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## 10<sup>th</sup> UNAOC Global Forum, Cascais, 25-27 November 2024

### Plenary Session 1: “Two Decades of Dialogue for Humanity: Reflecting on Lessons Learned and Forging a Path Forward”

26 November 2024, 12:03 -13:30, Main Plenary Hall

#### *Draft*

In September 2004, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York and the chain of terrorist attacks that followed in Bali, Madrid, London and İstanbul, the Government of Spain put forth a proposal to launch the ‘Alliance of Civilizations’ initiative to bring the international community together and build bridges between societies, promote dialogue and understanding across nations, cultures and religions. The *raison d’être* of the Alliance of Civilizations was to help prevent identity-based conflicts and sustain peace in which cultural, ethnic and religious diversity can be a source of strength and inspiration, as opposed to a justification for violence.

Co-sponsored by the Government of Türkiye, the initiative was formally announced and launched by the United Nations Secretary-General a year later. A group of prominent high-level officials generated a report<sup>1</sup> containing a series of recommendations and a programme of action in the areas of youth, education, migration and media that could assist in diminishing hostility and promoting harmony among nations and cultures. The relations between Western and Muslim societies were analysed with special attention. Promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue was identified as an essential tool in achieving peace and greater understanding and respect among civilizations, cultures, religions and beliefs.

Since 2007, under the able leadership of three High Representatives – H.E. Mr. Jorge Sampaio of Portugal (2007-2013), H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser of Qatar (2013-2018) and H.E. Mr. Miguel Angel Moratinos of Spain (appointed in 2019), the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) initiative has operationalized the key recommendations of the high-level group report and grew into a well-established and vibrant United Nations entity. Today, it serves as a unique and inclusive multi-stakeholder United Nations platform for advancing the culture of peace and promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue for peace and mutual respect.

Over the past years, UNAOC cultivated strong partnerships with non-state actors – civil society, academia, media, the private sector and young people – and launched a series of projects and programmes that facilitate a global conversation on challenges and opportunities for living in a landscape of diversity; prevent violent extremism conducive to terrorism; combat stereotypes, misperceptions, discrimination and xenophobia; and support innovative grassroots initiatives that contribute to intercultural dialogue and understanding, mutual respect and cooperation across divides. Hundreds of UNAOC programme alumni are now acting as agents of peace in their

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<sup>1</sup>UNAOC Report of the High-level Group, November 2006. Available at: <https://www.unaoc.org/resource/alliance-of-civilizations-report-of-the-high-level-group-13-november-2006/>

individual and professional capacities. The impact of UNAOC projects on the ground has been reported as significant and measurable, particularly those implemented with civil society organizations and youth-led organizations.

Increasingly over time, guided by the motto “Many Cultures. One Humanity”, UNAOC’s geographic focus of work has expanded beyond the Western and Muslim societies, with advocacy and programming activities spanning across all regions. Its Group of Friends – a community of countries and international organizations that rallied around the initial launch of the initiative during 2004-2006 - grew from 52 to 160 members. The United Nations Member States reaffirmed their support of UNAOC and its role in promoting dialogue as a soft power tool to prevent conflicts in General Assembly resolutions 64/14 of 22 December 2009 and 69/312 of 6 July 2015. They acknowledged the UNAOC work in other General Assembly resolutions and political declarations, adopted during the UNAOC Global Forums. Inspired by the values and principles of UNAOC, several Governments developed and launched their national plans and strategies, identifying and implementing a series of actions to prevent tensions and promote interfaith harmony, improve interethnic relations and foster social cohesion. Furthermore, several groups of countries have also adopted regional strategies as shared frameworks to build trust and enhance interaction between neighbours in their region. At the municipal level, UNAOC launched city-to-city dialogues and implemented projects with local authorities.

Having pioneered a range of preventive activities across youth, education, media and migration areas, UNAOC has widened its thematic focus by highlighting the essential contribution of women as contributors to peace and mediators and the role of sports and arts in bringing people together. It has also implemented activities in support of Pillar 1 of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism.

Following the attacks against mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019, the United Nations Secretary-General delegated UNAOC to formulate a comprehensive Plan of Action to prevent such attacks. UNAOC has developed the “United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites: In Unity and Solidarity for Safe and Peaceful Worship”, and today, it acts as the lead United Nations coordinating entity to implement its recommendations. A year later, in 2020, the United Nations Secretary-General designated the High Representative to be the United Nations focal point to monitor antisemitism and to enhance a system-wide response. Having developed a wide partnership network with religious leaders, faith actors and faith-based organizations, today UNAOC remains the main focal point in the United Nations Secretariat on addressing all forms of religious intolerance.

The 10<sup>th</sup> UNAOC Global Forum in Cascais commemorates the proposal to launch UNAOC and how the initiative came to fruition two decades later. It will be held at a critical juncture in global peace and security, which is marked by multiple conflicts and crises that contain identity-based components, exacerbate divisions and erode trust. As the United Nations Secretary-General suggested in “A New Agenda for Peace” policy brief<sup>2</sup>, the international community must step up

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations, Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9: A New Agenda for Peace, 2023. Available at: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-new-agenda-for-peace-en.pdf>

its global prevention efforts, with the United Nations at the centre of these efforts. To sustain peace, more people-centered actions, with the full spectrum of human rights at the core, are needed. The programming and advocacy activities of UNAOC are tailored as a direct response to those needs and aim to promote dialogue and trust among nations, civilizations and communities around the globe.

Against the above backdrop, Plenary Session 1 will provide an opportunity to share lessons learned in building and sustaining peace through soft power tools, including interreligious and intercultural dialogue. The speakers will explore the means through which the United Nations could meet the aspirations of humanity for durable peace and a brighter future for all, a commitment to which is reflected in the recently adopted Pact for the Future<sup>3</sup>. They will be invited to reflect on the ongoing trends in relations between diverse societies, the emergence of contemporary threats faced by humanity and why the entire multilateral system is under heavy criticism for not being fit for the present and future challenges. The speakers will deliberate on what role UNAOC, as an international multi-stakeholder platform for dialogue across cultures, ethnicities and religions, could play in addressing current and emerging challenges of humanity.

The speakers will address the following guiding questions:

- What is the evolution of the global landscape of divisions across cultural, religious and/or ethnic lines that we have observed during the past two decades? Do dialogue and building alliances remain an answer to them? Given the current global challenges, does UNAOC remain fit for purpose to help address them?
- What lessons has humanity learned – or has chosen to ignore - over the past two decades amidst rising hatred and global deterioration of trust and solidarity, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What success stories and good practices can we share to demonstrate that intercultural and interreligious dialogue goes beyond rhetoric and can translate into measurable and concerted actions on the national and global levels that promote human dignity anchored in inclusion, mutual respect and solidarity?
- Why should Governments and the international community prioritize prevention and invest political and financial capital in the culture of peace to build peaceful and inclusive societies? What priorities and actions could constitute the roadmap for UNAOC in the coming decade?

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations, Pact for the Future, 2024. Available at: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/soft-pact\\_for\\_the\\_future\\_adopted.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/soft-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf)