

HER HIGHNESS SHEIKHA MOZA BINT NASSER

Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser is well known as a champion for education and for social and cultural progress. The chairperson of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, a UNESCO Special Envoy for Basic and Higher Education and a member of the High Level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations, in this interview Her Highness speaks about the goals of the Alliance and the importance of inter-cultural dialogue for peace and development.

PHOTOS: MAHER ATTAR/HHOPL

Your Highness, The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (AOC) was founded in 2005 with 20 members from 17 countries, primarily in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. Now it has 130 members from all over the world. What has changed and why?

At its heart, the mission of the AOC is to build bridges between people of different cultures to foster peaceful co-existence and co-operation via inter-cultural dialogue. The AOC remit has broadened considerably since it was founded. In 2005 we were in the shadow of 9/11 and the Madrid bombings, and inter-cultural dialogue meant building a better understanding specifically between the Muslim world and the West. Now, while this remains a key objective, the AOC has become the United Nations' primary platform for inter-cultural dialogue everywhere.

In the 10 years since 11th September 2001, the world has become a smaller place, bringing people of different races, cultures and religions ever closer together. Nations and their governments are waking up to the reality that, as multiculturalism becomes the norm rather than the exception, we all have to become comfortable living with difference. And that concerted action has to be taken to help people overcome ethnic, religious and cultural divisions, especially where these threaten life, security, social harmony and – as is the case in so much of the developing world – sustainable development and economic growth. So the AOC's core mission hasn't changed. What has changed is that this mission is now truly global. →



→ **Qatar is bringing a new sense of urgency and pragmatism to the Alliance of Civilizations through the 4th AOC Forum this December which will be held in Doha. What do you believe would be a good outcome for this forum?**

The new sense of urgency and pragmatism has been brought about by the tumultuous changes the world is experiencing currently, such as the global financial crisis and the political transformations in the Arab world. It has also been brought about in anticipation of the tumultuous changes to come, as the world grapples with the demographic and environmental challenges of feeding its growing population, which as we know passed the seven billion mark in October. We have a choice in how we face these challenges. We can allow ethnic, religious and cultural divisions to become the fault lines of disintegration and conflict. Or by overcoming these divisions, we can create a basis for co-operation to tackle the challenges together.

Another reason for urgency and pragmatism is that time is running out for the United Nations to deliver the promise of its Millennium Declaration. Its objective is to bring about a peaceful, prosperous and just world for everyone, with a specific duty to include the most vulnerable - especially children - to whom the future belongs. The Declaration was distilled into eight specific Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved by 2015. With only three years to go, now is the time for action, not words. And we must not make the current financial crisis an excuse for failure.

The AOC's emphasis on diversity, co-existence, respect for human rights and sustainable development means it is fully aligned with the core principles of the Millennium Declaration. After all, they both come from the UN. My personal belief is that the AOC can exert the 'soft' power of inter-cultural dialogue and reconciliation to help achieve the MDGs through joined-up thinking and joined-up action. By the same token, I believe that progress towards the goals of the AOC is progress towards the MDGs. This is why I am asking this year's forum to identify and build on synergies between these two UN initiatives.

It has long been evident to me that the achievement of MDG 2, universal primary education, is a cornerstone or point of leverage for achieving all eight MDGs. If you educate people, they can stand on their own two feet. This is why so much of my work is focused on education, especially where it is under threat, such as in conflict zones. So I am particularly keen to develop synergies between the AOC and the achievement of MDG 2.

The Doha Forum brings together government bodies, the private sector and civil society organisations to forge new partnerships, come up with new ideas and make new plans for swift

implementation. To remind us of why we're all here, we will be joined by a delegation of 300 young people from different parts of the world, bringing relevance, optimism and energy to our discussions.

The AOC has four pillars of action which inter-connect the values of the AOC with the measurable pathway of the MDGs: education, youth, media and migration. I believe that these four pillars are not just relevant to inter-cultural dialogue, but also to creating the political, economic and social changes in the societies that need them most. For example, poor integration of migrants creates alienation and resentment, while well-integrated migrants demonstrate that diversity brings economic progress and social cohesion.

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So I am convinced that strengthening connections between the AOC and the MDGs will be a big step forward, one that will put inter-cultural dialogue at the heart of the world's development agenda. As a result, we expect the forum will achieve renewed political and financial thrust, with practical results and positive outcomes.

If, as you say, the forum aims to put inter-cultural dialogue at the heart of the world's development agenda, what attributes does Qatar offer that can actively contribute to this objective?

The young people currently transforming the Arab world, along with their peers across the globe, sense the need for change more than anyone and thereby are best placed to make it happen. So it is entirely appropriate that an Arab country is hosting the forum this year.

Mahatma Gandhi famously said that we must be the change that we want to see in the world and that is what we are doing in the development of Qatar itself. As a small country, almost every initiative we take in realising our National Vision 2030, which is essentially about transforming Qatar into a knowledge economy, involves dialogue and →



→ partnerships with people outside Qatar. We actively and happily engage with people of different nationalities, races and religions. Qatar is becoming known in the world as a place that thrives on diversity in almost every field: culture, education, the arts, economy and enterprise, healthcare, sport and so on. The Qatar way is to find the best the world has to offer and to bring it to our region, while finding the best our region has to offer and taking it to the world. Al Jazeera, Education City, Mathaf: The Arab Museum of Modern Art and Qatar Philharmonic are just four examples of hundreds of such initiatives.

A small example - but one which embodies so much of what we are trying to achieve with our youth in terms of early development of cross-cultural dialogue, leadership and critical thinking skills – is that of an event held by Qatar Foundation in association with THIMUN (The Hague International Model United Nations) in November. Over 1,000

young people from all over the world arrived here in Doha to stage a young person’s version of the United Nations. Playing the role of UN diplomats, they debated resolutions on the key issues facing the world. What made it so special – and so relevant to this development of cross-cultural dialogue - is that each young person had to represent a different country than his or her own – and often one with which their own country was in a state of actual conflict or tension.

With regard to Qatar’s specific contribution to the AOC programme this year, we are planning to launch a yearly Cultural and Youth Festival in Doha to celebrate diversity and we are setting up a world observatory of inter-cultural policies relating to the four pillars (education, youth, media and migration). There will also be other initiatives arising from the work of the forum.



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You are a great champion of education not only in your country but universally; even more importantly you have recognised that educated young people need jobs - thus setting up initiatives like Silatech. Do you believe such programmes will be fundamental to stem the “brain drain” in the Middle East and North Africa and thus help the region fulfil its human potential?

Silatech, which was launched at the Madrid AOC Forum in 2008, was indeed a recognition that we urgently need to tackle the challenge of unemployment in the Arab world. According to International Labour Organisation figures, the region has the highest unemployment rate in the world, averaging 10%. Among the under-25s, this rises to 40%. Events since 2008 across the Arab world have confirmed that social discontent brought on largely by unemployment was one of the triggers of the upheavals across the region. The challenge that confronts us is daunting: we need to create up to 80 million jobs over the next decade. I believe the first step is view our young people not as part of the problem but as part of the solution.

With this mind-set, everything becomes possible. The partnerships between the public, private and civil society sectors I mentioned earlier are critical, since to create jobs, we need to create an entrepreneurial culture, supported by appropriate infrastructures to nurture it. We also need to be much cleverer about ensuring that our young people are receiving an education which prepares them for the job market. Here the private sector has a major role to play as ultimate beneficiaries. Since 2008 Silatech has been endeavouring to build local, regional and global partnerships to achieve this entrepreneurial culture and shape education in support.

But there is another point that I need to make which is more fundamental than the ‘brain drain’ issue and that is the large number of children who are unable to obtain an education because it is too dangerous. Of the 70 million or so children who are out of school, more than half are in conflict zones. The attacks on schools and teachers that are carried out with impunity to international law must be stopped. As UNESCO Special Envoy for Basic and Higher Education I have and will continue to campaign to ensure that schools and places of education are protected together with teachers and students, and that in times of war and conflict, education is seen as a humanitarian necessity and not a luxury.

As young, modern rulers you and His Highness the Emir have opened the doors of Qatar to contemporary art, cutting edge technology and media, and embraced many cultures in your own soil. How have you tempered that openness with the preservation of your own heritage?

Culture is not just what you do, but who you are. It is as much an expression of identity as it is of art. I do not believe that openness and preservation are necessarily in conflict. The key is to instil in our young people a strong sense of self-confidence in who they are, by allowing them to take pride in their heritage and culture. And, of course, take pride in their language, as Arabic is the key to both our culture and religion. Once again education is the essential element. An educated person is able to appreciate and enjoy other cultures while always being centred on his or her own. Qatar is an Arab and Muslim country and is proud of its identity and culture, which form the links between our past and our future. It is this pride and confidence which allows our young people to participate in global cultural activities while preserving their rich and unique heritage.

But let me add another point here. When we speak about culture we need to be precise. On the one hand we should be aware of the need to create what I may call a ‘culture of culture’ and here Qatar – and I must mention Katara – is creating the appropriate atmosphere through the many museums, musical events, literary and artistic opportunities which flourish here. But on the other hand there is another type of culture of which we are equally aware and that is the culture that is relevant to the local Qatari. I mentioned before that culture is not just what you do but who you are. In this sense the local cultures of Qatar, the traditions that make Qatar what it is and not something else, need to be preserved and nourished. By preserved I do not mean in a quaint folkloric way but in an applicable and relevant manner which can strengthen and give depth to Qataris and affirm their sense of identity and confidence. ▣