

Muslims at the United Nations: Ethical and Political Issues

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Abstract

The United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC) was established in 2005 by the then United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, to try to improve inter-cultural and inter-religious relations after 9/11. Creating UNAOC stimulated wider interest in examining how and in what ways improving inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue might lead to better relations between the West and Muslims, making incidents like 9/11 less likely. Between 2015 and 2018, I researched into the UNAOC, mainly at UN headquarters in New York. The research involved, inter alia, interviewing over 80 knowledgeable people. As time went on, during repeated research trips to New York, it became clear that the issue of improving relations between the West and Muslims was far from straightforward, as it involved profound ethical and political considerations. The first was that at the UN, Muslims had a relatively understated position and did not enjoy equality with secular or Christian entities. I interviewed many Muslims from representative organisations at the UN. All were unwilling to conform to the UN's understanding that key problems of inter-cultural and inter-religious conflict were a consequence of Islamist extremism and terrorism. Muslims I interviewed saw the issue differently. They pointed to long periods of Western domination of international relations to explain the lowly position of Muslims. As a consequence, the UNAOC was seen to try to address the problem with unsound understanding of where the problem lay. Muslims believed that the modus operandi and aims of the UNAOC would divide not unite the very constituencies – that is, the West and Muslims – that the UNAOC was created to assist. The conclusion is that even well-meaning initiatives such as the UNAOC are bound to fail if they consider only one set of views and excludes others.

Keywords: *United Nations Alliance of Civilisations; the West; Muslims; extremism; 9/11*

Introduction

The United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC) was established in 2005 by the then United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, to try to improve inter-cultural and inter-religious relations after 9/11. Creating UNAOC stimulated wider interest in examining how and in what ways improving inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue might lead to better relations between the West and Muslims, making incidents like 9/11 less likely.

The paper examines the ethical and political characteristics of the United Nations' relationship with Muslims, by focusing on the UNAOC. The paper explains that Muslims that I interviewed during four years of research (2015-18) were mainly representatives of various UN-based Muslim organisations. All were unwilling to conform to the UN's understanding of where the main problems of post-9/11 inter-cultural conflict lay: Islamist extremism and terrorism-related violence directed against Western or 'Christian' targets. Muslims interviewed in the course of the research into UNAOC did not see things like this: they believed that the *modus operandi* and aims of the UNAOC divided not united the very constituencies – that is, Christians and Muslims – for whom UNAOC

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sought to build bridges. The conclusion is that even well-meaning initiatives such as the UNAOC are bound to fail if the pursuit of their goals considers only one set of views and excludes others.

The context for the emergence of the UNAOC goes back to the late 1980s and the end of the Cold War. From that time, as identified by Huntington, there was an increase in inter-cultural and inter-religious tensions between the West and the Muslim world.² This was exemplified after the Cold War in an ideational shift from new world order to new world disorder. Perceptions of new world disorder were inextricably linked to Western fears of Islamist violence and extremism, seen to undermine the West's security and stability. The issue was not addressed directly at the United Nations until after 9/11. Consequent to the al Qaeda attack on the Twin Towers which killed around 3,000 people directly, attempts were made at the UN to develop inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue as a response to fears of an intensifying of tensions and conflict between the West and the Muslim world.

This paper examines two UN initiatives in this regard: The United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC) and the UN's anti-Islamist terrorism activities focused in two main initiatives: "Preventing Violent Extremism" (PVE) and "Countering Violent Extremism" (CVE). The contention of this paper is that the UN's attempts to improve inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue (the UNAOC) were fatally undermined by its securitisation of Islam (PVE/CVE). This raises both ethical and practical challenges involved in studying Muslims at the UN. The paper seeks to understand better the ethics and politics involved in studying Islam and Muslims at the UN after 9/11.

During the 1990s, the UN sought to address the problem of growing inter-cultural and inter-religious tensions via an initiative supported by the UN General Assembly: "Dialogue Among Civilizations". The initiative was launched in 1998 by the then president of Iran, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami. It was followed by a UN General Assembly-endorsed "International Year of Dialogue among Civilizations" in 2001. On September 11, 2001, however, al Qaeda unexpectedly yet effectively attacked emblematic targets in the USA. This epochal event, leading to around 3,000 deaths, was seen by many as marking a new stage in the "clash of civilisations" between the West and the Muslim world. It was widely regarded as a watershed, stimulating the government of the USA, supported by the United Nations, to commence a "Global War on Terror", with the stated aim of rooting out and killing Islamist terrorists. Critics suggest that the USA also sought to take the opportunity to try to impose its vision of a "liberal and cosmopolitan Western political and economic world order" characterised by "socially intrusive and aggressive neoliberal capitalist-driven globalization and modernization".³ Given the proactive manner which the USA used to try to further its vision of a new world order, critics found it unsurprising that as an apparent result Islamist extremism and terrorism increased.⁴ Instead, it was seen by some as a predictable response, effectively repudiating Francis Fukuyama's "historically deterministic, and triumphalist liberal democratic/capitalist 'End of History' paradigm",⁵ and provided further evidence of the veracity of Huntington's "clash of civilisations" framework to understand post-Cold War international relations and onset of a new world disorder.⁶

² Samuel Huntington, "The clash of civilisations?", *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993); Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

³ Mark Sleboda. "A 'Dialogue of Civilizations' as a Theoretical Model for a Multipolar World Order", *Geopolitica*, n/d.

⁴ Mike Bowker, *Russia, America and the Islamic World* (London: Routledge, 2016); David L. Phillips, *From Bullets to Ballots. Violent Muslim Movements in Transition* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", *The National Interest* 16 (1988); *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

⁶ Sleboda, "A 'Dialogue of Civilizations'"



For Huntington, the only way to avoid or mitigate the emerging “clash of civilisations” was for the international community urgently to build a multipolar and multicivilisational international order. Discussions on how to do this would necessarily focus on multicultural and intercivilisational discourses, in order to try to find solutions to issues seen to exacerbate intercivilisational friction and lead to conflict. Huntington understood post-Cold War international relations as being dominated by civilisational core states, which he saw as potentially key “sources of order”, able to lead by example with civilisational like-minded states regarded as “cultural kin”. For Huntington, “[a] world in which core states play a leading or dominating role is a sphere-influenced world”.⁷ Core civilisational states would act as the primary actors of, and negotiators between, civilisations, helping to construct a new world order. This sphere-influenced world would necessarily be multipolar. According to Shahar, the aim of Khatami’s “Dialogue among Civilizations” initiative at the UN was to start the process of building such a new world order which, if successful, would likely mitigate or even prevent a “clash of civilisations”.⁸ But things did not turn out like that: 9/11 destroyed such aspirations. What could the UN do about it? Its response was to create the UNAOC in 2005, following a joint initiative from the governments of Spain and Turkey.

The UNAOC and Islam: the 7th Global Forum, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2016

The UNAOC’s showcase event is a biennial “global forum”. The first global forum took place in Madrid, Spain, in 2008. The most recent was held in New York in 2018. Each forum brings together around 3,000 people to discuss problems and prospects of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. Key discussions focus on relationships between the West and the Muslim world.

The 2016 global forum took place in late April in Azerbaijan, a former Soviet republic that in recent years has been seeking to make itself a global player. In the months before the global forum, the government of the oil-rich country sponsored major sporting events, including an international cycle race and Formula 1 motor racing. The desire to have a higher profile on the global stage helps explain why Azerbaijan’s government offered to host the UNAOC’s 2016 global forum and pay the estimated event costs of US\$2-3 million. The UNAOC is always severely strapped for cash, and almost any offer from a government to host the forum and pay the associated costs is taken very seriously.

The three-day global forum is crucial to the work of the UNAOC, enabling the body to highlight its work and receive publicity from the world’s media. I was invited to attend the forum as a paper giver and participant in a breakout session on the topic of “global citizenship education.” Global forums are the UNAOC’s showcase event, enabling it to highlight what it sees as its major achievements in relation to its four key foci: education, youth, media, and migration. The UNAOC regards the issues of inter-cultural and inter-religious friction – especially between the West and the Muslim world – as potentially solvable if sufficient attention is paid to these four areas. Two of them – education and youth – obviously bring to the forum the issue of interaction between young people and the UNAOC’s idea here is that if young people develop a sense of shared identity at an early age then it is far more likely that they will be happy to engage with each other as adults in a cooperative and mutually respectful way.

The print, broadcast and social media, on the other hand, are seen to hold the key to improved perceptions in both the West and the Muslim world of the “other” entity. So, the UNAOC works to

⁷ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 156.

⁸ Yael Shahar, “Al-Qaida: A Vindication for Constructivism?” (North Carolina: Institute for the Study of Asymmetric Conflict, 2019). Available at <http://www.asymmetricconflict.org/articles/al-qaida-a-vindication-for-constructivism/> Last accessed 13 February 2019.

improving intercultural dialogue.¹¹ It also raises the issue of the relationships between ethics and politics at the UN. What is the UNAOC's main responsibility: to help build inter-cultural and inter-religious bridges or cosy up to an egregious dictatorship because the latter is willing to pay the costs of staging the Alliance's showcase annual event? Put another way, it was more important for the UNAOC to support the status quo than to take seriously the issue of improving Muslim-Christian relations at its global forum. The failure in Baku was however not unexpected when we bear in mind the UN's wider understanding of the causes of inter-cultural and inter-religious conflict: Islamist extremism and terrorism.

The UN and securitisation of Islam after 9/11

The events of 11 September 2001 were directly responsible not only for the creation of UNAOC but were also a symptom of what many saw as growing polarisation between the West and the Muslim world. The response of the UN to 9/11 was Janus-faced. On the one hand, it promoted inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue via the UN Alliance of Civilisations from 2005. On the other hand, in 2006, the UN introduced an 'anti-terrorism' programme, Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE). The purpose was to counter, roll back and eventually eliminate violent extremism and terrorism, seen primarily to emanate from jihadis. The UN's PVE initiative was adopted by the UN General Assembly in the context of the UN's "Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy". The Strategy was based on four pillars: (1) tackling conditions conducive to terrorism; (2) preventing and combating terrorism; (3) building countries' capacity to combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the United Nations system in that regard; and (4) ensuring respect for human rights for all and the rule of law while countering terrorism.

While UN policies to combat terrorism emerged as a reaction to acts of extreme violence, they were mainly repressive in nature. Conducted in the name of national security, they largely overlooked pillars (1) and (4) of the Strategy. Perhaps best exemplified by the US-led "Global War on Terror", this security-based approach comprehensively failed, if judged by the number of deaths from violent extremism and terrorism across the globe. They increased nearly 10-fold between 2000 and 2014, rising from 3,329 to 32,685, before falling 22% to 25,673 in 2016.¹² In 2017, however, numbers of deaths rose steeply mainly due to the Syrian civil war. The Global Extremism Monitor reported that: "At least 84,023 people in 66 countries died during the year" because of violent extremism and terrorism.¹³

The alarming rise in deaths from violent extremism and terrorism from 2000 prompted the international community via the UN to shift the focus to preventing terrorism rather than countering it. In 2014, UN Security Council Resolution 2178 advocated countering violent extremism (CVE) as a mean to prevent terrorism, thus augmenting the original PVE concept.

While the UNAOC sought to use its soft power to address inter-cultural and inter-religious tensions and conflicts involving the West and the Muslim world, governments of most UN member states were more attracted to the use of hard power. It was deemed necessary in response to the egregious terrorist attacks in various parts of the world, including the USA and Western Europe, not least in order to convince sceptical electorates that their governments were taking all necessary steps to fight the terrorists. In the two decades following 9/11, many Western European countries experienced

¹¹ Jeffrey Haynes, "Inter-Civilizational Dialogue in Azerbaijan".

¹² Global Terrorism Index 2017.

¹³ Global Extremism Monitor 2018.

terrorist-related incidents, including the 11 March 2004 attack on Madrid's railway which saw more than 200 killed by an al Qaeda-inspired extremist and which led directly to Spain's initiative regarding the Alliance of Civilisations. In addition, the early 2000s saw the emergence of new, transnational jihadi organisations, including: Islamic State, Boko Haram, and Al Shabaab, which seemed to many to pose a new kind of threat of terrorist capacity to attack the West.¹⁴ There is no evidence to indicate that such jihadi groups would change their ways because of Alliance-style soft power approaches.

From the early 2000s, the UN was also seeking to deal with a number of "failing" or "failed" states, such as Somalia, Nigeria, Mali, Iraq, Syria, and following the overthrow and death of Gadhafi in 2011, Libya. Many such countries became focal points of transnational and national jihadi groups to control territory and populations. The UN's response, along with that of the USA, United Kingdom, and many other Western countries was to rely primarily on hard power methods to try to deal with such violent extremism and terrorism. Seeking to deal with a wave of violent extremism and terrorism, the United Nations General Assembly adopted by consensus a "Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy" on 8 September 2006. The Strategy was designed to be a unique global instrument to enhance national, regional and international efforts to counter violent extremism and terrorism. Fink notes that adoption by the UN of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in 2006 was a more comprehensive approach than hitherto, as it "includes preventive efforts, sanctions, law enforcement, and legal measures, as well as a human rights dimension".¹⁵ Subsequent establishment of a "Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force" provided the UN with a central platform to coordinate the terrorism- and violent extremism-related activities of 34 UN-related entities.

On 24 September 2014, eight years after the UN adopted the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the then UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, informed a special session of the UN Security Council that "[t]he world is witnessing a dramatic evolution in the nature of the terrorist threat... Eliminating terrorism requires international solidarity and a multifaceted approach—among the many tools we must use, we must also tackle the underlying conditions that provide violent extremist groups the opportunity to take root."¹⁶ Ban was addressing the UN Security Council at a time when many member states were increasingly concerned with the murderous activities of Islamic State, which at the time was successfully carving out for itself control of enclaves in several territories in the Middle East, including in Iraq, Libya and Syria, as well as in several African countries, such as Mali. A 2014 UN report made it clear that Islamic State was a key threat to regional and international peace and security, as it was shaping "the contemporary conflict environment" by using its "considerable resources and sophisticated communications technologies to attract" extensive international support, including fighters from numerous countries.¹⁷

It is clear that Islamic State was seen by the UN as a significant international menace, one which no country or regional organisation acting alone could resolve. As a result, it was necessary, the then US president, Barack Obama stated, to develop an international coalition that could "degrade and

¹⁴ Boko Haram was founded in 2002, so-called Islamic State emerged after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and Al Shabaab originated in 2006. The Institute for Economics and Peace, a New York-based research group, estimates that in 2016, there were a reported 25,673 deaths from terrorist activities, with so-called Islamic State directly or indirectly responsible for around three-quarters of the fatalities (<http://economicsandpeace.org/research/>).

¹⁵ N. Chowdhury Fink, 'Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism. The Role of the United Nations Today and the Impact of Security Council Resolution 2178'.

¹⁶ 'Secretary-General's Remarks to Security Council High-Level Summit on Foreign Terrorist Fighters'.

¹⁷ UN Security Council, 'Letter Dated 27 October 2014' (2014) 'Letter from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) Concerning Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council,' S/2014/770'.



ultimately destroy” Islamic State.¹⁸ Security Council Resolution 2178 won the unanimous support of UN member states. The severity and immediacy of the threat from the Islamic State reflected the fact that 13 years after 9/11 and nine since the creation of the UNAOC, the United Nations was confronting an unprecedented terrorist threat from an extremely violent, transnational, non-state entity whose aim was to provoke a high degree of regional instability which could conceivably destroy international peace and security. While the UN Security Council took swift yet controversial action in adopting Resolution 1373 in September 2001, which allowed the US to invade Afghanistan in pursuit of al Qaeda, a dozen years later there was a lack of clarity about how the United Nations could effectively respond to Islamic State and other evolving security challenges, while also supporting non-military, that is, soft power, approaches to combating terrorism, such as that provided by the UNAOC. In 2005, around the same time as creation of the UNAOC, the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, announced what was known as the “five Ds” in its counter-terrorism strategy: *d*issuading putative terrorists, *d*eterring states from supporting them, *d*enying them safe haven and resources, *d*eveloping state capacities, and *d*efending human rights.¹⁹ These five core principles shaped several subsequent multilateral counterterrorism efforts, most notably the 2006 UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which sought to express a more comprehensive approach to tackling violent extremism and terrorism to include preventive efforts, sanctions, law enforcement, and legal measures, as well as a human rights dimension.²⁰

Studying Muslims at the United Nations

From the two brief case studies presented above, it is clear that there is neither one ‘United Nations’ nor one ‘Islam’. Instead, there are multiple expressions of the UN – including the UNAOC and the PVE/CVE programmes – and various manifestations of Islamic belief and values: from jihadis to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Surveying the background and circumstances of the UNAOC 7th Global Forum in Azerbaijan in 2016, we saw that the UNAOC was happy to hold the Forum in a Muslim country in the interests of improving inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. On the other hand, we noted that the government of Muslim-majority Azerbaijan is a highly repressive regime that did its best at the Forum to undermine already poor relations with neighbouring Christian-majority Armenia. This was however no bar to the UNAOC which was grateful to have an oil-rich government willing to pay the estimated US\$2-3 million dollars to host the global forum. The Azeri government’s outspoken attacks on Armenia at the Forum were not commented on publicly by the UNAOC, although it is believed that the then UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, decided at the last minute not to attend the forum because he was aware that the government of Azerbaijan would use the event as a prolonged and focused opportunity for ‘Armenia-bashing’.

The second brief case study highlighted that the UN’s securitisation of Islam was the organisation’s main approach to addressing the issue of relations between Muslims and the West after 9/11. As a result, contemporaneous attempts at bridge-building by the UNAOC played second fiddle to the UN Security Council’s portrayal of ‘Islamic/Islamist terrorism’ as the key post-9/11 threat to global peace and security.

¹⁸ “UN Security Council, S/RES/2178, 24 September 2014”.

¹⁹ ‘UN General Assembly and UN Security Council’ (2002) ‘Identical Letters Dated 1 August 2002 From the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the General Assembly and President of the Security Council, A/57/273-S/2002/875, 6 August 2002, annex (Report of the Policy Working Group on the United Nations and Terrorism’

²⁰ Fink, “Countering terrorism”.

As noted above, I spent four years (2015-2018) researching into Islam/Muslims at the United Nations, leading to a research monograph on this topic.²¹ More recently, I looked at the issue of ‘the clash of civilisations’ in both the USA and Europe.²² Both at the UN and in relation to the USA/Europe the issue was broadly the same: the threat that Islam/Muslims were perceived to play to the security and well-being of a Western-dominated international organisation (the UN) and to Western countries (the USA/Europe). Both the UN and the governments of the USA and many European states were very concerned that the influx of migrants from mainly Muslim-majority countries to the West, especially from 2015 in the context of the Syrian civil war, combined with the rise of radical Islamist groups seeking to overthrow the existing political order in the Middle East and North Africa, made international peace and insecurity increasingly fragile. What were the practical and methodological opportunities, challenges and uncertainties involved in conducting research on Muslims at the UN in relation both to intercivilisational/cultural bridge building securitisation of Islam? While much research on Muslims/Islam takes place in increasingly unstable socio-political environments, the research underpinning this paper was undertaken at the UN, which is neither unstable or insecure. At the same time, there were still challenges involved in conducting the research linked to studying Islam/Muslims with a political science focus.

The remainder of this section examines ethical and practical challenges involved in studying Islam/Muslims at the UN. The aim is better to understand the ethics, politics, and responsibilities involved in studying Islam and Muslims in an age characterised both by religious resurgence and sustained efforts to see Muslims/Islam as a key existential threat to global peace and security.

I adopted a qualitative methodology for the research, primarily informed by 82, mainly face-to-face, personal interviews I conducted with individuals with knowledge of the ‘clash of civilisations’ issues and controversies. The interviews took place in the USA (mainly at the UN in New York) and in various European countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Poland, the United Kingdom) between 2015 and 2018. A full list of anonymised interviewees, as well as places and dates of the interviews, is provided in Appendix 1 in my *From Huntington to Trump: Thirty Years of the Clash of Civilizations*.²³ Additional material was collected from my attendance at the 7th United Nations Alliance of Civilisations Global Forum, held in Baku, Azerbaijan, 25-27 April, 2016, and at various UN events in which I took part during 2015-2017. I was an invited speaker at the 7th Global Forum, and this led to numerous useful conversations in Baku and later which also informed the research. Finally, the research at and about the UN was also conducted via internet archive research, which yielded many relevant primary and secondary source documents. Hard copies of some relevant documents were provided by those interviewed during the research, both on and off the record.

The starting point for the research was a three-year research programme (2015-2017) conducted under the auspices of the Enhancing Life Project (ELP), led by Professor Bill Schweiker (University of Chicago, USA) and Professor Gunther Thomas (Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany), supported by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation.²⁴ I was one of the 35 scholars who took part in the ELP, each of whom produced a book-length research output based on their research.

²¹ Jeffrey Haynes, *The United Nations Alliance of Civilisations and the Pursuit of Global Justice: Overcoming Western versus Muslim Conflict and the Creation of a Just World Order* (New York and Lampeter, Edwin Mellen Press).

²² Jeffrey Haynes, *From Huntington to Trump: Thirty Years of the Clash of Civilizations* (New York, Lexington Books, 2019).

²³ Haynes, *From Huntington to Trump*.

²⁴ “Enhancing Life Project”. Available at <http://enhancinglife.uchicago.edu/> Last accessed 29 April 2020.



Following the end of the ELP research project in August 2017, I decided to add to my earlier research by extending the analysis to include not only the United Nations in New York, but also the administration of Donald Trump in the USA and the contemporaneous growth in right-wing populism in several European countries. Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' paradigm was a common theme in each of the three contexts – the UN, the USA and Europe. To pursue the theme of the impact of the 'clash of civilisations' on international, regional and national contexts, further interviews were undertaken in Washington DC in April 2018 and in the same year in several European countries, including the UK and Poland and at the European Union. Early results of the research were published in 2019.

What were the ethical and methodological problems associated with researching into the UN's relationship with Islam/Muslims? First, who to approach for information? At the UN, the UNAOC was the focal point for the research. The UNAOC was however initially very wary about me and my research. Why did I want to do it? What was I trying to show? What were my motives? The UNAOC was suspicious of my response that I was conducting the research in a spirit of social scientific enquiry. Second, of the 82 people I interviewed for my two books on the issue, most were not Muslims.²⁵ This was because at the UN, Muslim organisations are under-represented compared to Christian and secular entities. Put another way, it is quite hard to find representative Muslim entities at the UN. The main one is the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) whose representatives, when approached, were welcoming and seemed genuinely pleased to be able to discuss the issue of the UN's relationship with Islam/Muslims with me. Unlike the UNAOC, the issue of my *bona fides* was not brought up by Muslim interviewees. Apart from the OIC, I also interviewed Muslims from advocacy organisations, charities, diplomats from Muslim-majority countries, Muslim and Islamic scholars, and Muslim members of the US government's (now disbanded) Office of Religion and Global Affairs. All were asked about the UNAOC and the UN's securitisation of Islam. The general response was that, first, the UNAOC's remit was unhelpful: by addressing the issue of a 'clash of civilisations' it implicitly accepted that there was such a clash and, second, that the clash was between Muslims/Islam and the West. Muslim interviewees were keen to point out that most Muslims did not regard the clash as a fact. They were concerned that the activities of a tiny minority of terrorists and extremists had so coloured perceptions of Muslims/Islam at the UN that the work of the UNAOC was bound to be marginalised. Consequently, most effort would be applied to securitisation of Islam and Muslims via programmes such as PVE/CVE which, they believed, would alienate many Muslims around the world. This was because this securitisation policy worked from an erroneous premise that *all* Muslims were potentially guilty of extremism and even terrorism and they had to be countered – if necessary with hard power tactics.

Conclusion

The UN value system is a 'bubble' which has become institutionalised, with various issues of great importance such as PVE/CVE. Why is this issue so prominent at the UN? It is because it is linked to security issues. CVE is 'good' for maintaining/increasing military spending. Governments fear that not to spend 'enough' money on the military opens them to the accusation that they are 'soft' on terrorism.²⁶

²⁵ Haynes, *The United Nations Alliance of Civilisations* and *From Huntington to Trump*.

²⁶ Author's interview with Hassan Abedin, Head of OIC Muslim Minorities Division, London, 20 June 2018

At the United Nations, the “clash of civilisations” is a controversial topic, which led to two, contrasting, responses. On the one hand, the UN claimed to be keen to develop a ‘dialogue among civilisations’ which was eventually given concrete form in the UN Alliance of Civilisations. Around the same time, as the quotation above points out, the UN enthusiastically adopted the PVE/CVE programmes. While both had their roots in the events of 9/11 and their aftermath, the creation of the two very different programmes sent different signals to Muslims around the world.

The Alliance of Civilisations initiative soon found significant corporate backing both from within the UN and from outside. The Alliance sought to construct ‘a global network of partners including States, International and regional organizations, civil society groups, foundations, and the private sector to improve cross-cultural relations between diverse nations and communities’.²⁷ In pursuit of its goals, the Alliance created a ‘Group of Friends’ to support its work, while also enjoying the support of a number of ‘Partner Organizations’, comprising both international organisations and civil society organisations.

The downside of this expansive outlook was that it might appear that the Alliance was all things to all people: without clear focus or directions and lacking the mechanisms and strategies meaningfully to work towards improved inter-civilisational dialogue in order to improve international relations. What of the stated UNAOC goal of achieving improved ‘cross-cultural relations between diverse nations and communities’? Historically, neither Western or Muslim societies have worked assiduously to achieve improved inter-civilisational dialogue and bridge building. Yet, a new and mutually rewarding relationship which developed via the Alliance of Civilisations might have the potential to bring Muslim and Western societies closer together, if it was recognised and acted upon to employ accumulated wisdom and insights to provide the basis of a valued coexistence. It seems clear that an improved relationship between Muslims and the West cannot be premised on or constructed via counter-productive ideas of cultural superiority of one ‘side’ over the other, but necessarily built on mutual respect and an openness to cultural eclecticism. In other words, Muslims and Christians should try to learn from and cooperate with each other in the pursuit of desirable shared values, such as improved human rights, including religious freedom. As Said remarks, the goal in this regard is to engage meaningfully and consistently in inter-civilisational bridge building. The overall objective should be to ‘develop and deepen normatively desirable values and expand common understandings of truth, to transform an increasingly conflict-filled relationship to one with collective good works serving humanity and the demonstration of the soundness of common values and contribution to civilisations’.²⁸

Achievement of normatively desirable inter-civilisational goals of the kind that Said highlights could only come about through authentic development of purposeful, sustained, and focused ‘global dialogue’²⁹ involving different but mutually sympathetic cultural groups. The UNAOC emphasised that a key imperative supporting its creation was awareness that, with the ‘return’ of cultural and religious tensions and conflict to international relations after 9/11 and the subsequent Global War

²⁷ “Who We Are – United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC)”. Available at <http://www.unaoc.org/who-we-are/> Last accessed 29 April 2020.

²⁸ Abdul Said, ‘The Whole World Needs the Whole World: Establishing a Framework for a Dialogue of Civilizations’, Washington, DC: American University, 2002, p. 7. Unpublished manuscript.

²⁹ According to the Global Dialogue Foundation, an Australia-based NGO, a partner organisation of the Alliance of Civilisations, ‘global dialogue’ refers to a ‘model for the citizen-civil sector in the frame of the UN – to work with all cultures and civilizations; addressing their needs, preserving identity, cultural heritage and using dialogue as the instrument for building a peaceful coexistence’ (globaldialoguefoundation.ning.com/) (Author’s Skype interview with Peter (Pece) Gorgievski, Global Dialogue Foundation, 22 February 2017)



on Terror, the UN needed to discover how to incorporate voices and concerns, both from among the elites and from among ordinary people collected in civil society organisations, into its strategies to reduce what many saw as egregious global injustices.

September 11, 2001, was not only directly responsible for the creation of UNAOC, but also underpinned a UN focus on securitisation of Islam: the CVE/PVE programme. Such policies to combat Islamist extremism and terrorism were a reaction to acts of extreme violence, but they were mainly repressive in nature. In this climate, it was scarcely surprising that UN initiatives to build trust between cultures, including those led by UNAOC, struggled to make headway. It was also not surprising to me, that when I asked questions of Muslims at and about the UN, their response was largely one, not of hostility, but of awareness that the UN was unlikely to have the answers to Islamist extremism and terrorism questions as long as the UN was controlled by Western leadership with deep-rooted suspicions of Muslims and Islam and their global role and position.

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