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Talking Points:

Political Leadership for Religious Coexistence and Shared Democratic Development

Why do we want to – indeed need to – talk about political leadership and religious coexistence?

First, because we need political leadership for religious coexistence.

Religious leaders cannot do it alone. As we know, some religious leaders do not promote coexistence at all – but incite mistrust and hatred based on different religious beliefs. Fortunately, most religious leaders preach tolerance, understanding, and coexistence, based on love for fellow human beings, whatever their differences in backgrounds and beliefs.

Political leaders are perhaps more often guilty of playing identity politics for political gains, or for fear of losing their base if they appear to want to improve the lives of those living outside or on the margins of that base. But political leaders have the capacity, in fact the obligation, to lead and to use their office and the institutions of policy and governance to make difficult

choices in order to try and lift all boats. It has been said that leadership is not so much exerting power as it is convincing one's followers to accept loss.

Without social cohesion, a nation is lost. And with globalization and migration making our nations more and more diverse, including religiously diverse, then one could say that without religious co-existence, a nation cannot have social cohesion, and therefore is lost.

Development of effective political leadership strategies for social cohesion, a starting point for the democratic development of societies and nations, is the focus of a major Club of Madrid effort over the next two years. The proposed project – **Managing Diversity and Dialogue for Shared Societies and Democratic Development: Effective Political Leadership Strategies for Social Cohesion** – comes in response to a widespread call from leaders for effective policies and practices that will improve social inclusion and increase community dialogue.

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Averting cultural conflict in and among nations and communities is an urgent priority for many cities and nations. The program is designed in the belief that societies are most likely to be peaceful, democratic and prosperous when leaders and citizens recognize the value of diversity and actively develop means to work together to build a shared society based on a set of shared goals and common values.

Cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity within the borders of any nation can be forged into communal interdependence and a shared society or manipulated into inter-communal conflict and destruction. Which path a society chooses is determined in large measure by the political, military, religious, economic, and professional leaders within each country. Leaders must be engaged in a dialogue about their role in building and sustaining societies that embrace coexistence.

The issue of a nation's accommodation of diversity is not a topic of minor consequence. How nations, individually and collectively, approach the issues of social cohesion and cultural diversity will have implications for political and economic development, human security, social stability, and peace throughout the 21st Century and beyond.

More than ninety percent of all nations in existence today have a minority population of at least ten percent. Many minorities are religious minorities. In any one of these countries, the failure to proactively and positively manage diversity has the potential to produce tangible negative consequences:

- The mismanagement – or outright manipulation – of diversity can play a significant role in the development and escalation of violent conflict.

- Failure to address issues of inequality and intolerance, and to create a sense of shared citizenship, can undermine a nation's economic well-being.
- The failure to recognize and harness the potential strength in diversity can inhibit a country's ability to create credible, effective, sustainable governing institutions that are deemed to be representative of, and responsive to, all citizens – a condition essential to a nation's stability and development.
- The failure of leaders to convince different groups within a society that inclusiveness is a positive social value may seriously inhibit a country's ability to reap the shared benefits of a socially inclusive society, such as overall economic growth, effective social networks, and a more stable and peaceful society.

The most direct threats to a national framework for coexistence and social cohesion are not inter-personal but institutional: the exclusion of groups from the economic life of a country; the proscription of cultural expressions of minorities such as customs or language; inequalities and inequitable treatment related to identity; or the lack of representation or participation of minorities at all levels of governance and in the social networks that are essential to the shared ownership of a national project for development.

Democracy is a political system by which we have learned to process the differences, and it implies a collection of rules that we all accept. Democracy, of course, is something we apply within our societies, where there is diversity and different values, culturally speaking.

When we speak of East-West or North-South encounters, when we speak of dialogue, of diversity and democracy, we are speaking of the difficulties in today's world, particularly after September 11, 2001, and of the dialogue through which different civilizations and cultures can understand each other.

Sometimes we give the impression that we have gone backwards to what you, here in Europe, left behind following the Treaty of Westphalia, back in 1650, which put an end to too many years of religious war.

How, then, do we conduct a dialogue, if we do not accept, firstly, that there is no culture, religion, or civilization which can dictate to others certain values as if they are the only valid ones. Because from that moment, we human beings begin to confront one another. Or we ask ourselves how to process diversity—what are the limits, when do we say "no" to so much diversity?

I believe that humanity, at the end of the 20th century—the short century, according to some outstanding historians, which began with World War I and ended with the fall of the Berlin wall; the century in which in the name of certain values there arose their antithesis—has learned to distrust those absolutist paradigms which have an answer to everything.

Why am I saying this? Because I believe that when we say dialogue, diversity, and democracy, what are we saying? We are saying that we want to build a conceptual framework to be able to share common values and experiences in very different environments, and that requires discussion.

Today, in the 21st century, nobody says, "I am against democracy." We can discuss what we understand about democracy, but nobody says, "I am against it." Nobody says they are against transparency. We all understand that we have to have a set of rules, called Rule of Law, and we all understand that the starting point of everything is the human being.

It is because we respect human beings, that there are human rights, and we can speak of first generation, second generation, and third generation rights.

There are human rights and nobody should be against them. If that is so, then dialogue, an encounter, needs to be about how we define them. If we decide this on religious terms, I would be very surprised if somebody told me

that there is a religion that does not put the human being at the centre of their concerns. And from that, we have a very clear point of encounter.

I believe that, yes, there is a dialogue that, more than about diversity and democracy, serves us to process the diversities and the democratic conceptions. In that dialogue recently, however, we have unfortunately gone back more than we have advanced.

We have lost ground because we tend to take positions that, in my judgement, have not kept up with the times. How can a congress vote on whether or not it can recognize the Holocaust? The Holocaust existed; it is a fact of history. I commend Pres. Khatami for publicly recognizing yesterday that the Holocaust – not for his courage, but for his common sense. The world – and most Iranians – will welcome this sensibility and he and those like him will be rewarded in time.

I believe that what we have to do is try to understand what it is that presents problems. Does it present problems? Then it presents problems. In a debate about the veil, as there are in so many places, you said: Is it an expression of religion or it is more profound, an expression of a sense of culture? And, how do we reconcile these? To me, it seems that we are in the position to approach each other, because with the same force that you can

say, "no to the veil," others are going to say to you, "Yes, and you want to impose your viewpoint on me."

The progress that we have made in these years has not kept up with the times. That is why we are having this debate, to say how we are capable of advancing.

At the Club of Madrid, we have brought up the possibility of having a dialogue of this nature in different places of the world, with the advantage of meeting those that at some time directed their countries. We unite the advantages of having experience with the freedom that we are not leaders in office now. But I believe that the action must happen quickly, because each day that passes, the dialogue becomes more deaf.

I thank all of you for being here; Prime Minister Bondevik for hosting us and bringing us to the table; President Khatami, for his efforts on Dialogue among Civilizations and for working with us on this critical issue. I look forward to interesting and, I hope, useful conversations today.

Thank you very much.