

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations' ability to improve relations between Christians and Muslims has been limited

*Following 9/11, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) was created to improve inter-community relations between Christians and Muslims. Over a decade after the Alliance was established, **Jeffrey Haynes** argues that while it is now an established entity at the UN, its capacity to help improve global justice in the context of relations between the West and the Muslim world is undermined by financial, organisational and policy-related weaknesses.*



The Third Global Forum of the UN Alliance of Civilizations in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Image: Wikimedia, Randam

After 9/11, governments and the global community were concerned with improving inter-civilizational relations between Christians and Muslims. It was widely agreed that addressing and achieving this goal would require real, sustained, and meaningful global dialogue, at both elite and grassroots levels. Both the United Nations (UN) and the 'citizen-civil' sector agreed to work together to help improve Muslim-Christian relations. The aim was to address the issues of mutual concern and, as a result, work towards preservation of each entity's identity and cultural heritage. The preferred mechanism was inter-faith dialogue to build and develop peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims. The **United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC)** was created to help deliver this goal.

The UNAOC was created in 2005, a joint initiative of the governments of Spain and Turkey, under the auspices of the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan. How would the UNAOC work towards the goal of improving dialogue and inter-community relations between Christians and Muslims? When I started looking into UNAOC, about 18 months ago, my initial perception was that the UNAOC is a well-meaning, elite-sponsored, initiative that nevertheless struggles to achieve its goal. I also identified three concerns. Firstly, does the UNAOC have enough in the way of leadership, funds and/or infrastructural support, to make achievement of its aspirations possible?

Second, does the UNAOC engage primarily in 'symbolic politics', that is, does it seek 'only' to create a more open atmosphere for dialogue among elites from the Christian and Muslim

'civilizations'? Put another way, does the UNAOC engage *meaningfully* and *consistently* with all relevant actors, including those at the community level, in pursuit of its goals? If so, how? If not, why not?

Third, how might UNAOC develop an institutionalised framework fit for purpose, comprehensive and flexible enough to facilitate both inter-elite and grassroots interactions in the Christian and Muslim worlds? In sum, how might the UNAOC help give Muslims and Christians hope to believe better relations are possible, following the nadir of 9/11?

After a preparatory period, the UNAOC began its work in 2007, under the auspices of Annan's successor, Ban Ki-moon. Initially housed within the UN building in New York, today the Alliance has an office 500 yards away, on 3rd Avenue. The UNAOC is housed on the 20th floor of an utterly anonymous office building that has no visible sign on the frontage that the Alliance is located there. Around 20 people work for the UNAOC. They are primarily 'UN bureaucrats', although a small number have specialist knowledge of Christian-Muslim relations, including at the grassroots (civil society and non-governmental organizations).

During its first decade, the UNAOC has generally eschewed big, headline events which would require more staff and financial resources. Instead, the philosophy of the Alliance is 'small is beautiful'. It works mainly in small-scale contexts with business, civil society and government representatives to start the ball rolling in terms of improved civilizational dialogue via a kind of snowball effect, which grows as people initially involved in activities with the Alliance go back to their home turf and begin to disseminate what they have learned.

The Alliance has implemented **eight Special Projects**, devoted to Education, Youth, Migration and Media. These include 'Summer schools', run in conjunction with EF Education First, a private international education company, where a group of '75-100 participants aged 18-35 engage in workshops, roundtables and collaborative work focused on fostering diversity and global citizenship; reducing stereotypes and identity-based tensions; promoting intercultural harmony and social justice';. Other initiatives are the 'Intercultural Innovation Award' and 'Intercultural Leaders Award'(both run in partnership with the German luxury car business, BMW Group), several initiatives devoted to furtherance of 'Media and Information Literacy' ,the Plural + Youth Video Festival(run in conjunction with the International Migration Organisation), the UNAOC Fellowship Programme, which brings together young people from both the West and the Muslim world to share experiences, the Youth Solidarity Fund, which provides seed funding to outstanding youth-led initiatives that promote long-term constructive relationships between people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds and the annual 'Hate Speech Conference', focusing on how to reduce hate speech from the media.

The impact of these Special Projects is hard to gauge in the context of improving inter-civilisational relations and global justice. Those benefitting from the Special Projects are few in number and mainly come from an-already existing elite. On the other hand, it is hard to know what more the Alliance can do to further its goals in relation to Education, Youth, Migration and Media, given its precarious financial position and only patchy support the UNAOC receives from its Group of Friends, discussed below.

The exception to this 'rule' of working in small-scale contexts are the biennial 'global forums', which bring together 2,000-3,000 people from both elite and non-elite organisations to discuss global dialogue and what can be done to facilitate improvements in this regard. The most recent global forum was held over three days in April 2016, in Baku, Azerbaijan. I attended the forum and found it very interesting.

I also spent a week in New York in January 2016, visiting both the UNAOC office and the UN, where I spoke to several knowledgeable UN personnel who have regular interactions with Alliance staff. I found without exception those I interviewed to be helpful, committed and keen to talk to me about the Alliance. Several interviewees suggested others who I could usefully talk to find out more and, as a result, I will return to New York in January 2017 for more interviews. Although

interviewees' perceptions of the Alliance's achievements were unsurprisingly quite varied, there was consensus that in these days of heightening inter-cultural tensions, reflected in the grotesque phenomenon of Daesh/Islamic State and the tragedy of the still unfolding and expanding European refugee crisis in the wake of the Syrian civil war, the need for the Alliance is clear and continuing.

But what does the Alliance *do*? How does it make a difference in the context of inter-civilizational dialogue? As one of my Alliance interviewees emphasized, the organization is a 'soft' power tool, different from the 'hard' power of military and economic clout, working to find common civilizational ground against extremism and terrorism. This is not to suggest that there is a kind of warm and fuzzy centre ground where 'representatives' from both the Christian and Muslim worlds agree on everything and no uncertainty or doubt prevails. The difficult trick that the UNAOC is trying to pull off is to establish, develop and consolidate the shared set of values, truths and beliefs which comprise one of the UN's foundation documents: the UN Charter of Human Rights, as a basis for shared understandings of the world and a template for what is appropriate and what is simply wrong. The aim of the Alliance – to enhance the lives of those on the sharp end of civilizational enmity – will hopefully be achieved *if* it can continue to work closely and flexibly with significant stakeholders in pursuit of consensual goals to enhance life.

After a decade of the UNAOC, we can see it as a *potentially* viable framework for improving inter-civilizational relations. Since inception a decade ago the Alliance has made some progress towards institutionalising inter-civilisational dialogue at the UN, with particular focus on Education, Youth, Migration and Media. On the other hand, the UNAOC's capacity to develop its planned ability regularly to bring together governments, IOs and CSOs was not achieved. The result is that while the UNAOC is now an established entity at the UN, its capacity to help demonstrably to improve global justice in the context of relations between the West and the Muslim world is undermined by financial, organisational and policy-related weaknesses.

Overall, progress is slow, held back by three main factors: (1) lack of agreement about what precisely desirable inter-civilizational goals are, and how we would know if we achieve them (2) insufficient UN encouragement, including a lack of financial viability for the UNAOC, and (3) a sense that 15 years after 9/11 the issue of improved inter-civilisational relations has been overtaken by other, more topical concerns, such as fixing the global economy and ending debilitating regional wars, as in Syria.

About the author



Jeffrey Haynes is Professor of Politics in the [School of Social Sciences](#), and Director of the [Centre for the Study of Religion, Conflict and Cooperation](#) at London Metropolitan University. His most recent books are *Faith-based Organizations at the United Nations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and the Routledge *Handbook of Religion and Politics* (2nd. ed., London: Routledge, 2016). During 2015-17, Haynes is undertaking research into the United Nations entity 'Alliance of Civilizations' as part of a large research initiative funded by the USA-based John Templeton Foundation's, 'Enhancing Life Project.'

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