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The False Promise of “The Alliance of Civilizations”

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In recent years, a host of events have affected and strained public perceptions between Islamic countries and the United States and Europe. The more notable incidents include the terrorist attacks on U.S. embassies in East Africa and the World Trade Center, the 2004 Madrid train bombing, a major terrorist attack in London, continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, riots over cartoon portrayals of Muhammad, the conflict between Hezbollah and Israeli forces in Lebanon, and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The general public perception in the West is that Muslims are fanatical, violent, and intolerant, while Muslims in the Middle East see Westerners as selfish, immoral, greedy, violent and fanatical.¹

To combat these tensions, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan proposed an Alliance of Civilizations in July 2005 to “respond to the need for a committed effort by the international community—both at the institutional and civil society levels—to bridge divides and overcome prejudice, misconceptions, misperceptions, and polarization which potentially threaten world peace.”² The Alliance would be guided by a “high-level group of eminent persons” instructed to submit a report in late 2006 to lay out recommendations and a practical plan of action to overcome this divide.³

The Report of the High-level Group of The Alliance of Civilizations is testament to the limited value of such exercises by the U.N. The report focuses obsessively on the failings of Western countries while largely ignoring the faults of Muslim countries. It offers implicit justification for constraints on free-

dom of media, speech, and expression in the name of halting “the spread of hatred resulting in Islamophobia, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism” and proposes a dubious agenda to “improve” non-Muslim media treatment of Muslims. The report glosses over the underlying reasons behind the economic problems of many Islamic countries in favor of a laundry list of objectives.

Despite the dubious contributions of the report, on December 18 Secretary-General Kofi Annan recommended that the U.N. adopt and implement its recommendations.⁴ Such action would provide little in the way of substantive ideas to improve relations between Western and Muslim countries. However, it would enshrine the Alliance of Civilizations and a host of supplementary bodies into the U.N. system. Moreover, Annan’s appeal for the U.N. to adopt these recommendations should raise serious questions about his motives—he is one of the individuals rumored to be in consideration for the post of High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations.⁵

The Report of the Alliance of Civilizations offers little to bridge the divide between Western and Islamic countries, and there is little basis for believ-

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ing that the Alliance would offer innovative ideas for addressing the divide between people in the West and those in Muslim countries in the future. The United States should oppose the self-serving proposals of the Alliance that would make the effort a permanent mandate of the General Assembly, establish a permanent funding stream, and create new mechanisms to support the Alliance.

The Origins of the Alliance of Civilizations

Polling data support the general perception that mutual poor regard between people in Western nations and those in Islamic countries is a significant problem. For instance, the latest Pew Global Attitudes survey finds,

After a year marked by riots over cartoon portrayals of Muhammad, a major terrorist attack in London, and continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, most Muslims and Westerners are convinced that relations between them are generally bad these days. Many in the West see Muslims as fanatical, violent, and as lacking tolerance. Meanwhile, Muslims in the Middle East and Asia generally see Westerners as selfish, immoral and greedy—as well as violent and fanatical.⁶

The notion that the U.N. could somehow alleviate the poor public opinions through international

conferences dates back to a U.N. program called the “Dialogue Among Civilizations,” which was first proposed by Iran in 1998 and launched by Annan in 1999. In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United Nations decided to replace the Dialogue with the Alliance of Civilizations in 2005. Although the former president of Iran, Mohammed Khatemi, who initiated the Dialogue Among Civilizations, remains prominent,⁷ the proposal to create the Alliance was made by Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the 59th General Assembly of the United Nations and subsequently backed by Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The Alliance of Civilizations is an effort to

forge collective political will and to mobilize concerted action at the institutional and civil society levels to overcome the prejudice, misperceptions and polarization that militate against such a consensus. And it hopes to contribute to a coalescing global movement which, reflecting the will of the vast majority of people, rejects extremism in any society.⁸

To guide this effort, Annan assembled a High-level Group of “eminent persons” to meet and draft a report of actionable recommendations by the end of 2006 for U.N. member states to adopt. Upon

1. Pew Research Center, “The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other,” Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 22, 2006, at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=253>.
2. “Annan announces new initiative to bridge gap between Islamic, Western worlds,” U.N. News Centre, July 14, 2005, at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/storyAr.asp?NewsID=15027&Cr=civil&Cr1=society&Kw1=Annan&Kw2=Alliance+of+Civilizations&Kw3=>
3. Alliance of Civilizations, “Report of the High-level Group,” United Nations, November 13, 2006, at http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf.
4. “Recommendations on the Follow-up to the Alliance of Civilizations to be Presented to the General Assembly,” Media Advisory, Alliance of Civilizations, at http://www.unaoc.org/repository/media_advisory_december_events.pdf.
5. “Annan calls for active effort to ‘discover what is best’ in other beliefs,” Kuwait News Agency, December 19, 2006, at <http://www.kuna.net.kw/home/story.aspx?Language=en&DSNO=935529>.
6. Pew Research Center, “The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other,” Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 22, 2006, at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=253>.
7. Claudia Rosett and George Russell, “New U.N. Scheme: Alliance of Civilizations,” FoxNews.com, November 22, 2005, at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,176362,00.html>; and Benny Avni, “New Forum Kicks Into High Gear at the U.N.,” *The New York Sun*, December 19, 2006, at <http://www.nysun.com/article/45391>; and Alliance of Civilizations, “Report of the High-level Group,” United Nations, November 13, 2006, p. 11, at http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf.
8. Alliance of Civilizations, “Report of the High-level Group,” United Nations, November 13, 2006, p. 47, at http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf.

receiving the report in late 2006, Secretary-General Kofi Annan recommended that the U.N. adopt and implement the recommendations of the Alliance of Civilizations report.⁹ He noted,

The Report's proposals—in the areas of politics, media, education, youth and migration—comprise an action plan to improve cross-cultural relations. Many of its suggestions—such as media campaigns to fight discrimination, or the critical review of educational materials—seek to foster tolerance and dispel stereotypes at the local and individual levels....

So let us work together to transform this Report into action, and let us work to strengthen and improve not any single society or any one nation, but all of human civilization.

Annan's endorsement should raise serious questions about his motives. The report calls for the establishment of a High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations with a support office; a Forum for the Alliance of Civilizations financed by the U.N.; an Alliance of Civilizations fund; and the creation of regional, national, and local Alliance Councils. All of these recommendations would make the Alliance—currently just a temporary initiative sponsored by Annan and some member states—a permanent fixture in the U.N. with accompanying bureaucracies, funding, and standing. Annan's endorsement raises other concerns beyond simply embedding a pet project into the U.N. system. For instance, Annan appointed his former deputy Iqbal Riza—who was deeply embroiled in the oil-for-food scandal for allegedly shredding documents related to the investigation—as Special Advisor of the Secretary-General for the Alliance of Civiliza-

tions.¹⁰ Moreover, Annan himself is rumored to be in consideration for the post of High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations.¹¹ Thus, Annan's endorsement could directly benefit him and at least one of his close associates.

The Disappointing Report

The report falls well short of its own goal of offering “practicable program of action for states, international organizations and civil society aimed at promoting harmony among societies.”¹² Indeed, the report often simply endorses ongoing initiatives. When it does offer analysis and recommendations, it is burdened by biased perspective, unacceptable calls for restrictions on free speech, and a list of objectives in place of a strategy to revive the economic performance of Middle Eastern and North African nations.

Biased perspective. The most egregious failing of the report is its one-sided treatment of the relationship between Western and Muslim countries. With the exception of noting that terrorism is a problem undermining relations with the West, the report consistently treats the people in Islamic countries as victims of depredations by Western countries and Israel. The governments of Muslim countries are given a free pass for the most part. The report largely ignores that the region is blessed with oil, enjoys a rich cultural and religious identity, and has enjoyed independence from colonial powers for decades. With these advantages, the governments in the region have only themselves to blame for its unequal legal and economic treatment of its female population, its failure to implement policies conducive to economic growth and job creation, and the prevalence of autocratic rulers.

In typical U.N. fashion, the report focuses obsessively on “the growing urgency of the Palestinian

9. “Recommendations on the Follow-up to the Alliance of Civilizations to be Presented to the General Assembly,” Media Advisory, Alliance of Civilizations, at http://www.unaoc.org/repository/media_advisory_december_events.pdf.

10. Joseph Klein, “Alliance of Civilizations?” FrontPageMagazine.com, March 29, 2006, at <http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=21814>; Claudia Rosett and George Russell, “New U.N. Scheme: Alliance of Civilizations,” FoxNews.com, November 22, 2005, at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,176362,00.html>.

11. “Annan calls for active effort to ‘discover what is best’ in other beliefs,” Kuwait News Agency, December 19, 2006, at <http://www.kuna.net.kw/home/story.aspx?Language=en&DSNO=935529>.

12. Alliance of Civilizations, “Report of the High-level Group,” United Nations, November 13, 2006, p. 47, at http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf.

issue,” which is judged “a major factor in the widening rift between Muslim and Western societies.”¹³ The report goes on to declare that “without a just, dignified, and democratic solution based on the will of all peoples involved in this conflict, all efforts—including recommendations contained in this report—to bridge this gap and counter the hostilities among societies are likely to meet with only limited success.”¹⁴ Yet the report merely offers the recycled objective of a reinvigorated multilateral peace process seeking “recognition of both the Palestinian and Jewish national aspirations and on the establishment of two fully sovereign and independent states living side by side in peace and security.”¹⁵ The report also pins its hope on a “White Paper” to acknowledge the “competing narratives of Palestinians and Israelis” with the aim of providing a “level-headed and rational analysis [that] would make it clear to the Palestinian people that the price of decades of occupation, misunderstanding and stigmatization is being fully acknowledged, while at the same time contributing to exorcise the fears of Israelis.”¹⁶

These recommendations should sound familiar because they have been part of the peace strategy for the past decade—a process that has been less than successful. They also ignore the interest of many Muslim governments in keeping the conflict going; as acknowledged in the 2004 Arab Human Development Report, the Israeli “occupation [of Palestine] has also given Arab regimes a pretext for postponing internal reform.”¹⁷ Moreover, despite the importance placed upon the conflict in the report, the high-level group fails to include a single representative from Israel. The High-level Group does, however, include nine individuals from pre-

dominantly Muslim nations among its 20 members, including the former president of Iran, where the current president has famously called for the destruction of Israel.

Meanwhile, the report downplays the fact that terrorist groups such as al Qaeda explicitly link their terrorist acts to Islam as interpreted through the lens of an extremist ideology. Instead, the report focuses on observations like “none of the world religions condones or approves the killing of innocents. All promote the ideals of compassion, justice and respect for the dignity of life. However, in a wide range of recent conflicts in many parts of the world religion has been exploited to justify intolerance, violence and even the taking of life.”¹⁸ This may be true but is beside the point. The use of Islam by terrorist groups is central to the ongoing deterioration of relations and cannot be glossed over. In this regard, the failure of the report to call upon Muslim political and religious leaders to denounce religiously-based violence and intolerance such as the cartoon riots or, specifically, to condemn terrorism by Islamic extremists is a gross oversight. Similarly, the report’s emphasis on “respect for religious monuments and holy sites” and “teaching about religions” rather than emphasizing the need for governments to remove existing obstacles to freedom of religion is odd considering the many restrictions on freedom of religion in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁹

Media censorship. Another worrisome aspect of the report is its implicit approval of constraints on freedom of expression and the press. The report asserts, “Increased attention to the responsibility of the press need not, and should not, detract from advocacy for the freedom of the press.”²⁰ However,

13. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

17. United Nations Development Program, “Human Development Report 2004,” United Nations Publications, New York, NY, p. 3.

18. Alliance of Civilizations, “Report of the High-level Group,” United Nations, November 13, 2006, p. 10, at http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 26, 34, and 41; and “Near East and North Africa,” 2005 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, March 8, 2006, at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/c17095.htm>.

this assurance is weak in the face of the lengthy recommendations for restraint on media content and coverage. For instance, the report concludes, “Assertions that Islam is inherently violent and related statements by some political and religious leaders in the West—including the use of terms such as ‘Islamic terrorism’ and ‘Islamic fascism’—have contributed to an alarming increase in Islamophobia which further exacerbates Muslim fears of the West.”²¹ The report counsels Western activists and governments to “avoid certain actions that have negative repercussions on debates taking place in Muslim societies. Propagation by Western media and official authorities of over-simplified explanations that either blame Islam as a religion or falsely pit secularists against religious activists has a detrimental effect.”²²

The report goes further than merely cautioning against untoward statements—it proposes a broad based international campaign to combat media misrepresentations of Muslims, including,²³

- Creating training programs in Schools of Journalism to widen “journalists’ understanding of critical international issues...and enhance their capacity to inform the public accurately and in a balanced way;”
- Encouraging leaders in the fields of “academia, religion, politics, civil society, and culture” to generate op-ed pieces, commentaries, and video- and audio-taped statements to help to deepen inter-cultural understanding;
- Directing greater resources toward media aimed at “improving popular attitudes between different cultures,” including broadcasting during major events that attract world attention, productions aimed at youth populations like video games, cartoons, and websites, and producing TV series in multiple languages addressing historical, social, and psychological aspects

of relations between societies to foster mutual understanding;

- Encouraging producers and script writers, particularly in Hollywood, to increase the “portrayal of normalized Muslim and other under-represented or negatively stereotyped communities in popular media;”
- Encouraging governments, media organizations, and civil society to work together to prevent the Internet from being used and abused to “disseminate racist stereotypes and intolerance that can inspire hatred and violence” and instead develop initiatives for the Internet to be “an instrument of cross-cultural dialogue;”
- Monitoring and reviewing media coverage of Islamic-Western relations and reward efforts that “aim to improve coverage of relations between Muslim and Western societies;” and
- Establishing a “Risk Fund” to “temper the market forces that encourage sensationalistic and stereotyped media and cultural materials” and compensate theaters, museums, publishers, and other cultural venues for losses incurred when they feature media that “humanize and normalize the views of populations in the West and in predominantly Muslim societies about one another.”

It is doubtful that a politically correct media campaign will overcome bitterness based on real substantive differences. Moreover, the report’s emphasis on altering Western media products and content seems off target since the Pew Global Attitudes survey finds,

...despite the deep attitudinal divide between Western and Muslim publics, the latest Pew Global Attitudes survey also finds that the views of each toward the other are far from uniformly negative. For example, even in the wake of the tumultuous events of

20. Alliance of Civilizations, “Report of the High-level Group,” United Nations, November 13, 2006, p. 40, at http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

23. The following are summarized from Alliance of Civilizations, “Report of the High-level Group,” United Nations, November 13, 2006, p. 40-2, at http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf.

the past year, solid majorities in France, Great Britain and the U.S. retain overall favorable opinions of Muslims. . . . On average, Muslims in predominantly Muslim countries are more likely to associate Westerners with multiple negative traits than vice versa.²⁴

Considering the spate of protests and riots in Islamic countries following publication of cartoons depicting Mohammed and academic commentary by Pope Benedict XVI, it seems as if tolerance is far more lacking in the Muslim world than in the West. In spite of this, the report virtually ignores the pervasive constraints, official or otherwise, on freedom of speech, expression, and the press that exist in many Islamic countries.²⁵

Most troubling, however, is that all of the above suggestions would greatly increase government intervention in the media in order to promote an agenda as designated by an undetermined authority. This course of action is far more likely to undermine freedom of speech, expression, and the press than to protect it.

Misdiagnosis of problems in the Middle East.

The report notes a number of economic problems in Islamic countries, including youth unemployment, lack of access to the Internet, persistent poverty and global inequities, and migration to developed countries. The recommendations for resolving these concerns are predictable but unlikely to work. The recommendations include calls for convening and supporting “a coalition of multilateral agencies and

civil society organizations. . . . to pilot broad-based youth employment initiatives,” “expanding access to education,” and “expanding Internet access in developing countries.” They also call for “wealthier countries [to meet] their commitments of increased investment in the developing world, as this, together with good governance and capacity building efforts in developing countries, would help improve economic conditions in those countries.”²⁶

The problem with these recommendations is that they are a wish list rather than a strategy. They largely ignore the main reason why countries in the Middle East have failed to develop or generate jobs, namely the repressive economic policies of the governments. Economic studies indicate that sound economic policies, the rule of law, and good governance are the key to promoting economic growth, creating new jobs, and reducing poverty. According to the 2006 *Index of Economic Freedom*, co-published annually by The Heritage Foundation and *The Wall Street Journal*, the Middle East and North Africa region follows only Sub-Saharan Africa as the least free region in the world in terms of economic freedom.²⁷ The World Bank’s *Doing Business in 2006* concludes, “Middle Eastern nations with high youth unemployment rates continue to thwart small and medium businesses with heavy legal burdens and piecemeal reforms.”²⁸

Economic freedom and increased integration into the global economy are urgent if the countries of the Middle East and North Africa are to experi-

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24. Pew Research Center, “The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other,” Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 22, 2006, at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=253>.
25. For more information, see “Near East and North Africa,” *2005 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, March 8, 2006, at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/c17095.htm>; and *Freedom of the Press 2006*, Freedom House, at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=16>, which observes, “Generally, media in the [Middle East and North Africa] region remain constrained by extremely restrictive legal environments, in which laws concerning libel and defamation, the insult of monarchs and public figures, and emergency legislation continue to hamper the ability of journalists to write freely.” Indeed, the only nation possessing a free rating in the region is Israel.
26. Alliance of Civilizations, “Report of the High-level Group,” United Nations, November 13, 2006, pp. 27, 29, and 37, at http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf.
27. Marc A. Miles, Kim R. Holmes, and Mary Anastasia O’Grady, *2006 Index of Economic Freedom* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation and Dow Jones & Company, Inc., 2006), Executive Summary.
28. “Doing Business in 2006: Middle Eastern and North African Nations Lag In Encouraging Businesses with Regulatory Reforms,” Middle East & North Africa News Release, International Finance Corporation, The World Bank Group, September 13, 2005, at http://www.doingbusiness.org/documents/DB2006_PR_MENA_English.pdf.

ence the increased economic growth and development that lead to job creation. The report, however, makes deceptive and inaccurate statements like "...income inequality has continued to rise in recent decades and current studies indicate that increased integration into the world economy has actually exacerbated the divergence in the economic growth of countries."²⁹ Such statements are based on selective data that ignore evidence that globalization has led to convergence of global incomes³⁰ and provide irresponsible justification for developing countries to distance themselves from international markets, which provide the surest path to increasing economic growth, development, jobs, and economic opportunity.

Conclusion

The Alliance of Civilizations is a disappointment. Far from offering a "bridge" to cross the divide, the Alliance of Civilizations report offers little more than platitudes and wishful thinking, one-sided analysis, justification for constraining freedom of expression and religion, and repackaged calls for increased assistance from Western countries. The lack of substance and originality in the report—the report itself acknowledges several times that many of its recommendations and initiatives are already in place or being pursued—explains the lack of interest in the report since its release in November.

Despite failing to meet its objective, the Alliance shamelessly calls for the General Assembly incorporate the Alliance of Civilizations into the agenda of its 62nd session to ensure that the effort survives beyond Annan's tenure. It also calls for the establishment of a litany of supporting councils, representatives, forums and funding to expand the work of the Alliance. Annan's petition for the U.N. to adopt these recommendations should raise serious questions about his motives because he is one of the individuals rumored to be in consideration for the post of High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations.³¹

The performance of the Alliance does not justify the expense and the radical expansion of bureaucratic structure. Not even the report's sole highlight—a clear repudiation of targeting non-combatants by terrorists—offsets its overall weaknesses and justifies American support.³² To the extent that the ideas of the Alliance prove useful, they are not unique or dependent upon the perpetuation of the Alliance. The U.S. should oppose any effort to make the Alliance a permanent part of the U.N.

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29. Alliance of Civilizations, "Report of the High-level Group," United Nations, November 13, 2006, p. 7, at http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf.

30. For instance, economist Xavier Sala-i-Martin concludes that "Looking at the planet as a whole, never in history has poverty been eradicated so rapidly as it has been during our lifetimes. Moreover, individual income inequalities have been falling, and this is the first time they have fallen since the eve of the Industrial Revolution. The aggregate numbers have never looked better. Looking at the world distribution of income (WDI), the world is a better place." See Xavier Sala-i-Martin, "Global Inequity Fades as the Global Economy Grows," forthcoming in the 2007 *Index of Economic Freedom*. Based on Xavier Sala-i-Martin, "The World Distribution of Income: Falling Poverty and ... Convergence, Period," October 9, 2005, at http://www.columbia.edu/~xs23/papers/pdfs/World_Income_Distribution_QJE.pdf.

31. "Annan calls for active effort to 'discover what is best' in other beliefs," Kuwait News Agency, December 19, 2006, at <http://www.kuna.net.kw/home/story.aspx?Language=en&DSNO=935529>.

32. "We must make it clear that, in our view, no political end, whether arising from historical injustice or contemporary provocation, and whether committed by resistance organizations, global militant groups, or by states, can justify the targeting of civilians and non-combatants. Such actions must be condemned unequivocally." Alliance of Civilizations, "Report of the High-level Group," United Nations, November 13, 2006, p. 16, at http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf.