# Religion, Education and Security: The United Nations Alliance of Civilisations and Global Citizenship †

## Jeffrey Haynes

School of Social Sciences, London Metropolitan University, London N7 8DB, UK; tsjhayn1@londonmet.ac.uk
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**Abstract:** Global citizenship refers to a sense of belonging to a broader community and common humanity. It emphasises political, economic, social and cultural interdependence and interconnectedness between the local, the national and the global. Given the compelling necessity to tackle critical global challenges such as the prevalent trends of growing intolerance and violent extremism, global citizenship is a fundamental aspect of a necessary approach to living together. Its purpose is to champion and spread what many, but not all, regard as desirable universal values, including improved human rights, gender equality, cultural diversity, enhanced tolerance, and environmental sustainability. For the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC), a key approach to help achieve these aims is to improve education, especially for the young, in relation to other faiths and cultures. The article seeks to examine a fundamental component of the Alliance's activities—improved education for the young about other cultures—in the context of increasing international concern with violent extremism and terrorism. It assesses the achievements of the UNAOC in this regard since its founding in 2005. The article explains that over time the Alliance has made several false starts in relation to its educational programmes and policies but recently, with the recent appointment of a new High Representative and the strong support of the UN Secretary General, there are indications that the UNAOC is now focusing more on developing closer partnerships, both within the UN and without, in order to achieve its educational goals. The first section of the article examines the emergence of the UNAOC and explains its focus on improved inter-cultural education for the young. The second section identifies the post-9/11 focus on violent extremism and terrorism at the UN as a trigger for a shift in the educational activities of the UN to a concentration of preventing and countering violent extremism. The concluding section assesses the record of the UNAOC in relation to its educational goals and the achievement of enhanced global citizenship, especially among young people from various cultures.

**Keywords:** global citizenship; education; United Nations Alliance of Civilisations; violent extremism; terrorism

Global citizenship refers to a sense of belonging to a broader community and common humanity.[1] It emphasises political, economic, social and cultural interdependence and interconnectedness between the local, the national and the global. Given the compelling necessity to tackle critical global challenges such as the prevalent trends of growing intolerance and violent extremism, global citizenship is a

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[1] The Ideas for Global Citizenship charity defines global citizenship as a 'way of living that recognises our world is an increasingly complex web of connections and interdependencies. One in which our choices and actions may have repercussions for people and communities locally, nationally or internationally' (http://www.ideas-forum.org.uk/about-us/global-citizenship).

fundamental aspect of a necessary approach to living together. Its purpose is to champion and spread what many, but not all, regard as desirable universal values, including improved human rights, gender equality, cultural diversity, enhanced tolerance, and environmental sustainability.

To this end, Global Citizenship Education (GCED) emphasizes and seeks to build towards these normatively desirable universal values and responsibilities. GCED was identified as a priority in the 2006 Report of the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC) High-level Group (HLG). The High-level Group identified GCED as a key way to strengthen multiculturalism and to achieve improved understanding among individuals from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Seeking to advance these objectives, GCED takes 'a multifaceted approach, employing concepts and methodologies already applied in other areas, including human rights education, peace education, education for sustainable development and education for international understanding' (UNESCO 2014, p. 15). GCED focuses on the long term: a lifelong learning perspective, from early childhood, through all levels of education, continuing into adulthood. GCED requires 'formal and informal approaches, curricular and extracurricular interventions, and conventional and unconventional pathways to participation' (UNESCO 2014).

Several guidelines drawn up by intergovernmental organisations, as well as world leaders, speak to the need for improved and sustained intercultural/interreligous education and the necessity to learn about and across such differences. Significant publications in this regard include: UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education (UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education), *Civil Paths to Peace: Report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding* (2007) and a (Council of Europe 2008) (CoE) 'White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue', entitled '*Living Together as Equals*' (2008). In addition, useful specific references on education about religions include, *inter alia*, Keast (2007) and *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs* (2007).

These notable publications appeared at around the same time as the UNAOC's foundational High-level Group report, that is, the mid-2000s. The then United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan created the UNAOC following 9/11 and many of the publications noted in the previous paragraph would also have been strongly informed by that watershed event and those that followed included the March 2004 Madrid bombings and the July 2005 London attacks, both undertaken by extremists inspired by al Qaeda.

During its first meeting in Palma de Mallorca in November 2005, the HLG agreed to study several thematic areas related to finding ways to reduce tensions between the West and the Muslim world and develop an intercivilisational alliance instead. The context in which the HLG worked was one which highlighted the importance of GCED. As a result, the HLG focused upon education and included the need for:

- improved global and cross-cultural education;
- better media literacy;
- more teaching about religion in schools;
- good quality peace education and civic and social engagement;
- upgraded internet access, and
- holistic and integrated curricula.

The UNAOC highlights education in the belief that it is very important that we know more about each other and that we learn 'the right things' about each other. That is, promoting knowledge and understanding about other cultures through education aims to undermine stereotypes and enhance mutual respect. While knowledge about other cultures is a necessary first step, it needs augmenting by multifaceted contextualisation, with improved knowledge of: history, geography, religions, beliefs, languages and other distinctive features of cultural groups.

The UNAOC focus on GCED came in the context of burgeoning ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, and language diversity, sometimes accompanied by heightened tensions. This was underlined in Europe by the failure of the European Union and individual member states' to deal adequately with

2015's unprecedented migration/refugee crisis and in the USA by the success of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election, following a campaign notable for both anti-Mexican and anti-Muslim invective. In addition, there was an enhanced securitisation of Islam in both the USA and Europe after 9/11. To what extent, if at all, could the UNAOC's education efforts counter this development?

There is a paradox to be noted. On the one hand, GCED has never been more necessary than it is today. Governments, civil society and educators need to rethink existing notions of citizenship and nationality, in order to embed and strengthen concepts and practices of GCED. There is also a clear need to deepen, augment and spread normatively desirable universal values, including democracy and improved human rights. Around the world, nations should seek to coalesce around a set of democratic values, including justice and equality, and make sustained efforts to balance unity and diversity while protecting the rights of diverse groups. This is, of course, a difficult task; but it is also essential. Government and civil society must work together to make these objectives both meaningful and attractive via the formal educational system and various entities, such as faith-based organisations, which deliver many non-formal educational initiatives (Haynes 2014, 2018).

These efforts should be assisted by the knowledge that the UN's 4th Sustainable Development Goal is: to 'Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning, so as to ensure that by 2030 all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development' ('Sustainable Development Goal 4').

On the other hand, the recent trend towards securitisation of Islam does nothing to aid GCED. The 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT) launched by the administration of George W. Bush in the aftermath of 9/11 'trie[d] to embrace in its self-understanding 99.9 per cent of the global population: all civilised or wanting-to-be-civilised people (all but the terrorists themselves). An important element of this is that the GWoT ha[d] strong elements of existing order universalism—all states against non-state terrorists, order against chaos—mixed with a US-centred inclusive universalism' (Buzan and Waever 2009, p. 65). Islamism is widely seen to be 'uncivilised' when expressed via extremism or terrorism, whereas 'moderate' Islam is judged to be 'acceptable' as it reflects how civilised values can be expressed in a faith beyond Christianity (Bosco 2014; Cesari 2016; Eroukhmanoff 2017). After 9/11, governments in both the West and in the Muslim world sought to encourage 'moderate' Islam among their Muslim citizens and internationally. But the question of what 'moderate' Islam is substantively was not clearly articulated. Instead, Muslims *tout court* were often regarded by many governments and citizens in both Europe and the USA as an existential threat to their security and stability.

The first section of the article examines the emergence of the UNAOC and its focus on improved inter-cultural education for the young. The second section identifies a post-9/11 focus on violent extremism and terrorism at the UN as a trigger for a shift in the UNAOC's educational activities. The concluding section assesses the record of the UNAOC in relation to its educational goals, including in relation to the development of global citizenship among young people from various cultures.

## 1. The United Nations Alliance of Civilisations and Education

The UNAOC was launched in 2005. Over time, the Alliance has concentrated its efforts on four 'pillars': education, youth, migration, and media. These four areas were identified by the HLG in a foundational report, which appeared in 2006.

Membership of the High-level Group, co-chaired by Professor Federico Mayor of Spain and Professor Mehmet Aydin of Turkey, was chosen on a geographical basis. The aim was to be as representative as possible of the world's regions, cultures and religions. The HLG's 20 members were selected from 'the fields of politics, academia, civil society, international finance, and media from all regions of the world' (http://www.unaoc.org/who-we-are/high-level-group/). The HLG met five times in the year following November 2005. Its second meeting, in early 2006, coincided with a

major international controversy, consequential to publication in a Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, of derogatory cartoons of the founder of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad. This experience encouraged the HLG to focus on education and the media as key areas that the UNAOC should address (Interviews with the UNAOC's Shamil Idriss and the HLG's Karen Armstrong). In addition, as the UNAOC's former research and education manager, Thomas Uthup, noted: 'The whole areas of Youth, Education, Migration and Media [are where] you are trying to understand the differences and Youth and Migration are two areas where you had to act on the commonalities' (Interview with Thomas Uthup).

The HLG's 63-page report highlights what its members saw as the key causes of global instability and insecurity: increased radicalisation, extremism and terrorism, primarily undertaken by numerically small but very impactful extremist Islamist groups. To address these issues, the HLG believed it would be necessary to focus on four key areas: education, youth, migration, and media. Improvements in these four areas were collectively seen as playing 'a critical role in helping to reduce cross-cultural tensions and to build bridges between communities' (High-level Group Report 2006, p. 25). The HLG Report notes that:

> We ... live in an increasingly complex world, where polarized perceptions, fueled by injustice and inequality, often lead to violence and conflict, threatening international stability. Over the past few years, wars, occupation and acts of terror have exacerbated mutual suspicion and fear within and among societies. Some political leaders and sectors of the media, as well as radical groups have exploited this environment, painting mirror images of a world made up of mutually exclusive cultures, religions, or civilizations, historically distinct and destined for confrontation. Worse, by promoting the misguided view that cultures are set on an unavoidable collision course, they help turn negotiable disputes into seemingly intractable identity-based conflicts that take hold of the popular imagination. It is essential, therefore, to counter the stereotypes and misconceptions that deepen patterns of hostility and mistrust among societies. (High-level Group Report 2006, p. 3)

This quotation from the HLG report highlights three of its key claims: (1) global injustices are a key cause of rising international tensions, especially between Western and Muslim societies; (2) inter-civilisational relations are likely to be made worse by 'war, occupation and acts of terror'; and (3) there is a widespread—and perhaps growing—perception both among elites and the mass of 'ordinary' people that 'cultures are set on an unavoidable collision course'. To try to counter these malign developments it was necessary to increase knowledge by, *inter alia*, improved inter-cultural education, especially of young people.

Regarding Education, the Report notes that 'Education systems today face the challenge of preparing young people for an interdependent world that is unsettling to individual and collective identities'. The Report affirms the importance of education as a vital instrument to prepare young people with suitable knowledge and perspective to tackle existing and emergent, including inter-cultural, problems. This is because it is vitally important both to be educated about one's own culture and to know about others. It is necessary to know about one's own community—a vital component to help instil and develop a sense of societal cohesion and unity—and also essential that, in modern multicultural societies, we also learn about other societies and cultures. In addition, we need to comprehend global issues and understand how they affect us all. To address these concerns, governments and other education providers should provide broad-based education—covering, *inter alia*, politics, international relations, economics, history, sports, art, drama, and film—so as satisfactorily to build and develop interactive relations between individuals and their communities. According to the Report, the overall objective should be broad-based educational programmes, helping young people in particular to avoid the kind of 'exclusivist thinking which holds that one group's interests may be advanced at the expense of others or that one group's victimization justifies the victimization of others' (High-level Group Report 2006, p. 25). In sum, the HLG Report underlined the importance of education in 'preparing young people for an interdependent world' and called for education systems

to 'provide students with an understanding and respect for the diverse religious beliefs, practices and cultures in the world' (High-level Group Report 2006, pp. 25–26).

Turning to a closely related issue, youth, the Report contends that if young people from various cultures have a chance to meet with and learn about each other then they are more likely to get to know and like each other as individuals. The anticipated result was that they would not, for the most part, perceive their counterparts from different cultures and/or religions in a poor light, which, the Report avers, is the likely consequence if young people draw their understanding only from stereotypically malign expressions of different cultures as represented in many television programmes, films, newspapers, and social media.

Following the Report's recommendations, the Alliance of Civilisations implemented eight Special Projects; several of which were devoted to Education and Youth. They were (1) 'Summer Schools', initially run by the UNAOC (2010–2102), and then in 2013–2015 in conjunction with Education First (EF), a private international education company. Each of the Schools would bring together '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' (Interview with Christopher McCormick, EF Education First) (2) the 'Intercultural Innovation Award' and (3) 'Intercultural Leaders Award', both run in partnership with the German luxury car business, BMW Group (Interview with Milena Pighi, BMW) (4) several initiatives devoted to furtherance of 'Media and Information Literacy' (5) the Plural + Youth Video Festival, run in conjunction with the International Migration Organisation (IMO) (Interview with Ashraf El Nour, head of IMO); (6) the UNAOC Fellowship Programme, which brings together young people from both the West and the Muslim world to share experiences (Interview with Isabelle Tibi, UNAOC); (7) 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 (Interview with Isabelle Tibi, UNAOC); and (8) the annual 'Hate Speech Conference', focusing on how to reduce hate speech from the media (Interview with Jordi Torrent, UNAOC).[2]

The overall impact of these Special Projects is hard to gauge in relation to the general goal of the UNAOC: improvement of inter-civilisational relations between the West and the Muslim world. Those benefitting from the Special Projects are relatively few in number and mainly come from an already-existing or putative elite. The UNAOC has identified that there are what might be called 'professional attendees' of some Special Projects, that is, young people who are very adept at completing the relevant application forms for the UNAOC programmes and activities and, as a result, often find themselves accepted for them (Interviews with Christopher McCormick, EF Education First; Isabelle Tibi, Thibault Chareton, Jodi Torrent, all UNAOC). That being said, hundreds of young people have passed through the UNAOC's programmes over the years and some have gone on to become professional figures seeking to improve inter-cultural relations, as examined in the next section.

Critics identify what they see as significant UNAOC failings. For Salt (2012, p. 209), the Alliance 'remain[s] a utopian ideal, chalking up small victories but having little or no effect on problems regarded as the most threatening to global peace and order'. Spielhaus argues that the UNAOC started from a major disadvantage 'when it comes to making concrete progress as it is shackled by its own terminology. The two sides'—that is, the West and the Muslim world—are 'often portrayed in simplistic terms'. Spielhaus claims that the UNAOC's main problem is that its 'binary' approach emphasises a bifurcated terminology: 'the West' and 'Islam'. While 'dialogue and direct communications between individuals are to be preferred to violent conflicts', Spielhaus noted, 'it remains questionable whether they will lead to solutions or further partitions if the terminology remains binary' (Spielhaus quoted in

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2　See the details of these initiatives at http://www.unaoc.org/.

Amies 2010). Bosold contends that UNAOC lacks fundamental ability to achieve its desired results because it is top-down focused and consequently lacks consistent connection with civil society:

> UN initiatives such as the AoC are only useful in terms of symbolic politics by creating a more open atmosphere for political discussions among political leaders . . . In order to achieve concrete results, AoC lacks at least three aspects: it is not able to connect with civil society in both the Islamic world and the West in order to bring significant parts (sic) from both sides into a permanent dialogue; it is elite-driven and not a grass roots-level endeavour, notwithstanding its pretension to achieve that very end. (Bosold quoted in Amies 2010)

For Bosold, the problem is made worse because the UNAOC does not have a clear or viable framework outside the UN. Finally, he suggests that having a role, even a key one, in the UN is no longer necessarily sufficient to be influential more generally. This is because today the UN is not as central to international relations as was envisaged seven decades ago, immediately following World War II: 'Since the Secretary Generals of the UN have increasingly lost the ability to set the international agenda, I don't see how this problem might be remedied when it comes to the AoC' (Bosold quoted in Amies 2010). Finally, Beittinger-Lee (2017, pp. 121–22) notes that the UNAOC is not a UN 'agency or body per se' but 'established under the auspices of the UN and funded by a Voluntary Trust Fund' (VRT), which makes it 'susceptible to criticism'. The VRT receives financial contributions from various state and non-state 'key partners', notably the luxury car maker, BMW, which cannot 'be identified even in the UNAOC's Annual reports'.

In sum, critics of the UNAOC claim that it is (1) 'utopian', unable to deal substantively with important issues threatening global peace and order (2) 'shackled' by its own—binary—terminology (3) a top-down initiative that does not connect well with civil society, in direct contrast to what the HLG recommended, and (4) it is not funded transparently.

*Specific UNAOC Initiatives Relating to Education*

The UNAOC has consistently focused on education, seeing it as crucial in the context of improving inter-cultural relations between the West and the Muslim world, especially after the trauma of 9/11. What educational methods did the UNAOC adopt to try to improve inter-cultural understandings between the West and the Muslim world? A general aim of the Alliance's activities was to seek to desecuritise Islam in global discourses and to help achieve this goal; the UNAOC regarded improved mutual understanding between the West and the Muslim world as crucial. Initially, the UNAOC adopted a research-based strategy to try to achieve this objective. Over time, however, the Alliance's focus shifted from a research-based approach to disseminating information about religions, cultures, global citizenship and education to one which concentrated on specific initiatives, typically in partnership with UN agencies, civil society or business (Interview with Jorge Sampaio, former High Representative of UNAOC). Changes in this regard can be traced to the differing leadership approaches of the UNAOC's successive High Representatives: Jorge Sampaio (2007–2013) and Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser (2013–2019) (Haynes 2018).

A research-based focus was clear among participants at the UNAOC's first Global Forum held in Madrid in January 2008. Those present expressed the strong desire that the UNAOC should found a 'clearinghouse'[3] on 'Education about Religion and Beliefs' (ERB). The aim was to establish and develop a focus on education about religion and beliefs which was seen as integral to the UNAOC's goal of educating school children and further- and higher-education students about civic and peace education, tolerance, ethics education, and global and cross-cultural education. The ERB was seen as a means to advance a key goal of the UNAOC: how to 'live together', especially in the context of some societies where there were signs of tensions and conflicts between some religious and cultural groups.

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3 A 'clearinghouse' is 'an agency or organisation which collects and distributes something, especially information'.

The ERB defined 'religion' and 'belief' according to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights' *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs* (2007). This publication takes a comprehensive view of 'religion' and 'belief', incorporating both 'traditional and long-established religions', 'less well known and less well understood systems of belief' and 'non-religious systems of belief', drawing on various UN Human Rights documents (pp. 30–31) (Interview with Kishan Manoche, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe). The overall aim of the ERB initiative was to establish a focus and context for the UNAOC where 'education about different religions and beliefs, and critically thinking about the nature of beliefs, enables populations to deal sensitively and tolerantly with the reality of today's globalized multicultural world where one will encounter people who believe in many different religions, or people who may not believe in any religion at all' (Overview of ERB 2018). What this entailed, essentially, was that the UNAOC would encourage education professionals to pool their knowledge under the auspices of the Alliance. Those interested in expanding the knowledge of their students—including teachers and lecturers in further and higher education—would then access the material and use it to help educate their students (Interview with Robert Jackson, emeritus professor of education and early contributor to the ERB clearinghouse).

The ERB clearinghouse focused on primary and secondary education about religions and beliefs. It featured 'material on civic education, tolerance education, ethics education, and other forms of education', aiming to be a useful resource for 'policy-makers, educators, and researchers in these fields'. It was envisaged that the ERB clearinghouse would 'work through a network of partner organizations that will include universities, other intergovernmental organizations, and civil society organizations. Partners will be drawn from different regions so that the materials in the clearing house are available in many languages and on different subjects.' Overall, the ERB clearinghouse would develop a 'research network of think tanks and universities to engage in research on political issues relevant to the objectives of the Alliance' (Overview of ERB 2018). The UNAOC's Global Forums and the ERB clearinghouse were 'intended to serve a catalytic function by convening groups or disseminating information that generate ideas and action in this way' ('AOC Implementation Plan, 2007–2009' 2009, p. 8) Results, however, were disappointing: In 2013, '[a] network of just 18 academic and civil society partners around the world exist[ed] to feed content to the site. Many of these are now dormant and do little work on the site, and only agreed to in the first place because of the perceived prestige of engaging with a UN project' ('United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Strategic Review and Plan, 2013–2018' 2013, p. 18, footnote 7).

Perusal of the ERB clearinghouse website indicates that there has been no work on the site since 2016. Many of the listed organisations allegedly supporting the initiative no longer exist, or at least the link provided to a putatively relevant website no longer works. The conclusion is that the ERB clearinghouse initiative is no longer actively encouraged or supported by the UNAOC.

The research-based educational strategy adopted by the UNAOC in its initial years was dependent upon the voluntary, unpaid actions of educational professionals who were however not easily able to influence either the strategy or the focus of the UNAOC's educational work (Interviews with Robert Jackson and Thomas Uthup). This does not necessarily mean that the UNAOC's method was 'wrong' in itself but it does imply both a lack of funding, necessary to put the strategy into full effect, and an inability to engage consistently the energies and expertise of sympathetic education professionals.

To pursue its goals, the UNAOC envisaged that there would be both regional and national plans which governments would establish and develop in relation to educational and other goals. However, despite relatively optimistic early signs, over time, these initiatives largely withered on the vine, primarily due to many state's reluctance to develop either national or regional plans in pursuit of the UNAOC's objectives. This lack of state engagement may be one of the reasons why the Alliance and the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) began in 2017 to collaborate in the development and launch of a web-based version of the long-established UNESCO Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers. The website is available in the six official

languages of the United Nations. It 'provides access to a multimedia teaching resources tool for educators and researchers on media and information literacy' (UNAOC Annual Activity Report 2017, p. 11; Interviews with Marie Roudil and Lily Valtchanova, UNESCO).

As well as such web-based initiatives, the UNAOC ran educational summer schools annually for six years from 2010. From the limited evidence available,[4] it would seem that many participants in the summer schools benefitted from their experiences. During 2010 and 2015, the UNAOC ran annual summer schools 'based on the conviction that youth are a driving force for positive social change and should receive adequate support to enrich their action'. During 2013–2015, the summer schools were run in New York State in partnership with EF Education First, a private international education company. Overall, the summer schools attracted nearly 500 young people from 119 countries who were to benefit from the opportunity 'to increase their understanding of other cultures and faiths, of the similarities that unite us despite our differences and to act for positive social change'. The participants received 'concrete, applicable tools for growing and sustaining their impact as activists, change-makers and leaders in their initiatives and organizations' (https://www.unaoc.org/what-we-do/projects/summer-schools/). One of the participants, Lynn Pinugu from the Philippines, expressed the following sentiment:

> The program provides young leaders a unique opportunity to deepen one's understanding of the different challenges that one encounters in promoting peace-building, while gaining access to a variety of possible solutions in order to overcome them. The discourse is further enriched by the diverse experience of the 74 other youth participants, who are also striving to make a system-wide change, in their chosen advocacy (https://www.lynnpinugu.com/).

Pinugu is co-founder and executive director of Mano Amiga Philippines. Founded in 2008, Mano Amiga Philippines, is 'a nonprofit organization providing high quality education and community development services to children and families from low-income communities' (https://www.lynnpinugu.com/). Pinugu attended the last of the UNAOC/EF Education First summer schools in 2015. Further (anonymous) supportive comments from attendees of the 2015 summer school are available to view at http://unaocefsummerschoolblog.tumblr.com/.

It is perhaps surprising that the EF Education First/UNAOC summer schools came to an end, especially as they appear to have been a successful means to expand inter-cultural knowledge among participants. An interview with Christopher McCormick, designer of the curriculum of the EF Education First/UNAOC Summer Schools, revealed that there were several reasons why the partnership between EF Education First and the UNAOC ended. First, the two partners differed fundamentally about who should attend the Summer Schools. EF Education First believed that participants from the age of 11 would benefit from the programme, whereas the UNAOC preferred to recruit those between 18–35 years, with an average age of attendees being 25 years. Second, the UNAOC was allegedly less than happy with EF Education First's 'entrepreneurial' approach and, according to McCormick, was relatively unhappy with 'public/private projects'. Third, many participants at Summer Schools expressed the view that regionally-focused programmes would be beneficial. The UNAOC responded by holding its first regionally-based education programme in West Africa in the autumn of 2016 which, according to Isabelle Tibi, the UNAOC's Project Management Specialist in Youth and Education, was a success and would be rolled out in other regional contexts (Interview with Isabelle Tibi).

The success of the 2016 pilot project in West Africa was followed in 2017 by an Alliance collaboration with a non-governmental organisation, Generations for Peace,[5] financially supported by

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4    There is only limited evidence, at least in part because the UNAOC does not make public the feedback from those attending its Special Projects, including Summer Schools.

5    'Generations for Peace is a Jordanian non-governmental organisation based in Amman dedicated to peacebuilding through sustainable conflict transformation at the grassroots'. (https://www.generationsforpeace.org/en/).

a Spanish agency, the Agencia Extremeña de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (AEXCID),[6] in an initiative, entitled: the 'Young Peacebuilders' programme with a focus on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The educational aim of the initiative was to support and seek to expand networks of young peacebuilders with the necessary capacities and strategies to 'address negative stereotypes, prejudice and polarization in order to build more inclusive and peaceful societies at the local, national and regional levels' (UNAOC Annual Activity Report 2017, p. 8). To do this, the programme sought to advance the competences of young people and youth organisations to develop capacity in relation to policymaking on local, national and regional peace and security issues while also aiming to bolster peacebuilding, promote cultural diversity and expand human rights. The programme stems from recommendations set out in a 'progress study on youth, peace and security' mandated by the UN Security Council in Resolution 2250 (2015) and in the Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism.

## 2. The UNAOC's Changing Strategy in Relation to Education in the Context of PVE/CVE

It is clear that the UNAOC's education initiatives were a mixed bag. On the one hand, the attempt to create, develop and expand a research-based 'clearinghouse' did not succeed. On the other hand, the bottom-up approach, which saw young people attending specific UNAOC educational events, such as the Summer Schools was, as far as can be ascertained, successful in building a like-minded network of inter-cultural entrepreneurs working to spread the idea of harmoniously living together.[7] It is a moot point however to what extent such initiatives can make much headway in a global context of growing polarisation between the West and the Muslim world.

The terrorist attack of 9/11 was directly responsible for the creation of the UNAOC. It was also the cause of growing polarisation between the Western and Muslim worlds. The response of the international community was to initiate a programme at the UN, known as Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE). The initiative started after the September 11 attacks in the United States, as the international community became increasingly aware of the need to combat terrorism. This emerged in 2006 through the adoption by the UN General Assembly of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. The Strategy was based on four pillars: (1) tackling conditions conducive to terrorism; (2) preventing and combating terrorism; (3) building countries' capacity to combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the United Nations system in that regard; and (4) ensuring respect for human rights for all and the rule of law while countering terrorism.

While policies to combat terrorism emerged as a reaction to acts of extreme violence, they were mainly repressive in nature. Conducted in the name of national security, they largely overlooked pillars (1) and (4) of the strategy. Perhaps best exemplified by the US-led 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT), this security-based approach seems to have comprehensively failed, if judged by the number of deaths from violent extremism (VE) and terrorism across the globe, which increased nearly 10-fold between 2000 and 2014, rising from 3329 to 32,685. This prompted the international community to shift the focus to preventing terrorism rather than countering it. In 2014, UN Security Council Resolution 2178 advocated countering violent extremism (CVE) as a mean to prevent terrorism. In this climate it is hardly surprising that UN initiatives to build trust between cultures, including those led by the UNAOC, struggled to make headway.

According to Buzan and Waever (2009, p. 65), the GWOT 'trie[d] to embrace in its self-understanding 99.9 per cent of the global population: all civilised or wanting-to-be-civilised people (all but the terrorists themselves). An important element of this is that the GWoT ha[d] strong elements of existing order universalism—all states against non-state terrorists, order against chaos—mixed

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6　AEXCID is a local government agency based in Mérida, Spain.
7　The UNAOC does not make available feedback from participants of the Summer Schools, nor does it have in place robust monitoring and evaluation of its initiatives. The only form of monitoring and evaluation which the Alliance undertakes is in its annual and periodic overviews of its activities. These are available at the UNAOC website (https://www.unaoc.org/).

with a US-centred inclusive universalism'. Yet, the issue of how successfully to encourage 'moderate' Islam was not resolved. Muslims are now regarded by some Western governments and citizens as an existential threat to their security and stability (Bosco 2014; Cesari 2016; Eroukhmanoff 2017).

Didier Bigo suggests the notion of a 'security continuum' to understand what is happening. On the one hand, a feeling of general insecurity develops—or is created—at a time 'where distinctions like internal/external security, police/military etc. are fading'. A result is that widespread 'fears of crime, foreigners, unemployment, drugs, terrorism and war are connected and repeatedly listed together in official documents, without any overarching justification for this classification' (Bigo quoted in Buzan and Waever 2009, p. 267).

The global conversation in the two decades since 9/11 focusing on securitising Islam has been much larger and arguably more effective than the capacity of initiatives, such as those of the UNAOC and UNESCO, to desecuritise Islam (Interviews with Hilary Weisner and Jorge Sampaio). Over the last 15 years, the UNAOC has sought to play a leading role both at the UN and in the wider international community in relation to inter-cultural dialogue. Yet, during this period, the focus of the UN has shifted from seeking to improve Western/Muslim relations to expressing sustained concern with Islamist terrorism and extremism and how to prevent and combat them (Interviews with Western diplomats at the UN 2017). Reflecting this shift, the Alliance has recently refocused its educational initiatives to focus on preventing/countering violent extremism (PVE/CVE). This is exemplified in the most recent annual UNAOC report covering 2017, which indicates that the Alliance has moved into PVE/CVE in its educational initiatives. The Alliance has long emphasised a link between improved education of the young and the prevention of violent extremism. During 2017, the Alliance took a leading role in various related events. In February, for example, the UNAOC and the United Nations Academic Impact[8] co-organised a round table discussion at UN headquarters in New York on the theme 'Media and information literacy: educational strategies for the prevention of violent extremism'. The aim of the event was to identify ways that enhanced media and information literacy could be utilised to help 'deliver a long-term strategy for promoting a culture of peace and understanding among individuals from different cultural and religious backgrounds' (UNAOC Annual Activity Report 2017, p. 7). In March, following a request from UNESCO, the Alliance participated in a round table discussion on 'Preventing violent extremism through universal values in curriculum'. The discussions focused on the personal and professional experiences of leading scholars in the field and their substantial contributions to inclusion, peace education and human rights in various contexts worldwide. Like the February event, the aim was to stimulate wide-ranging discussion on how best to help prevent—or at least diminish—violent extremism by means of formal and non-formal educational activities.

In 2017, the UNAOC's then High Representative, Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, was appointed a member of the UN Secretary-General's 'high-level action group on the prevention of violent extremism'. At a meeting of the group in December, Al-Nasser enumerated Alliance projects designed to support grassroots efforts by young people to prevent violent extremism, including the regional inter-cultural events discussed earlier (Interview with Thibault Chareton, UNAOC Project Management Specialist, Media and Migration). In the same year, the Alliance was a member of an advisory board which reviewed and edited a comprehensive, 300-page 'Youth-led guide on prevention of violent extremism through education' produced by the UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development in New Delhi (http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002605/260547e.pdf). The Guide includes 'testimonies and experiences of more than 150 youth from over 58 countries across the globe, including Alliance programme alumni'. In addition, the volume sets out 'guidelines and recommendations for teachers, school administrators, policymakers,

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8    'The United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) is an initiative that aligns institutions of higher education with the United Nations in supporting and contributing to the realization of United Nations goals and mandates, including the promotion and protection of human rights, access to education, sustainability and conflict resolution'. In 2019, more than 1400 universities worldwide were members of the UNAI (https://academicimpact.un.org/content/about-unai).

youth and other stakeholders with the overall aim of preventing violent extremism among youth' (UNAOC Annual Activity Report 2017, p. 7).

During 2017, in line with the aim of the new UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, to 'streamline' UN Secretariat activities, the Alliance worked to 'mainstream' its work, including its educational activities, into UN Headquarters structures. Many of the more than 60 interviews undertaken by the author since 2015 in relation to the UNAOC's activities and achievements highlight how marginalised the Alliance has become within the UN, highlighting a subsequent need to work more closely with a variety of partners at the UN. Increasingly, the UNAOC seeks to develop joint or mutually reinforcing capacity-building programmes and projects with other United Nations entities in accordance with their comparative advantages and respective mandates. In furtherance of this goal, a new UNAOC High Representative, Miguel Angel Moratinos Cuyaube of Spain,[9] took office on 1 January 2019. It is likely that Moratinos will encourage the Alliance to work in greater cooperation and collaboration with other United Nations system entities.

## 3. Conclusions

Critics of the UNAOC have identified alleged failings of the Alliance. It is said to be (1) 'utopian', unable to deal substantively with important issues threatening global peace and order (2) 'shackled' by its own—binary—terminology, that is, the West/Muslim world (3) a top-down initiative that does not connect well with civil society, and (4) not funded transparently.

Fifteen years after its founding, what overall conclusions can be drawn regarding the Alliance and its objective of enhanced education to improve inter-cultural relations between the West and the Muslim world? To what extent are critics' allegations valid and justified? The UNAOC's most recent 'Strategic Review', covering 2013–2018, restates the Alliance's commitment to its four fundamental 'pillars': Education, Youth, Migration, and Media. The Review also declares the UNAOC's intention to work closely in its educational activities on 'conflict prevention' via enhanced inter-cultural understandings, especially among the young ('United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Strategic Review and Plan, 2013–2018' 2013, p. 16).

In relation to education, the Alliance's 2013–2018 Strategic Review discusses creation of a database of 'best practices and lessons', the publication of 'more analytical reports or case studies', and the intention of making the Alliance more 'field-driven' through work undertaken with other UN agencies, such as the United Nations Development Programme and UNESCO, as well as partner NGOs (Interview with Marie Roudil, UNESCO). The Review also indicates that the Alliance would seek to improve its efforts to develop and deepen relations with its Group of Friends, as well as private foundations, the private sector, and significant development agencies ('United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Strategic Review and Plan, 2013–2018' 2013, p. 13). In the context of the critiques noted above, the aspirations of the Alliance expressed in the 2013–2018 Review suggest that the UNAOC is aware that its activities should be grounded in 'real world' issues, problems and solutions, and work closely with civil society. Regarding its terminology, the UNAOC is part of a UN system which since 9/11 has identified the issues of violent extremism and terrorism largely in the context of relations between the West and the Muslim world and this terminology is now so established and embedded in the UN culture that it is very difficult to see what the UNAOC could do alone to change things in this regard. Finally, the lack of transparency in funding of the UNAOC could easily be addressed if the Alliance and its Group of Friends—the key funding mechanism of the UNAOC—agreed to publish full funding details. So far, however, this has not occurred (Haynes 2018, pp. 80–89).

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[9]  Moratinos was Spain's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation from 2004–2010 and has had various senior UN roles, including presidency of the Security Council, as well as chairmanships-in-office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe and the Council of the European Union (http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-11/21/c_137620394.htm).

Since its inception, the Alliance has sought to be an important 'soft' power tool, different from the 'hard' power of military and economic clout, working to find common inter-civilisational ground against violent extremism and terrorism and develop an enhanced sense of global citizenship, that is, a sense of belonging to a broader community and common humanity. The Alliance has developed various educational programmes, including the Summer Schools and their regional successors, which, according to the limited evidence available, have been successful in helping develop a sense of global citizenship among the hundreds of young people who have taken part in the programmes over the years.

The UNAOC has been slow systematically to develop in partnership with cognate UN agencies, such as UNESCO, although there are signs that in recent times the Alliance and UNESCO are becoming more closely aligned in their aspirations and goals. The fact remains however that the Alliance, as well as UNESCO and other UN agencies, are working in conditions which are increasingly unconducive to closer inter-cultural and inter-faith relations between the West and the Muslim world. As noted earlier, in 2014, more than 32,000 people died as a result of violent extremism and terrorism. Even if there *is* a centre ground where 'representatives' from the Christian and Muslim worlds can agree on the way forward, is this going to be enough to undermine the often-murderous activities of the hard men and women of, *inter alia*, al Qaeda, Islamic State, Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab? The difficult task that the UNAOC is trying to pull off in its educational activities is to establish, develop and consolidate a common set of values, truths and beliefs based on the UN Charter of Human Rights, reflected in the notion of global citizenship, as a basis for shared inter-cultural understandings of the world and a template for what is appropriate and what is simply wrong.

Finally, the aim of the Alliance—to enhance the lives of those on the sharp end of inter-cultural enmity, extremism and terrorism—is to be achieved by stakeholders working closely and flexibly together pursuing consensual goals in the context of enhanced global governance. The 2017 UNAOC annual activity report indicates that the Alliance is now seeking to work more closely with a variety of partners both within and without the UN, a process to be encouraged by the Alliance's new High Representative, supported by UN Secretary General Guterres.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Interviews**

Interview with Karen Armstrong. Member of High-level Group. London, 27 October 2015.

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