

## Ambassador Ali Yakital's presentation

Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here with you today to discuss a very important issue that affects us all.

Indeed, given the recent global upheaval caused by the publication of caricatures insulting Prophet Mohammed, first in a Danish newspaper and then in several other European media, I believe it is extremely timely to try to understand the root causes of the crisis and explore the ways and means of building dialogue among different cultures and religions.

Therefore, I would first like to thank the Finnish Institute of International Affairs for organizing this important seminar and giving me the opportunity to address such a distinguished audience.

I would also like to thank the Spanish, German and of course Turkish Embassies, as well as the French Cultural Centre and the Finnish Parliament in supporting this organization.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Within the last few weeks we all have spent a great deal of our time and energy in analyzing the crisis that erupted with the publication of some offensive cartoons in European newspapers.

In this respect, there has been a heated debate on the use of the right to freedom of expression and its legitimate boundaries. I find this debate very stimulating and useful as it touches upon a fundamental issue with respect to the balance between our freedoms and responsibilities.

And I am pleased to see that there is an increasing commonality of views on this important matter, to the effect that incitement to violence and offending religious beliefs and convictions can not be considered as covered by the freedom of expression. And that the cartoons in question have definitely infringed upon this boundary.

However, today I am not going to dwell upon this issue any further.

I would rather try to see what lies behind the recent crisis.

In this regard, I do not believe that these cartoons just suddenly came out of the blue and that they only reflect a black sense of humor. No, they are in fact the result of a series of misunderstandings and misperceptions about Islam that have accumulated particularly over the last few years.

In other words, the caricature incident is merely the tip of the iceberg. What lies under the water is what we have to see and address. Only then can we make a sensible judgment about the problem at hand and come up with a sound strategy to deal with it.

In order to do this, we have to go a little back in time and recognize that particularly since the September 11 attacks, there is a dangerously growing sense of Islamophobia in the West; that Western populations are wrongly led to believe that Moslems are prone to violence and terror, and that their traditions and values are not compatible with those of democratic and contemporary societies.

The terrorist bombings in Madrid, Istanbul and London, as well as incidents like the Van Gogh murder have further aggravated this phenomenon in Europe.

We also have to recognize that those with authority and capacity have unfortunately failed to redress this misrepresentation. In the West, for instance, we felt the absence of a convincing political leadership rejecting the association of Islam with violence. The available means have not been used effectively enough to enlighten peoples and save them from falling into this trap.

At least, not more effectively than those radical circles on each side who continue to exploit the situation to the detriment of all. Indeed, it is obvious that the only winner of this situation and crises like the cartoon incident are radicals on both sides who wish to divide the international community along cultural and religious lines.

In the Moslem world, on the other hand, the true image of Islam has not been done justice. The suicide bombings and acts of terror, claimed to be perpetrated in the name of Islam have not always been condemned strongly enough. Furthermore, the sectarian clashes like the ones we see in Iraq, even though such clashes in this country have certain other reasons, do not help to reflect the image of a self-respecting and peaceful religion either.

Authorities on both sides have also procrastinated before engaging with each other in a genuine dialogue to address the matter jointly. For instance, I recall the doubt initially expressed by some countries on the added value of the Alliance of Civilizations initiative which we co-sponsor with Spain, although it seems to be embraced by all nowadays.

Distinguished Guests,

So, this is the background that brought us to date. The caricatures therefore are in fact only a reflection of this wrong and dangerous perception mounting in the West for some time. That said, these cartoons, although they have kept the whole world busy around them, are not the only or the most perilous reflection of this growing sense of Islamophobia either.

The xenophobic and discriminatory laws and practices that we see on the rise within the

last few years are even more dangerous and indicative of the potential threat facing us all. In particular, we have to acknowledge that the Moslem migrant populations living in Europe feel under increasing pressure, and even a value-based attack.

In short, while talking about the so-called cartoon crisis, we have to be able to see the whole picture and make informed decisions accordingly with a view to preventing the recurrence of such crises. So the question now is what to do in concrete terms to achieve this objective.

First and foremost comes of course the need to establish genuine and functioning channels of dialogue. Indeed, one important conclusion to be drawn from the present crisis is that the lack of confidence and dialogue between the West and the Islamic world can have serious implications for global peace and stability.

It is therefore incumbent on the international community to take urgent steps to promote dialogue, understanding and mutual respect. It is equally important that this process not turn into a monologue and that we must learn to listen and understand each other.

This is precisely what the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, launched by the UN Secretary General and co-sponsored by Turkey and Spain, calls for.

It is indeed a direct response to "the need, felt across many divides, for a committed effort by the international community - both at the institutional and civil society levels - to overcome through a functioning dialogue the existing prejudices, misconceptions, misperceptions, and polarization".

The main objective of the initiative, as you all know, is to elaborate practical measures in this direction. And I believe that the action-oriented nature of the initiative is where its particular added-value lies. Because, it is of utmost importance that we should now act rather than talk and translate our words and long-standing commitments into deeds as soon as possible.

This is why a High Level Group of eminent personalities, representing different geographies and cultures, have been instituted within the framework of the initiative. This group which had two meetings so far has already outlined a viable working strategy.

In this regard, the problem areas are rightly identified and the initial ideas for practical steps are also very pertinent. I am sure you will excuse me for not going into details of this exercise, as it is an ongoing study. The work on the Action Plan will be finalized in the fourth meeting in Istanbul this September and then submitted to UN Secretary General.

However, I will just mention that the Group's identification of youth and the migrant communities as priority populations to focus on, and education and media as the foremost means of engagement are steps in the right direction.

Education starting from the very elementary level, for instance, is the key to success in this whole endeavour with a view to preventing young minds from being further polluted by prejudices and misinformation.

Media, on the other hand, should be engaged in a cooperative relationship, given that in today's world of technological advances, the outreach of media has taken on unprecedented proportions. The explosive impact of the caricatures throughout the globe leaves no doubt on this point.

Whereas, the priority of migrant populations is also absolutely irrefutable, given that they are one of the most affected parties by the widening fault-lines between different cultures and religions. Their experiences have a significant impact on mutual perceptions; so should their sensitivities and expectations.

Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I will not take too much of your time and will leave the elaboration of these points to the discussion period. But allow me to respond to a question which faces me wherever I go and I expect the same can happen here. So let me try to preempt it anyway.

It is about whether I am optimistic or not on the chances for the Alliance of Civilizations initiative to make a real difference and thus contribute to intercultural dialogue. My answer is positive. Yes I do sincerely believe that we have a chance to bring an added value and complement in a positive way many similar efforts dedicated to this end.

First, because there is a vast common ground and an emerging consensus within the international community that the future must belong to the harmony of cultures and to that end we must promote dialogue and cooperation.

Secondly, because we are more willing than ever to listen and engage in a meaningful dialogue. The High Level Group meetings of the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, for instance, have already become a center of attraction for opinion and political leaders from every corner and the mutual feedback is highly impressive.

Thirdly, because a great majority of people from all over the world desire peace and stability. They want development and prosperity and wish to benefit from the positive aspects of globalization. They are still more receptive to the calls of dialogue rather than confrontation.

Fourthly, because we are all part of one human civilization, irrespective of our cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. Indeed there is no hierarchy among cultures, nor is there superiority in the manifestations of human civilization. Rather they are cumulative, interactive and progressive. All societies have made their unique contribution to the evolution of human civilization in the course of history.

Finally, because, values like respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law are essentially universal. No single culture can claim ownership of these values alone. Instead, these values are the product of mankind's collective wisdom, conscience and progress.

All we need to do now is to highlight these facts and establish it in the hearts and minds of everyone concerned. The Alliance of Civilizations is an important means to this end.

Distinguished Guests,

Based on these premises, Turkey has so far been active in promoting dialogue, tolerance, and mutual respect. And we will continue to do so. As a secular European country with a predominantly Moslem population; a co-sponsor of the Alliance of Civilizations; a member of the OIC; an EU candidate having started accession negotiations; and a member of all the major international and European institutions, Turkey considers itself well-placed to offer its contribution to the promotion of a genuine inter-cultural dialogue in collaboration with its friends and partners.

Indeed, in all related literature on this issue, people tend to talk about two sides of the predicament and categorize countries accordingly. This may be true for many. But for us, we cannot be just placed on one single side. Because we belong to both, on the basis of our values and traditions, but more so on the basis of our ideals and expectations. We understand the views, concerns and aspirations of both sides and feel well-disposed to bring them together around a common vision.

In fact, our EU membership process has already become a powerful symbol of this positive universalism. Indeed, many in the Moslem world see this process as the triumph of universal values, multi-culturalism and tolerance. They see that differences in culture or religion do not prevent societies from embracing each other and charting towards a common future on the basis of universal values; that "a civilizational fault-line exists not among religions or cultures, but instead between democracy, modernity and reformism on the one side, and totalitarianism, radicalism and lethargy on the other".

With these thoughts I thank you once again for inviting me here and listening to what I had to say.