



ADDRESS

BY

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PRIME MINISTER
OF THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY**

AT

THE 63RD UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

ON

**AGENDA ITEM 45:
THE CULTURE OF PEACE**

13 NOVEMBER 2008

Mr. Chairman,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Distinguished Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to extend my heartfelt greetings to you all. We are gathered here today in order to consider one of the most sensitive issues facing our world. I am greatly honored to be able to address you from this rostrum, on the Interfaith Dialogue initiated by my brother, His Majesty the King of Saudi Arabia.

The participation of such a high number of Heads of State and Government in this High Level Meeting has justified the personal interest that His Majesty the King has taken in the issue of interfaith dialogue. Naturally, we are all aware of the underlying cause which has brought together such a distinguished gathering; this cause is the alarming level of polarization, lack of understanding and discrimination prevalent in the international community. The precise nature of the steps that will be taken in order to ensure respect for diversity, and their level of success, will have a profound effect on the character of international relations in the decades to come.

It is evident that the behavioral norms of 20th century are now out of date and that in these "modern times", our world faces numerous new risks and threats. Terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, illicit trafficking and organized crime have assumed global dimensions. While enormous advances have been achieved in production and prosperity, we cannot claim that the prosperity has been shared equitably or that our world has become safer. In light of the tragic experiences we all had to endure, I would maintain that "either we are all secure, or none of us is secure".

This is especially true in the case of terrorism. Taking this opportunity, I would like to stress the following point in particular: We should now put an end to perceptions of "good terrorists" and "bad terrorists", and avoid providing refuge to "terrorists of others". Terrorism is crime against humanity, regardless of its source, pretext or ambition. We believe that "if a person slays a man, it will be as if he had slayed the whole of mankind; and if a person saves a man from death, it will be as if he had saved the whole of mankind".

The risks and threats I mentioned earlier require international cooperation and solidarity more than ever. Unfortunately, we have not achieved much success in displaying a common political will against these challenges. We have so far failed to overcome the polarization, lack of understanding and discrimination in the international community. We need to achieve greater progress in this direction.

Mr. President,
Distinguished Colleagues,

We should all note with satisfaction the steady increase in the number of individuals who perceive the need for respect for diversity and therefore wish to launch new initiatives or to contribute to existing efforts. We therefore welcome the initiative which my dear friend and brother, His Majesty the King of Saudi Arabia has launched in the field of theological dialogue. I wish to thank him again for his efforts. Turkish theologians have participated in both the meeting of Muslim scholars held in Mecca in June 2008 and the subsequent conference of dialogue co-hosted with Spain in Madrid in July 2008. This initiative will no doubt make a major contribution to the on-going efforts for dialogue between faiths and cultures.

I believe that the exchange of views taking place as part of this High Level Meeting yesterday and today should be considered as an indication of the heightened sensitivity of the international community. The other initiatives in this field also represent individual examples of the growing acknowledgement of this message and the greater acceptance of the fact that polarization and confrontation are detrimental. I am deeply grateful to all these initiatives and their supporters. I wish to name, in particular, the Dialogue between Faiths and Cultures for Peace pursued by Pakistan and the Philippines, and the conference organized by Kazakhstan on the theme of "Common World: Progress through Diversity".

Owing to her special geographic location, rich history and cultural heritage, Turkey feels an additional sense of responsibility. We are therefore greatly attached to the Alliance of Civilizations initiative which we launched together with H.E. Mr. Zapatero, the Prime Minister of Spain.

The Alliance has now become a UN initiative under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General. He has appointed the former President of Portugal, His Excellency Jorge Jampaio, as the High Representative of the Alliance, while the Group of Friends set up at the UN has continued to grow. The Alliance of Civilizations, as of today, includes 78 countries and 13 international organizations. These achievements are an indication of the growing support of the international community for the principles and aims of the Alliance of Civilizations.

The Alliance of Civilizations has proved that the fundamental values which bring us together, such as democracy, human rights and rule of law, are stronger than our cultural differences.

We need the contribution of all the existing initiatives in this field, in order to limit the potential danger posed by extremists. We should work together to ensure the success of these initiatives. I regard these efforts as mutually reinforcing and complementary initiatives, rather than competing endeavours. Each of these initiatives should follow its own path and sustain its contribution in the specific area where it has a comparative advantage.

The Alliance of Civilizations will seek to enhance its contribution under the umbrella of the United Nations and work towards ensuring that official policies and statements reflect a moderate and responsible approach. Members of the Group of Friends will endeavour, through their National Strategies, to inform their own public opinion on the aims of the Alliance and to remedy the current shortfalls in dialogue by developing joint projects, especially in the fields of youth, media, education and migration.

We need a consistent vision, in order to be able to face the future with confidence. In this vein, one of the most pressing issues concerns the compatibility of freedom of expression and respect for religious beliefs. Freedom of expression is one of the indispensable elements of our civilization and the foundation on which the other freedoms rest. However, I believe that this freedom should be exercised responsibly and in a manner which would reinforce the culture of tolerance and co-existence. That is because freedom of conscience and religion and respect for religious values are also among the fundamental principles of our civilization.

What I have in mind here is not the right to criticize or to question. The right to question is sacred in free societies. However, we regret to see that there is a very thin line sometimes between freedom of expression and provocative attitudes calling for discrimination and even violence. The recent developments such as the "Cartoon Crisis", for instance, are sometimes too provocative to be explained in the context of freedom of expression.

We are under an absolute obligation to reflect upon the impact of such expressions within different cultures, religions and regions. Only then could we achieve a better understanding of each other, respect each other's sensitivities and avoid the mistake of branding as the "other, those who are, merely different. I should also point out that, for global peace, we also need to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and to stabilize Iraq. We should be able to demonstrate, through our actions and statements, that there is a common bond of civilization for the entire mankind, on the basis of universal values, regardless of ethnic, linguistic and religious affiliation.

Despite all the narrative, efforts and initiatives to the contrary, we will continue to proclaim the following: Co-existence is possible. And so is to see diversity as a source of enrichment. Confrontation is the easy option, while conciliation is the difficult one. I firmly believe that we will accomplish the difficult option through our genuine and determined efforts.

I wish to conclude my statement by inviting you all to Istanbul in 2009. You might be aware that the Second Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations will be held on 2-3 April 2009 in this city which embraces two continents and three monotheistic faiths. I will be honoured to host you in Istanbul and to provide the opportunity to continue our deliberations at a location which overlooks the Bosphorus. I thank my dear brother, His Excellency the King of Saudi Arabia, for initiating this gathering and wish you all the success.

My respects to you all.