

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2339
March 11, 2009

Why President Obama Should Not Attend the Alliance of Civilizations Forum

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A Turkish newspaper is reporting that President Barack Obama will attend the second annual United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (AoC) forum in early April during his visit to Turkey.¹

The AoC is an attempt by the U.N. to quell perceived tensions between Muslim and Western nations by promoting dialogue. Although well-intentioned, the effort has little prospect for success due to bias and objectionable proposals to freedom of expression. The base document for the Alliance of Civilizations focused on the supposed failings of Western countries while largely ignoring the faults of Muslim nations. It also endorsed the idea of constraining freedom of media, speech, and expression in order to combat “Islamophobia.” This is an agenda similar to the effort by Muslim countries to prohibit “defamation of religion” that the U.S. has opposed in other U.N. forums. Rather than attend a U.N. talkfest wedded to objectionable ideas, President Obama should spend his time in the region more constructively, for instance discussing with the Turkish Prime Minister how Turkey can work with the U.S. on mutual concerns like bringing pressure on Iran to halt its nuclear program.

A Less Than Useful Forum. A successor to the Iranian-proposed Dialogue of Civilizations and brainchild of former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the Alliance of Civilizations aims to improve relations between Western and Muslim countries by responding “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, mispercep-

tions, and polarization which potentially threaten world peace.”²

The 2006 report from the High-Level Group for an Alliance of Civilizations fell far short of this goal. Indeed, the report often simply endorsed ongoing initiatives like the multilateral peace process to resolve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict or repackaged calls for increased assistance from Western countries. When it did offer analysis and recommendations, they were burdened by biased perspectives and a list of objectives—instead of a strategy—to revive the economic performance of Middle Eastern and North African nations.³

Among the worst of the recommendations was the report’s support for constraining media content and coverage in Western countries “including the use of terms such as ‘Islamic terrorism’ and ‘Islamic fascism’—[which] have contributed to an alarming increase in Islamophobia which further exacerbates Muslim fears of the West.”⁴ The report virtually ignored the pervasive constraints, official or otherwise, on freedom of speech, expression, and the press in many Islamic countries.

Despite its problems, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed the former president of Portugal, Jorge Sampaio, as the High Representative

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/wm2339.cfm

Produced by The Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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for the Alliance of Civilizations in April 2007, giving him the task of promoting “the Alliance of Civilizations as a credible and viable attempt to diminish the dangerous tensions between diverse societies and their threat to international stability”⁵ and established a voluntary Trust Fund in September 2007 to support the Alliance of Civilizations.

Not unexpectedly, the report of the first annual Alliance of Civilizations forum in Madrid in January 2008 illustrated that the AoC continues to support constraints on freedom of expression and speech in order to combat “Islamophobia”:

One of the biggest challenges in engaging “Muslim” and “Western” societies is the rise of “Islamophobia.” Constantly, Muslims and Islam are on the defensive. The point of departure for discussions on Islam is often that it is not a violent religion. In the non-Muslim world it is thought that it is the responsibility of mainstream Muslims to differentiate themselves from extremists. The non-Muslim world also has a part to play in actively differentiating between the religion and acts of terror.

Stereotyping is often a product of intended ignorance. There are resources being constantly deployed to spread disinformation and misperceptions of others. This can be described as an industry of ignorance. To counter this, it was proposed that a *human right to be under-*

stood should be promoted as a mutual obligation for all societies and cultures. Additionally, education around this right should be incorporated into school curricula and textbooks, such that it can become the basis of interaction between cultures and societies.⁶

To accomplish the objectives of the AoC, which, presumably, include taking action to help combat negative “stereotyping” by the media and establishing an indefinable “human right to be understood,” the AoC has created:

- A Media Literacy Education Clearinghouse to create a “participatory global repository of information, resources, and good practices relevant to Media Literacy Education, Media Education Policy and Youth Media”⁷;
- An Education About Religions and Beliefs Clearinghouse to offer “consensus guidelines about teaching about religions and belief in elementary and secondary education; collections of curricula about religions and beliefs in elementary and secondary education, and where possible, evaluations of curricular outcomes; links to relevant associations, institutions and organizations; and events of interest to researchers, policy-makers and educators working in this area”⁸;
- A Rapid Response Media Mechanism to “provide a platform for voices that can help reduce

1. “US President Obama to visit Turkey on April 6–7: Spanish Sources,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, March 11, 2009, at <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/11174198.asp?scr=1> (March 11, 2009).
2. Press release, “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> (March 11, 2009).
3. For a more complete discussion of the report, see Brett D. Schaefer, “The U.S. Should Oppose the Proposed U.N. Alliance of Civilizations,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2009, February 22, 2007, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/bg2009.cfm>.
4. Alliance of Civilizations: Report of the High-Level Group,” United Nations, November 13, 2006, at http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf (March 11, 2009).
5. United Nations Department of Public Information, “Secretary-General Appoints Former President Jorge Sampaio of Portugal as High Representative for Alliance of Civilizations,” U.N. Document SG/A/1060, April 26, 2007, at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/sga1060.doc.htm> (March 11, 2009).
6. United Nations, “The First Alliance of Civilizations Forum,” Madrid, January 15–16, 2008, p. 38, at <http://www.aocistanbul.org/data/AoC%20Forum%20Report%20Madrid%20complete.pdf> (March 11, 2009). Emphasis in original.
7. Alliance of Civilizations, United Nations, “Media Literacy Education Clearinghouse,” at <http://www.aocmedialiteracy.org> (March 11, 2009).
8. Alliance of Civilizations, United Nations, “Education About Religions and Beliefs Clearinghouse,” at <http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/252/224/lang.english> (March 11, 2009).

tensions in times of cross-cultural crises” and establish a “network of experts to develop messages (i.e. op-ed articles, audio and video statements and interviews) that help frame contentious issues in less polarizing terms and offer insightful and nuanced perspectives on complex debates”⁹; and

- A multi-million dollar Alliance of Civilizations Media Fund “aimed at financing mainstream film productions that help promote cross-cultural understanding and combat stereotypes.”¹⁰

It is easy to imagine how a tyranny of relativism could govern the information collected, since the countries involved do not share the same values or philosophies.

Pushing Back Freedom. There is remarkably little information on exactly what the AoC has accomplished aside from holding meetings and establishing Alliance-approved databases of experts and organizations who can discuss youth, education, media, and migration issues.

There is major cause for concern considering the AoC’s ongoing support of constraints on freedom of expression and speech. As U.N. High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations Jorge Sampaio announced at a 2008 press conference in Iran, “There is a balance to be found between freedom of expression and respect for religion and for religious feelings and principles.”¹¹ These types of platitudes are unworthy of a true effort to promote frank dialogue. Freedom of expression means little if it is subject to the sensitivities and feelings of those who may be offended by personal statements on, or

media coverage of, religious matters. After all, non-controversial statements and views are rarely subject to censorship. Discussions stilted and constrained by censorship are unlikely to “promote understanding and reconciliation among cultures globally and, in particular, between Muslim and Western societies.”¹²

In U.N. debates, the balance between freedom of expression and “respect for religion and for religious feelings and principles” is increasingly tilting against freedom of expression and speech. The Organization of the Islamic Conference, for instance, has convinced the U.N. Human Rights Council and the U.N. General Assembly to pass resolutions that limit freedom of speech in the name of opposing “defamation of religions” and “Islamophobia.”¹³

Only weeks ago, the Obama Administration announced that it would not participate in the upcoming Durban Review Conference (Durban II) on racism, in part because the conference’s resulting draft document embraced the troubling concept of “defamation of religion.”¹⁴ It would send mixed signals, to say the least, for the U.S. to boycott Durban II in protest over the concept of “defamation of religion” while simultaneously embracing the idea of constraints on freedom of expression and speech through President Obama’s attendance at the Alliance of Civilizations forum.

A Better Use of Time. President Obama is right to recognize that not all Muslims are extremists, and he is right to express his hopes that Western nations and moderate Muslims can work together to confront Islamic extremism, which threatens them

9. Alliance of Civilizations, United Nations, “Rapid Response Media Mechanism” 2009, at <http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/91/126/lang,english> (March 11, 2009).
10. Alliance of Civilizations, United Nations, “Alliance of Civilizations Media Fund,” 2009, at <http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/95/130/lang,english> (March 11, 2009).
11. Alliance of Civilizations, United Nations, “President Sampaio Gives Press Conference in Iran,” press statement during trip to attend the “Religion in the Modern World” conference in Tehran October 13–16, 2008, at <http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/321/200/lang,english> (March 11, 2009).
12. Alliance of Civilizations, United Nations, “Objectives,” 2009, at <http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/29/83/lang,english> (March 11, 2009).
13. See Steven Groves, “Why the U.S. Should Oppose ‘Defamation of Religions’ Resolutions at the United Nations,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2206, November 10, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/LegaIssues/bg2206.cfm>.
14. Press release, “U.S. Posture Toward the Durban Review Conference and Participation in the UN Human Rights Council,” U.S. Department of State, February 27, 2009, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/02/119892.htm> (March 11, 2009).

both. Such sentiments are logical and echo those of President George W. Bush, who also sought to reach out to moderate Muslims and work with them to combat extremism.

Such objectives are not likely to be advanced by the AoC. A dialogue subject to censorship, regardless of intent, is unlikely to be productive or fruitful. Instead, President Obama should express, unequivocally, his commitment to freedom of speech and expression—even if it leads to statements deemed

unacceptable by the AoC. Rather than attend the AoC forum in Turkey, the President should dedicate his time to soliciting Turkey's cooperation on serious foreign policy objectives, such as halting Iran's nuclear program.

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