



## **Speech by Mr Jacques CHIRAC, President of the French Republic, at the inaugural Session of the Cultural Workshop Europe - Mediterranean - Gulf States.**

[Arabic translation available here \(PDF\)](#)

Elysée Palace, Paris, Wednesday 13 september 2006.

Your Highnesses,  
Madam President,  
Mr Deputy Prime Minister,  
Chief Rabbi,  
Ministers,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the summit in Barcelona, I suggested that creative people, intellectuals and decision-makers from either side of the Mediterranean and from the Gulf States should come together to discuss the "dialogue among civilisations". I am therefore most happy to be here with you today to inaugurate this Cultural Workshop.

Why this initiative? Because we are threatened by a growing-apart of our cultures. The West versus Islam, secular versus religious values, North versus South: there is a risk the various rifts in our world will deepen and possibly link up, with consequences we can all only dread.

Since 11 September 2001, exactly five years ago, fear and a lack of understanding have triggered passionate reactions - as evidenced by the unjustifiable attitudes brought about by appalling terrorist attacks, and more recently the emotions and the violence of the reactions caused by the publication of the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed.

This rising wave of non-understanding, of intolerance and resentment is having a particular impact on our shared living space. Marked by a wide diversity of backgrounds, religions and societies, it has become the theatre for conflicts whose violence was recently once again demonstrated, in particularly dramatic fashion, in Lebanon.

The Mediterranean, at the crossroads of so many peoples, cultures and nations, the cradle of the Bible-based religions and of western civilisation, the source of the values of freedom and human dignity might have seemed an obvious area of solidarity. Indeed, there was a time when our cultures were connected. Averroes revered Aristotle, of whom he said he was "sent by God to proclaim the truth",



and Saint Thomas Aquinas saw in this universal genius of Arab science the "commentator" par excellence on the Graeco-Roman heritage. But our histories followed very different paths. Long years of confrontation, the Islamic conquest, the Crusades, and colonialism resulted in deep divisions. And thus, despite their common origins and innumerable links, the Mediterranean area is a juxtaposition of worlds that are closed to one another. We differ in everything that makes up an identity, our lifestyles, our beliefs, the ways our social and legal systems are organised, our political models.

The dramas of the 20th century further aggravated the misunderstandings, the feelings of resentment. The conflicts in the Middle East, which are all growing stronger and becoming linked up, not only affect our shared living space but are now at the centre of the instability in today's world. Their destabilising influence pervades the entire planet, as evidenced by the cruel lessons of terrorism. They nourish a sense of injustice, the belief that identities are disregarded, that the universal values are applied inequitably and may be used as a pretext to deny cultural diversity.

The situation, today, has become urgent. We must dispel the stereotypes, the fears and bad memories and learn at last to look each other in the face, to rise above our differences and set about building our shared future.

That was one of the objectives of the Barcelona Partnership, but culture has remained a poor relation. If we want to see the Mediterranean countries and the Gulf linking up politically, becoming an area of solidarity, and to avert the threat of a conflict resulting from nothing more than ignorance, stupidity and arrogance, we must find the means to restore dialogue between the different peoples.

Swift and vigorous action is required. Action on the political and diplomatic fronts, in the interests of peace. Action by means of a dialogue between different societies and cultures. These two lines of action, the political and the cultural, the handling of crises and the dialogue among cultures, must be pursued in parallel.

Regional crises weigh heavily on the world's conscience. But I would state once again: issues will never be resolved unilaterally, by the use of force. People are resistant to imposed solutions, which fuel resentments and carry the seeds of future conflicts. Only negotiated political settlements, worked out together by all parties concerned and benefiting from the support and backing of the international community, can bring about lasting solutions. People must be provided with greater security, but also justice and solidarity, these belong together.

This applies first and foremost to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, at the heart of the sense of frustration so profoundly felt by the Arab and Muslim world. Peace between Israelis and Palestinians involves two States living side by side within viable borders that are recognised and internationally guaranteed. It also applies in the case of the rifts in Iraq and Lebanon, and



to the tensions in the Gulf.

Force will solve nothing. Nor will cartoons or exclusion defuse tensions. The demonisation of the West, on the one hand, the harbouring of suspicions vis-à-vis Islam, on the other, represented as being resistant to modernity: these are dangerous stereotypes against which joint efforts must be deployed. The crusading spirit, based on ignorance, and militant proselytizing inspired by a totalitarian vision of humanity are things we must oppose with a spirit of dialogue based on knowledge, tolerance and a desire for openness.

This dialogue is something we must undertake as partners, respectful of what we are, aware that we belong to worlds that are different but of equal dignity, that have much to learn from one another and must cooperate as they face up to common challenges. No single people has a monopoly of the universal, but let us not forget that, looking beyond our differences, we share a common destiny.

Because we are all part of humanity, we respect universal values, the infringement of which can never be justified by any cultural exception. The roots of humanism are deeply established in the soil of the three Bible-based religions, all of which extol the dignity of Man. But while such values are absolute, the way they are experienced reveals the differences that express our identities.

If we wish to work together, then we must base ourselves on this cultural, social and religious diversity. Not all societies move forward at the same pace. Each must work towards achieving democracy and respect for human rights, but by following a path in keeping with the spirit of its people. Foreign models may offer a huge source of inspiration, comfort and support in the effort to enhance human dignity, but foreign interference or injunctions can only weaken and impair the causes they purport to serve.

Your conference is very much in line with the spirit of the work carried out under the aegis of the Secretary-General of the UN with the Alliance of civilisations advocated by the Prime Ministers Zapatero and Erdogan. It is the starting point for a discussion process extending over a period of months that will take you from Paris to Seville and Alexandria.

It is for you to help us to better know and understand one another, and to better cooperate when facing common challenges.

Your Workshop will also be aiming to develop projects capable of being implemented by States, regional and international bodies, the cultural and audiovisual operators and the various agents of social change. Some have already emerged in the course of your preparatory discussions. I'm thinking of the idea of historians looking at the way history is taught, and at the textbooks, for example, and the planned co-production of images broadcast by the major television operators in the North and the South.



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I would suggest three other possibilities: cooperation in the area of the codification and reform of legislation; a Mediterranean Erasmus programme to bring together our young people - possible drawing inspiration from the figure of Averroes; and a charter for dialogue among cultures which could lay down the ground rules regarding how we can all live together in the era of globalisation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The challenge facing your Workshop is nothing less than to restore the confidence of a world threatened by fear and hatred. Given that the Mediterranean area has become the focal point for the lack of understanding between peoples, it is to this same region that we look to bring forth the promise of a world in which, with a new self-confidence, everyone will be better able to accept the appearance and the voice of difference.

Thank you.

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