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**Statement of H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser,
President of the 66th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Lecture at the University of Oxford “Global Challenges and the
Role of the UN at the Dawn of the 21st Century”**

Mr. Director
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen

I am most appreciative of the great honour bestowed upon me, to address you as Distinguished Visiting Lecturer here at the University of Oxford, with the support of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies.

Let me start by extending my sincere gratitude to Dr. Farhan Nizami, Director of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. Dr. Nizami is not only a distinguished scholar, but he is an eminent cultural entrepreneur, as the founder of this prestigious Centre. Thanks to his unrelenting efforts, Oxford University and its community will be able to enjoy the magnificent building that will soon house the Center. This building will truly be a jewel in Oxford's already-beautiful crown.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The University of Oxford is a beacon of wisdom and forward-looking thought. The University plays a leading role in the constellation of international educational institutions. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to make a small contribution to your intellectual debate.

At any given period in history, we can point to enclaves of poverty – be they small or large. To territories in conflict – be they local or regional. To inequality of various degrees.

This is to say, injustice and inequity are not new. They have been part of humankind's journey since the dawn of time.

You would, however, agree with me that there are very few periods in the world's history during which there was as much conflict and tension. As many competing aspirations, with their resulting instability. As much conspicuous consumption and inequality. In a few words- as much dysfunction as there is in the global world of today.

What also makes today truly unique is that we are no longer concerned just by our family, just by our village, or just by our nation State. In this deeply interconnected planet, what concerns one concerns all. The challenges belonging to one group belongs to us all.

The question then is: how to adapt our lives so that we - and our planet - do not breakdown from these new, never-before-seen burdens?

How to ease the backlash of shifting tectonic plates, tsunamis, drought, and the impact they leave on our minds and souls, as we watch them endlessly on the television set, on the computer screen, everywhere we look?

How to ensure that these heightened perceptions do not create tensions and conflicts?

How to teach our children to love - not fear. To hope - not despair. To show compassion - not scorn. To be generous - not selfish.

The question then is: how to live and to think of ourselves as one human community with one shared destiny, living on one planet blessed with rich yet limited resources.

As individuals, families, communities, administrations and Heads of State - as we all grapple with these difficult issues - the United Nations offers us a focus of hope. The organization offers an opportunity for all nations to come together to seek common solutions to common problems.

By its Charter, the UN is a forum whose purpose is [and I quote]:

“To unite our strength to maintain international peace and security”

and [to quote again]:

“To practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours”. [End quote].

These are apt words for a world where we are now all neighbours. Where we all face shared, extraordinary challenges.

In my lecture, I will focus on the four main areas of global challenge as I see them: economic, political, cultural, and communications and technology. I will discuss where the United Nations affords us a comprehensive approach to addressing these challenges.

I share with you these thoughts as President of the General Assembly. In this position, day after day, I deal with all four of these dimensions of human endeavour, in an effort to seek wise solutions, acceptable to all.

For this is what the United Nations is – a place where all the major problems of the world find their destination; a place where all the hopes of humanity converge for a better tomorrow.

Yet, it would be lacking in moral honesty not to acknowledge a perception that the United Nations has failed. Not to acknowledge a tendency by some, at times, to bypass the United Nations and assign problem-solving functions to other multilateral groupings. Such actions create more anxiety and doubt

than hope and certainty in the world system. They give rise to suspicion by those not involved in these outside dealings. Those outside the process often feel marginalized. They resent activities which they see as undertaken behind their back, without considering their interests as well.

Let us start then from this premise. The premise that the United Nations is the world's most universal, legitimate world forum. And if you agree with me on this premise, let us then, together, consider the role the UN plays in addressing the four key themes that I identified earlier: economic, political, cultural, and communications and technological challenges.

First, the economic challenges of today's world.

At the heart of our economic challenges are the issues of demand versus resources. How to provide economic justice so that the world can live and progress in greater harmony.

Because, as we speak, food prices are rising. The gap between rich and poor is expanding. Economic growth is weak and the global economic system is fragile. And everything is compounded by increasingly depleted natural resources.

I strongly believe that only sustainable development will take us where we need to go. Emphasizing the interdependence of economic, social and environmental factors, the sustainable development approach offers comprehensive, long-term, enduring solutions.

This June, world leaders will gather at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio. They will come together to harmonize their positions and chart the way forward. The eyes of the world will be on Rio, watching and hoping for action-oriented and forward-looking outcomes. Outcomes that will reduce poverty and protect the future of our planet.

Addressing poverty is of course key to achieving economic justice. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provide a blueprint for development. A policy framework agreed by all the world's countries and leading development institutions.

Eight goals have been set: from halving extreme poverty, to ensuring environmental sustainability, to stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS. The target date for the MDGs is 2015.

Since their launch in 2000, the MDGs have galvanized never-before-seen efforts to meet the needs of the world's poorest populations. There is no doubt that important progress has been made in most MDG targets.

But now our work is to prepare for post-2015.

Going forward, the principles of the Millennium Declaration will remain as pertinent and urgent as ever: Freedom. Equality. Respect for nature. Shared responsibility.

I would submit that what is also required is stable and inclusive growth. Employment creation and equal opportunities for all. Development-oriented macroeconomic frameworks and the responsible, sustainable use of our natural resources. And inclusive social policies that protect human rights.

Of course, sustainable development must be at the heart of any post-2015 UN development agenda.

In recent times, the global aid architecture has become more complex. It is more important today than ever before to pay close attention to strengthening development effectiveness. This can be done by improving the range of existing and emerging partnerships, including South-South and triangular cooperation. The need for establishing a new global partnership that is more broad-based, inclusive and effective has also emerged. Again, the UN's role is to harmonize these diverse actions. The UN also provides other important fora for building collective action and addressing major economic challenges.

For example, the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability brings together prominent world figures, providing fresh ideas for building a sustainable future. Bold new approaches and ambitious outcomes have emerged in their report: "Resilient People, Resilient Planet." This report will feed into intergovernmental processes around sustainable development.

The UN's Economic and Social Council – "ECOSOC" - is a policy formulation and coordination body focused on international economic, social and other related issues. I would challenge those who say ECOSOC is only a talk shop. ECOSOC has a very clear role under the UN Charter: the harmonization of the economic and social interests of the international community. For those who have experienced the limitations of other economic fora, I would reiterate: exclusion does not solve economic problems. It simply delays them and they worsen. I would instead appeal to those leading efforts through various negotiating fora to heed the call of universal interests and to make greater use of instruments such as ECOSOC.

It is for this same reason- legitimacy and inclusion- that, as President of the General Assembly, I have hosted briefings of the Assembly pre- and post- G20 Summit. It is the General Assembly's role to lead the world in building a united global partnership. The G20 is an important player in this partnership and the UN will continue to encourage dialogue and cooperation among all key stakeholders. In today's interconnected world, where what affects one nation affects us all - close collaboration is the way forward.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The world is in crisis also because the world has changed. The world of today is not the world of 1945 in which the United Nations was born. There are new realities of power. Realities created by the freedom to shape one's destiny, to exploit one's resources, to build one's economy.

Which brings me to the second major theme I wish to address: political challenges. Political challenges created by a new political landscape and the rise of new powers.

I am not a Marxist but I believe that economic realities to a large extent determine political realities. It is no wonder that today we have new centres of power such as the BRICS – the expanding powerhouses of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

We have seen over the last decade or so efforts to bring the realities of the IMF voting structure to reflect the new power realities – and this is only natural, I would say: just.

There is no reason that what was valid 60 or 50 or 40 years ago, when the world system was driven by the powers of the time, should be valid today. Today, when the economic shifts have produced different power structures.

I said “justice” – I submit it is even in the interest of all. It is a matter of efficiency that the required changes take place. Otherwise the system will be obsolete, and we will go from one crisis to another, with endless painful consequences for all.

But the mayhem cannot stop there. In the end, we will have to come to the seat of international decisions at the international level.

Of course we cannot discuss major international decisions without discussing the United Nations Security Council.

Charged by the UN Charter with the maintenance of international peace and security, the Council deals with some of the most urgent and pressing global issues. Its responsibilities, among others, include investigating disputes which may lead to international friction. Recommending action on threats to peace. Taking military action against an aggressor.

The Membership of the Council is well known: five permanent members with the power to veto decisions. Ten non-permanent members, without the power to veto.

But does this membership reflect the global realities of today? I do not think there is anyone in his hall who would argue that it does.

How long then can the world wait without the necessary reform of the Council? I do not think there is anyone among us who would argue: much longer.

For history has shown that international organizations face their most critical moments when they fail to respond to dynamic changing environments.

What will the situation be if we do not achieve progress on this front? Could the United Nations and the international community bear the consequences? My answer is no.

The legitimacy of the United Nations’ mission will be undermined in the absence of an efficient, inclusive and representative Security Council. Timely reform is urgent if the United Nations is to

respond to 21st Century realities. However, to attain real progress, reform must be fully driven and defined by the Member States.

As you can see, ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, at the core of all these issues before us is the issue of justice. It applies to the case of Security Council reform issue as well. A legitimate, representative Security Council- this is a matter of justice.

New realities are also visible in the cultural arena. Which brings me to the third area I will address: cultural challenges.

Talking about culture means talking about values. I would assert that the yearning of humanity for universal values is as old as humankind itself. Our desire for universal values can be traced back through the history of civilizations. Through religions, classic philosophical debates, the Age of Enlightenment and beyond. These values have, throughout time, been embraced worldwide as the foundation for overcoming our differences and bringing us together in one human community.

Cultural relativism has no place here. Those who say that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has its limitations are cultural relativists. And cultural relativism is a dead end. For who can, in all moral and intellectual honesty, argue anything other than equality? Other than dignity for all?

The UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reaffirm these fundamental rights. The worth of the human person. The equal rights of men and women, of nations large and small. Our joint obligation to ensure justice and respect for international law.

There was a time when our diversity was considered by anthropologists as a strange collection of species to study. Ladies and gentlemen, these “species” have now reasserted their importance and their human dignity.

Let me therefore be clear. Diversity is not the issue. Through all cultures, there are yearnings for universal values. Whatever forms these yearnings take, this is what the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights assert. Universal values are what sustain our life as the international community.

But they of course take different forms. Each culture expresses these values in its own ways.

The challenge is precisely that there are 193 States. 193 States, each with their own history, their own political system, their own national economy. This is our richness, the richness of the world. This is our wealth. We should celebrate it. The time is over when diversity was only for colonial anthropologists, publishing monographs on strange things happening here and there. This time is over.

It is in the halls of the UN where all these traditions, languages, histories come together. It is a challenge but it is a hope.

Our challenge remains the eradication of contempt and disrespect. How to let all countries bring to the table their vision of universality.

This is the claim shared by the occupants of Wall St, as well as poor workers in poor countries. Justice. Dignity. Justice. Dignity.

This is also what, in reality, unites the world of Islam and the West, despite claims to the contrary. But let us first define what we are speaking about when we speak of “Islam”, “the West”. Let us make clear that we are not speaking of homogeneous entities, but of diverse worlds on both sides.

But for the sake of exposition, and within the time allotted to us, let us assume that these are clearly defined camps. And with this assumption, let us then recognize that the competition between the two civilizations has been as old as the advent of Islam on the scene. What my Special Advisor, Professor Mustapha Tlili, has coined “the third kid on the block”. The two others being Judaism and Christianity.

Historically, that competition has been peaceful at times, violent at others, but overall extremely productive and to the benefit of humankind’s advancement. Advancement in philosophy, science, technology, state administration, army organization, and many other fields of human progress that would not be what they are today without this dynamic relationship.

So let us not forget this important truth. And let those who agitate the specter of confrontation, of a clash of civilizations, remember that within these three faiths and within these three civilizations, what is common far exceeds what is different.

If we find ourselves today in moments of tension, particularly since the ugly terrorist attacks of the last decade – in New York, London, Madrid and other places where senseless violence has struck – this should not cloud our judgment, nor make us believe that confrontation is an inevitable fate inherent to each of these great civilizations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is no inevitability of a clash of civilizations between the West and Islam. It is not a clash of values, it is a clash of perceptions.

Muslim as well as Western philosophers uphold the same values of compassion and justice. There was a time when the two traditions nurtured each other, as beautifully described in the great book of Maria Menocal, “The Ornament of the World”.

For in fact, what binds us as humans is our collective needs as living creatures, and our inherent loving, compassionate nature.

It might be that current world crises have heightened our imagination and have acquired a more dramatic impact on us because of the global communications dimension of our world.

And so I arrive to my fourth and final theme: Communication and technology challenges.

It used to be that we would hear about a catastrophe in Japan years after it happened. There would be little impact on others' perceptions and lives. Or imagine the plague that erased most of Europe in the 14th Century. Then, the impact on China was not registered. Events would be local, perhaps regional at best.

But today, we have a world where immediacy is the postulate of our lives. To the extent that sometimes we live events before they happen – through rumours or “news” going viral on the Internet and through social media.

In the age of the Internet, history cannot define events in the same way it did before the advent of the Internet. Yet we – myself included- what do we know about the Internet, about these new instruments shaping our lives?

My 5 year old son knows more about the Internet than I pretend to know. He was born into it.

The 193 Heads of State and Government who flock to United Nations Headquarters in New York each September may have children who know more about how to retrieve documents than the world leaders themselves.

Yet, this is the world that is shaping our lives. A world offering both hope and despair.

Without social media, the drama set off by young Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi would have been limited to his hometown. It would not have affected the region and the world, setting off a most profound chain of events.

And Occupy Wall Street? A small group of activists in New York City set off a worldwide protest movement. Now, common parlance speaks of “the 99 percent”, as if we never knew otherwise.

It is likely that this “supra-connection” through social media will only continue, as the technologies advance and improve.

So we are moving. The challenge is how to understand the implications of qualitative change and their full potential for solving crises and increasing the opportunities to work together.

I spoke of immediacy, of powerful new instruments that change how we deal with each other. In many ways, this shows what our future might be. And this will only increase.

For, how can Heads of States make thoughtful and accurate decisions in a world where these decisions might not make sense minutes after they are made?

Accidents happen. If, when States are involved, accidents are misinterpreted, it can lead to catastrophe. If the world was saved from nuclear destruction during the Cold War, it was because the Soviet Union

and the United States kept secret channels of communication to gauge each others' true intentions. This we know today, it is part of the historical record. In these times of tensions between the US and Iran, I would call for the setting up of a similar channel of communication, to avoid a simple, yet catastrophic misunderstanding.

Another aspect of the problem: how can we feel secure when hackers can break into the highly confidential documents of one of the world's largest powers?

What role can the United Nations play in building more harmonious lives for the global community, using the communication tools at our disposal?

Here too, ladies and gentlemen, let me call your attention to this truth that so many tend to forget:

The UN has been at the origins of the global communications revolution. It has led the way, through the organization's various bodies. Bodies ranging from the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space to the Committee on Information and the International Telecommunication Union.

Through all these bodies, the main concern of the United Nations has been – and remains- here too, justice.

How to implement justice in the digital arena and to prevent division in the world between the digital haves and the have-nots.

How to give access to communication satellites to those in the developing world who cannot afford what other powerful and rich countries can afford, either in launching their own satellites or buying use time.

How to benefit from the advances in Internet technology in a way that no population is left behind.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You will concur with me that our future- the future of humanity- the future of the world in which my 5 year old son will live – will be, whether we want it or not, dominated by Internet communications.

Here I call on all responsible members of the international community to think seriously on gathering all actors- State, private sector, academia, technology powerhouses – to debate together in a world forum all the possibilities of this future. And to prepare the necessary blueprint for a more coherent, effective and just system that will benefit all and will spare the world crises and damage that we cannot even think of now.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I come from a faith tradition – Islam. At the heart of Islam is the call for justice.

And I am deeply fortunate to lead the international community at a time when the call for justice is everywhere on our planet. As I said, from the desolate, arid lands of central Tunisia to the streets of Manhattan.

The connection of these two destinies makes me feel at ease in the role I try to play in these difficult times. Times of rising dreams and hopes everywhere, times of frustrations, but times that require answers that will fulfill the need for justice, if we want to avoid future turmoil.

To close our eyes to the challenges confronting us today, or to underestimate their potential impact - for today and future generations - will not only be betraying our faith in justice but also bad policy and politics, to be paid in high price by those who do not listen to the voice of reason, let alone the call for justice.

When I, as President, ponder the vast agenda of the United Nations General Assembly, I see the world as it is today, but also as it might be tomorrow. I see our hopes, our dreams. I also see all the obstacles that can stand in the way of collective harmony and true peace. And often, I must confess, humility overcomes me, in the face of these daunting challenges.

But history, as Machiavelli vividly painted in the conclusion of his superb treaty, “The Prince”, governs only 50% of our destiny. The 50% left remains in our power, in our virtue.

Call it “wisdom”; call it as we say in Arabic “barraka”; call it “blessing”. Whatever name we give it, if we are lucky and wise enough to act to prevent violence and chaos from engulfing us all in destruction; if we are astute enough to think about the challenges of tomorrow and to deal with them today for the benefit of all, we can rise together and feel that we have contributed something positive to humankind’s magnificent journey.

Thank you.