

As delivered



ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

Jorge Sampaio

UN HIGH REPRESENTATIVE FOR
THE ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

ADDRESS TO THE CONFERENCE

A new era for Arab-West relations: social transformations, media freedom
and bridging the gap in mutual perceptions

Cairo

6 April 2011

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished guests,

- First of all, let me greet my dear friends Mr. Amr Moussa and Mr André Azoulay as well as Ms Gunilla Carlsson, to whom I am most grateful for being with us here today.

- Let me also extend my warm greetings to all the participants and tell you how thrilled I am to join you in this journey.

- As a joint initiative of the Arab League, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and the Anna Lindh Foundation, this Forum builds upon the Regional Strategy for Intercultural Dialogue and Cooperation for the Mediterranean, adopted in Malta, last November.

- In a rather amazing anticipation of the current changes, this Strategy which is but a framework for action in this region identifies five objectives and ten priority domains for action.

- Among the objectives mentioned are the following: protection and respect of cultural cultural diversity; religious freedom and pluralism; promotion of dialogue; and fight against intolerance;

- Among the priority domains of actions for 2011-2015, let me single out the four following ones:

- human rights and fundamental freedoms, social cohesion, citizenship and participation;
 - gender equality, equal enjoyment of human rights and equal opportunities for women and men;
 - Intercultural and interreligious dialogue as a tool to promote tolerance, pluralism and fight against extremism and radicalization;
 - Independence of the press, media literacy and respect for plurality of views and fundamental rights;
- We are now firmly committed to finalize an Action Plan implementing these aims and priorities. In doing that, we will be anticipating a new agenda for Millennium Dialogue and Diversity Goals, that Mr. Moussa has just mentioned.
- This agenda will be at the center of the 4th Global Forum of the Alliance, to be held in Doha, next December as matching together democracy, development and dialogue seems to me a most urgent task ahead.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- As a former student who led youth protests, a lawyer who defended political prisoners during dictatorship and as an old retired politician of a country, Portugal, that also made a revolution - which we called the carnation revolution - to bring freedom, human rights, dignity,

development and democracy to its people, I must say that I have been following the ongoing changes in this region with great excitement and hope, but also a certain anxiety.

- Excitement and hope because I sense that Arab societies are at a key turning point that may represent a quantum leap for their development at large. But equally I feel some anxiety because the prospect of some missed opportunities in the region is also looming large. This might put people's lives and aspirations on hold for a while.

- At a time when we see such great discredit over politics and democracy emerging in many developed countries, while other societies are now claiming for freedom, and democracy as a way to achieve dignity and a juster life, let me recall very briefly Indian ground-breaking scholar Amartya Sen's vision of democracy and development as they are quite inspiring to think about the ongoing changes in this region.

- In this regard what I like most in Professor Amartya Sen's approach is his concern in rooting the discussion of democracy in the "vast world" and looking at it beyond "European and American evolution", to avoid seeing it as a kind "of a specialized cultural product of the West".

- For him, democracy is first and foremost political participation, dialogue and public interaction, which is fundamental for preventing sectarian violence and making the appropriate social choices to ensure development in a broad sense. For my work as High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations this perspective is very enriching.

- Against this backdrop, let me stress the need to consolidate national ownership of politics and democracy and to keep public debates focused on the demands of people for freedom, development and justice. This is my first point.

- My second point aims to underline that although each people and each country has its own particularities that make social choices and the search for justice and democracy a non-transferable work on non-exportable goods, however, we live in an interconnected world, we are all interconnected societies and further to that we share a common humanity.

- Therefore there is also room enough for dialogue and cooperation, for exchanges and partnerships. This is particularly important at times of transition when all stakes are open and when sharing views and experiences can help to make the right choices. So communication is key in all this.

Ladies and Gentlemen

- Communication is the fundamental basis of human existence, be it as groups of loose individuals or strong societies.

- But communication can either be a tool for building bridges between communities and societies or a channel to fuel hate and mistrust and ignite violence.

- I grew up at a time shaped by newspapers, radio – and later television – and now I live during – and try to keep up with – a time dominated by the so called social media, marked by the Internet and the likes of Facebook and Twitter.
- But I also grew up in a time - and a country - where the mass media were not free and where we had to make a revolution to be able to have access to free speech in the media and in our lives.
- A lot – as you can see - has changed since the seventies but communication and the ability to express who we are and what we want (or don't want) is still very much in people's agenda.
- And this for one sole reason: people wish to have better lives than their fathers and mothers and communication is a fundamental tool in that process of social change.
- I am recalling the basic role of communication in our lives, because I believe that, in addition to accepting the role of communication in social change, we must also discuss what are the strengths and weaknesses of the kind of communication we are currently experiencing, I mean a “networked communication” and no longer just what we learned to call “mass communication”.
- I truly believe that if we don't fully discuss the pros and cons of what communication is today, we will not be able fully to grasp the conditions

under which it will fulfil the mission of creating ties between people and of achieving a better society, or, on the contrary, when communication is contributing to fuel distrust and break up societies.

- Over the last few months we have witnessed social change in many areas of the world but nowhere else has it had such an impact in our perceptions of the world and the “other” as in the case of the so-called “Arab Spring”.
- Through the eyes of the international media, namely television, and also through social media, be it Facebook or Twitter or the more local versions of social media, we witnessed vast mobilizations of people towards social change.
- Some have called such mobilizations “Twitter” or “Facebook” revolutions, but in doing so they have in many ways forgotten that before social media there is social trust. I mean, trust between people that technology just helps to consolidate. Furthermore, valuing communication with the “others” comes before trust.
- I remember pretty well a conversation I had a few years ago with the late Roger Silverstone, Professor of Media, at the London School of Economics (LSE) who used to insist a lot on the role of the media in shaping our perceptions of the “other” and the need to have more different views of the world available for us, in order to build a better understanding among people.

- In many ways, such a role has been performed by satellite broadcast over the last twenty years. First with English speaking global channels and later with Arab and other languages shared by the populations scattered in many different countries.
- Whether or not we agree with the values shared by individual broadcasters through their emissions, we have to acknowledge that their existence has led all of us to perceive diversity as a common feature of human societies.
- This global broadcast communication changed the way in which we looked upon the “other”, because we were finally able, on a global scale, to see “ourselves” through the eyes of the “other”.
- With satellite television we all became someone else’s “other”. In doing so, I believe, we have grown as individuals and as societies, because we have reached a point where the “other” is no longer just a product of our imagination, but a “real image” that can no longer be ignored in our thoughts.
- It’s true that we can always choose to hate the “other”, but it’s increasingly difficult to do so, when the other “enters” our living room through our television screens – and I would add particularly if the broadcasts reach us through the values of free speech.
- As I have argued, trust is the fundamental dimension that enhances the possibility of fruitful communication, towards the building of better

societies.

- But trust is also the foundation for meaningful institutions in our societies, I mean institutions that are able to become the trustees of individual aspirations.

Ladies and Gentlemen

- I'm talking, as you have by now realized, of political institutions – be it governments, parties, associations, or informal networks with common cultural, economic or political objectives.
- At this point, I would like to return to the perceived role of social media in the events that we have witnessed during the last few months, not just in this region, but everywhere around the world. I would like to add that, following the Arab pattern last month, in my country, Portugal, we had one of the largest demonstrations in many years called by an informal group of young people through Facebook and afterwards amplified by television. It gathered more than 200.000 people on the streets – something never seen since the revolution!

Dear participants

- It is crystal clear that social media add new social functions to the role of the media in our societies and we need to explore further these new opportunities.

- I don't need to recall to this audience that the mass media have always been part of the public space acting as a pool of ideas and values that help people shape their identities.
- However, social media has given us much more than that.
- Social media has created a community of belonging and opened up the possibility of building one's autonomy. By this I mean that social media allowed large groups of people to organize themselves around a common objective to be achieved – social media allowed people to share aims and act together to achieve this goal.
- As my good friend Manuel Castells says, we live in a network society. A society where organizations tend to develop according to network models and to be more flexible, but where they still play a fundamental role in our lives.
- When looking at social media, one wonders whether the very same people who have stood and are able to stand against what they don't agree with, will also be able to join efforts in building new political institutions. Institutions that, probably, will be more flexible than the previous ones. But these institutions have also to be the main pillars of trust and to become trustees of the political aspirations of societies towards a better future.

- Whether this will happen or not it is still an open question. But we need to address this topical issue if we want to make full use of the opportunities provided by the “networked communication” focused on building trust in the “other” and, consequently, on building trust in our societies.
- Without trust and the ability to communicate trust through free mediation the future of a society will always be one of deprivation shaped by fears and, consequently, lacking the ability to achieve real social transformations and bridge gaps in mutual perceptions.
- So I very much hope that this Forum will be helpful in this regard as a first step towards other initiatives that can be developed if this is your recommendation to us.
- In any case, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations is ready to work with you, to develop its own projects such as the Global Finder or shape new initiatives to address new needs.
- Many thanks