

**From Dialogue to Alliance of Civilizations:  
*Iranian and Spanish Initiatives Revisited***

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**Abstract**

The Dialogue of Civilizations and Alliance of Civilizations initiatives, launched by the former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami and the former Spanish head of government Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero are analysed in this paper. By comparing the two cases we will try to address the question of the objectives both governments had in mind when proposing such initiatives to the international forums, as well as the success or failure of both initiatives in regards to those objectives. The paper argues that both projects failed to prevent the eruption of violent conflicts since their launching, mainly because they focused in governmental institutions rather than civil society organizations.

**Keywords:** Clash of Civilizations, Dialogue among Civilizations, Politics, Iran, Spain

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## **From Dialogue to Alliance of civilizations: Iranian and Spanish initiatives revisited.**

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### **Introduction**

This paper briefly analyses comparatively the initiatives of Dialogue Among Civilizations (DaC), proposed by the former Iranian president, Mohamed Khatami, in 1997 and the Alliance of Civilizations (AoC) initiated by the president of Spanish government, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, in 2005. Both proposals will be analysed through 3 key factors in order to assess their contribution to the Dialogue for Peace:

1. The political orientation change of the governments headed by Khatami and Zapatero respect to their predecessors;
2. The international forums in which these proposals were presented and the repercussion they generated;
3. The external and internal legitimacy objectives they seek.

The final comparison ended with a non-optimistic conclusion regarding the relative failure of both initiatives in preventing the actual conflicts that affect the MENA region. The possible hypothesis behind this failure could be the excessive focus of both initiatives in

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high level governmental meetings, disregarding the civil society participation.

### **Khatami, Zapatero and their predecessors**

Both head of governments represented “reformist” or “progressive” political orientation in comparison with the previous governments of Hashemi Rafsanjani and Jose Maria Aznar respectively, that were considered as “conservative”. In that sense, both initiatives represented a change in the external orientation of both governments. On one hand, Khatami’s diplomatic approach to Iranian foreign behaviour, based on confidence building measures, mainly with the regional neighbours, but also with extra-regional powers, such as the European Union countries, as well as with international organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency-IAEA and the United Nations. On the other hand, Zapatero’s less interventionist policy, represented by the quick withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq once he assumed power in 2004 –something he promised during his campaign, following the strong anti-war sentiment portrayed by most of the Spanish people against the Popular Party decision to directly support the 2003 occupation and to participate in the military control of some provinces during the provisional government.

Thus, in both cases the result of this change in the ideological orientations of the heads of governments produced a change in their foreign policy options that ended with an improvement of the external prestige and image of Spain and Iran as a less confrontational states, not only at the regional level but also internationally. While Rafsanjani was sometimes associated with a more revolutionary approach to the Iranian foreign policy, which granted Iran with a very bad reputation mainly within European countries, Khatami drastically changed this perception due to his diplomatic offensive toward, among others, European states, including also the Vatican. On the other hand, while Aznar was associated with the “Canarian Summit” – the meeting between President George Bush, the Prime Minister Tony Blair and President of Government Jose Maria Aznar in Canary Island where the decision to participate in the Iraq invasion was made–, Zapatero was associated with a more tolerant approach toward the Middle East problems, including all the pending bilateral issues with one of the most important Spanish Arab neighbours, Morocco.

## **The Dialogue among Civilizations**

The Iranian proposal of DaC was presented for the first time in the 8<sup>o</sup> Islamic Summit Conference at Tehran in December 1997. Called “The session of Dignity, Dialogue and Participation”, the final statement included the decision of creating a committee to develop guidelines to strengthen regional arrangement to promote systematic dialogue and reinforce cooperation and confidence between member states. The final statement of the summit was the result of the two discourses made by the president Mohamed Khatami and the Iranian leader Ali Khamenei. The first one calling for promotion of confidence building measures in Middle East and Persian Gulf region, the second by ending the ideological struggle of the Islamic Republic in face of the rest of the Islamic states.

The first consequence of the summit was the beginning of the re-approach between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and a timid attempt with Egypt, even though any of them ended with the persisting bilateral tension. After that, with the good international acceptance of Khatami’s discourse and diplomatic initiative, the initiative was presented at 53<sup>o</sup> Plenary Session of the General Assembly of United Nations on 21<sup>st</sup> September, 1998. On that occasion the Assembly declared 2001 the International year of Dialogue Among Civilizations, upon the Iranian proposal.

Khatami’s discourse was looking to put in the UN discussion table several international situations in which the Muslim population were suffering, like Afghanistan, Palestine, Kosovo, but stressing the necessity of philosophical discussion about the history and construction of civilizations, and the importance of inter-religious dialogue and the returning to spirituality in civil society.

On November 4<sup>th</sup> 1998 the Iranian delegation proposed the resolution project of DaC. It was approved on November 16<sup>th</sup>, asking UN and UNESCO to plan cultural, social, and educational program on DaC, including conferences and seminars, and other information activities around the world. There were several preparative meetings like the Panel Discussion and the Islamic Symposium on DaC in New York on May 1999. This meeting adopted Tehran Vision Statement, supporting the initiative made by Khatami and proposing a 10 years program. The participants in the forums and conferences were related with religious, intellectual and academics fields and not with governmental institutions.

The first goal of DaC was cultural discussion and promotion of different vision of the world to eliminate intolerance and intercultural and religious violence. There were not a political o security goals in terms of elaboration of concrete policies of fighting against terrorism or wars. We must remind that even the year of DaC was 2001, the proposal was made three years before the New York terrorist attack on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

The conclusion of that year was written and sent to the UN General Assembly by the representative of Kofi Annan to the DaC, Giandomenico Pico. The final document was called “Crossing the divide: Dialogue among Civilizations”. The institutional repercussion of the year of DaC was broad, as it is show in Table 1, with six resolutions from the General Assembly of the United Nations dedicated to the Dialogue

**Table 1: GA/UN Resolutions**

Document Symbol	Date	Summary
A/RES/56/6	21/11/01	Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations.
A/RES/56/3	11/05/01	Decides to convene the plenary meetings devoted to the item entitled “United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations” on 8 and 9 November 2001.
A/RES/55/23	13/11/00	Decides to include in the provisional agenda of its fifty-sixth session the item entitled “United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations”.
A/55/492/Rev.1	09/11/00	United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations: Report of the Secretary General
A/RES/54/113	10/12/99	Decides to include in the provisional agenda of the fifty-third session of the General Assembly the item "The United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations".
A/RES/53/22	16/11/98	Proclaims the year 2001 as the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.

**Source:** <http://www.unesco.org/dialogue/en/sources.htm>

The international body in charge of the activities and meetings, UNESCO, also reflected the relevance given to the year of DaC, as it is shown in the resolutions and declarations issued during that year (Table 2) in order to establish not only the framework for the discussions and the program and plan of action but also to start a long awaited debate on cooperation to prevent terrorist actions worldwide.

**Table 2: UNESCO Decisions/Resolutions/Declarations**

Document Symbol	Date	Summary
Resolution 25	02/11/01	31 C/Resolution 25 adopted by the UNESCO General Conference: UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity
Resolution 39	20/10/01	31 C/Resolution 39 adopted by the UNESCO General Conference: Call for international co-operation to prevent and eradicate acts of terrorism.
161 EX/INF.14	21/05/01	Report of the Director-General of UNESCO on the Execution of the Programme adopted by the General Conference: United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations -- UNESCO Framework for Action
Resolution 31	17/11/99	30 C/Resolution 31 adopted by the UNESCO General Conference: Preparation by UNESCO of the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations

Source: <http://www.unesco.org/dialogue/en/strategy.html>

Although the year of DaC was only 2001, the cultural activities related to UNESCO program still continued from 2003 until 2006, as it is show in the Table 3. The high level meetings, held in Africa, Asia, Europe and America, covered a wide range of topics related to intercultural, religious and civilizational dialogue.

**Table 3: UNESCO Dialogue among Civilization Meetings 2003/06**

Date	Title	Location
20 - 21 June 2006	African Regional Conference on the Dialogue among Civilizations, Cultures and Peoples	Abuja, Nigeria
1-2 June 2006	Communication of Heritage: A New Vision of South East Europe	Opatija, Croatia,
14-16 June 2005	Conference on Fostering Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations through Concrete and Sustained Action	Rabat, Kingdom of Morocco
6 to 8 May 2005	Dialogue among Civilizations: Islam and the West	Laval University, Sainte-Foy, Quebec, Canada
20-22 December 2004	Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on "Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations for Peace and Sustainable Development"	Hanoi, Viet Nam
9-10 December 2004	Regional Summit on Inter-religious and Inter-ethnic Dialogue	Tirana, Albania
4-6 October 2004	Second International Conference on Turkic Civilization: "The Role and Place of the Turkic Civilization amongst World Civilizations"	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Location</b>
6-8 September 2004	“New Ignorances, New Literacies – Learning to Live Together in a Globalizing World”	Barcelona, Spain
10-11 June 2004	High Level Conference Eurasia in the 21st Century - Dialogue of Cultures or Conflict of Civilizations?	Issyk Kul, Kyrgyzstan
10 -11 February 2004	Colloquium on the Dialogue among Civilizations and Cultures	Sana’a – Republic of Yemen
17 - 19 January 2004	Euro Mediterranean Forum for Science, Development & Peace: The 'Clash of Civilizations' will not take place	UNESCO HQ, Paris, France
15-17 December 2003	International Congress on Dialogue of Civilization, Religion and Cultures in West Africa	Abuja, Nigeria
17-21 November 2003	International Conference on Intercultural Dialogue and a Culture of Peace in Central Africa and the Great Lakes Region	Libreville, Gabon
9-11 November 2003	International Experts' Symposium on "A Culture of Innovation and the Building of Knowledge Societies"	Moscow, Russian Federation
29 & 30 August 2003	Regional Forum on Dialogue among Civilizations	Ohrid, FYR of Macedonia
30 & 31 July 2003	Globalization with a Human Face -- Benefiting All	Tokyo, Japan
9 & 10 July 2003	International Ministerial Conference on the Dialogue among Civilizations "Quest for New Perspectives"	New Delhi, India

**Source:** <http://www.unesco.org/dialogue/en/conferences.html>

Once the UNESCO program ended in 2006, the activities related to the DaC were continued by the Foundation of Dialogue among Civilizations (FDC), institution established in 2007 “to promote the institution of regular dialogue between the world’s peoples, cultures, civilizations and religions in order to promote peace, justice and tolerance”<sup>1</sup>, according to their mission statement. The foundation is located in Geneva, and headed by the former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami. The FDC has been keeping alive and active the spirit of the Iranian DaC initiative through a series of meetings and cultural, artistic and scientific activities, involving NGOs and

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1. See <http://dialoguefoundation.org/>

international organizations such as IESCO, ECOSOC, in order to promote “mutual understanding, tolerance, peaceful coexistence and international cooperation and security”.

### **The Alliance of Civilizations**

The Spanish proposal of AoC was presented in the 59<sup>o</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly in September 2004 and then before the League of Arab States. Following consultations between the Spanish government and the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in June 2005, both head of government decided to co-sponsor the initiative in order to provide it with a multi-cultural and multi-religious framework. The initiative was officially proposed for General Assembly approval on July 2005 with the joint support of the Turkish and Spanish governments, and with the official support of the by then Secretary General of the General Assembly Kofi Annan, who announced the launch of the AoC initiative in New York on 14<sup>th</sup> July. On October 24<sup>th</sup> the General Assembly approved the proposal and the creation of the discussion instrument and methodology proposed. The proposed program included fundamental issues such as antiterrorist cooperation, overcoming economic inequalities worldwide and intercultural dialogue.

The proposal included the creation of a High Level Group (HLG) of 20 people including governmental and non-governmental personalities. The HLG worked in two different aspects: political and security matters and cultural matters. During its first years the HLG was chaired by the Spanish Federico Mayor Zaragoza and the Turkish Mehmet Aydin. Mohammad Khatami, the former Iranian president, was one of the 20 personalities included in the HLG. The program included four high level meetings during that inaugural year. The first were held at Palma de Mallorca (Spain) on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2005, the second at Doha on 25<sup>th</sup> February 2006 and the third at Dakar on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2006. In all these meetings Mohammad Khatami had a relevant role, as the AoC was recognized as the continuation of the Iranian initiative of DaC impulse by the former Iranian head of government.

There were others meetings of the Group of Friends created in the United Nations General Assembly. This group is composed by governments of 30 countries and 3 international organizations –European Union, League of Arab States and Organization of Islamic Conference.



The AoC initiative is still active, and the GoF is composed nowadays by 139 members including states and governmental organizations. The United States government joined the GoF on May 2010, under the presidency of Barack Obama, who recognized the “value of the Alliance of Civilizations as an important initiative that is aimed at a better understanding among cultures and people”.

A central goal of AoC since its creation was to identify similar initiatives engaged in bridging current global direction through dialogue and action and to counter the rise of extremism and polarization. The character of AoC was then primarily political at difference with the DaC, that was mainly focused on cultural and academic initiatives. The AoC looks for practical recommendations for governmental actions, to fight against terrorism and violence in first place and promote a concrete active plan on educational, mass media and social integration fields.

**Table 4: Alliance of Civilizations Meetings 2005/14**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Location</b>
26-29 November 2005	First meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations High-level Group	Palma de Mallorca, Spain
25-28 February 2006	Second meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations High-level Group	Doha, Qatar
28-30 May 2006	Third meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations High-level Group,	Dakar, Senegal
05-06 September 2006	Working meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations High-level Group	New York
22 September 2006	First Ministerial Meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations Group of Friends at United Nations Headquarters	New York
12-13 November 2006	Fourth and Final Meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations High-level Group. Presentation of the High-level Group Report to UN-SG Kofi Annan	Istanbul, Turkey
26 September 2007	Second Ministerial Meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations Group of Friends at the United Nations Headquarters	New York
15-16 January 2008	First Alliance of Civilizations Forum and the Third Ministerial Meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations Group of Friends	Madrid, Spain

<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Location</b>
24 September 2008	Fourth Ministerial Meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations Group of Friends at United Nations Headquarters	New York
2-3 October 2008	First Meeting of the Focal Points of the Alliance of Civilizations' Group of Friends.	Paris, France
6-7 April 2009	Second Alliance of Civilizations Forum and the Fifth Ministerial Meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations' Group of Friends	Istanbul, Turkey
8 April 2009	Second Meeting of the Focal Points of the Alliance of Civilizations' Group of Friends	Istanbul, Turkey
26 September 2009	Sixth Ministerial Meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations Group of Friends at United Nations Headquarters	New York
10-11 November 2009	Third Meeting of the Focal Points of the Alliance of Civilizations' Group of Friends,	Rabat, Kingdom of Morocco
27 May 2010	Fourth Meeting of the Focal Points of the Alliance of Civilizations' Group of Friends	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
27-29 May 2010	Third Alliance of Civilizations Forum and the Seventh Ministerial Meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations Group of Friends at the Third UNAOC Forum	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
24 September 2010	Seventh Ministerial Meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations Group of Friends at United Nations Headquarters,	New York
25-27 October 2010	Fifth Meeting of the Focal Points of the Alliance of Civilizations' Group of Friends	Berlin, Germany
23 September 2011	Eighth Ministerial Meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations' Group of Friends at United Nations Headquarters	New York
2 November 2011	Sixth meeting of the Focal Points of the Alliance of Civilizations' Group of Friends	Lisbon, Portugal
11-13 December 2011	Fourth Alliance of Civilizations Forum and the Ninth Ministerial Meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations Group of Friends	Doha, Qatar
31 May-1 June 2012	First Partners Forum for the Alliance of Civilizations	Istanbul, Turkey

Source: <http://www.unaoc.org/>

The Table 4 shows the HLG, GoF and ministerial meetings held under the umbrella of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations initiative, since its launching in 2005 until 2012. Even though the high level meetings finished by 2012, the initiative is still active through a diverse kind of events and gatherings such as the Global Forums held in Doha in 2011, in Vienna in 2013 and the Bali in 2014. These forums were mainly dedicated to promote the dialogue among civil society and youth organizations about shared values and principles.

### **The internal and external objectives**

The Iranian and Spanish governments privileged the aspects related to the exterior image of both countries, which were damaged because of the previous government foreign policies. Iran wanted to break the international isolation and to promote the distension in the Persian Gulf and in the relations with the European Union mainly. Is possible to say that DaC was the continuation of Khatami internal goal of searching for political reform in the Iranian political system, based on the spreading of Islamic or religious civil society that didn't mean separation between religion and politics or government but only the improvement of certain aspects of Iranian society like local elections, freedom of press and women participation in political or social issues.

On the other hand, Spain sought to change the image after the intervention in the Iraq war, mainly between the Arab and Islamic countries. The withdrawal of the Spanish soldiers from Iraq was the first step that showed the future attitude of the Socialist Party in foreign policy. And is possible to say that in the internal front was looking for more legitimacy considering the little difference of votes between Popular Party and PSOE in March 14<sup>th</sup> election and after the March 11<sup>th</sup> bombing at Atocha, claimed by Al Qaeda. In that sense it was a very different approach towards the international terrorist threat in comparison with the United States response portrayed by George Bush Jr. administration.

Another comparative elements is that while Iranian DaC was started by a Muslim state, with an international bad reputation since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and within an Islamic context (OCI Summit), with general goals and long term objectives, the Spanish AoC was initiated in a more general context as UN-GA an with a more concrete focus, with

defined political goals and operative and short term objectives. And even both initiatives were launched within a governmental context, the DoC then became a mainly non-governmental initiative, while the AoC remained as a high profile level governmental meetings.

Even though the 11<sup>th</sup> September terrorist attacks against the United States and the resulting wars of Afghanistan and Iraq shadowed the outcomes of the DaC proposal, the initiative was able to overcome religious divisions, proving that the Iranian government maintained to some extent the universalistic appeal of the Islamic Revolution though with a different strategy and diplomatic tone. And more important, for the first time, an Iranian initiative was supported by the most representative governmental institution in the world, the General Assembly of the United Nations. On the other hand, the AoC initiative was also launched in the middle of a politically contaminated regional environment as a result of the occupation of Iraq. The Arab Spring events, followed by the conflicts erupted in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, and the reinforcement of some authoritarian regimes such as the Arab monarchies and Egypt, also shadowed the Spanish-Turkish initiative.

One final assessment that is possible to elaborate as a preliminary conclusion on the success or failure of both initiatives is that, the DaC and AoC initiatives benefited mainly those countries that proposed and launched them. Their images changed in the international community, as well as the own personal images of the statesmen that proposed them – Khatami, Zapatero and Erdogan. However, it is arguably the effectiveness of both initiatives, in the light of the current situation of events in the whole Middle East and North African region. The efforts exerted by both, individual personalities and governments, from Western and non-Western states, proved to be fruitless in order to prevent religious and sectarian confrontation in the region, and to promote the peaceful solution of internal conflicts. The actual existence of more ‘failed states’ since the Arab Spring, without a prospect for a negotiated solution, corroborate the conclusion that these initiatives, involving mainly head of government and states, finally never reached the civil society and people from those states.