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Umut Uzer

*University of Maryland University College*, [uuzer@umuc.edu](mailto:uuzer@umuc.edu)

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## **Turkey as a Catalyst for the Alliance of Civilizations**

Umut Uzer

The Alliance of Civilizations (AoC) project offers opportunity spaces for the United Nations as well as for Spain and Turkey to tackle the issues of radicalism and animosities between different cultures. This article puts the AoC in its historical and political context by analyzing the relevance of Turkish foreign policy and the ruling Justice and Development Party's (JDP) orientation to domestic and foreign affairs. The AoC fits within the framework of JDP's inclinations to solve all problems with its neighbors as well as with its manifest or latent Muslim identity. The major question is whether Turkey continues to perceive itself as a Western or Muslim country.

### **Introduction**

Tolerance has been the overriding motive of Turkish historical experience starting from the time of the Ottoman Empire and continuing during the Republican era. As a multinational empire, the Ottomans could not have survived through oppressive measures, necessitating the emergence of tolerance out of cultural as well as practical needs of the Turkish people. Besides the humanitarian Islam of Yunus Emre<sup>1</sup> and Mevlana Celalettin Rumi,<sup>2</sup> the existence of Christians and Jews in the Empire required a policy of coexistence both at the governmental and popular levels.

Events that seem to contradict coexistence among different nationalities and religions seem to be the exception rather than the rule throughout Turkish history. Especially after the emergence of nationalism in the 19th century, liaisons between the peoples of the empire and the central government deteriorated as the latter tried to keep the empire intact. Consequently, the breakup of the empire was

traumatic for Turks, Arabs, Greeks, and Armenians. However, peaceful relations were established between Turkey and Greece in the 1930s upon the efforts of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Elefterios Venizelos and between Turkey and Syria, Iraq and the Soviet Union. From that date on peaceful resolution of international conflicts became the dominant method of Turkish foreign policy behavior.

In this regard, the AoC seems to be commensurate with Turkish and Ottoman history and the peaceful foreign policy of Republican Turkey. In this article, I will try to analyze the connection between the Turkish view towards other ethnic and religious groups and the AoC initiative. I will start by drawing upon Turkish history to enlighten the interconnectedness between history and current Turkish foreign policy, analyze the civilizational debate in early modern Turkey, continue with a discussion of the clash of civilizations theory of Samuel Huntington, and conclude with a short narrative of political endeavors aiming at the establishment and development of the AoC initiative.

In sum, I will put the AoC in its historical and political context by analyzing the project's place within the foreign policy of the ruling party in Turkey. It should also be pointed out that inter-civilizational dialog fits within the framework of an elevated concern for the former territory of the Ottoman Empire as well as the Islamic world under the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government.

### **Turkish History and Tolerance**

Turks emerged in world history in Inner Asia, gave their name to the Turkestan, and eventually moved westward in their long odyssey to the Caucasus, Middle East, Crimea, Anatolia, and the Balkans. In all these regions, they have engaged in interactions with different peoples possessing various cultures.

Turkish culture emanated in Inner Asia and as a consequence of its interaction with the Chinese, Mongolians, Indians, Iranians, Russians, Georgians, Greeks, Armenians, and Arabs, modern Turkish culture has influenced and was influenced by all these different nationalities culminating in a modern tolerant society.

Throughout the centuries, refugees, who were being oppressed and killed in their countries of origin, found a safe haven among the Turks. For instance, in 1492 Jews were forced to leave Spain and Portugal and were given a sanctuary in the Ottoman Turkey. Almost 500 years later, Jewish professors fled Nazi Germany and served the academic community in Turkey.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Turkish diplomats throughout Europe issued Turkish passports, oftentimes to non-Turkish Jews too, to save them from the Holocaust. Among them Namık Kemal Yolga who was working at the Turkish consulate general in Paris and Necdet Kent in Marseilles and Grenoble in France (Shaw, 1993, pp. 60, 64) and many others should be remembered.

Earlier in history in 1848, a number of Polish and Hungarian nationalists were forced out of their motherlands and found a peaceful land to live in Turkey. To this day, there is a Polish village in the outskirts of Istanbul, namely *Polonezköy*.

One explanation for this state of affairs can be found in Islam as the way it is practiced and preached in Turkey, which is overwhelmingly peaceful. Both state-controlled and popular religion are moderate. The Directorate of Religious Affairs, *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, and the *Fethullah Gülen* movement can be given as examples to a peaceful path in line with the very message of Islam that is peaceful, tolerant, and open to dialog.

For instance, Ali Bardakoğlu, president of *Diyanet* is adamant that not a single hate speech could be found in the mosques controlled by his organization in Europe. The DİTİB (*Diyanet İşleri Türk-İslam Birliği*, The Turkish-Islamic Union of Religious Affairs) mosques in Europe are in close coordination with *Diyanet* and their preachers, *imams*, are usually appointed by Ankara.

As a culmination of this history, Turkey became a strong supporter of the AoC project. In 2005, Turkey together with Spain, initiated the AoC initiative under the auspices of the United Nations, which aimed to build bridges and increase understanding and cooperation between different nationalities, especially between Muslim and Western societies. Turkey with its centuries of tolerance towards believers of all creeds and the humanitarianism of its Muslim thinkers, Mevlana Celalettin Rumi and Yunus Emre, has a lot to contribute to an ever closer understanding between the West and the Muslim world.

It should be remembered that from each religion, extremist individuals do emerge and the best way to combat them is to emphasize the peaceful elements inherent in the religion of Islam. The Islam practiced in Turkey and the Turkic world is commensurate with democracy, human rights, tolerance, and co-existence. After all, we should be aware that there will always be different religions and points of view, and the logical policy would be to live peacefully side by side.

It would be in order to emphasize the similarities between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, rather than quibble about their differences, and remember that there is a common Abrahamic legacy and tradition embraced by all the followers of the three monotheistic religions. A proper interpretation of Islam would make it evident that Islam respects all the previous prophets of God which to a large extent correspond to Adam, Noah, Moses, and Jesus as well as other religious figures of Judaism and Christianity and the books of God by which the Old Testament and the New Testament are implied. It all depends on interpreting religion in a peaceful manner and trying to break the monopoly of the extremists over Islamist discourse.

### Turkish Identity and a Civilizational Approach

Turkish perception of culture and civilization are pertinent to the discussion at hand. During and after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, there were arguments about Turkish identity and its place in Europe as opposed to the Muslim world. Among the first articulators of Turkish nationalism, Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924) discussed the concept of civilization in detail and called for a civilizational change for Turks without losing their national traits.

Ziya Gökalp made a differentiation between culture (*hars*) and civilization (*medeniyet*), the former being national whereas the latter international, corresponding more or less to technology. The founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, on the other hand advocated a single universal civilization, which he called contemporary civilization (*muasır medeniyet*) to which Turkey should belong.

In contrast, Ziya Gökalp in his book, *History of the Turkish Civilization*, published in 1925 wrote that there could be no single civilization, rather there were numerous civilizations in the world. He used the term *medeniyet* as a translation of the French word *la civilisation* (Gökalp, 1976, p. 17). He talked about the Egyptian civilizational circle, the Mediterranean civilization constructed to a large extent by Phoenicians, Christian civilization in Europe, and an Islamic civilization in Asia and North Africa. In Europe, after the Renaissance and Reformation, the Christian civilization was transformed into a secular civilization. Turks have already changed their civilizational identity twice throughout their history. Initially, they belonged to the Far East civilization living in the borderlands of China and around present day Mongolia. After their conversion to Islam, Turks entered the Eastern civilization. Since the 19th century, Turks were trying to become part of the Western civilization (Gökalp, 1976, p. 18).

A civilization is an international construct, developed through method and mind and is the collection of economic, religious, legal, and moral ideas. Culture, on the other hand, is national, cultivated through intuition and is the sum total of religious, moral, and aesthetic *emotions*. In Gökalp's judgment, nations can change their civilization but not their culture (Gökalp, 1976, p. 19, my emphases). In other words, a civilization was the sum total of positive sciences and technology whereas culture was a product of religion, morality, language, and aesthetic values (Gökalp, 1959, pp. 133-134, 246). For our purposes a more relevant idea from Ziya Gökalp was that he explicitly rejected equating religion with civilization. For example, there were Eastern and Western civilizations and they borrowed from each other without any feelings of inferiority. Arabs borrowed from the Byzantine music and philosophy, and Armenians and Jews shared the Oriental taste in music (Gökalp, 1959, pp. 272-

273), they in fact contributed to the classical Ottoman palace music, which was in fact influenced by Byzantium as well.

For Ziya Gökalp, this dichotomy was important because a nation had to protect its culture and values without being out of touch with modern times. He was proposing a synthesis between Turkish, Muslim, and Western elements to form a modern Turkish nationalism under the inspiration of science and technology (Gökalp, 1988, p. 34). While there was no universal civilization, there could be a society of nations in the future (Gökalp, 1959, pp. 280-282).

Among the conservative thinkers, Peyami Safa also called for a harmonious synthesis between the Eastern and Western civilizations together with national-religious traditions. He was proposing the injection of the spiritual values of the East into the West and in return importing the scientific methods and technology from the West. While Europeanizing, progress towards a new amalgamation of the intuition of the East should also be achieved. Neither the Arabs nor the Europeans should be imitated in his judgment, as Turks were prone to copy Arabic culture and language in the past and European ways and mannerism at the present (Safa, 1976, p. 23-26). This was a conservative criticism of Kemalist reforms, which, in his and other conservatives' minds, have gone too far in aping the European culture.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, on the other hand, advocated modernization and expressed his opinion that there was only a single contemporary civilization. He was critical of the limitations of Islamic teaching and thought and believed that a break with the Islamic past was necessary.

It would not be fair to say that Ziya Gökalp was opposed to Kemalist reforms as he died in 1924 before they were fully in place. While there was a different approach to civilization on the part of Gökalp and Atatürk, there were also numerous similarities between their ideas. In fact, the founder of modern Turkey called Gökalp the father of his ideas. Furthermore, Turkish call to prayer, modernization, and secularization of social and political life, gender equality, and of course, cultural nationalism were all beliefs which they enthusiastically shared. They were also believers in the necessity of the Western orientation of the Turkish people so that they would achieve political, economic, and cultural progress.

### **The Clash of Civilizations**

We need to remember the context of the AoC as to why it emerged. In fact it appeared as a reaction to the clash of civilizations theory articulated first by Bernard Lewis (1990, p. 60) and then by Samuel Huntington.

When analyzing historical or political phenomena, it is absolutely in order to take civilizations as units of analysis. For instance, the eminent historian Arnold

Toynbee in interpreting human history, took encounters between civilizations into consideration. Analyzing the Ottoman-European relations from this perspective, Toynbee discussed the European onslaught on the Islamic World, after the Turkish failure in the second siege of Vienna in 1683 (Toynbee, 1953, p. 2).

The relations between the Western world and the Muslim world have been based on inequality, the former encroaching upon Muslim lands ever since Napoleon set foot in Egypt in 1798. Unless there is a move towards equilibrium between the two entities, it would be very difficult to establish healthy relations based on recognition and dignity. Today, there is both collaboration and conflict between the West and the Islamic World. The most important issue for the majority of Muslims is a just resolution of the Palestinian problem (Uzer, 2004, p. 141). From this point of view, we can definitely claim that efforts by the new American administration to resolve this dispute would not only serve peace in the Middle East and the world but also American national interests.

The clash of civilizations thesis was popularized by Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington in an article, "Clash of Civilizations?" published in the summer 1993 edition of the *Foreign Affairs* journal. The author expected the new area of conflict to be cultural rather than ideological or economic and that states would coalesce around other states possessing similar civilizational identities. He defined civilizations as cultural units, in fact the highest forms of cultures just below humanity. Categorizing the Islamic civilization, he discussed its Turkish, Arab, and Malaysian sub-units (Huntington, 1996, pp. 1-3).

Huntington identified eight civilizations including Western, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, African, and Islamic civilizations. He predicted that in the post-Cold War era, there would be clashes between those civilizations, especially since peoples belonging to different civilizations became more conscious of their identities as opposed to other civilizations as a consequence of globalization. The West's power and wealth has become a source of animosity among members of different civilizations. The bottom line about the civilizations is that nations cannot change their civilizational identities (Huntington, 1996, pp.4-5), hence foreign policy behavior of states would be influenced by such civilizational concerns.

He expanded his article into a book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, in which he argued there already emerged a multicivilizational and multipolar world. He insisted that civilizational identities, determined by religion, influenced foreign policies of the states and consequently for world peace, each civilization should be represented at the UN Security Council as a permanent member. Turkey should take the helm as the leader of the Muslim world instead of being humiliated at the gates of Europe. The rest of the arguments are similar to the article except he added a ninth civilization, namely the Buddhist

civilization which included Tibet, Mongolia, and Cambodia (Huntington, 2003, pp. 20, 48, 178-179, 308, 312, 317).

In his article, Huntington characterized Turkey as a torn country because it was facing an identity crisis about which civilization it belonged. It has rejected the Islamic civilization and has been rejected by Europe. This state of affairs led to its turn toward the Turkic world, of which it desired to be its leader. (Huntington, 1996, pp. 7, 13-14). It should be emphasized that Turkish interest in the Turkic world was never presented by Turkish decision makers or commentators as an alternative to Europe.

For a civilizational change to materialize, the elites as well as the public should be convinced of this change but more importantly members of the target civilization should believe in the necessity for such a civilizational change and accept the country in question as a new member (Huntington, 1996, p. 21).

As far as Turkey is concerned, especially the third element is lacking as the European public opinion has not embraced Turkey as part of the European cultural sphere. Furthermore, it is also unclear whether the bulk of the Turkish people consider themselves as European. There is always a differentiation when Turks talk about "the Europeans" and their efforts seem to be more trying to be European than being and feeling truly European.

Also, Huntington was adamant that a civilizational war should be prevented at all cost and all civilizations should learn to live peacefully and in coexistence. He ruled out the possibility of a universal civilization and was arguing for the consolidation of the Western civilization (Huntington, 1996, pp. 24-25) While he argued for peace between civilizations, he also advocated a civilizational split such that they should live separately without distorting each others' cultural essence. My definition of civilization is somewhat different from the one devised by Samuel Huntington. I purport to make a more comprehensive analysis of civilization that goes beyond religion—of course also incorporating it into my definition—encompassing all cultural, philosophical, and artistic artifacts in addition to political institutions. In other words, I do not equate civilization with religion which also has secular elements including art, music, and archaeology.

Furthermore, a civilization is never a closed unit. There is neither a monolithic Western civilization nor an Islamic civilization. There is no reason why people should not engage in cross-cultural encounters and try to amalgamate what they perceive to be the positive or desirable elements, from another civilization. In fact, that is what globalization is about. And Ziya Gökalp might be right in the sense that without losing one's national culture, an individual can adopt civilizational attributes of another unit.



One of the major problems with Huntington's theory is that identities are presented as static formations without much possibility to change. While identities are significant and his theory has explanatory power in cases such as al-Qaeda's attack on mainland United States, it does not change the fact that states override cultural affiliations for the sake of national (read state) interests. The rise and fall of pan-Arabism is a case in point. And it should also be pointed out that intra-civilizational conflicts can be as severe as inter-civilizational conflicts as seen in the Iran-Iraq war. There is as much cooperation as conflict between nations belonging to different civilizations. Turkey's close cooperation with the Western world and its improved relations with Middle Eastern nations can be argued as a case in point.

Turkish people have a grounding in both the Islamic and the Western worlds and their inclusion or exclusion in the European Union can be a function of its civilizational identity as well as pure political calculation on the part of the European politicians. Considered as the Other for many centuries, it would not be easy for the European public to embrace the Turks as fellow Europeans. It should be mentioned that the Turkish expatriate community living in Western Europe, especially in Germany, has not demonstrated to be a good example of integration due to both their intransigence as well as the discriminatory attitudes of the authorities and peoples in the countries in which they reside. It remains to be seen whether they will be successful in their long odyssey from Inner Asia to Eastern Europe to become accepted members of Europe. This depends as much on the endeavors of the Turks as on the willingness of the European nations. Only then will the validity of Huntington's ideas about Turkey be vindicated or not.

### The AoC and Turkey

The leaders of the Justice and Development Party, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül, since their election in 2002 and reelection in 2007 advocated a proactive foreign policy for Turkey in its region and the world. The person behind these ideas was Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu, the foreign policy adviser to prime minister Erdoğan and the current foreign minister, who championed making good use of Turkish history and its imperial legacy for a dynamic foreign policy in his book, *Strategic Depth* (Davutoğlu, 2003). He was of the opinion that Turkey should become a central country in its region and follow a "multidimensional foreign policy" (Duran, 2006, p. 292). Besides Davutoğlu, another academic-politician Mehmet Aydın, minister of state, was also influential in the articulation of Turkey's policy (Balci & Miş, 2008, p. 388).

The party had a number of achievements in its foreign policy among which election of Professor Ekmelettin İhsanoğlu as the secretary general of the

Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), the start of accession talks with the European Union and Turkey's election to the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member in 2008 can be mentioned.

The new party adopted a radical change from the Islamist National Outlook Movement (*Milli Görüş Hareketi*, which included parties- namely MNP, MSP, RP, FP, and SP<sup>4</sup>) of which it was an offshoot and jettisoned the anti-Western and anti-Semitic discourse and world-view in favor of a pragmatic party of services and a policy of pro-European Union decisions and measures (Yavuz, 2006, p. 3).

While the JDP was in favor of "civilizational dialog" between the Muslim and Western peoples, it did not shy away from criticizing the problems in the Islamic world as well, as can be observed in the statement of foreign minister Abdullah Gül at the Organization of Islamic conference summit in Tehran in 2003, to the effect that the Muslim World was in dire need of democratization, promotion of human rights, and protection of the status of women (Duran, 2006, pp. 288-289).

Even though the first EU-OIC summit meeting was held under the tenure of the late foreign minister Ismail Cem from the Democratic Left Party in February 2002, the JDP continued these summits and perceived them as commensurate with their promotion of dialog between cultures and civilizations. To prove his pro-European orientation, Erdogan's first visit after becoming prime minister was to Greece and Western European capitals (Duran, 2006, p. 287).

The pro-EU policies of the JDP government had a number of functions. By moving away from the Islamist discourse of their past they opened up new spaces to play the political game domestically and internationally. In other words, they tried to shield themselves from the criticism of the secular circles including the bureaucracy and military that they were an anti-secular movement by making domestic reforms needed for EU accession. Furthermore, they made a de facto alliance with the liberal intellectuals in the press and at the academe that supported the government's policies of democratization and the softening of Kemalism.

At the international level, Erdogan and Gül succeeded in convincing many quarters at European capitals and to some extent in Washington that the party was the wave of the future and they were on the path of Europeanization and democratization of Turkey.

This was especially the case in JDP's Cyprus policy on which they were inclined to follow the EU position and tried to resolve the conflict between Turks and Greeks on the two mainlands and in the island (Duran, 2006, p. 291). Thus one of the iconography of the nationalists right and left and even the National Outlook Movement was shattered by the new pragmatic political party.

The intellectual background for the AoC project was presented in the previous discussion of the clash of civilizations to which it was a reaction. Huntington's

theory was perceived by many as advocating war and conflict and a remedy was searched by intellectuals and politicians.

The Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had already internalized civilizational dialog as can be observed from his speech at the American Enterprise Institute, in Washington D.C., on January 29, 2004. He talked about the “harmony of civilizations” and “meeting of civilizations” and his desire to struggle against the prospects of clash of civilizations. He opined that all monotheistic religions preached against violence and terrorism and that killing of a single individual was equivalent to killing the whole mankind (Erdoğan, 2006, pp. 337, 339-340). In other words, Erdoğan was expressing ideas similar to the AoC, before it was undertaken as an initiative of Spain.

The first proposal for conciliation between civilizations came on November 4, 1998, from the Iranian President Mohammed Khatami. The United Nations later adopted this idea and declared 2001 as the year of Dialogue among Civilizations (Balci & Miş, 2008, p. 390).

Meanwhile, on March 14, 2004, three days after the train bombings in Madrid killing 191 people, Luis Zapatero was elected as the Spanish prime minister. He defeated Jose Maria Aznar, who had supported the American occupation of Iraq. The significance of this election was that Zapatero was advocating the withdrawal of all Spanish troops from Iraq (Balci & Miş, 2008, p. 391).

Consequently, the new Spanish prime minister proposed the “AoC between the Western and the Arab and Muslim world” to the UN Secretary General during a speech he made at the UN General Assembly on September 21, 2004. He invited Turkey to become a co-sponsor of the AoC initiative. In fact Kofi Annan, was adamant that a Muslim country should be one of the cosponsors of the initiative (Balci & Miş, 2008, p. 392).

On July 14, 2005, Spain and Turkey established the AoC initiative under the auspices of the United Nations. Its aims included: being a “bridge builder and convener, connecting people and organizations devoted to promoting trust and understanding between diverse communities, particularly – but not exclusively – between Muslim and Western societies,” “catalyst and facilitator helping to give impetus to innovative projects aimed at reducing polarization between nations and cultures,” and being an “advocate for building respect and understanding among cultures and amplifying voices of moderation and reconciliation which help calm cultural and religious tensions” (<http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/39/73/lang,english/> accessed on January 27, 2009). On April 26, 2007, Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon appointed the former president of Portugal, Jorge Sampaio, as the High Representative for the AoC whose Secretariat was also established in New York City (<http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/39/73/lang,english/> accessed on January 27, 2009).

The AoC claims to have a global perspective, not confined to eradicating the misunderstandings and stereotypes between the Western and Muslim worlds, rather focusing on all forms of discrimination, including against the minorities. They employ the term civilization or culture in the broadest sense of the word, and do not equate civilization with religion. Hence, the AoC does not pursue interfaith or interreligious dialog but endorses exchanges between people of divergent cultures (Interview with Emmanuel Kattan, Communications Adviser, Office of the Secretariat, Alliance of Civilizations, New York City, April 22, 2009).

Previously, the High-Level Group for the AoC was nominated by Kofi Annan which consisted of 20 politicians and intellectuals. The co-chairs of the High Level Group were Professor Federico Mayor of Spain and Professor Mehmet Aydın of Turkey. Other members included Mohammed Khatami of Iran, Ismail Serageldin of Egypt, Mohamed Charfi of Tunisia, Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, Hubert Vedrène of France, Karen Armstrong of the United Kingdom, Vitaly Naumkin from Russia, John Esposito and Rabbi Arthur Schneier from the United States.

Admittedly, this is a remarkable and prestigious group of people, including the former French foreign minister, an unyielding fighter against apartheid and experts on world religions. All these individuals have worked across different cultures by studying various religions and languages. John Esposito of Georgetown University, as well as Vitaly Naumkin of Moscow State University and Mehmet Aydın are experts on Islam. Rabbi Arthur Schneier has been an advocate of inter-religious cooperation and visited numerous countries to this end.

The High Level Group prepared a report for the meeting in Istanbul on November 11-13, 2006, which stated that the “divide between Muslim and Western societies are not religious, but political” and that the “central driver in global tensions” was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Balci & Miş, 2008, p. 399).

There is also an 80-member Group of Friends of AoC, including numerous countries and international organizations such as the Arab League, European Commission, Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Visibly absent are the United States and Israel.

The Turkish prime minister fully embraced the initiative which would, in his judgment “end terrorism” throughout the world. He also wrote an article for the *International Herald Tribune* together with his Spanish counterpart, Zapatero, demanding “respect and calm” from all the parties to the conflict, revolving around the publication of a number of cartoons illustrating prophet Muhammad as a terrorist in the Danish and then Norwegian newspapers (Balci & Miş, p. 394-395). The Minister of State Mehmet Aydın was a bit more critical of Europeans as he said that even though Muslims loved Jesus, Westerners did not

love Muhammad. He also pointed out that Islamophobia should be resisted just like anti-Semitism is combated against (Balci & Miş, pp. 396, 398).

The initiative was used by Turkey as a tool furthering its membership in the European Union and utilizing to increase its prestige. Tayyip Erdoğan had said time and again that the European Union could only prove that it was not a Christian club by allowing Turkey to become a member, which would function as a bridge between Europe and the Islamic world. For Spain, on the other hand, AoC enabled it to hasten its withdrawal from Iraq and to fight against terrorism. Balci and Miş argued that the project can be seen as the “Middle Easternization of its foreign policy” and portrayal of Turkey as the “spokesperson of the Islamic world”. They are also quick to add that many retired politicians were represented on the High Level Group, for instance Muhammed Charfi, former Education minister of Tunisia, former Iranian president Mohammed Khatami, Moustapha Niassé, former prime minister of Senegal, and Ali Atalas, former foreign minister of Indonesia. They also pointed out that there was little emphasis on Judaism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (Balci & Miş, pp. 389, 400-402) within the mechanisms of AoC. This is implied as a weakness of the initiative where retired politicians participate but probably nothing substantial would emerge.

In a sense, the kinds of arguments mentioned above by the Turkish prime minister, reverses Turkey’s desire to become a European state, rather presents Turkey as a member of the Islamic world in, what was until now, a Christian club. The argument contains the implicit assumption that by admitting a Muslim country, the European Union proves that it is not antagonistic to the Islamic world.

Such an argument, however, begs the question as to whether Turkey is a typical Muslim country, if there is such a phenomenon, and more importantly, whether Turkey’s secularism, democracy, pro-Western foreign policy, and partially geography were not the characteristics that enabled its candidacy to the European Union in the first place. Regardless of these questions, the AoC continued its deliberations.

The AoC further cultivated its projects at the Second Forum of the UN Alliance of Civilizations, held in Istanbul on April 6-7, 2009. Ever since the inaugural Forum of Madrid in January 2008, the AoC strived to encourage specific projects and initiatives that would promote intercultural dialogue among grassroots advocates with politicians and religious leaders (Alliance’s Initiatives and Ongoing Programs: General Overview. Second Forum of the UN Alliance of Civilizations. Istanbul, Turkey, 6-7 April, 2009.). In other words, the AoC secretariat wanted to turn a good idea into concrete, down-to earth projects that influenced people on the ground, especially the youth.

Among the projects and initiatives, which aim at collaboration between civil society, the business world and the government, one could mention the

youth event, with the goal to build “a Global Youth Movement” to foster dialog among the youngsters living in various countries. The Alliance Fellowship entails learning about each other’s culture, politics, and media by visiting other countries. Silatech is another initiative that will create jobs, and will provide capital for entrepreneurs in the Arab world (Outcomes of the Second Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations, 2009).

The Dialogue Cafe, supported by Cisco, through video-conferencing in pilot cafes in New York, London, Istanbul, and in a number of cities in the Middle East will enable citizens of various countries to engage in dialog with other people living in different cities of the world. On the other hand, Alliance Research Network will function as a think-tank focusing on education, media, migration, and youth, and promoting educational exchanges. A number of experts from 12 universities will cooperate and debate issues of interest to them and to the AoC (Outcomes of the Second Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations, 2009).

The Alliance Forum aims to promote “intercultural cooperation” and realize a “dialogue that delivers.” It also calls itself as a “global matchmaker” connecting “innovative grassroots initiatives with policy makers and potential funders” (Istanbul Forum: Concrete Progress made in building Bridges, Connecting People across borders). Furthermore, there are numerous publications, documentaries, and media outlets, encouraging especially the youth from all around the world to be in touch with each other and learn the culture of different peoples. One ambitious initiative is the Pakistan Madrasa Project aspiring to reform the curricula at the seminaries in the country in question and training the teachers at those schools (Outcomes of the Second Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations, 2009).

Evidently, Turkey has a lot to contribute to the AoC through its civil society organizations, universities, think tanks, and media. There are abundance of ideas and ideologies that are competing with each other and there is an active civil society including secular and religious associations. As a country with a moderate and peaceful understanding of religion, it can offer the possibilities of being Western, Muslim, and democratic at the same time.

Of course, it is unclear as to whether different civilizations are perceived by the UN, Spain, and Turkey as separate but equal entities, each deserving respect and recognition. In other words, Turkey’s desire to become part of Europe might flounder if there is such a perception.

This is particularly relevant as there are strong opposition voices against Turkey’s accession to the European Union. Both German Prime Minister Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy offered Turkey a privileged partnership instead of full membership in the European Union. Angela Merkel not only called Turkey culturally different but also as not having lived through

the European Enlightenment. Furthermore, overwhelming majorities in Austria, France, and Germany are opposed to Turkey's accession to the European Union (Yavuz, 2009, pp. 219-220, 227).

A more positive approach is being heard, as far as reconciliation between religions is concerned, from the United States. President Barack Obama in his inaugural speech in January 2009 said the United States was a country of Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and nonbelievers. He also opened up to the Muslim World in his speech at Cairo University on June 4, 2009. In that speech, Obama tried to send a message to the Muslim world by saying that faith should bring people together not divide them. He also praised "Turkey's leadership in the Alliance of Civilizations" ([http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/369/73/lang\\_english/](http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/369/73/lang_english/), accessed on June 26, 2009).

The UN High Representative for the AoC Jorge Sampaio welcomed the bold vision set forth by the American President to "inaugurate a new era of peace and cooperation between the 'Muslim world' and the West based on mutual respect, trust and partnership. From the Alliance of Civilizations' perspective, this approach provides a strong framework, not only for advancing Muslim-Western relations, but also for engagement between diverse communities and cultures around the world. It constitutes our best hope to turn tides of mistrust that have beset us in past decades and forge a new beginning" ([http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/369/73/lang\\_english/](http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/369/73/lang_english/), accessed on June 26, 2009).

"President Obama's speech provides a clear path for constructive engagement with the Muslim world, a path that doesn't attempt to paste over differences, but builds on common aspirations. Most importantly, he emphasizes the need to address the various sources of tensions—including violent extremism and the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians—and join forces to confront them. Moreover, President Obama recognized the realization of human rights, freedom and development opportunities for all as a main goal to be achieved through concrete actions" ([http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/369/73/lang\\_english/](http://www.unaoc.org/content/view/369/73/lang_english/), accessed on June 26, 2009).

From the statements above, a closer relationship between the United States and the UN AoC can be expected under the Obama administration.

### **Conclusion: Prospects for and Weaknesses of the AoC**

Today, the United States has a president who has a Muslim middle name, Hussein. While, Barack Obama is a Christian, his multicultural background, African, Kansan, and having lived in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world, could help him establish positive relations with the Muslim world as well as with sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Of course it should be added that having such a background is not a *sine qua non* for a successful foreign policy. Bill Clinton had none of these family connections but he was successful in establishing or continuing positive relations with Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, and other Muslim nations. Most Turks remember him when he visited Turkey in the aftermath of the horrible earthquake in 1999, playing with a baby who recently survived the horrendous calamity. His speeches at the Turkish Grand National Assembly and the Jordanian parliament are also reminisced where he said he was respectful of Islam convincing many Muslims.

So, Obama comes to the presidency at a historic time, when relations between Americans and the Muslims need mending. His emphasis on dialog both at home and throughout the world are causes for hope for the resolution of disputes such as the Arab-Israeli conflict through diplomacy and negotiations.

To the post-September 11 world, Turkey can offer a model of moderation and peaceful co-existence. The Armenian village of Vakıflı in the province of Hatay as well as the Polish village in the outskirts of Istanbul can be given as symbols of co-existence between different nationalities in modern Turkey.

Admittedly, Turkish history is not flawless regarding tolerance and coexistence. The 1934 Thrace incidents against the Jews, the 1942 Wealth Tax imposed predominantly on non-Muslims, and the September 6-7, 1955 attacks on Greeks are examples when foreign relations or other security considerations can be used to justify putting pressure on domestic minorities. Such occurrences however, are not supported by the majority of the people and are always criticized in newspaper columns to this very day.

It should also be borne in mind that there is proliferation of intolerance among certain circles in Turkey existing both among religious and secular circles. There is a serious polarization in modern Turkey between the supporters of the government and the opposition. Attacks on priests and missionaries, while not widespread, are still worrisome. Those concerned about missionary activities in Turkey seem to be unaware about the existence of numerous Turkish mosques in Europe and North America. What we are seeing is the radicalization of youth as a reaction to a number of conspiracy theories which have been proliferating and increasing their influence after 2002-2003. The reasons for this state of affairs are manifold but two major reasons can be given. The first one is the American occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the perception that Americans are supporting the creation of a Kurdish state. The second one is the JDP, perceived by many secularists as a party with a secret agenda to Islamize Turkey.

This state of affairs is a major concern for peaceful coexistence among people belonging to different ideologies and religions. All political and social groups in Turkey should emphasize the significance of democracy and respect for freedom of expression and opinion.



What is striking about the AoC is that Spain with its Islamic past- albeit not always peaceful and Turkey with a number of problems in its recent history, have come together to transcend religious bigotry and to establish a more peaceful world. While, this initiative should be commended, it should be given form and substantiated so that the precise mechanisms and aims of the initiative becomes manifest. For this aim to materialize American and Israeli participation are essential as these are the two controversial countries for the Middle East.

The AoC is a good idea which is hard to translate into practical politics and achieve concrete results. That is why the AoC started numerous projects and initiatives. As a concept, the AoC is contemplating closer liaisons between cultures and civilizations, yet it is not necessarily an alliance, a mechanism which has to be against a state or organization. While the AoC is against terrorism, it does not form a classical alliance against terrorist organizations either. Rather, it is a mechanism, a marketplace of ideas, where one can exchange and learn about each other's experiences and culture.

Institutionally, there is a risk that it might become another bureaucratic agency under the United Nations. These weaknesses however, do not cancel out the good intentions behind this project aiming at minimizing animosities and misunderstandings and trying to establish respectful relations between civilizations. It is a challenge to be addressed not only among but also within nations.

The discourse and practice of tolerance should be emphasized against the preachers of extremism. On this point, Mevlana is a highly relevant historical figure with his message of tolerance and peaceful coexistence between different religions.

### Endnotes

1 Turkish sufi who lived during the 13th century and expressed divine love and fraternity between peoples.

2 The 13th century Turkish sufi who lived in the central Anatolian town of Konya and who believed in religious coexistence. He said "Come, come again, whoever you are, come. Heathen, fireworshipper or idolatrous, come. Come even if you broke your penitence a hundred times, Ours is the portal of hope, come as you are." From <http://www.mevlana.net>, retrieved February 28, 2009.

3 The professors hailed from all academic fields. One noteworthy individual was Ernst Reuter who taught urban planning in Turkey between 1935 and 1946. He was to become the mayor of West Berlin after World War II. See S. Shaw, (1993). *Turkey and the Holocaust* (pp. 6-7). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

4 MNP (Milli Nizam Partisi is the Turkish acronym for National Order Party, MSP (Milli Selamet Partisi) for National Salvation Party, RP (Refah Partisi) for Prosperity Party, FP (Fazilet Partisi) for Virtue Party, and SP (Saadet Partisi). The term national in the context of the National Outlook Party is more religious than secular.

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