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**Chairman, BISS**  
**Distinguished Friends and colleagues**  
**Asalam-Alaikum & Good Morning.**

In 1993, a political scientist from Harvard proposed a theory that peoples cultural and religious identities will be primary source of conflict in the post cold war period. Samuel Huntington who gave the theory, believed that the age of ideology has ended and the world has returned to a normal state of affairs characterized by cultural conflict. As an extension, He gives the concept of different civilisation as the highest rank of cultural identity.

To him :

The clash of civilisations will dominate global politics. The fault line between civilisations, will be the battle lines of the future.

In 1996, he tried to identity the various civilisations. His main criterion was the predominant religion in each category. Thus he classified the world into having the following civilisations:

1. Western civilisation
2. Orthodox Christian civilisation
3. Latin American civilisation
4. Muslim civilisation
5. Hindu civilisation
6. Chinese civilisation
7. Japanese civilisation
8. Sub Saharan African civilisation
9. Buddhist areas of certain countries like Bhutan, Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia, etc.
10. Ethopia, Hiati and Turkey labeled as lone countries.
11. Carribbean countries also constitute a distinct entity.

Huntington argues that there is no universal civilisation based on western values. This approach antagonizes other civilisations. Although the west has built the international system, wrote its laws and gave it substance in the form of United Nations, but he identifies two 'Challenger civilisations' – the Sinic / Chinese and Islam. The economic rise of China poses a long term threat to the west. But Islamic civilisation has experienced a massive population growth which is fuelling instability,

both in its borders and in its interior, where fundamentalist movements are becoming popular. To him 'Islam has bloody borders'. The danger from Islam is therefore twofold :

1. Its youth bulge + population growth
2. Its proximity to many civilisations such as Chinese / Orthodox / Western and African.

Huntington's theory has received much criticism from different paradigms.

### **The Historical experience :**

But let me walk you all through history and see how much of it is accurate and possible.

First, let us go back to the period of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphate in Islamic history in the seventh and eighth century. During that period, when the Islamic empire was quickly spreading throughout the known world, from India to the borders of China in the east and through North Africa to Spain in the west, Muslim Arabs faced a patchwork of ethnic and religious communities. Large urban populations of Persians, traditional Zoroastrians, Aramaic speakers, Christians, Hindus and Jews became their subjects. A range of new comers assumed influential role in intellectual and political affairs of the empire.

The Muslim conquest restored ancient ties among historic centers of civilisation across a huge land mass.

When the Muslim Arabs defeated the forces of Tang dynasty of China in Talas, they through a prisoner of war, acquired the wondrous Chinese technology of paper making. This technology was brought to Samarkand, where from tax rolls to love poems to philosophies to star tables were written, studied and recorded.

At that time, book bazaars became a common feature of urban life. Then patronage by the rich for authors and their books led to the creation of great libraries. In Damascus, the Arab libraries brought together Greek and Christian works on Alchemy, medicines and other sciences. But the gathering of knowledge from all corners of the empire, needed royal libraries, modeled after those of Persian kings. Here an army of scholars were given tasks where creative and original ways to solve problems were addressed. These were known as Bayat-ul-Hikmah or the House of Wisdom. For over

150 years, the scholars translated all available Greek books on science and philosophy into Arabic.

But what was significant was that the quest for learning and knowledge brought civilisations together. The will to express, to exchange, to create original thesis, was what brought aliens to become friends.

The Islamic empire benefited from these creations. So did the periphery empires. A rich pot-pourri of cultures were brought together. Peace prevailed.

But then what happened to that glorious arrangement?

The year 1492 is often seen as the beginning of the modern period. That year 3 very important things happened in Spain, where vestige of Islamic empire still prevailed.

First, in January, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella conquered the Muslim kingdom of Granada – the last stronghold of Islam in Europe. With deep emotions, crowds watched the Christian banner raised on the city walls. The Christians had finally purged Christendom of the ‘filth’ they called Muslims.

Second, in three months, the Jews in Spain who worked with Muslims there in translating and interpreting the works of scholars were given a terrible choice : they had to convert to Christianity or leave the country.

Third, present at the liberation of Granada was a man named Christopher Colombus. He came from a family of Jewish origin but was a Christian. In August 1492, he sailed across the Atlantic and accidently discovered America, instead of India. Columbus had hoped as a Christian to launch a new crusade against the Muslims from India. His dairies show that years later he was still pre-occupied with the conquest of Jerusalem. With Columbus, the crusading enthusiasm crossed the Atlantic and took root in America.

But what triggered the hatred of Spanish Christians against Jews and Muslims was the fact, that many of them who did not leave Spain but chose to convert to Christianity, never became at heart a Christian. They were known as ‘Merinos’. In 1499, came the edict called ‘Strictures of the purity of blood’ – to define who was racially pure – ‘old Christian’ or who was ‘new Christian’ of Jewish or Muslim extraction. The Spanish inquisition then swung into action.

A few years before in 1453, the Ottoman Turks had conquered Byzantium and brought Islam to the very gates of Europe. Now without the rampart of Byzantium, Christians in Europe seemed very vulnerable. Islam seemed to swallow up poor little Europe.

Faced with the Islamic peril, Europeans were incapable of understanding that the Ottomans could not conquer Europe. The Ottoman defeat in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 proved it.

But after the Crusades, Jews and Muslim were both objects of irrational dread. They were seen to be capable of destroying Europe. They were not seen as normal foreigners, but were synonymous with evil itself.

But as Europe succeeded in modernizing and industrializing, it continued to be haunted by inner demons and by bogeys it itself created. Europeans became interested in their enemies, or the images of their enemies, that they had created.

As time passed and European colonialism gained strength, the people of the three faiths were walled off from one another. The Christians pushed the Jews and Muslims away from themselves. With the onset of the Jewish migration to Palestine, the Muslims and Jews parted company.

### **The need for a 'Dialogue among civilisations :**

This 'Alienation of civilisations as we see through history, began as rejection of Muslims and Jews by Christians in medieval times. This was followed in modern times by Jews and Muslims going far away from each other. In the beginning, religion was the cause. But today it is much more than that. For want of a better word, we can term it generally as a 'trust deficit' between the three great civilisations.

So what can we do to overcome this 'deficit'? Let me catalogue the elements that make up this deficit. They are :

1. Mutual prejudices
2. Mutual mis conceptions
3. Mutual mis-perceptions
4. Polarised political views
5. Bitterness due to historical injustices (Jewish occupation of muslim lands)
6. Strains resulting from rapid globalisation

7. Economic deprivation and desperate poverty
8. Double standards

These are elements that concern modern day policy makers and philosophers alike. Many of them have called for a 'Dialogue among civilisations'. The President of Iran originally introduced the idea. The United Nations adopted a resolution to name 2001 as the year of 'Dialogue among civilisations'.

The crux of the issue was to open lines of communication and redefine the meaning of diversity. To many diversity of culture is a threat and to others it is an opportunity and an important ingredient for growth. But all this would require 'a basic change in political ethics' around the world.

### **The UN initiative called 'Alliance of civilisations' :**

Looking at all this, the President of Spain in 2005 initiated a proposal in UN General Assembly called the 'Alliance of Civilisations'. It aims to galvanize international action against extremism by forging international, inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and co-operation. The initiative was co-sponsored by the Turkish Prime minister at the UN. The aim of the initiative was to produce :

- actionable
- time – bound

recommendations for UN member states to adopt. It was agreed that co-existence between groups of people with divergent backgrounds, has resulted in instability in various societies, which was exploited by extremists round the world – leading to violent acts of terrorism.

### **The inherent challenges before Alliance of Civilisation :**

To achieve a modicum of an Alliance, all civilisations have to face certain challenges. These are :

1. Overcoming prejudice and stereotypes, fed by ignorance, fear of change, over-simplification.

These have blinding effect as others are not seen as human beings, with same human rights and the need to belong.

2. Integrating diversity in public policies and citizens programs for change and development.
3. To live together as equal citizens and to respectfully dissent, without tearing the fabric of societies.
4. In an informed society, in the midst of crucial debates, there must be ways to hear echoes of a growing number of cultures.

All cultures in order to grow and flower, need to be irrigated by different currents, large and small. All civilisations have tremendous know-how, wisdom and experience. Bridging divides is an important challenge.

The ultimate goal of the Alliance would be what can be called as a 'Dialogue that delivers'. A dialogue that triggers change on the ground across cultural lines and is a harbinger of peace and harmony among peoples and civilisations.

#### **Prospects for Alliance of Civilisations :**

To do this, we must not insist that it is only an inter-governmental affair. In fact, it is to be assumed that the Alliance is a mobilizing force, a kind of global matchmaker, which connects political leaders and policy makers, business leaders and international organizations, human rights advocates, religious leaders, journalists and youth.

Only then viable, projects can be created which would be innovative solutions to complex problems which our diverse societies face.

For this, huge changes in education need to be planned and executed. Languages need to be learned. History will be required to be revisited. Intercultural skills need to be acquired.

We cannot forget the use of the internet and the media in this effort.

Of course, the vanguards in all these have to be our political leaders and all our religious leaders of all persuasions.

#### **The Bangladesh perspective – need for grand intellectual exchanges :**

To end my presentation this morning, I would like to introduce the Bangladesh perspective in all this. What role can Bangladesh and its people play in building this Alliance of civilisation.

Curiously enough, Bangladesh is situated along three major civilisational fault lines and in close proximity to 4 major religions. Throughout history it has been a conduit for one or more religions and civilisations. Although today, we are a particularly homogenous people with a mono – culture and a religion which is almost omni – present, yet we are proud inheritors of a diverse cultural heritage.

To our west is the great Hindu civilisation of India. To our north east we hug the great Chinese civilisation. While we ourselves are successors to a Muslim civilisation. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Confucianism are in our proximity and we have passed on Buddhism to our neighboring countries like China and Sri Lanka.

In the medieval age, Bangladesh was the home of 36 Buddhist Universities. The great teachings of this religion was shared with Tibet and China, India and Sri Lanka.

What prevents us from doing the same now? There are erudite scholars both at home in Bangladesh and in the region. We are strong advocates of peace in the UN and our soldiers travel to distant shores to enforce peace on behalf of the world.

We are used to diversity of races and cultures. In any case we are one of the few nations that welcome and enjoy different cultures.

We can be the fermentation pot of civilisations. Interestingly we are familiar with western civilisation in the immediate colonial past. All this makes us a good via media to build an effective Alliance of civilisation. Our leaders and thinkers must take up the task.

Like peace-keeping we should work towards peace –building.

Thank you.