

Alliance of Civilizations: “Islam and West” or among Cultures Globally?

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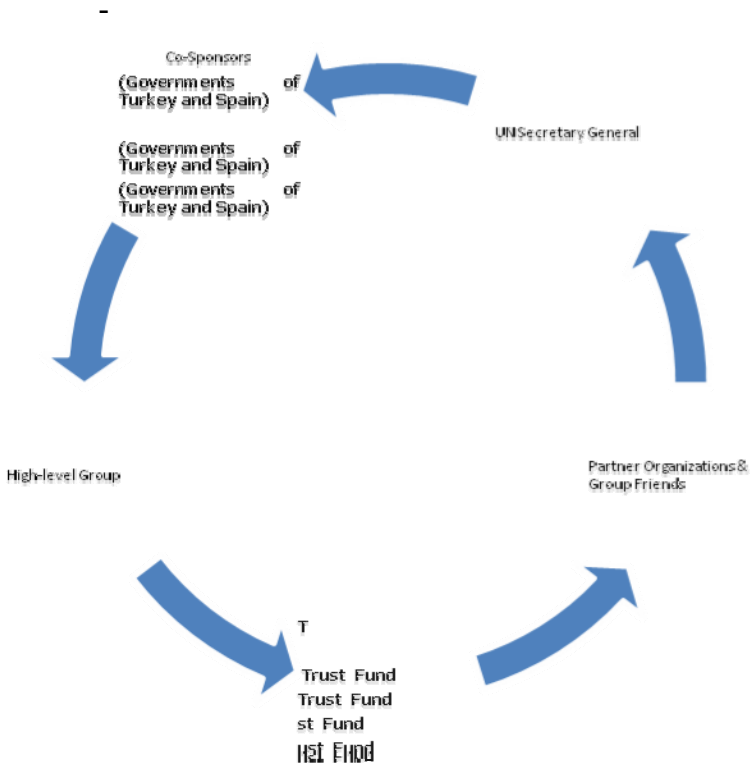
Introduction

The Alliance of Civilizations (AoC) was established in 2005, at the initiative of the Governments of Turkey and Spain, under the auspices of the United Nations. It aims to improve understanding and cooperation among nations and peoples across cultures and religions and, in the process, to help counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism. The AoC is supported by a Group of Friends - a community of over 80 member countries and international organizations and bodies. The AoC cooperates with various partner organizations such as UNESCO, Council of Europe, League of Arab States, ALECSO, ISESCO and United Cities and Local Governments. It is co-sponsored by various academics and statesmen from different parts of the world like Professor Mehmet Aydin, State Minister of Turkish Republic (co-chair); Professor Federico Mayor, President of the Culture of Peace Foundation and former Director-General of UNESCO (co-chair); Mohammad Khatami, former President of Iran; Sheikha Mozah Consort of the Emir of the State of Qatar and Chairperson of the Qatar Bint Nasser Al Missned Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development; Dr. Ismail Serageldin, President, Bibliotheca Alexandria; Dr. Mohamed Charfi, former Education Minister of Tunisia; André Azoulay, Adviser to King Mohammed VI of Morocco; Moustapha Niassé, former Prime Minister of Senegal; Archbishop Desmond Tutu, The Rt. Hon. Archbishop of Cape Town; Hubert Vedrine, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of France; Karen Armstrong, Historian of Religion (United Kingdom); Professor Vitaly Naumkin, President of the International Center for Strategic and Political

Studies and Chair, Moscow State University; Professor John Esposito, Founding Director-Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University and Editor-in-Chief of the Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World; Rabbi Arthur Schneier, President, Appeal of Conscience Foundation & Senior Rabbi, Park East Synagogue; Enrique Iglesias, Ibero-American Secretary-General and former President of Inter American Development Bank; Professor Candido Mendes, Secretary-General, Académie de la Latinité; Dr. Nafis Sadik, Special Adviser to the UN Secretary General; Shobana Bhartia, Managing Director of the Hindustan Times, New Delhi; Ali Alatas, former Foreign Minister of Indonesia; Professor Pan Guang, Director and Professor, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.

The AoC has online facilities to introduce best resources, materials and practices on cross-cultural dialogue and cooperation projects as well a Rapid Response Media Mechanism to supply constructive database and opinion during times of increased tensions around cross-cultural issues. Based on the recommendations made in the AoC High-level Group Report, its work is structured as in the diagram below and around the following three objectives (www.unaoc.org):

Diagram 1. Structure of the Alliance of Civilizations



- Co-sponsors: Governments of Turkey and Spain)
- High-level group: The UN Secretary General established the High-level Group under the co-sponsorship of the Governments of Turkey and Spain. It is composed of 20 prominent leaders in the fields of politics, academia, civil society, international finance, and media from all regions of the world. The High-level group has met five times since 2005, in Palma de Mallorca, Spain between 26-29 November 2005; in Doha, Qatar between 25-28 February 2006; in Dakar, Senegal between 28-30 May 2006; in New York between 5-6 September 2006; and in

Istanbul, Turkey between 12-13 November 2006, respectively. Its recommendations specifically encompass strategies for developing better cooperative frameworks and partnerships that can be nurtured to achieve the goals of the Alliance. It proposes educational approaches and methods for supporting the mobility of young people to promote values of moderation, cooperation and appreciation of diversity.

- Partner Organizations and Group Friends: The AoC cooperates with various partner organizations such as UNESCO, Council of Europe, League of Arab States, ALECSO, ISESCO and United Cities and Local Governments, and is supported by a Group of Friends - a community of over 80 member countries and international organizations and bodies.

The UN Secretary General also established a voluntary Trust Fund, which was recommended in the High-level Group's report. The main objectives of the Trust Fund are to support: (a.) the projects and activities of the AoC; (b.) the activities and outreach initiatives undertaken by the High Representative in his official capacity; and (c.) the AoC Secretariat's core operational and human resources needs.

Objectives:

1. Develop a network of partnership with States, international organizations, civil society groups, and private sector entities that share the goals of the AoC to reinforce their interaction and coordination with the UN system,
2. Develop, support, and highlight projects that promote understanding and reconciliation among cultures globally and, in particular, between Muslim and Western societies. These projects should be related to the four main fields of action of the Alliance: youth, education, media and migration,

3. Establish relations and facilitate dialogue among groups that can act as a force of moderation and understanding during times of heightened cross-cultural tensions.

In pursuing these objectives, the AoC maintains and demonstrates, through its choice of activities, a universal perspective. At the same time a priority emphasis on relations between Muslim and Western societies is warranted given that cross-cultural polarization and mutual fear are most acute within and between these communities and represent a threat to international stability and security (www.unaoc.org).

AoC Activities in Turkey

As one of the two leading sponsors of the Alliance, the Turkish government has been developing and supporting several projects, and has been organizing informative and encouraging meetings in the country. Some of the meetings and the projects are as follows:

1. **The meetings organized by the co-sponsor Professor Mehmet Aydın, Minister of State**
 - Supervisors' Meeting: Professor Halil İnalçık (Bilkent University), Professor Talat Halman (Bilkent University) - Ankara, 5 December, 2005
 - AoC Information Meeting: The Ambassadors of European Union member countries Ankara, 8 December, 2005
 - Supervisors' Meeting: Professor Mehmet Akif Aydın, Professor Mustafa Fayda, Professor Bekir Karlığa, Professor Alpaslan Açıkgenç, Professor Mete Tunçay, Professor Tülin Bumin, Professor Betül Çötüksöken, Fehmi Kuru, Ali Bulaç, Kürşat Bumin- Istanbul, 9 December, 2005
 - International Convention on Migration: Opening speech focusing on the AoC- Istanbul, 8-11 December, 2006

- Press Meeting: Media representatives Ankara, 13 December, 2005
- International Conference on “Women’s Role in the AoC”: Closing remarks of the conference- Istanbul, 28-29 February, 2006
- Maltepe University Conference on AoC: Istanbul, 17 March, 2006
- 18th Islamic Conference: Presentation on “AoC, Living Together and Islam” – Cairo, Egypt, 5-9 April, 2006
- Meeting with the Islamic Conference Youth Representatives: Ankara, 14 April, 2006
- Euro-med and Foro-med Common Meeting on “AoC, Peace in the Middle East, Palestine and Iraq- Cairo, Egypt, 22-23 April, 2006
- Opening Speech on “AoC and Migration Policy” at the International Conference on “Europe, Turkish Diaspora and Migration”: Istanbul, 27 April, 2006
- Speech on “AoC and Political Values” at the NATO Parliaments Assembly- Istanbul, 2 May, 2006
- Briefing with the Representatives of the Organization of European Security and Cooperation in Europe and AoC Co-sponsors – Vienna, Austria, 4 May 2006
- Opening Speech at the Forum Istanbul on “AoC and Living Together” – Istanbul, 11 May, 2006
- Opening Speech at the “Civilizations and World Systems”- Istanbul, 12-14 May, 2006
- Various articles released in various national newspapers and several television programs on different dates between 2005- 2008

2. National Projects

These projects are accessible at

<http://www.medeniyetlerittifaki.gov.tr/projeler.htm>

A. Ministries of State

Project	Year(s)
Modernization of Turkey through the Perspective of the AoC	2009
The Conference on Ataturk's Vision of Culture and Civilization	2008
The Conference on Inter-civilization Dialog and Cultural Diversity: Media's Role	2008
The Conference on Alliance of Civilizations in accordance with Scientific Developments	2009
The Conference on Islamic Civilization and Ottoman Peace	2009
Scholarships	2008-2009
The AoC Academic Board of Publications	2008-2009
Registered Productions and Translations Concerning the AoC	2008-2009
The Project on Media Literacy	2008-2009
Protocol on Publication Ethic Principles	2008-2009
The Seminar on Education for Media	2008-2009
World Children Festival	2008-2009
Projects on Visual Arts	2008-2009
The AoC Media Award	2008-2009
Internet Website and Meeting Point of Civilizations	2008-2009
The AoC and Training Seminars	2008-2009
The World Youth and Dialogue Conference	2009
Three Cultures, Three Cities, Three Sports	2008-2009
The Human Race One Step Two Continents	2008
Meeting of Civilizations: International Antakya- Rome Cycling Tour	2008
Culture of Sport and Peace	2008-2009
The Project on Runners for the Future	2008-2009
The Week of Youth	2008
Middle and South East European Turks – Turkish Youth Exchange Program	2008-2009
Employment Focused Youth Centers	2008-2009
Social Inclusion and Employment of the Youth	2008-2010
The Youth Social Development Program – The Bridge of the Youth Culture	2008-2009

Studies on the Turkish women who are living abroad	2008-2009
Studies on struggling against Human Trade	2008
The AoC and Religious-Cultural Activities	2008-209
Activities of the Experiences on Living Together in Islam	2008
Training Program on Preparing Religious Staff for International Services	2008-2009
Student Exchange	2008-2009
International Theology Program	2008-2009
The Project on Inter-religious Relations in terms of Historical, Doctrinal and Functional Dimensions	2008-2009
Studies on informing Turkish people living abroad on the AoC	2008-2009

B- Ministry of Inner Affairs

Project	Year(s)
Projects which are harmonious with the basic principles of the AoC	2008-2009

C- Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Project	Year(s)
Regional Meetings: Central Asia, Middle East Balkans	2008-2009
Summit Meeting of Africa	2008
Struggling activities against religious, ethnic, cultural discrimination and Islamofobia	2008-2009

D- Ministry of Education

Project	Year(s)
The AoC and Educational Curriculum	2008-2009
Course books	2008-2009

Providing Universal Access/Participation to/in Elementary Education	2008-2009
Participation in the related international projects	2008-2009
Democracy Education and School Councils	2008-2009
The Portal of Accessing Knowledge	2008-2009
Introducing historical heredity and cultural values to students	2008-2009
Academic Activities	2008-2009
The Centers of Fight Prevention and Solution	2008-2009
Dialog Studies	2008-2009
Student Exchange	2008-2009
Comprehensive Student Project	2008-2009
Scholarships	2008-2009
Cultural and Educational Visits	2008-2009

E- Ministry of Labor and Social Security

Project	Year(s)
Activities related to migration and immigrants	2008-2009
Diagnosis and National Action Plan on the Employment of the Youth	2008-2009
Project on the Introduction to the Vocational Education and Employment	2008-2009
Project on Women- Men Equality in Employment and Increasing Women Employment	2008-2009
Intercultural Apprenticeship Project	2008-2009

F- Ministry of Culture and Tourism

Project	Year(s)
Exhibition of the Inter-civilization Interaction	2008-2009
Exhibition of the Culture of Living Together from Ottoman to Republic	2008
Exhibition of the Handwritten Manuscripts and Rare Works of Art	2009
Cultural Bridge Program	2008-2013

AoC Art Activities	2008
Mevlana Documentary	2008-2009
Documentary on the Anatolia Culture and Civilizations	2008-2009
2008 Frankfurt Book Fair Host Country-Turkey	2008
European Capital of Culture- Istanbul	2008-2010
The meeting of the Mediterranean Countries National Library Directors	2008
Islamic History of Science and Technology Museum	2008-2009
Tourist Guide Training	2008-2009
Youth Tourism	2008-2009
Map of Religious Tourism and Religious-Cultural Activities	2008-2009

G- Ministry of Environment and Forest

Project	Year(s)
Regional Collaborative Meetings Concerning Water	2008
Regional Collaborative Meetings Concerning Environment and Forestation	2008-2009

The activities stated above show how much the AoC is valued by Turkey. Almost every section of the Turkish government either developed or supported a project which contributes to the dissemination of the principles introduced by the Alliance.

Discussion on the Approaches of the Alliance

It is an undeniable fact that most of the global problems concerning international and intercultural relations stem from educational problems. Unfortunately, in most of the developing countries there is a serious education problem. Only a minority of people receives good quality education and consequently has greater chance to have a good career in life. However, the majority has to struggle for better educational opportunities for their families. Recep Tayyip Erdogan (2006), the Prime Minister

of Turkey, points out that terrorism and violence are fed through illiteracy. Therefore various international treaties and huge projects are aimed at overcoming the growing global illiteracy problem. Lisbon Strategies, Bologna Process, the EU Life Long Learning Projects and the PISA projects are only some of them.

When the objectives of the AoC are examined it is seen that in some documents it identifies the focus group of the civilizations as “the West” and “the Islam”. For example, Jorge Sampaio, High Representative for the AoC (2007, a), underlines the significance of bridging West-Islam divide and states that “... the emergence of the contemporary trend towards extremism is not specific problem of the relations between Western and Muslim societies”. However, Sampaio (2007,b) also points out that the Alliance deals with some major problems of our times such as how to bridge cultural and religious fault lines dividing societies; how to improve mutual respect and understanding between different communities and societies. Similarly, in the same meeting it is also stressed that the top priority of the AoC is to work in closer collaboration with all partners, both within and outside the UN system. Asian, Pacific, African, European and Latin America regional bodies need to be mobilized to make the AoC a success. When these two different conceptual approaches are compared and contrasted, it can be seen that there is a confusion of concepts in the definition of “alliance”. Is it an alliance of the West and the Islam or an alliance of different religions and cultures without special reference to a particular region for a global peace? In the same vein Zapatero, the Prime Minister of Spain (2008), maintains that “The fact is, if the Alliance of Civilizations is a concept of a strategic, global nature, it will only be a success; it will only last over time, if we are able to give it a practical, specific content”. However, this specific content must also be planned in a global scale, covering all living cultures and societies.

It cannot be claimed that religions belong to certain regions in the world. If the subject matter is Islam, it has to cover all regions of the world including the West owing to millions of Muslim citizens in the Western countries. If the subject matter is civilizations, then the discussion for the global and universal understanding of the Alliance should be based on the East, the

North, the South even the North-east, South-west, not only on the West. Zapatero (2008) focuses on the significance of the role of the Alliance saying “...it does want to contribute to isolating extremist and intolerant discourses on the part of those who try to utilize religion or culture for political purposes. It does aspire to build bridges that can help us to manage the differences existing in the world, particularly those linked to religious or cultural issues”. Therefore it should be remembered that for a global peace there must be a global understanding of the “Alliance” covering all cultures and all religions regardless of their location.

Sampio (2007, c) reports that Madeline Albright argues that the resurgence of religious feeling will continue to influence world events, and he also maintains that 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. Erdogan, the Prime Minister of Turkey (2005), stresses the fact that in the essence of cultures or religions there can be no motives of violence and conflict. Sampio (2008) says that “to prevent polarization, confrontation, conflict and intolerance and to develop a culture of peace, understanding, tolerance and respect, we need universal values grounded on the common humanity shared by every man, woman and child on earth, regardless of linguistic, racial, religious and other differences”. Similarly, on the website of the AoC (www.unaoc.org) in the Recommended Readings page it is reported that in the Exploring Misconceptions about the Islamic World section, there is a Daily Lesson Plan on the AoC by the New York Times Learning Network. In this lesson, students learn about a United Nations initiative to create the AoC to resolve conflict between the East and West. They then discuss and dismantle a number of misconceptions about the Muslim world. Erdogan, the Prime Minister of Turkey underpins two significant facts as in the following:

1. We have to recognize humanitarian values rather than power based relations;

2. Every culture has its unique contribution through universal values to the development history of the world

Suggestions

It is not fair to claim that there is a “clash of civilizations” in the world. “Alliance of Civilizations” should be seen as an effort to establish and maintain sustainable world peace for the future generations. Surely, it is not possible to pretend that there are no conflicts in most part of the world including the East and the West. These conflicts may stem from political or economical reasons. Therefore if there is “clash”, this is not a “clash of civilizations”. This is a “clash of politicians” or a “clash of economies”. For instance, it is reported that “Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero has come under criticism for posing with a Palestinian scarf on his shoulders after accusing Israel of using force "abusively" to defend itself”. Despite the fact that a scarf represents Islamic beliefs, the reaction to Zapatero is against Palestinian attitude in the region and this reaction is on behalf of Israel’s policy in the Middle East; not on behalf of Christian or Jewish beliefs. Moreover, both Palestine and Israel are in the same region; one is not in the West and the other is not Islam, and when the problems between these two countries are solved, it will simply mean that the problem between Israel and Palestine is solved.

Undoubtedly, labeling some regions as “Islam” or “Christian” means underestimating the power of the loving hands of God. For instance, a big percentage of the population of Turkey is Muslim but Turkey cannot be called an Islamic country. Turkey is a young modern republic which appreciates democracy and secularism with its Muslim, Christian, Jewish and other citizens. And as the citizens of this young republic, Turkish people always value the great Statesman, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s motto, “Peace at home, peace in the world”. Similarly, the Western countries cannot be labeled as “Christian countries” due to their Muslim, Jewish, Hindu or other citizens. Countries have their governing systems and people living in a country have their beliefs called religion. Despite the fact that religion is a

common thick red line in the lives of human beings, countries should not be labeled in accordance with the characteristics of individuals however big portion of the population it may be.

Improving educational facilities concerning cultural diversity not only in the developing countries but also in the developed countries will be the most effective means of action for inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue, mutual respect and understanding. Most people in the developed Western countries assume that Islam is a threat to their social life. However, in Islam, just like all other religions, fighting is forbidden. Muslims are guided to love all creatures and they are reminded that a human being is the most beloved creature of God. In the holy book of Muslims, Koran, Christ is introduced as one of the prophets who helped human beings find the way of the God. And all Muslims believe in Christ, which is not known commonly by most of those who have developed Islamofobia. Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of Britain (2006) introduces Koran through his statement "The most remarkable thing about reading the Koran - in so far as it can be truly translated from the original Arabic - is to understand how progressive it is. I speak with great diffidence and humility as a member of another faith. I am not qualified to make any judgments. But as an outsider, the Koran strikes me as a reforming book, trying to return Judaism and Christianity to their origins, rather as reformers attempted with the Christian Church centuries later. It is inclusive. It extols science and knowledge and abhors superstition. It is practical and way ahead of its time in attitudes to marriage, women and governance".

Likewise, Käser (2008) reports that "Analysis on the Media Report of the AoC illustrates that western journalists are frequently unfamiliar or only very superficially informed about Muslim culture, which often leads to misunderstandings and biased coverage focusing on marginal systems such as radical Islam while ignoring the vast majority of Muslims". Tony Blair also says (2006) "There are those - perfectly decent-minded people - who say the extremists who commit these acts of terrorism are not true Muslims. And, of course, they are right. They are no more proper Muslims than the Protestant bigot who murders a Catholic in Northern Ireland is a proper Christian."

Providing sufficient education for all, both in the developing and in the developed countries about different cultures, will contribute to internationally collaborative fight against terrorism. It should not be forgotten that terrorists cannot represent a society or a culture or a religion.

When the conflicts in different parts of the world are closely examined, besides the education based reasons, it is also possible to realize that globalization matters due to the fear of homogenization and question of identity. From this viewpoint it is safe to assume that conflicts can partially be avoided through letting each culture find itself in the diversity. From this perspective Blair (2006) points out “Which brings me to the fundamental point. ‘We’ is not the West. ‘We’ are as much Muslim as Christian or Jew or Hindu. ‘We’ are those who believe in religious tolerance, openness to others, to democracy, liberty and human rights administered by secular courts”. Therefore all political leaders, representatives of international and regional bodies, civil society groups and foundations should introduce some practical and feasible plans for promoting cross-cultural understanding globally.

Considering the global scope of the objectives of the Alliance we should focus on democracy, peace and collaboration for every single world citizen whoever s/he may be and wherever s/he may live. S/he can be a shepherd in the highlands of Sweden, a business person in Manhattan island of New York in the USA, a driver in Lagos in Nigeria or a student in Manila in the Philippines.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, it is a striking fact that in some parts of the world due to economic, social and political reasons, there are financial, educational and health problems which need urgent solution. As a result of such problems, sometimes cross-cultural problems may occur. The AoC has a significant role in building bridges between societies as well as in promoting mutual understanding and tolerance through reducing tensions and hostility within and among societies. The UN Secretary General, Co-sponsors

(Governments of Turkey and Spain), High level Group, Partner Organizations and Group Friends have exerted great effort in pursuing the objectives of the Alliance.

In light of the discussion in this study, it is safe to conclude that we need self-criticism, mutual understanding and dialogue, but the conceptualization of the problems should be revised and the general policy in the problem solving approaches of the AoC should be determined accordingly. The action plans have to focus on the consequent answer to the following question: Is this an alliance of "Islam and the West" or "among cultures globally"?

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