

Building Bridges Across the Mediterranean

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The word “Mediterranean,” once called *sea of light* brings up various connotations. It is a conglomeration of strength and weakness; of welfare and poverty; of concord and dissention; tolerance and extremism; peace and conflict. Throughout history, as an important passageway, the Mediterranean has been vital in all strategic equations. Some segments of the region have become stronger, while others have weakened. It has become in the course of history a milieu which is ethnically, culturally, socially complex and always extraordinary.

The region’s creativity and common sense of the people of *the sea of the light* gives us hope against all difficulties. One should never forget that all contemporary values have their roots in the Mediterranean. We are the descendants of those who built most of the civilizations in the history of humanity like the Egyptians, the Romans, the Greeks, the Carthaginians, the Arabs, the Andalusians and the Ottomans. In our common geography we have created values on which everyone could converge irrespective of his or her religion, language or ethnicity.

Indeed, the Mediterranean culture has developed in the course of history thanks to myriad exchanges and meetings among its people. It is because of this very dense interface that some call it the sixth continent rather than a sea.

As it has always been *the heart of the world*, issues and perspectives of global scale also have their ramifications in the Mediterranean. Global problems such as terrorism, intolerance, environmental degradation, spread of weapons of mass destruction, confront the Mediterranean too. Democracy, good governance, economic development, security, fair distribution of income and resources, tolerance, respect to cul-

tural differences, eradication of illiteracy are common demands in the Mediterranean as anywhere else in the world.

At a time when the most immediate need of humanity is tolerance and respect to each other’s differences, the Mediterranean should be nothing else than a source of inspiration. It is there where the three monotheistic religions were born and established. It was Arab scholars who translated Aristotle into Arabic and Latin. Toynbee followed the footprints of Ibn Khaldun in analyzing our societies. Voyages, trade, episodes of war and peace, marriages and the consequent cultural amalgam in music, painting and culinary arts: such is the Mediterranean civilization that it was so interwoven through centuries.

Unfortunately, this spirit of exchange and commonality that was woven by the thick ropes of time has started to degrade. It would be astonishing for our forefathers of ancient times to witness some of the level of incomprehension which lies across the *Mare Nostrum*.

Instead of strengthening and promoting our common values, we invented a hypothetical “clash of civilizations”. We centred on this hypothesis in the past ten years. We turned our linguistic, religious, cultural and ethnic richness into dividing lines. Some among us adopted the contemporary values while some were delayed in taking the required steps in transparency, democracy and human rights.

In sum, too much time has been wasted in speculation about a clash of civilizations. The real threat is a clash of ignorance. Therefore, we must seize every opportunity for dialogue and promotion of mutual cohabitation.

We should also not forget that the gap between the levels of development among the two shores of the Mediterranean entrenches a gulf between the South and the North. Root causes of many problems lie in this gap.

The Barcelona Declaration of 1995 launched a very important initiative eleven years ago uniting the two shores of the Mediterranean with the aim of extending peace, stability and prosperity to the whole Euro-Mediterranean region.

A year after the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Barcelona Process, unfortunately, we have not yet reached the desired level of consensus on many issues in the Mediterranean region. The priorities of the North and the South vary considerably. In bringing the North and the South closer the dialogue frequently falls victim to the political issues, particularly the developments in the Middle East.

If not addressed with a constructive frame of mind, the chronic problems which we face today may aggravate and can become source of further instability. The answers are not easy. Before we take steps for the solutions we need to have a better understanding of the problems.

The Mediterranean is also an inalienable element in Turkey's policies, economic relations, culture and history. We have close ties with all the sub regions in the Mediterranean which emanate from history and are shaped today on the principle of cooperation and mutual benefit. We take part not only in intra regional cooperation, but also cooperation between Mediterranean and its neighbouring regions. Turkey will continue to conjoin the Northern and Southern shores of the Mediterranean once it accedes to the EU.

There lies the significance of Turkey's membership to the EU as it will demonstrate to the whole world that different cultures can co-exist and could indeed live together in peace under the same political and economic Union. This will seriously challenge the philosophy of the radicals from all faiths.

Everyone in the Mediterranean may have his or her dream for *the Mediterranean of the future*. No matter how different means everyone may suggest to achieve it, the concepts for the future are similar: We all want to have political stability. We all want to live in security, with an end to hostilities. We all want a prosperous life. We all want economic cooperation. We want to live free from terror and discrimination on the basis of language, religion or ethnic origin. We want to have our say in the world of science and technology. We do not want to fall behind innovation, but pioneer it.

We want to achieve it by sharing burdens and benefits, thus creating a region where prosperity is distributed evenly. Bottlenecks should not be the destiny of the South and the North is not the only one to prosper. We all know that this will serve to the long term interests of both shores in the Mediterranean.

Thus, *the Mediterranean of the future* requires a great breakthrough from us. It does not tolerate further delays in carrying out our responsibilities to coming generations. *The Mediterranean of the future* expects us to act not with our memories but with our common sense.

In this respect, it was not a coincidence that from two ends of the Mediterranean together with H.E. Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero we have been the co-sponsors of the *Alliance of Civilizations*. We are both determined not to let this common heritage speak of mutual incomprehension.

With this understanding, I invite you all to contribute to this common effort for a better future by promoting peace, tolerance, mutual respect and understanding in our region and beyond.