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## **TURKEY: A BRIDGE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST AND ITS CATALYST ROLE IN ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS INITIATIVE**

### **Summary**

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, co-sponsored by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, founded the Alliance of Civilizations – an international organization aimed at bridging cultural gaps and preventing future conflicts between the West and the Muslim world. The idea was officially accepted by Kofi Annan and sponsored by United Nations in 2005. Turkish co-sponsorship was both symbolically and factually valuable, and constituted a strong political signal. The paper aims to present the main ideas for an Alliance of Civilizations, its objective, scope and activities with specific attention to Turkey as a unique country playing a symbolic role between Islamic world and the West.

**Key words:** The Alliance of Civilization, Turkey, Spain, clash of civilizations, religion.

**JEL codes:** F5

### **Introduction**

In the wake of the September 11 attacks where religious fundamentalism has become one of the main sources of instability and violence, the question of dialogue among cultures and civilization achieved an unprecedented importance in international context. Respectively, there emerged a highly significant intellectual discussion among scholars to find remedies how to prevent the emergence and nurturing future prejudices that may challenge prospects for future peace in post 9/11 world.

There used to be a common belief and considerable agreement amongst intelligentsia that Samuel Huntington's notorious Clash of Civilizations (Huntington, 1997) theory was appropriate as it was predicted the next pattern of conflicts in post-cold world that will be culture or civilization base. Yet, Huntington's Clash of Civilization in the turmoil of hectic post 9/11 years notably challenged by intellectuals and scholars both from the West and Muslim world. Along with many other scholarly works, it was Mohammed Khatemi's Dialogue among Civilizations (Rapadi, 2014) which is appreciated

to be a strong rhetoric and anti-thesis against the Clash of Civilizations thesis that seeded the idea of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) initialized by Spain and co-sponsored by Turkey.

The article is about the Alliance of Civilizations initiative with a special focus on Turkey's role in the Alliance. The main objective of the article is to discuss Republic of Turkey's engagement with the project as a Muslim majority and a secular democratic state that displays a bridge role between Islam and the West, particularly aftermath of September 11 attacks. The paper suggests an original contribution to a better understanding of the civilization discourse in the realm of international relations in the context of United Nations Alliance of Civilizations stressing the performance of Turkey.

Regardless of the fact that Spain co-sponsored the establishment of the Alliance of Civilizations the hypothesis of the paper lays on the argument that similar projects in international level are vital in terms of prospects for future peace both in the Middle East and in the globe as religion based radicalism constitutes a serious threat against international security.

## The Roots

Prior to September 11 attacks, it was former Iranian President Mohammed Khatami who introduced the idea of Dialogue among Civilizations and inspired the Alliance of Civilizations as an antithesis against Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis and Hans Köchler is believed to be the first scholar who coined the idea of dialogue among civilizations (Köchler, 1985). In a letter that Khatami addressed to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) he proposed to organize an international conference to discuss the perspectives of dialogue between different civilizations in 1972 (Köchler 1985). As a natural consequence of Khatami's intellectual engagement United Nations entitled 2001 as the "United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations". In the vision part of the charter it is stated that:

"The act of dialogue among cultures and civilizations faces multiple theoretical and practical questions. Fundamental questions regarding civilization and culture, and the intellectual and scientific preoccupations in this regard should not be underestimated. I would like, however, to emphasize that the main objective for this initiative of dialogue among cultures and civilizations is in fact to initiate a new paradigm in international relations and those among human beings in our contemporary world. This necessity will be clearer when we compare it with the other paradigms which currently form the basis of international relations. It is through a fundamental and structural critique of these paradigms that the *raison d'être* for this new paradigm is identified" (Rapadi 2014).

While the mission is stressed as:

- The foundation aims to build upon the successes of the United Nations year and further implement the recommendations of the relevant UN resolutions;
- The Foundation believes that dialogue among civilisations is conducive to mutual understanding, tolerance, peaceful coexistence and international cooperation and security (Rapadi 2014).

As for the objectives:

1. promoting and facilitating the peaceful resolution of conflicts and/disputes;
2. reconciling tensions between cultures, countries and religions;
3. promoting and facilitating the much needed dialogue between Muslim societies and other societies around the world;
4. contributing to academic research and enriching the wider debate around peace in the world (Rapadi 2014).

Eventually the scope of activities is mentioned as follows:

1. the organization of diverse cultural, artistic, and scientific events including debates, fora, symposia and seminars designed to encourage exchange between cultures and civilizations in the spirit of the Foundation;
2. maintaining, and when needed, initiating regular communication with experts in the field as well as with all other foundations or associations with similar or complementary objectives;
3. the publication of articles and reports resulting from research carried out by the Foundation's committees and debates at its workshops (Rapadi 2014).

As mentioned above, the initial seeds of creating an alliance against future clashes among cultures, religions or civilizations were planted by former Iranian President and following Madrid attacks in 2004 the idea matured to the Alliance of Civilizations initiated by former Spanish President Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapotero and co-sponsored by former Turkish PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

## **The Alliance of Civilization: Structure**

### **The Secretariat, the High Representative**

In order to realize the high level of coordination of the Alliance a Secretariat within the body of United Nations was established in New York, United States of America. On one hand the Secretariat engaged with routine activities of the Alliance while on the other hand engaged with other related issues to promote the ideas of the Alliance through media and education or forums.

In April 2007, the former President of Portugal, H.E. Mr. Jorge Sampaio, was designated by the UN Secretary-General as High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations. Thereon, the Secretariat drew up an Implementation Plan which it submitted to the Secretary General in June 2011 upon the approval of the High Representative. On 28 September 2012 in New York, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon announced the appointment of Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, the President of the 66th UN General Assembly as the new High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations as of 1 January 2013.

## **Preliminary work**

In order to realize the main objectives of the Alliance former Secretary General of United Nations Kofi Annan assembled a High Level Group consisting of twenty eminent scholars from academia, civil society, religious leadership and the media. Mohammad Khatemi, Prof. Pan Guang and Arthur Schneier were among these scholars. The group have met in different places every year submitting reports and action plans to resolve misconceptions and misunderstanding between Muslim world and the West.

## **Major Projects**

Taking into account the fact that media plays a crucial role in the future of mutual dialogue to prevail hate and misunderstanding among Muslims and the West the Secretariat of the Alliance has initialized media oriented projects to disseminate idea of intercultural communication in global media environment. In addition to that, so as to spread tolerance and peaceful understanding the Alliance sponsored many education activities among youth via grants and scholarships. Similar projects dedicated primarily to youth organizations to advance cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue in local, regional, international and global level. Apart from the media and youth activities the Alliance paid a special attention to education. In order to prevent future conflicts among diverse cultures and civilizations the alliance created and disseminated education materials all around the world. Similar activities mainly encompassed learning about diverse religions and faiths with a stress on tolerance and civic education.

## **Annual Forums**

Apart from realized various activities in different realms the Alliance hosted annual forums where the head of states and governments as well as ministers and statesmen along with the representatives of NGO's, religious

authorities, scholars and media members found a platform to exchange views and discuss ideas related to Alliance's progress and possible future prospects

### **2008 Madrid Forum**

The first forum of the Alliance of Civilization was held in Madrid in 2008. The Madrid forum evidenced a high level participants all around the world. Officially it was hosted by Spanish government where during the meetings to promote global understanding political leaders, ministers, senior officials, religious authorities exchange their views to achieve global understanding and peace. The result of the Forum has been announced and a memoranda of understanding signed with leading international organizations like Arab League and Council of Europe.

### **2009 Istanbul Forum**

The second forum of the Alliance was held in Istanbul in 2009. Around two thousand participants all around the world met in Istanbul to review activities of the Alliance and discuss recent events since last meeting. The Forum served as an opportunity to take stock of initiatives developed by the Alliance, to showcase practical projects in collaboration with civil society and corporate partners and to launch new programs.

## **Turkey: A Bridge between East and West**

Turkey is often appreciated to be a bridge between East and West, Eastern and Western civilizations as well as between Islam and Christianity. It is a predominant Muslim country ruled by democracy. It is the only Muslim majority member of North Atlantic Treaty Organization as well as an ambitious candidate state for full EU membership. It displays a unique catalyst role between Islam world and the West as it constitutes a good sample where Muslims may enjoy their religious freedom under the rule of a democratic regime. Turkey's experience with democratization or the so-called Turkish model is believed to be good evidence where a modern moderate Muslim state model may work. The main standing point of the Turkish model discourse lays on the fact Turkey is a secular and a democracy with its liberal market economy and its close ties with the West. There is a common belief among scholars and researchers – both in Turkey and abroad – Turkish experience maybe a source of inspiration for the Middle East states as this very experience has been successfully applied in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Apart from that, following the Justice and Development Party rule since 2002 the unique feature of Turkish model gained a deeper meaning as Turkey started to be ruled by a post – Islamist government the charter members of

which is constituted of observing Muslims governing a nation founded on the principles of democratic secularism. Therefore, it may be argued that it was a quite appropriate decision to take Turkey under AKP rule as a co-sponsor to the Alliance of Civilization project to avoid future clashes among civilizations.

## Turkey and Alliance of Civilizations Initiative

As mentioned previously the Alliance of Civilization initiative was launched by Spain and Turkey in 2005 and later adopted by United Nations. Throughout the post 9/11 the fear and polarization was highly prevalent whilst the relation between Islamic world and the West was at odds. Turkey's engagement with the Alliance mostly focused to create a great coalition in the course of war against radical terrorism where Turkey suffered a lot.

Besides Ankara under the rule of Justice and Development Party was trying to foster tolerance and understanding between Muslim world and the West while fighting against Islamophobia. Thanks to sincere contributions of Turkey the Alliance become a central initiative advocating interreligious and intercultural communication and dialogue. Through its engagement with the Alliance Turkey searched to galvanize international action against religious extremism through fostering international, intercultural and interreligious dialogue and cooperation where it displayed an intermediary role to defuse tension between West and Islam world.

## Conclusions

The post 9/11 troublesome world was under the rule of regional and global crisis burnt with religious extremism threatening world peace and security. Following US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq not only the Middle East but also all around the world the tension and uncertainty encompassed the world exacerbated by religious outrage and tension. To create a platform privileging peace and favoring cooperation, boosting coexistence as well as mutual understanding to confront hate and hostility among Muslims and the West was imperative. Therefore the idea of creating an Alliance of Civilization against religious extremism and Islamophobia was obligatory to avoid future conflicts among cultures was a proper initiative.

As a matter of fact Turkey's co-sponsorship to the Alliance as a country displaying a bridge role between Islam and the West was highly appreciated. Turkey under the rule of post Islamist Justice and Development Party as the co-sponsor of the initiative undertook various engagement to boost intercultural and interfaith dialogue to prevail global peace against radical terrorism. Actually, Justice and Development Party's initiatives was symbolically

important in as much as Turkey as the Party constituted to be a sample of rule of observing Muslims in a democratic country.

Regardless of the fact that Spain suspended its activities due to government changes within the frames of the Alliance, the establishment and activities of the Alliance of Civilizations and other similar initiatives as argued previously in international level are vital in terms of prospects for future peace in the Middle East as religious radicalism constitutes a serious threat against international security. Charles Hebdo, Paris and latest Brussels attacks one more time barely proved the reality that religion inspired terror still consists a thereat not only for the Middle East which suffers under the atrocities of so- called Islamic State (ISIS) but also Europe and other parts of the world. Therefore, instead of appreciating similar initiatives as a project of some definite states, the head of states and governments as well as ministers, statesmen along with the representatives of NGO's, religious authorities, scholars and media members should encourage similar initiatives in international arena to boost peace among nations.

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## Turcja – most łączący Zachód ze Wschodem i jego rola jako katalizatora w inicjatywie Sojuszu Cywilizacji

### Streszczenie

W następstwie ataków z dnia 11 września, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, wspierany przez Recepta Tayyip Erdogana, założył Sojusz Cywilizacji – międzynarodową organizację mającą na celu zmniejszanie różnic kulturowych i przeciwdziałanie przyszłym konfliktom pomiędzy Zachodem a Muzułmanami. Pomysł założycielski został oficjalnie zatwierdzony przez Kofiego Annana i wsparty przez ONZ w 2005 roku. Tureckie poparcie miało wartość zarówno symboliczną jak i rzeczywistą, i było silnym sygnałem politycznym.

Praca ta ma na celu przedstawienie głównych założeń Sojuszu Cywilizacji, jej celów, skali i zakresu działań ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Turcji, jako wyjątkowego państwa odgrywającego symboliczną rolę w relacjach świata Islamskiego z Zachodem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Sojusz Cywilizacji, Turcja, Hiszpania, zderzenie cywilizacji, religia.

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