

TODAY'S ZAMAN

Dialogue and justice

The 4th UN Alliance of Civilizations Forum was held in Doha, Qatar, Dec. 11-13 with strong international participation. The forum addressed a wide range of issues, including diversity, tolerance, development, intercultural dialogue and Islam-West relations 10 years after the Sept. 11 attacks.

World leaders, prominent academics and thinkers reiterated their call for more dialogue and understanding between different cultures and drew attention to the deteriorating relationship between Islamic and Western societies.

The new Gallup and Pew surveys, a summary of which was presented at the forum, concluded that the wall of mistrust between predominantly Muslim societies and Western countries is growing. More Europeans and Americans identify Islam and Muslims with violence and intolerance and more Muslims think the Westerners do not respect Islam and are selfish, materialistic and arrogant. Ten years after the 9/11 attacks, Muslim and Western societies mistrust each other more than before.

This is not simply a matter of misplaced fears and perceptions. The root cause of conflict for much of the Muslim world is the real issues of justice. Ordinary Muslims may not be educated and sophisticated enough to appreciate all the nuances and multiple realities of what we call the "West" -- i.e., Western governments, economies, societies, laws, educational institutions, etc. And they must do their homework to understand that there is not a monolithic West and not all Europeans and Americans are bent on destroying the Muslim world.

But the real issues of justice, war and occupation are hardly mistakable. No agenda of peace, dialogue and tolerance is possible without addressing the hard-core political issues on the ground. Rather than religion or culture, political representation, economic injustice and global inequality are the real sources of violence and resentment in much of the Muslim world today. Discourses of peace and tolerance make little or no sense when people die in concocted wars of neo-imperialism, for oil revenues or in a power struggle between states. Diversity and dialogue do not make much sense when people are humiliated and dispossessed under occupation on a daily basis.

That is why I believe the UN Alliance of Civilizations initiative must also address real political issues. With so much injustice and inequality in the world, no human conscience will be at ease by just talking about diversity or tolerance.

These values have meaning and substance only when they are joined with justice and human dignity. Unfortunately, this is not the direction our world is heading at the moment.

Some inconvenient facts might highlight these points. According to Taner Yıldız, Turkey's energy minister and one of the most knowledgeable people on global energy, around 1.4 billion people have no access to electricity in the world today. Yıldız also notes that the city of New York with a population of 17 million uses as much electricity as about 750 million people on the African continent.

In 2010, world military spending was about \$2 trillion excluding many wars and military operations. The United States has the largest military spending in the world. The US Congress just approved a \$662 billion defense/military budget for 2012. All indications suggest the world's military spending will continue to rise in the years to come.

Now contrast this with the fact that about 1.7 billion people live in absolute poverty, i.e., on less than \$1.25 per day. This means no access to food, clean water, healthcare, education and proper housing. While we take pride in our advanced science and technology, millions of people in Somalia, Africa and elsewhere face famine and humanitarian disaster. Even the UN has not been able to raise the \$1.5 billion needed to address the deteriorating situation in Somalia.

It is these realities on the ground that must be addressed as real issues of justice. The world system in which we live does not seek to protect human dignity but to increase interest and greed. With the incredible recourse we have at our disposal, we are still failing to make justice, equality and dignity a cornerstone of our political and economic lives.

How can we expect the poor and the dispossessed of the world to simply forget about justice and believe in a dreamy discourse of peace and tolerance?

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