an inter-cultural or inter-religious "clash of civilizations" - which appear to have been confirmed by 9/11 and its tragic worldwide consequences – urgently put cultural diversity issues in a broad sense high on the international agenda.
- In my view, this urgency of tackling cultural and religious diversity and promoting intercultural and inter-religious dialogue remains a big challenge ahead for two main reasons.
- On the one hand, the increasing diversity of our societies – be it ethnic, linguistic, religious or cultural – is generating a certain anxiety among populations, driving communities apart and putting our societies under mounting pressure.
- On the other hand, if we look at the world as it is today, we realize that most of the ongoing conflicts have a cultural dimension at large.
- However, please note that by stressing this dimension of some conflicts, I am in no way making the case for the culturalization of political conflicts.
- Indeed, political problems have to be solved by political means. But it is also quite clear that political disputes, even when settled by a binding political agreement between political actors or governments focused on the issues of contention, have always to be embedded in a much broader process involving people at all levels of society. This is precisely where culture comes in because culture is the way in which our values and our worldviews express themselves and shape our attitudes and behaviour.
- Furthermore, there is a growing recognition that the success of peace processes in many parts of the world depends on the effective engagement with religious communities, who have a great deal of influence over large constituencies.



- So my take is that it is great time to develop further dialogue processes be it at country level, at regional or international level with diverse religious and secular civic and political movements in the framework of mediation, conflict prevention and conflict resolution.
- Even in major politically harsh conflicts, soft power has a strong – although often neglected - role to play because, after all, reconciliation as part of peace-building depends highly on cultural and identity issues, narratives and stories built and exchanged about conflicts, stories that influence their resolution or contribute to their perpetuation.
- Just take the conflict in the Balkans, apartheid in South Africa or the case of East-Timor, three different examples but all of them showing the role of cultural and public diplomacy, as one might say, as a soft power tool to build sustainable peace among people.
- Take also the 60 year-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict and see how much we should invest in soft power to influence the behaviour of the two parties in order to get the desired outcome of peace.

Excellencies,

- In recent times, religion has been perceived again as a source of hostility and hatred. True, to suggest that religion can act as a positive force for peace is not a position that is always easy to defend. From Iraq to Afghanistan, from Kashmir to Sri Lanka, from Syria to Israel and Palestine, it often seems that religion fuels violence and raises the stakes of war. But the fact that religion is a factor in many contemporary crises does not necessarily mean that it is the trigger that initiated them.

- To promote the idea that religion is one of the principle sources of harm and violence in the world is not only unfair; it is also dangerous because it diverts our attention from the political roots of most conflicts as I mentioned above. Discriminations of all sorts, social exclusion, economic injustice, military ambitions, lack of good governance and geo-political rivalries play an important role in the waging of wars. Even in cultural and religious rooted conflicts, most of the times, violence and extremism stem from the exploitation of religion for ideological goals.
- On the contrary, the positive influence of religion can be felt through the core values and common ideals of the great faith traditions, which urge their believers to respect both the most fundamental human value – the right to life of all – and the right to live in dignity. This basic tenet articulates the fundamental requirement for peaceful relations between peoples and societies. It lies at the heart of key international accords and agreements – most importantly, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- Increasingly, religious leaders of all hues are using their influence to promote the peaceful resolution of conflicts through dialogue and political means. Particularly, the role of Muslim leaders in supporting peace efforts and condemning terrorism is often overlooked. But again and again, in every corner of the world, they have come out strongly to denounce violence as antithetical to Islamic teachings.
- We cannot allow that extremism and fundamentalism divert religion from its humanistic path and make it an instrument of violence and terror. We cannot accept that in the name of international fight against terrorism, governments pass off their responsibilities for ensuring citizens a decent life, accordingly to human rights standards that forms the foundation for stable societies and peaceful international relations.

- Political and religious leaders should join further their forces against extremism, totalitarianism and exclusion. Politicians, religions leaders, churches and other confessional organizations should unite their efforts to promote a global alliance for development and peace.
- In this regard, I think that soft power initiatives such as the Alliance of Civilizations have a unique role to play.

Excellencies,

- All our countries face the challenge of enhancing dialogue and understanding between cultures and of supporting peaceful coexistence between peoples. This what I usually call “good governance of cultural and religious diversity”. This is all about preparing the hearts and minds of all individuals and peoples for the fact that globalization forces us to live in a global village where we are permanently confronted with identity dilemmas and diversity issues.
- So, good governance of cultural diversity is a topical issue that has to be tackled in order bind people together and enhance our common sense of belonging to a community that share a common destiny, to foster a culture of peace and prevent conflicts and tensions.
- This is all about learning how to live together in our globalizing word, where clashes anywhere are clashes everywhere and where cultural and religious fault-lines sometimes divide our societies.
- The Alliance of Civilizations makes full sense precisely in this framework - as a new UN soft power tool to address these new “glocal” challenges for security and peace.
- Many thanks for your attention

Excellencies,

- Let me now try to bridge these three parts of my exposé and draw to a conclusion.
- Looking back on history, it is quite easy to agree that diplomacy never had an age of innocence. But considering the roots of modern diplomacy, there was a time when its boundaries were fairly well defined and its actors clearly identified.
- Diplomacy was practised by a country's diplomatic service as its foreign policy "army" with a view to safeguarding national interests in the external arena.
- As you have seen, today the picture is increasingly blurred: no neat boundaries between foreign policy and other policies; no clear frontiers between bilateral, multilateral and regional fields of diplomatic endeavour; no well allocated roles for the various new emerging actors in international relations.
- Therefore, diplomatic practice today faces a triple challenge: it has to deal with transformations in the relations between states; it needs to take into account the changing fabric of transnational relations and the complex network of non State actors; it has to deal with new issues and shape a new agenda.
- In my view, a new way of making diplomacy is rising. It challenges traditional diplomatic culture, it has probably removed some of the certainties of foreign policy practice, but it has already opened up many new opportunities.
- No doubt we are living at a time when the traditional paradigm of diplomacy - as well as that of foreign policy – is shifting.
- "Cultural diplomacy", as we could call the field of action of the Alliance of Civilizations, is part of this new emerging paradigm. It expresses the major role that

culture as a broad concept is playing in inter-state relations and in relations between people.

- Indeed, long before the term “cultural diplomacy” was employed, countries had developed extensive and diversified cultural exchanges and relations.
- But nowadays “cultural diplomacy” has a much wider scope and it includes new priorities such as, for instance, the promotion of human rights and dignity, tolerance and understanding, good governance, the role of religious movements in world affairs and the role of the media in civil society, the fight against extremism, security and peace.
- Secondly, as it deals with soft power, “cultural diplomacy” is clearly a key dimension of a new model of governance.
- The relevance of “soft power” cannot be dismissed nowadays. Not only because of global communication but also because it is the only way of binding people together in a sustainable way.
- I hope that one day we can say that the Alliance contributed to prove it.

Many thanks.