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Introduction

Exploring and Interrogating the “Alliance of Civilizations” Project

Akanmu Adebayo

The papers in this special edition of the *Journal of Global Initiatives* were presented at the conference on the theme “Alliance of Civilizations: Turkey at the Crossroads of Cultures” held on January 29-31, 2009 at Kennesaw State University, Georgia, U.S. The conference was attended by dignitaries from Turkey and the United States. Delegates from Turkey came from the parliament, the media, academic institutions, and non-governmental organizations. Over forty academic papers were presented, and one of the keynote addresses was delivered by Ambassador Mark Parris, formerly U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, on the fascinating subject “Prospects for U.S.-Turkish Relations under President Obama.”

The conference itself was part of an academic year-long program entitled “Year of Turkey,” which was the twenty-fifth edition of the annual country study series at the university. Undoubtedly, the Year of Turkey was a most ambitious undertaking, but it was also one of the most exciting and educative programs in the university’s history of internationalization. Emphasizing the importance of the Year of Turkey in KSU’s global learning efforts, President Papp led a delegation of KSU faculty and administrators to Turkey to secure support for many of the projects. The result was a surge of interest in the program among Turkish citizens, officials and institutions, thereby furthering the university’s vision of a robust and epochal year-long study. In addition, the planning for the Year of Turkey included input from many Turkish cultural groups, governmental agencies, consular representatives, business associations, non-governmental organizations, and the media. KSU faculty, staff and students served on the planning committee, along with representatives of the co-sponsoring organizations. These made the program richer, the academic content stronger, and its cultural events more authentic and relevant.

Through the lectures, artistic displays and performances, and other events during 2008-2009 academic year, the immediate metropolitan Atlanta and the larger Southeastern U.S. learned about Turkey's long and checkered history, its strategic location, the contemporary political dynamics, relations with the EU and the U.S., and its regional leadership and influence.

In addition to weekly lectures, performances, art exhibition, and film shows, highlights of the year-long program included the following:

- Several courses were offered on Turkey in Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 that explored various themes and tied their classes to the weekly schedule of public lectures;
- October 8, 2008: Grand opening of the Year of Turkey featuring the performance by the Mehter Band from Istanbul, Turkish food, the KSU Players, and several goodwill messages by and from Turkish dignitaries;
- January 29-31, 2009: International conference on "Alliance of Civilizations: Turkey at the Crossroads of Cultures";
- February 10-11, 2009: Performance of Konya Sema Whirling Dervishes; and
- March 19-April 30, 2009: Exhibition of "ATA.TÜRK: Chantal Zakari/Mike Mandel in Collaboration."

The Theme of Alliance of Civilizations

Like the conference at which the papers were first presented, this special edition of the *Journal of Global Initiatives* engages the theme of "alliance of civilizations" (AoC). While disputing the "clash of civilizations" proposed two decades ago by Samuel Huntington, they also interrogate the counter-proposal of "alliance of civilizations" in regards to its validity as a theoretical concept and its usefulness as societal and national political and economic behavior. If indeed Turkey is not at odds with itself, does its very survival depend on delicately managing its diversity and drawing strength from its roots, even if these were partly in Europe and Asia?

Straddling Europe and Asia, Turkey by its location and history has been at the crossroads of cultures and civilizations. Turkey sees and perceives the world through various lenses. Turkey is as European as it is Asian, as Western as it is Eastern. Historically, the region comprising modern Turkey has overseen the birth of major civilizations such as the Hittite, Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. Today, Turkey is a democratic, secular, constitutional republic with a Muslim majority population. Turkish society features islands of wealth and poverty, and of modernity and tradition. As the articles in this

edition demonstrate, Turkey is a perfect laboratory for learning, and learning *more*, about religion and politics, ethnic and cultural diversity, historical connections and intersections, gender issues and social relations, economic growth and development, and the challenges of modernity in a land still viewed by many with mysticism and exoticism.

Initiated by the governments of Turkey and Spain, the “Alliance of Civilizations” proposal was accepted by the United Nations and, subsequently, an “Alliance of Civilizations” office was opened at the UN. How valid is the claim of Spain and Turkey? What are the goals of this project in the UN? What, in Turkey’s history and current political climate, makes Turkey a credible proponent for the concept and project? These and other questions are addressed in this special edition. The answers are presented in two parts. With four papers, Part 1 conceptualizes the “Alliance of Civilizations” and explores the position of Turkey as a principal partner in its proposal and implementation. Part 2 examines political and cultural issues that promote or hinder Turkey’s position.

The lead-off paper is Umut Uzer’s which examines Turkey’s role as a catalyst for the alliance of civilizations concept. After critiquing Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” thesis, Umut Uzer’s examines the political history of the AoC. He asserts unequivocally that the AoC was within the framework of domestic and foreign policy pursuits of the Justice and Development Party, a pursuit that includes coming to terms with Turkey’s Islamic identity and peaceful relations with its neighbors. Gokhan Bacik extends this connection between Turkish foreign policy and the AoC by examining the question of dialog among civilizations. After all, to have an “alliance” there must also be communication and dialog. How critical is Turkey’s position in the AoC? How would Turkey entrench that position? How could a country be considered an ally and a member of NATO, but have its intentions to join the European Union (EU) rebuffed? Bacik suggests, among other things, that the Turkish thesis may become stronger as the country takes advantage of its position as a bridge between East and West.

This “bridging” theme is explored in economic (and trade) terms by Murat Doral’s article. Doral presents evidence which demonstrate that Turkey’s main trading partner has been the EU, that Europeans dominate the list of tourists spending money in Turkey, and that EU countries top the list of foreign direct investments in Turkey. Turkey seemed ready to use these economic relations to initiate dialog. Perhaps not all issues are economic. Despite the trade relations, for example, Turkey’s membership of the EU has not materialized. What of politics? Maia Hallward answers this question. Among other things, she explores the impact of Turkey’s identity as “a non-Arab secular democracy

currently governed by a Muslim-oriented party.” How are Turkey’s internal politics and foreign policies—including relations with the Middle East, role in Israeli-Syria negotiations, and concerns for regional security—perceived by outsiders, especially those states that, potentially, would play critical roles in the AoC project?

Articles in Part 2 of this special edition explore specific issues in the AoC theme, some theoretically, others empirically. Juliette Tolay’s article examines the missed opportunities for dialog in Euro-Turkish relations. Her position is that whereas dialog is central to the AoC proposal, and while there has been the “appearance” of dialog in Turkey’s relations with Europe, in actual fact there has not been the “practice” of dialog. Turkey’s official diplomatic relations with individual countries, Turkey’s negotiations with the European Union, and the presence of Turkish immigrants in various parts of Europe—none of these has yielded opportunities for real dialog.

Lisa DiCarlo’s paper uses the public reception of a widely successful photographic exhibition entitled *Ebru: Reflections of Cultural Diversity in Turkey*, by Attila Durak, to interrogate Turkish view of “Turkishness” and, therefore, Turks’ readiness to accept the “Other”—one of the cardinal issues in the AoC project. DiCarlo’s paper presents the reaction of viewers as the exhibition moved through various parts of Turkey. If truly a photo is worth a thousand words, those photos on display seemed to have elicited another thousand words. Apparently, there still are lingering issues about Turkish identity even among Turks.

The paper by Hasan Aydin looks at first generation Turkish immigrants and the challenges of their assimilation to the majority culture. Concentrating on Turkish immigrants in Poland, Aydin concludes that while the Turkish immigrants may be integrated into the Polish religion, language and culture, they may not be “completely assimilated” into the society. The paper raises the question of the relative value of “melting-pot” in the context of AoC.

The environment of global peace and understanding is one of the overall goals of the AoC. How closely does the AoC project mimic M. Fethullah Gulen’s ideas? Richard Penaskovic sifts through Gulen’s works as they relate to world peace. He concludes that if Gulen’s ideas were followed, the “relationship between Islam and the West would be dialogical rather than conflictual.”

The final article in the special edition situates itself in Istanbul. In this paper, Nilgun Anadolu Okur examines Istanbul’s contribution to global cultures and the AoC. After stating clearly that Istanbul’s “wealth lies in its reservoir of cultures,” and after establishing the continuities in Istanbul’s culture history, Nilgun proceeds to discuss each of the major landmarks—historic buildings, historic sections of the city—and maintains that a continuity in their use and habitation is a testimony to Istanbul’s immutability.

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Many individuals and organizations collaborated to make the Year of Turkey events and the Alliance of Civilizations conference a huge success. As I was also directly involved in these activities, I want to use this opportunity to thank these individuals and organizations. Within KSU, first and foremost I thank President Dan Papp and Provost Lendley Black for their support of the Year of Turkey and their commitment to internationalizing the campus. Next, my appreciation goes to the staff of the Institute for Global Initiatives (IGI) and numerous volunteers. In particular, I thank Dr. Dan Paracka, Maggie Scott, and Vivian Bonilla. Dan has remained the backbone and the chief coordinator of the entire “Year of...” As usual, his amazing organizational skills gave shape to and held the various events together. Maggie arranged transportation—air and ground—for all lecturers, which is not a small task. Vivian maintained contact with all conference presenters, and was responsible for the entire logistics. She also hanged all exhibits and hosted all guests in relation to the conference. Dr. Barry Morris, then operating from the Office of the Provost and now Interim Executive Director of the IGI, played a truly outstanding role and I am grateful for his support. He provided leadership during several trips to Turkey, Washington D.C., and New York, and brought his diplomatic skills to bear during numerous meetings and consultations.

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