Thank you for inviting me to address today’s important meeting.

We meet today at a time of seemingly unprecedented violence and intolerance in our world. From, for example, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Mali, Myanmar and Nigeria, we face major challenges in combatting extremism and promoting understanding between communities.

Global events have led us to ask searching questions about the nature of terrorism, security, freedom of speech and religion; the limits, or otherwise, of press freedom, tolerance, racism, inequality, the impact of social media and the lack of connectivity between peoples and cultures. In the midst of the hatred and brutality which bombards us every day on our television screens and in even more graphic terms on the internet there has been an outpouring of global solidarity and revulsion at the activities of those who seek to divide, rather than unite us.

Humanitarianism has changed substantially in the last few years. Now nearly 80 per cent of our work is in countries and regions affected by conflict. We are increasingly called on to provide lifesaving assistance and protect civilians – a responsibility which rests with a state, but when the state is also a party to conflict, it is to the United Nations that people turn. Civilians are killed and injured in targeted or indiscriminate attacks in violation of international humanitarian law with complete impunity. 82 per cent of people killed or injured by explosive weapons in 2013 were civilians.

Violence and other forms of persecution force an average of 23,000 people per day to flee their homes. The Alliance of Civilizations and the UN’s humanitarian agencies all deal with the effects of conflict and the breakdown of social order, and I believe we have to learn from each others experiences.

The organisation that I run, OCHA, tries to influence the parties to conflict, either through public statements and appeals, or through private diplomacy to respect
international humanitarian law and give us access to the people who need our help. Our work is not politically motivated, although there are attempts almost every day, in some part of the world, to undermine that principle. We work in a neutral and impartial way. We try to use ‘soft power’ to mitigate the effects of extremism on the ground, to protect civilians, to build confidence, and to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid.

In Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the occupied Palestinian territory, Syria and many other countries around the world, civilians are routinely killed or injured in targeted or indiscriminate attacks.

Many of these conflict situations arise from or gain strength through the exploitation of ethnic, religious and cultural differences.

I saw the effects of this in South Sudan last week. A recent report by the UN Mission there found that in just two, out of the hundreds of attacks, that took place last year, at least 353 civilians may have been killed and 250 injured, based on their ethnicity or nationality. The report said the attacks revealed the extent to which anger had seeped into communities. The conflict in South Sudan has caused some 1.5 million people to flee their homes. The use of ethnicity by those with power and influence, in sustaining conflict, comes at a high price.

Displacement within and across borders is a defining feature of conflict, and is now at record high levels. At the end of 2013, 33.3 million people were displaced in their own countries and 16.7 million children, women and men were refugees outside their countries.

Displacement is traumatic, disrupts families and communities and puts significant strain on the communities and countries which host and support them. And it carries huge hidden costs in lost earnings and wasted potential, particularly for children who miss out on an education and women who may be forced into early marriage as a survival strategy.

Much of this displacement, fuelled by conflict, is rooted in a lack of understanding, dialogue and respect between communities. The principles and initiatives of the Alliance of Civilizations have an important role here.

Your work with grassroots organizations can help to build openness and tolerance in communities from the ground up. When children and young people are involved in these initiatives, their influence can last a lifetime and help to build peace and inter-communal respect for generations to come.

The UNAOC’s Youth Solidarity Fund shows what can be achieved. From bridging the gap between Dalit and Muslim people in Bangladesh, to promoting dialogue and human rights in Somalia, these programmes are helping to build tolerance and understanding between communities.

Your work with faith-based organisations is also significant and your support can help these groups increase their reach and make an important contribution to humanitarian action. They are the groups which, day in and day out, continue to work in insecure and volatile situations. We have seen the impact of this in the Central African Republic.

The mission of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors.
But humanitarian work is no substitute for a political resolution to deep seated and complex crises. That takes time, painstaking negotiation and compromise. Only political action can address and resolve the underlying causes of conflicts and create a safe, secure and stable environment for the ordinary people who are victims in this.

Here, too, the Alliance of Civilizations provides soft power tools for conflict prevention, peace-building and reconciliation, through its promotion of communication and dialogue at the highest levels.

Working together we can really make a difference and the World Humanitarian Summit which will be held next year, offers a unique opportunity to discuss issues of concern and promote solutions to the complex challenges facing our work today.

Thank you.