

# PURPOSE

## Strengthening Intercultural Dialogue

An Interview with His Excellency Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser,  
High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC)

**EDITORS' NOTE** H.E. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser assumed his current post in 2013. Prior to this, Al-Nasser was the President of the 66th session of the United Nations General Assembly. A veteran diplomat, Al-Nasser has the rank of Minister, granted by His Highness the Emir of the State of Qatar. For 13 years, he served as Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations. During this period, he played leading roles as Chairman of the General Assembly's Special Political and Decolonization (Fourth) Committee



H.E. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser

and as President of the General Assembly High-level Committee on South-South Cooperation. He also chaired the Group of 77 and China at the United Nations in New York. Al-Nasser represented his country on the United Nations Security Council during the two-year term of Qatar as a non-permanent member. He was Security Council President for the month of December 2006. During his term as Ambassador to the United Nations, Al-Nasser also served as a Vice President of the 57th session of the United Nations General Assembly and represented his country at numerous international and regional conferences and other forums. At the same time, he served as non-resident Ambassador to a number of countries in the Americas, including Argentina, Belize, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay and Uruguay. Earlier, Al-Nasser was appointed as his country's resident Ambassador to Jordan, before which he was first posted to the Permanent Mission of Qatar to the United Nations, New York, as Minister Plenipotentiary. Al-Nasser entered the international arena at an early age, and was appointed Attaché at the Embassy of Qatar in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1972. He was assigned to the Embassy of his country in Islamabad, Pakistan, in 1975 and, later that year, was dispatched to Dubai, United Arab Emirates, where he served as Consul-General for Qatar through August 1981. He also holds several honorary doctorates, in international affairs from the government of China through Chongqing University, from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Doctorate of Laws from Fordham University in the United States, a Doctor Honoris Causae from Candido Mendes University and an Honorary Doctorate in Philosophy from TERI University and Institute in New Delhi, India. In 2014, Al-Nasser received from The Islamic University of Malaysia an Honorary Doctorate. In 2017, Al Farabi Kazakh University presented him with an honorary doctorate. Recently, Al-Nasser accepted the title of Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Order of Francis I.

### What stimulated the creation of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC)?

In the aftermath of 9/11 and in the context of the global war on terror, Huntington's controversial theory of the clash of civilizations, and the series of bomb attacks around the world in 2005, governments and the global community were concerned with improving inter-civilizational relations. It was widely agreed that addressing and achieving this goal would require sustained and meaningful global dialogue. The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) was created to help deliver this goal.

UNAOC was created in 2005 by United Nations (U.N.) Secretary-General Kofi Annan, with the co-sponsorship of the governments of Spain and Turkey. Mr. Annan nominated a high-level group of experts composed of prominent leaders from various fields and all regions of the world to explore the roots of polarization between societies and cultures, and to recommend a practical program of action to address the issue, which formed the guidance for the activities of UNAOC. UNAOC began operations in New York in 2007.

Over the past 10 years, the support of the international community to the Alliance has grown rapidly. Our Group of Friends now comprises 146 members of which are 119 UN Member States, one non-member state and 26 international organizations. They represent all continents, societies and cultures.

The Group of Friends of the Alliance play a vital role in the formulation of our strategy, in the implementation of our programs and in providing us both political and financial support that was demonstrated when in this past July, the General Assembly adopted by consensus resolution "The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations."

### What is the mission and purpose of UNAOC?

Our work is guided by the report of the high-level group, the principles of the U.N. Charter, and the priorities of the U.N. Secretary-General. UNAOC's mission is to improve understanding and cooperation among nations and peoples across cultures and religions – in particular, between Western and Muslim societies – and in the process, to help counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism. UNAOC works as a convener and facilitator to bring all sectors of society together to strengthen

intercultural dialogue and diminish hostility. It seeks to build a sustainable and evolving network of state and non-state, secular and faith-based entities to work together to enhance civilizational dialogue and, thereby, greatly reduce chances of inter-civilizational conflict.

### What are the priority areas for UNAOC?

In its 2006 report, the high-level group identified four priority areas of action, which all play a critical role in reducing cross-cultural tensions and building bridges between communities, and to which UNAOC brings a multidisciplinary and multi-perspective approach:

1) Youth: UNAOC encourages youth empowerment and involvement through education, training and expanding opportunities for innovation and creativity.

2) Education: UNAOC works to enable citizens to acquire intercultural competencies and skills to foster intercultural dialogue and overcome cultural stereotypes and intolerance.

3) Migration: UNAOC addresses the potential of migration for development, but also its challenges to foster inclusive and peaceful societies.

4) Media: UNAOC encourages critical thinking about the role of media in shaping perceptions, narratives and attitudes, and works to strengthen constructive voices and to engage traditional and new media in productively shaping public debates.

### Will you discuss the projects and initiatives UNAOC is currently working on?

UNAOC is currently working on various initiatives related to its four pillars of youth, education, migration and media. These activities include:

The #SpreadNoHate series: this initiative is a platform engaging global media in a dialogue on hate speech and the negative portrayal of immigrants and minority groups in traditional and new media. Since its launch in 2015, the initiative has promoted constructive dialogue on hate speech among media professionals, academia and NGOs, and shared best practices in preventing and countering hate speech.

The Young Peacebuilders consists of a series of regional workshops that UNAOC implements in different regions of the world to offer competence development to young people and to grow and strengthen the global movement of young peacebuilders. Through this action, UNAOC is committing to support young people's participation in peacebuilding with a growing coalition of partners.

The Youth Solidarity Fund supports youth-led organizations that foster peaceful and inclusive societies by providing direct funding to outstanding projects promoting intercultural and interfaith dialogue. Established in 2008, the Fund responded to calls for action made by youth-led organizations around the world on the importance of establishing funding mechanisms for youth.

The Fellowship Program promotes intercultural exchange and understanding by engaging with emerging leaders and young professional from Europe and North America (EUNA) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Organized around two-weeks exchange trips between EUNA and MENA countries, the initiative sends participants from each geographic area to their counterparts' region. By exposing participants to new perspectives and by immersing them into culturally diverse and unfamiliar environments, the Fellowship Program contributes to challenging perceptions and deconstructing stereotypes.

PLURAL+ is a youth-produced video festival that encourages young people to explore migration, diversity and social inclusion, and to share their creative vision with the world. The initiative is jointly organized with IOM and thanks to a network of over 50 partner organizations, it supports the creative efforts of young people and distributes their videos worldwide.

By working with education experts, policy-makers and mass media producers, Media and Information Literacy (MIL) initiatives provide the knowledge base necessary for individuals to be informed consumers and producers of media. UNAOC MIL initiatives include a multi-language web-based MIL clearinghouse, a global university network, yearly publications and development of MIL educational strategies to prevent violent extremism.

Through PEACEapp, UNAOC develops a series of hands-on workshops with young refugees focusing on the creation of video game apps as creative forms of storytelling and digital narratives.

The Intercultural Innovation Award is a global venture in partnership with BMW Group. The initiative recognizes and supports the most innovative grassroots projects encouraging intercultural dialogue around the world. Recipients receive a monetary grant and one year of mentoring support to help their projects expand and replicate.

Intercultural Leaders, a project of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) in partnership with the BMW Group, is an exclusive skills and knowledge-sharing platform for civil society organizations and young leaders that work on addressing cross-cultural tensions. It is comprised of alumni of various UNAOC programs and projects, professionals from partner organizations and a group of mentors form Intercultural Leaders. Through an innovative online system, Intercultural Leaders harnesses the solidarity of its members to maximize the impact of their work and help them foster cross-cultural understanding and cooperation.

#### **Will you elaborate on the Global Forums for UNAOC?**

The Global Forums are the high-profile events of UNAOC which serve as a platform for intercultural dialogue, bringing together 1,500-4,000

participants each time. UNAOC and the host countries convene political leaders, representatives of international and regional bodies, religious leaders, youth, corporate executives, civil society groups, media and foundations for an open dialogue on reducing polarization between nations and launching joint initiatives to promote cross-cultural understanding globally. The Global Forums offer a unique opportunity to forge partnerships among various stakeholders, showcase the UNAOC programs and initiatives, and develop concrete projects on intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, particularly in the UNAOC priority areas of education, youth, migration and media.

To date, UNAOC has convened seven Global Forums in Madrid, Istanbul, Rio de Janeiro, Doha, Vienna, Bali, and Baku, Azerbaijan, which have disseminated the UNAOC's message of peace and tolerance across continents.

In 2018, UNAOC will convene its eighth Global Forum in the last quarter of the year. We are at the final stage of consultations with the potential host, which will be announced in the coming weeks.

#### **How has UNAOC grown since it was founded in 2005 and how has it made a difference?**

Since its inception, UNAOC has established itself as one of the most relevant U.N. platforms seeking to build intercultural dialogue, trust and understanding among people and communities around the world. It has grown to be recognized as a creative laboratory within the U.N. system that seeks to foster innovative and impactful cross-cultural initiatives.

Over the years, UNAOC has generated ever-growing support from countries, as well as from regional and international organizations. UNAOC membership has brought together developed countries of the North and developing countries of the so-called global South, as well as the East and the West. It represents all continents, societies and cultures. In addition, more than 60 Memoranda of Understanding have been signed between UNAOC and academic institutions, think tanks, foundations and international organizations, which has helped amplify the impact of UNAOC's work.

UNAOC programs have impacted millions of people globally by implementing and supporting projects on the ground in the fields of education, youth, media and migration, such as the Fellowship program; the Intercultural Innovation Award in partnership with BMW Group; the Youth Solidarity Fund, which provides seed funding to youth-led organizations; the PLURAL+ Youth Video Festival on migration; the Young Peacebuilders training; the #SpreadNoHate series, which brings together experts to tackle the issue of hate speech against migrants and refugees in the media, and many others.

UNAOC's digital presence has continued to gain momentum. Its website, [unaoc.org](http://unaoc.org), attracts an average of 4.6 million visitors annually. The organization has more than 115,000 followers on social media, with campaigns such as #SpreadNoHate and #Commit2Dialogue, among others, reaching over 30 million people across different platforms,

with a long track record of viral messaging and trending in global capitals.

UNAOC has also developed tools to help professionals around the globe work to the best of their abilities in the fields of youth, education, media and migration. Tools include publications such as the Media-Friendly Glossary on Migration, which helps media professionals make informed word choices when covering migration-related issues, and Opportunities For Media and Information Literacy in the Middle East and North Africa in collaboration with UNESCO, which provides recommendations and information about new research findings on ways to enhance youth's media literacy. UNAOC also drafts and publishes periodic newsletters to inform U.N. Member States, international organizations and the public at large about its policy initiatives, advocacy, programs, institutional development, opportunities and forthcoming events.

#### **How do you measure the impact of UNAOC's work?**

Measuring the difference that we're making in our work involves knowing what to look for as indicators of change and how to collect that evidence. Throughout our programming, we implement surveys to measure the impact in terms of evolution in perceptions and skills acquired. In initiatives where we support specific NGOs at field level and provide mentoring to strengthen their work and ensure sustainable results, we periodically monitor the downrange impact that their work is having within their communities.

As an example, since 2008, UNAOC's Youth Solidarity Fund has provided seed funding to 50 youth-led and youth-focused organizations to implement projects promoting intercultural and interfaith dialogue. These projects were completed in 30 different countries and directly impacted almost 80,000 individuals. A further 1.2 million indirect beneficiaries were reached through project activities. Additionally, since 2011, UNAOC's Intercultural Innovation Award, in partnership with BMW Group, has supported more than 50 organizations around the world to expand and scale up their innovative projects encouraging intercultural dialogue. The selected organizations expanded their operations to over 100 countries, impacting over two million beneficiaries.

#### **What are the key priorities for the organization as you look to the future?**

Since its inception, UNAOC's mission was to build bridges of understanding between diverse cultures and faiths and promote tolerance, respect of the other, as well as cultural and religious pluralism. These are universal values at the core of the UN work. As such, these were the key priorities for UNAOC almost 12 years ago, and promoting the same values is more relevant today than ever before given the global challenges our world faces from polarization to the rise of xenophobia, radicalization and populism.

UNAOC will continue to do what it is doing, while at the same time streamlining its work with the bigger UN agenda. ●