

13 June 2012

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser,
President of the 66th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Lecture on “How Universal are Universal Values?”**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am deeply moved to be here today in this House of Wisdom, Bait el Hikma, the symbol of the greatness of Islamic civilization. It calls to mind that remarkable moment of culture and science under Harun al-Rashid and after him, his son al-Ma'mun. What a great symbol!

I am deeply moved to have the honour to address you, the sons and daughters of Tunisia, its best and brightest, you who gave the world a new and powerful model of human dignity and justice.

I was deeply moved to set foot on Tunisian soil. At the start of this century, Tunisia has provided a compelling paradigm for individuals, societies, and nations to look up to as they strive towards universal values, freedom, democracy, openness, tolerance and reason.

It is no wonder that it all started here. Three thousand years ago, Carthage — where we meet today — was the superpower that maintained kept peace and security as it faced the other superpower, Rome. In their strategic competition, the Mediterranean region and the world knew prosperity and cultural brilliance, paving the way for human progress on the long journey that led us to where we are today.

In that context, I believe the Alliance of Civilizations has an extremely important role to play on the international arena. It should be used to foster dialogue and to bring different cultures closer together, encouraging them to live together in order to preserving international peace and security. I am proud of the role played by my own country, Qatar, in supporting the Alliance and its goals. I have taken up the task of applying and promoting that strategic policy at the United Nations through my work as Permanent Representative of Qatar. It should therefore come as no surprise that the Alliance of Civilizations and its role in peaceful conflict mediation is at the forefront of my priorities as President of the General Assembly.

After finally defeating Carthage, Rome inherited this land. For six centuries, it shaped the history of Tunisia, what was then called “Africa”. It shaped every aspect of civilization— the economy, culture, urban life, and more. Music, philosophy, literature and architecture all bear witness to the creative flourishing of that great age. That period was another step on humanity’s journey towards refinement, the rule of law and life according to the dictates of reason.

The Arabs and Islam found in Tunisia an established, vibrant legacy. After several centuries, that legacy had become the basis for Tunisian spirit – the spirit of openness to the world; a capacity to

absorb newcomers and best that they can offer in order to organize life and society; a philosophy of live-and-let-live; and the rejection of violence.

In more recent times, and after historical turbulence in which the Tunisian state lost its autonomy, the Tunisians impressed the world by reviving the State and reconciling Tunisia's past with modernity, as shaped particularly by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

Only those who do not know the history of your country could fail to recognize the protesters who brought an end to the previous regime, giving the world the "Jasmine Revolution", which would later be known as the Arab Spring. The protesters were the educated sons and daughters of the large middle class, built over decades under the historic leadership of those who liberated Tunisia from colonialism. Tunisian identity was shaped by this specific history.

The protesters' demands reflected the very essence of this history. They yearned for dignity, justice, freedom of expression and thought, the reaffirmation of the gender equality gained under Bourguiba, and the rule of law. That aspiration has become a cry of protest for revolutionaries the world over, who are taking their destiny into their own hands, in the Arab world and beyond, from Libya to Egypt, Yemen and Syria; from Wall Street to Red Square; and who knows where else tomorrow.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These are the universal values for which the United Nations stands. They are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They are the noble values that made possible the phase of universal civilization that we are blessed with today. These are the values that bridge our differences and bring us together in one human community.

While there is no one balance that suits everyone, universality is, as a matter of principle, the indispensable goal in order to strengthen the values of human rights, freedom, justice, equality and freedom of expression. These are freedoms that our culture and values have promoted and honoured.

I should like to reaffirm here what I said at New York University, at Oxford University, at Moscow State University:

Who could argue anything for other than unequivocal equality and dignity for all? For anything other than the full freedom of expression, regardless of particularities of place and moment? I could go on.

Francis Fukuyama put it remarkably, in famous if often misunderstood terms, speaking of "the end of history". What Fukuyama argued powerfully was that liberal democracy and its values are the endpoint of humanity's socio-cultural evolution; that in liberal democracy we have reached the ultimate form of organizing social life, of articulating the social contract. Of course, I concede that there are particularities in given societies; but it is possible always to strive constructively towards the utmost level of universality.

That is true, regardless of any shortcomings. It is not because a value is not fully realized that it is not universal. The journey of humanity moves endlessly towards the universality articulated by Emmanuel Kant, who dreamt of perpetual peace.

After disaster of World War I, when President Wilson was considering the future of humanity, Kant's essay was one of the works on which he relied most of all. These works infused the spirit of the treaty that gave birth to the League of Nations and charted a new course for humanity.

Born after the tragedy of World War II, the Charter of the United Nations took up this challenge again, striving to bring us ever closer in our quest for universal values.

The United Nations is the place where the quest for universality is a tangible everyday experience. It is the place where governments are held to account to uphold universal human rights. The call for justice, dignity, freedom of expression and the fulfilment of all human rights is an everyday business for the United Nations – and I can tell you this without hesitation, from my perspective as President of the General Assembly. It is a difficult road that we still pursue today, even after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Indeed, the General Assembly of the United Nations is but the most recent expression of this long, demanding, yet exciting human journey to build a community of nations and to achieve Kant's dream of "perpetual peace" based on the achievement of universal human rights.

This is no small task. Those who think of the United Nations as lacking in action should understand that the mission to bring together 193 nations is neither easy nor simple.

Because universality is not a given. 193 countries implies 193 governments, 193 national economies. And how many cultures! And how many historical experiences! And how many national interests!

Yet this is our business everyday, and the goal does not change. We strive to achieve only one objective: universality.

Are we there yet? It would be both foolish and insincere for scholars and diplomats alike to ignore our collective failure.

Failure? Yes, today, in the Middle East, Africa, and other corners of our small world.

Yes, yesterday, in Rwanda and Bosnia.

I am a witness to our world's continuous tragedies.

This is for me a daily lesson of humility and lucid acknowledgment of the challenges on the road ahead.

But it is also a lesson of hope.

My presence here among you in Tunisia, the land that gave the world the Arab Spring, is a testimony to the power of hope over despair. Before Mohamed Bouazizi sacrificed his young life for dignity and justice, who could have imagined that his tragedy would liberate the dormant forces that soon blossomed in the Arab Spring? This could only have happened in Tunisia because, as I attempted to explain earlier, your people after so many centuries of culture and achievements, were ready to carry the flame for universality. The historic change that was triggered by Bouazizi's tragedy occurred in the name of the universal values of Kant, in the name of the age of the Enlightenment, in the name of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It occurred in the name of freedom of expression, freedom of thought, gender equality, human dignity, the rule of law and democracy.

The Arab Spring — or, better still, the Arab awakening — is, in short, another step on the road to universality. Cultural relativism cannot smother democracy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is a profound moment in the history of the Arab world: a moment that was born in Tunisia, but whose roots go back to the oldest times of humanity. From Averroes to Plato and beyond, we can trace the desire of humankind for universal values. Everything that came before has led to this moment: the moment in which the people of the Arab region, the people of the world, united in choosing democracy, peace, dignity and universal values.

As we stand at this crossroads, where the only true path is towards liberal democracy, universal values and perpetual peace, let me say that as an Arab, I am of course proud of the achievements and civilization of our peoples — achievements in philosophy, science, medicine, arts and in all the other aspects of civilization.

However, I have to be frank with you.

Today, the Arab world is largely absent from the forces moving humanity in science, technology, the arts, music, literature, and other creative endeavours.

The United Nations human development reports bear witness to this bitter truth.

With very few exceptions, the current landscape does not give cause for optimism.

As I recently said at Moscow State University, the region would once again excel if, every year in the future, it could claim its Nobel prizes in chemistry, in physics, in medicine, in literature, in economics.

We need to develop ourselves and our capacities. We need to present ourselves and our civilization to the world, for we have wonderful potential.

Let me tell you about something I did a few days ago in New York to develop our civilization. Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to say that out of pride in our Arab culture and heritage, and with support from the State of Qatar, I organized an Arab musical heritage evening, a fine musical display that was held in the General Assembly hall to great acclaim. The audience, including representatives of States, civil society institutions and academics, were able to experience the way Oriental music can build bridges with others. That beautiful music is not far removed from Tunisia: it was influenced by the history of this region, its rich heritage and beautiful art.

Arabs would once again excel if their highly qualified sons and daughters, who today contribute, as expatriates, to the development of science and technology in Silicon Valley, to the brilliance of literature and fashion in Paris and London, could find themselves comfortable in the political and social environments of their home countries, in which they would reclaim the status of the region as an “ornament of the world”, the way it was in times past, to use the expression of Maria Rosa Menocal.

This is possible today, with the dawn of democracy, with the opportunities before us.

The premises of democratization, openness, transparency, the rule of law and universal values are there to give the region a chance to join the movement of history, to be part of the global village and the modern world, and to contribute to global progress, by providing not only energy resources, but also universally-acclaimed intellectual outputs.

The region can once again excel by reaffirming universal values and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The region can once again excel when freedom of thought, expression, academic research, information, religion and conscience, and full gender quality, are the absolute principle upheld by all constitutions and government structures, and are adopted by civil society as a culture.

Before closing, let me take a moment to imagine what the Arab world will look like 15 years from now, when my six year-old son will be an active citizen.

If all goes well,

If Palestinians and Israelis live in a just peace, in two States recognized by the world community and integrated into the region;

If the Middle East finally becomes a zone free from nuclear weapons;

If solid democratic institutions are built to sustain and manage the normal political life of a peaceful, participatory democracy;

If investment in modern education and culture comes to the forefront of national priorities;

If the Arab world pools its enormous natural resources and its efforts, and puts them in the service of collective regional development and modernization;

If openness, tolerance, transparency, the rule of law, justice and freedom of thought, information and expression – all the fundamental freedoms that I stressed earlier – become embedded in the civic culture;

If all these challenging, yet possible outcomes are realized;

Then I can see an Arab world reconciled with itself and with modernity.

I can see an Arab world becoming the land in which civilization blossoms again and offers the world that which only this great region offered throughout history: a combination of a life of dignity and spiritual elevation; a new modernity, aligning the material and the spiritual.

I can see all of this happening. This is the path that Harun al-Rashid and al-Ma'mun, through Bait el Hikma, charted for us. This is what we can achieve in our own time.

Thank you.