



# World Chronicle

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Deputy Director of the Office of the Alliance of Civilizations

**MODERATOR:** Tony Jenkins

## Alliance of Civilizations

Events of recent years have heightened the sense of a widening gap and lack of mutual understanding between Islamic and Western societies – an environment that has been exploited and exacerbated by extremists in all societies. The Alliance of Civilizations initiative is intended as a coalition against such forces, as a movement for mutual respect for religious beliefs and traditions, and as a reaffirmation of humankind's increasing interdependence in all areas – from the environment to health, from economic and social development to peace and security.

In this edition of World Chronicle, Shamil Idriss, Deputy Director, Office of the Alliance of Civilizations, talks about how to bridge divides and overcome prejudice, misconceptions, misperceptions, and polarization which potentially threaten world peace.

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**ANNOUNCER:** From the United Nations in New York, an interview programme on major global issues. This is **World Chronicle**. And here is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

**JENKINS:** Hello, I'm Tony Jenkins. Last July, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced the launch of "Alliance of Civilizations", an initiative intended to respond to the need of a committed effort by the international community to bridge divides and overcome prejudice, misconceptions, misperceptions, and polarization which potentially threaten world peace. In September, the Secretary-General announced the composition of the High-Level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations. Among the nominees, Federico Mayor – former Director-General of UNESCO, Ayatollah Mohamed Khatami – former President of Iran, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Professor John Esposito from Georgetown University, Rabbi Arthur Schneier and Enrique Iglesias, former President of the Inter-American Development Bank. Recently, the High-Level Group met in Palma de Mallorca, Spain, to develop a plan of action and to tackle practical issues. Our guest today is the Deputy Director of the Office of the Alliance of Civilizations, Shamil Idriss, a U.S. national, who was the Senior Adviser for Islamic-Western relations Programme for the international conflict resolution organization – *Search for Common Ground*. Mr. Idriss, welcome to World Chronicle.

That was quite a lengthy introduction. Now were talking about some fairly major things here. It seems to me that this initiative was born out of the fear that we may be witnessing or maybe about to witness a major clash of civilizations. To what an extent do you think that is true? Did you see the evidence towards that? To what extent, for example, to you believe that your average Christian blames Islam; your average Muslim blames Christianity for some of the problems in the world today.

**IDRISS:** Well first, thank you for having me. I think the way you look at the world will largely define the messages you want to pick up. If you want to look at the world as destined for a clash of civilizations of the kind that you are talking about, then you can see ample evidence of it. If you want to look at the direction the world is going in and look for signs hope and look for cooperative engagements, collaborative engagements, Muslim/Christian cooperation and efforts at understanding, you can

find that. I don't see any inevitability whatsoever in the clash of civilizations thinking, but I do think, as that kind of notion gets popularized for people, it can become sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**JENKINS:** But, you know, I've seen opinion polls that try to take the temperature of public opinion, for example in the Arab world – what do they think of the west? I'm not sure if we've done the same to see what our people think of them. But it wouldn't surprise me. Do you see those sorts of polls? What are the trends? Are they negative?

**IDRISS:** Well it depends on which polls you consult. Again, you can see very negative trends and very positive, so I'll give you an example. I mean the kind of polls I imagine you are talking about, I mean the kind of things that you see. Here where we're having this conversation for instance, in the United States; an increased fear, suspicion and distrust of Muslims and Islam on the one hand. On the other hand, you have never seen so much over enrollment in programs, in educational courses, majors in colleges and universities on Islam, people wanting to learn Arabic, people trying to understand a great deal more. As a Muslim/American myself I can tell you I have never been invited to so many synagogues and churches to talk to people about Islam. People coming, sometimes with some suspicion, but also looking to understand. And in the Arab world, what you get only makes up less than 20 percent of the Muslim world population wise, we always have to remember that. But in the Arab world, where there are some very long standing grievances on how Muslim populations, they feel, have been treated, and broader Arab populations – Christian and Muslim have been treated by some western governments with whose policies they disagree. You are going to find that those grievances exist still today and are heightened. People look at the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, they look at the situation in Iraq, they look at the situation in Afghanistan and if you focus on those kinds of things, yes it is very negative. At the same time there is a huge amount of interest in coming to the west, both Europe and The United States, to study.

**JENKINS:** So on both sides, your talking about fear and curiosity mixed in.

**IDRISS:** Exactly.

**JENKINS:** Let's here from Ayatollah Mohammad Khatami – the former president of Iran, on the need that he sees for a dialogue among civilizations.

**KHATAMI** (Farsi): If we accept that we live in a bad world and if we accept that all of humanity is concerned about a better destiny, we have to find an immediate solution to our problems. I believe there is a fire that is destroying the world of Islam, the West and all humanity, in general. This fire is consuming everybody. We have to extinguish this fire because it is affecting the security of nations. In order to obtain this solution, a dialogue between all people, all cultures and all religions is necessary. There should be an understanding between cultures; between all nations; between all people; and especially between religions. Fortunately, this present moment is deal to attend to these problems.

**JENKINS:** That raises a number of different questions to my mind. For a start off, is religion a part of the problem or a part of the solution? The Ayatollah is suggesting that religion can be part of the solution but a lot of people, as we were just discussing earlier, would blame the religion of the other side. There are Muslims who believe the United States, for example, is engaged in some sort of a religious crusade against them. What is your take on this? Is religion a fundamental element that you are trying to use as part of this dialogue?

**IDRISS:** I think it's not only inescapable but it would almost be unjust not to engage religious communities on all sides to address these kinds of problems. The world is... religion is quite important to so many people in the world that sometimes when your sitting in places that are mostly secular or centers of decision making power, where you have a lot of secular thought, you sometimes lose sight of that. And yet I think it is incredibly important to understand what a motivating factor religion is for people and also the different, sort of, sides of religion. You have, for all religions you have what you might say is the lake, you know the lessons taught; the books of faith, the Koran, the bible,

the Old Testament. And then you have the river. You have how those religions evolve in terms of their practice and in terms of how people understand them and practice them based on what they bump into on their daily lives. What were having today is a lot the river people are having difficulty with across one another's faiths. But at the same time you have a lot of countervailing forces and you have a lot of people working from religious perspectives and faith based organizations trying to do very positive things. I would mention one thing on this that I think is important. The starting point of faith, often times when people engage in these sort of dialogue of cultures the people who are involved are sought to be moderate. Moderate does not necessarily mean secular, or even liberal. You know moderate is the approach that one takes to achieve one's ends, violent or non-violent. What sometimes gets washed away in these discussions is that there are quite a number of moderate/religious, deeply religious and devout people from all faiths. And those people need to be engaged not shunned to the side because they are not secular enough for us.

**JENKINS:** Interesting, well we'll get into that a little bit more but let me say first that this is **World Chronicle** and we are talking about the alliance of civilizations. And here's what Federico Mayor – Director-General of UNESCO has to say.

**MAYOR:** Misery is growing, the condition in which these people are living is a condition that leads normally to men than women. For men to say enough is enough, now I'm already completely frustrated. I've no hope anymore. I consider that I have been really following the lying of these people. The only possibility is precisely to better share. And to better share you must be guided by some ethical, moral values. And this moral values, what precisely is the Declaration of Human Rights. I'm not now telling you exactly what but only the article number 1 that says that we are born free and in equal in dignity, only this, equal in dignity, all the human beings are equal in dignity. Regardless if they are

women or men, black or white, whatever they are, whatever is their belief, they are equal in dignity. And this is what we must try again.

**JENKINS:** Isn't part of the problem that governments, by in large, must live in the secular world and they weigh their interests in terms that are purely practical and not, certainly not overtly religious, or unnecessarily overtly moral. For example, western governments don't necessarily measure the status of the world being of their own people by looking at the status of the poorest people around the world. Federico Mayor was talking about how we need to realize our common humanity and everyone is entitled to dignity but that is not the role, say of the British government. It's maybe an adjunct but its primary role is not to make sure people in Africa are living more or less as well as people in Britain. Moral values, in that sense, religious values can't directly be a part of a government, can they?

**IDRISS:** Well it's interesting you say that because again the place where we are having this conversation in the United States, I think this issue is very much up for debate. And you're seeing a real political battle in between people across the political spectrum over what are the real values that a government should legislate upon; and should decide upon; and should lead upon both domestically and overseas. I think one thing that has happened all around the world is that there has been a realization, and I do believe this is true, that whether we like it or not, our world is more interdependent now than it ever was before. The avian bird flu, whether we like it or not, is something that everyone has to be concerned in, regardless of where it started. Environmental degradation; or economic well-being whether we like it or not is tied to economic practices of people we may never meet. As people begin to have that realization, I think both in western governments and non-western governments; both in those governments that are more religious than those that

are more secular, there is a dawning realization that, whether we like it or not, we need to be concerned about the welfare of others.

**JENKINS:** The tools that the powerful countries normally reach for first and not the moral tools or the tools of moral suasion if you like, so much as they are the military. I mean for example, take the issue again that confronts us today of this growing radicalism in the Arab world. There are those that would say the United States has spent; and Britain; and Italy; and what have you between them, they've already spent something like 350 billion dollars on Iraq. If we had taken a third of that say, 100 billion dollars and put that as aid into the Gaza Strip to build up the Gaza Strip to become the Manhattan of the Mediterranean. Would that have done a better job in reducing the level of radicalism; reducing the number of people who support terrorism? Would that have worked to our benefit? It might have but the ability to convince your people to spend 100 billion dollars on the Gaza Strip seems to be much less than the ability to persuade them to spend 350 billion on the war.

**IDRISS:** Your talking about a question of leadership and a direction of which people decide to lead and whether one tries to convince one's population that this is in fact the way to make us more secure and safe in the world. I do think that one thing that happened is even among those that have been very supportive of more military approaches I think there is a dawning realization that some of these unaddressed grievances and perceived injustices, whether we agree with them or not, if they exist people are acting off of them. So I think there is an understanding that in terms of this question of the Muslim world and the west, better exchanges in education are very important, but they are not enough. I think there is a dawning understanding that some of the grievances and unaddressed injustices, perceived injustices need to also be addressed. And that is really what you are talking about. And I think as that

realization becomes stronger and stronger, you will see more of that kind of an approach.

**Jenkins:** Interesting. Our guest today is Shamil Idriss - Deputy Director of the Office of the Alliance of Civilizations. Here is what archbishop Desmond Tutu has to say about what drives people to commit acts of terror.

**TUTU:** there are people who would say – what is wrong with Islam? There is nothing wrong with faith. We don't say, it's very interesting, I mean we don't say, for instance, about the Ku Klux Klan or the Oklahoma bombers – ah, what is wrong with Christianity, we don't even call those Oklahoma bombers terrorists. We don't call them Christian terrorists, which is a very interesting point to how we categorize. And therefore we are trying to say, there are certain features of today's world, which, at least some of us feel, which are conducive to the tension we are experiencing - the sense of alienation that some people have; the sense of being the left behinds. And that's why one is saying we do require a multi-polar approach because it isn't just Arab or Muslims who feel hard done by, people in Latin America, many people in Africa. And some of us have said that there's no way in which we are going to win the war on terror as long as there are conditions in the world which drive people to desperation, poverty, disease, the sense of being humiliated, the powerlessness. The resentment is growing and it is pervasive, it is not something that is limited to a small part of the world.

**JENKINS:** Desmond Tutu, of course, was echoing what you were just saying but he goes further in a sense that he's trying to draw attention to the fact that the problem is perhaps wider than a lot people understand at the moment. For example, he was talking about Latin America where we see a growing tendency to elect popular, left-wing governments, something that is of great concern in Washington. But as a reaction to what they describe as neo-liberal



economic policies, policies that don't seem to be helping those at the bottom end of the scale. Are you seeing that all across the world at the moment?

**IDRISS:** I think the points that he made do speak to dynamics that are global. And he talked about a sense of being the left behind and one of the biggest problems that I think we do have today is you have huge numbers and one could argue vastly growing numbers of people who do feel left behind. The world is changing so rapidly and fruits of development are not necessarily filtering down to all layers of society. So what he's talking about is a very real dynamic and I think it makes an important point that when we get into this issue of the Muslim world and the west, that term means so many things that it gets conflated with so many dynamics that in fact have nothing to do with the Muslim world and the west and are something broader. At the same time there is something specific going on within that relationship that's causing great concern for people globally. But I think the point that he makes and your making I think is spot on, it is very true.

**JENKINS:** So the danger in all of this, of course, is that when you start to put something like this together all your doing is creating another talking shop and god knows the United Nations and the international community have enough talking shops. People get together, they slap each other on the back; they say some nice words, nice rhetoric. At the end of the day you don't see much happening in practice. Presumably you don't want to be associated with that sort of thing so what are you hoping to see coming out of an exercise like this in practical terms?

**IDRISS:** First a number of things. The members of the high level group themselves and U.N. Secretary-General's office; the co-sponsoring governments of this initiative; the Spanish and Turkish government have all made it abundantly clear from the beginning and repeatedly as we've started this process that that is exactly not what they want. They do not want just another

report being generated. They are looking for, and in fact what we are tasked with producing, what the high level group is tasked with producing is an action plan, an implement-able action plan to the U.N. Secretary-General so that there can be some sort of implementation phase after that. That's very much what I'm looking forward to, in terms of how that will filter out; what kind of action plan. That will be determined by the high level group. But I think things have to the touch the lives of people who are at risk.

**JENKINS:** Alright, well before we go any further here is Rabbi Arthur Schneier of the Appeal for Conscience Foundation with another thought on terrorism.

**SCHNEIER:** Let's not talk about a clash of civilizations; we are talking about clash between those who are trying to impose tyranny. I also think, this is my own view, we are not fighting terrorism. We are fighting an ideology, an ideology that uses terrorism as a method.

**JENKINS:** So what is the Rabbi referring to there? Is he essentially saying that there is an ideology that is on a par with religion that uses terrorism? Is that what he is saying?

**IDRISS:** Well I don't want to speak for him, but what I understood from his comments is that if you have an ideology that says our differences are not about our interests but there something essential to us. Meaning it doesn't matter what you do and it doesn't matter what you say, your interests are something about your identity; who you are is going to cause me to go to war with you and I expect that it will cause you to go to war with me. If we think in this way, whether we are religious, secular, whether we are in the west or not in the west, we are destined to go to war with one another. I think my understanding of what he is saying is that it's that ideology of extremism, exclusivism in identifying our differences; our diversity itself as the problem. I think

that kind of approach does lead to extremism and violence no matter how you cut it, and I think that is what he is talking about combating.

**JENKINS:** This is sort of a religion of intolerance in a way, I guess. You were talking earlier in how you were hoping this won't be a talking shop and how you want to get something practical out of it. But it seems to me if your going to have what you're looking for, an alliance, an understanding between peoples, than it is actually the peoples that need to do the dialoguing and not just their leadership. I mean if Ayatollah Khomeini gets together with Federico Mayor, at the end of the day what does that matter to the average Spaniard and the average Iranian? Are you going to try and get something going at the grassroots and root level and if so, what?

**IDRISS:** First, very much so or were going to try and do that. One of the ways we are going to try and do that, we've been tasked. The body that I work for is the secretariat that serves this high level group. They have tasked us; they have directed us to engage in consultations that reach below the level of elites that engage people, youth group leaders and networks, corporate leaders – people in the corporate world who are engaged. People often leave out the corporate world, as important as that sector is. Women's associations and movements, civil society organizations...

**JENKINS:** What are you going to do? Are you going to bring them together for a conference every five years? Are you going to try and have more travel exchanges, get more students into different countries? What are you going to do to get a significant people of different cultures to intermingle more?

**IDRISS:** I don't want to prejudge what the outcome of this process is going to be. Right now we are engaged in a deliberation. The high level group needs to look at what exists today, where are the gaps, and where are really the high leverage points where more investment and attention can make a real difference. So maybe they will say – ok, exchanges but not all exchanges. They

are a particular group of people that if we can provide exchanges there it would have a huge multiplier effect on their communities. Maybe they will say that, you know what it's really the media. That's one of the main areas of the high leverage point. If we can engage media and develop cooperative media projects... I don't want to judge because they will make that final decision. But what we will do is to provide information; our office will provide information to this high level group, to the people you saw speaking and their colleagues on the high level group. So if they can make the judgment, this is where we think a real difference can be made and when we get engaged in consultation with civil society groups and others we will be asking them - Where are the gaps? What is the most useful, productive and hopeful engagement that you've seen and that you would like to see multiply out there?

**JENKINS:** Have you guys identified any of those yet? I mean is there something that is obvious that we've been overlooking until now?

**IDRISS:** I think that some of the areas that have gotten a lot of attention from the high level groups just in its initial meeting, and again we are very early on in this process, are youth involvement and engagement. Not just programs by adults for youths but youth activism; engaging youth in activism. Education initiatives; not just the materials that exist, which often times gets a lot of attention, but also the training of the teachers themselves and the methodologies. Then the media, which I have mentioned before. So these are areas which have gotten some attention but I can't give you more details until they provide more details.

**JENKINS:** Well here is another participant from that meeting, John Esposito of Georgetown University with an idea of what needs to be done for an alliance to work.

**ESPOSITO:** I think that the challenge that we have is not to reproduce what so many other organizations and groups have done particularly post 9-11. There are all

kinds of dialogues of civilizations all over the world. And our challenge is really, yes to start with understanding but move towards action. I think that's what we are talking about, trying to really mobilize a concerted effort to develop actual on the ground projects and programmes. Programmes to deal with the media because the media is the most important area of disseminating knowledge, attitudes, issues that deal with education, issues that deal with directly addressing extremist ideologies and what I call theologies of hate.

**JENKINS:** I hate to keep coming back to it, but the Bush administration is engaged in this, what it sees as a global war on terror, and therefore it seems to be at the apex of all this. But the Bush administration, for example, has indulged in things like the secret jails, Guantanamo, first of all retentions, the patriot act; secret spying on its own citizens now, all in the name of the defense of freedom. Is that a wrong way to go?

**IDRISS:** Well I think one of the things that is inescapable when you have a population that is scared and is living in fear, whether you agree with the reasons of fear or not. When people are living that way you are going to see the kinds of reactions you are going to see today, whether from the Bush administration or others. So I think that, if your asking my personal politics, I would very much like to see a more open, tolerant and engaging prospective to different cultures; different civilizations. At the same time we have to recognize, where are those fears coming from and how can they be addressed?

**JENKINS:** In some ways this is in direct response to the terrorism, of course, which is to retrench, to try and build up your defenses. But in the process what you are doing is undermining the very elements which you are supposedly to be protecting in this war.

**IDRISS:** In one way I think you are very right. On the other hand, when a pendulum swings very far in one direction the one thing you know is going to happen is that it is going to swing back. Now forgetting whether you are talking

about American domestic politics or the situation in the world more generally, I found that in the United States and in predominantly Muslim societies in the west and overseas, you're seeing a real rethink among people. But current approaches are not working. Not... not working because our political adversaries or their political adversaries don't like them, but not working because we are not more secure than we were several years ago. If we're not more secure than we were several years ago then we need to find a better way. What I think is lacking is people having a sense of what the better way is. This is largely why the alliance was launched between the Spanish and Turkish governments and announced by the Secretary-General of the U.N.

**JENKINS:** We expect people of that level to get along together. Were they all getting along together or are there disagreements? I mean do they agree on the fundamentals when they sit down?

**IDRISS:** One of things that I do appreciate with the high level group is that they do have different perspectives and they hash them out, they were hashed out with a great deal of respect. But this is a... you can just see from the clips that you've had here, it is a deeply intellectual and at the same time deeply practical group of people, which is very refreshing I have to tell you. So some the discussions people have had is where do you lay down the emphasis between the larger dynamics that Archbishop Tutu was talking. Poverty and sense of being left behind and a specific set of issues that people feel are being engaged between the Muslim world and the west.

**JENKINS:** And the Rabbi is saying, let's focus first on terrorism. So there is an obvious clash there. How were they handling it?

**IDRISS:** Very well. I mean they laugh together a good deal. They were very serious. I mean there is one unifying element regardless of what people chose to take as their first step. This group of people, I believe is hugely concerned with where the world is today. They are not interested; they are too busy to get

engaged to get into another talk shop. Even if you look at... intellectuals and academics sometimes get a hard knock by not being practical enough. If you look at the intellectuals and academics of this group they are all also activists, people who have engaged in developing things that can make a difference in peoples everyday lives. So there was an abiding sense of mission, I think, on this group; not to spite the differences but wanting to hash out those differences because the mission is the same. I think there is a real shared feeling among the group. I mean they were recruited for a purpose by the U.N. Secretary-General and I think they know that purpose and are working towards it.

**JENKINS:** And that purpose is to find common ground. Well on that optimistic note, we are out of time. Thank you for being with us on this addition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest today has been Shamil Idriss, Deputy Director of the Office of the Alliance of Civilizations. I'm Tony Jenkins inviting you to be with us for the next addition of **World Chronicle**.

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