

## Meeting of the OIC Commission of Eminent Persons

Alhamdulillah, all praise be to Allah, by whose grace and blessings we are here today able to meet in Putrajaya. Let me at the outset, extend a very warm welcome to all of you, in particular the members of the commission of eminent persons who have travelled from various parts of the OIC world. I am indeed happy to see all the members assembled here to implement the resolution made at the last Islamic Summit that took place here in Malaysia in 2003. Each of you bring a unique perspective and exceptional capacity to the commission. I am confident that with the diverse backgrounds and combined wealth of knowledge possessed by the commission, it will be able to offer pragmatic and implementable recommendations that can assist the Muslim world to better meet the challenges confronting it in the 21st century.

The commission shoulders a heavy responsibility. The OIC and the Muslim Ummah look to you to provide the ideas that can drive change in the Muslim world for the next generation. We look to you to craft the vision that will be ours to realise in the years to come. We depend upon you to suggest to us the strategies and the paths we must take to reach our destination, and the programmes of action that we must implement along the way.

In helping us chart the future of the Muslim world, I am sure you will take stock of the present as well. There are many challenges that we need to overcome. In many parts of our world we are in deep crisis. The OIC landscape is a distressing one, to say the least. Some of us are in conflict, either within our own borders or with our neighbours. Even if there is no conflict sometimes there are tensions and lack of trust between us. Darfur is a humanitarian disaster. Two of us are occupied, Iraq completely and Palestine partially. Uppermost in the commission's agenda therefore must surely be the question of how to strengthen the prospects for peace, security and stability in Muslim countries, and between Muslim countries and others.

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Keynote Address by Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Prime Minister of Malaysia and Chairman of The 10th Summit of The Organisation of Islamic Conference at the Opening Session of the Meeting of The OIC Commission of Eminent Persons in Putrajaya on 27 January 2005.



Some of the OIC countries are rich and their people affluent. But they are too few and far between. The OIC landscape is littered with nations that are poor and people that are hungry. Illiteracy, which in the developed world is a thing of the past, is still a feature of the present in many Muslim countries. Globalisation has benefited some of us in some respects. The poorer countries, however, have not been able to take advantage of it. Globalisation has further impoverished and marginalised them. They are largely at the mercy of developed nations and of forces beyond their control. I would therefore think that equally high in the commission's agenda, would be the question of how poverty and illiteracy in the Muslim world can be eradicated. The bulk of the Ummah that have been too long in the backwaters of human development must be brought into its mainstream.

Human development, of course, is not just economic development. It is the comprehensive development of the human person. We must therefore foster the political, economic, social, cultural and religious environment in which human development can take place. This is an enormous challenge for the Muslim world. In some cases it will involve the fundamental transformation of the domestic political, economic and social order. It will take time, but wise and enlightened leadership can hasten the process.

The key to both human and economic development is knowledge. Centuries ago, when other civilisations were still in darkness, the Muslim world was synonymous with enlightenment and the pursuit of knowledge. We expanded the frontiers of knowledge as well as learnt from others. What we learnt, we enriched and passed on. Today knowledge is more valuable than ever. We cannot compete and prosper in the global economy without enriching our knowledge base. Knowledge drives growth in this new economy. Yet at a time when knowledge has become such a vital and indispensable factor, the Muslim world is left behind.

This brings me to the question of religious knowledge and the linkage that some in the outside world mistakenly see between the teachings of Islam on the one hand and the extremism, militancy and terrorism engaged in by some Muslim groups on the other.

Since the 11 September tragedy especially, Islam and Muslims have been portrayed by their detractors as violent and intolerant. This is most unfortunate. Despite vigorous efforts taken to correct this ignorant and extremely damaging perception, we Muslims are still unable to break free from this profiling. The profiling must stop. It does grave injustice to a noble religion whose very name means 'peace'. It also does grave injustice to the overwhelming majority of Muslims who live in peace. Indeed, Muslims suffer much more from militancy and terrorism than do others.

The Muslim world must do more to disabuse others of their mistaken impressions of Islam and Muslims. Islam does not enjoin upon its adherents to

mount attacks on others. Islam's message to the world is that human relationships must be founded upon justice and the highest moral standards. Indeed, all religions call on their followers to abide by this injunction. The Quran says, 'We sent aforetime our messengers with clear signs and sent down with them clear scripture and the balance so the people could establish justice. And we sent down iron wherein are mighty power and many benefits for mankind' [57:25].

Islam stands not only for peace and justice; it also stands for enlightened moderation. Viewed from Islam's intellectual, ideological and moral perspective, moderation will stand out as a distinguishing feature of Islam both as a religion as well as a civilisation. That is the reason why Islam has decreed 'adl', which stands for moderation and balance, in matters concerning one's faith, actions, community life, worship, rituals, economy, and even in matters concerning friendship, war and peace. This concept of 'adl' should be elaborated upon to dispel misperceptions about Islam and the Ummah.

In Islam, a person is accountable for all that he or she does. The sense of accountability derives from awareness, discretion and rationalisation. This also helps to check bias and imbalance. The Quran has described the Muslim Ummah as 'Ummatan Wasatan' (a moderate community). Our holy prophet also declared moderation and the middle road as the best course. To quote him: 'Khair Ul Umoori Ausatuhaa' (moderation is the best course).

Within the Ummah, we need to seriously and sincerely address the issue of Jihad and its true application in the modern world. Islamic scholars define Jihad in terms of sustained effort to discipline one's own 'self' in obedience to Allah. Jihad also implies an endeavour to uphold social justice, peace and fair play. Still, our prophet described Jihad-Bil-Nafas or self-actualisation as the greater Jihad. It is most unfortunate that some have narrowed down the concept of Jihad to 'qital', which concerns physical fighting. It is even more unfortunate that this is the only meaning commonly understood by the general public. This meaning is in turn conveyed to the wider world. If Muslims themselves can make this mistake, what more can we expect from others? Muslims therefore are as much to blame for this distortion of the meaning of Jihad.

Muslim governments, scholars and the more informed Muslims in society have the obligation and responsibility to correct these misperceptions both among the Ummah as well as in the wider world. We must also take more effective measures to deconstruct the intellectual and ideological foundations of religious extremism and sectarianism, for they do great damage to the cause of Islam and the welfare of Muslims.

If the Muslim world and the OIC want to be successful in this effort it must engage the media, especially the Western media, more effectively. We have not been very successful at this so far. We have not made our presence sufficiently



felt, or our views sufficiently heard, in the Western media. Where we have, often speakers from the Muslim world are not as able or as eloquent as others in the forum. Sometimes our spokespersons in fact convey a negative rather than positive image of Islam and the Muslims. The media is a powerful tool. We must take it seriously, for it is through the media that others form their impressions of us.

Moderation has always helped curb extremism and its destructive excesses. It has protected us from bigotry and hatred. It has allowed us to practice the true teachings of our religion. It is our duty to demonstrate, by word and by action, that a Muslim country can be modern, democratic, tolerant and economically competitive. Islam does not teach us to turn our backs against the rest of the world. Neither does it enjoin us to preach hatred and commit violence.

It is generally recognised that one of the important means of reducing the mutual prejudices and misunderstandings that exist between the Muslim and Western worlds is to engage in sustained dialogue with one another. I will return to this subject later. Here I would like to emphasise that sustained dialogue and exchange of views is equally important within the Muslim community. Many of the problems and divisions that exist within the Muslim community, including those between the so-called moderates and extremists, can be overcome through earnest dialogue. Dialogue helps dispel misconceptions and promote understanding and trust. Dialogue and consultation can help bridge gaps and prevent alienation. Dialogue can assist in moderating differences and tensions between the different groups and persuasions. It can help promote unity and solidarity.

Muslim citizens must be given opportunities to tell their leaders of their worries and predicaments. I am referring to bread-and-butter issues and other matters affecting their daily lives, not necessarily ideological battles as such. Reform and renewal in policy and approaches must be continually carried out as a means of addressing the grievances of citizens. Sound education will not only free ordinary Muslims from the clutches of extreme dogma but also provide economic opportunities.

Beyond dialogue, it is absolutely necessary that Muslim countries embark upon instituting a culture of good governance. Some of the fundamental elements of good governance include management based on best practices, moral leadership, righteous conduct, accountability, justice and the rule of law. This will ensure just treatment and equal distribution of wealth in Muslim countries that will in turn generate progress and stability. We should all remind ourselves of Surah Al-Nissa verse 58: which means 'Allah doth command you to render back your trusts to those to whom they are due, and when ye judge between man and man, which ye judge with justice'.

I am a firm believer in the fact that the tide of radicalism and extremism can be checked and reversed with good governance, healthy democratic practices and

empowerment of the citizenry through education and equitable economic growth. In Malaysia, we promote these elements through the concept of Islam Hadhari – literally meaning ‘civilisational Islam’. Let me emphasise that Islam Hadhari is not a new religion. Nor is it a new Mazhab. It is merely an approach that builds upon the noble values and ideals of Islam to foster a progressive Islamic civilisation. It is an approach that places substance over form. It is practical and pragmatic. It emphasises development consistent with the tenets of Islam and which focuses on enhancing the quality of life for every citizen, regardless of his or her religion. We view Islam Hadhari as an effort to bring the Ummah back to basics, to return to the primacy of good values and principles. Islam Hadhari posits 10 fundamental principles which Muslim nations and communities must demonstrate:

- i. First, faith and piety in Allah;
- ii. Second, a just and trustworthy government;
- iii. Third, a free and independent people;
- iv. Fourth, vigorous pursuit and mastery of knowledge;
- v. Fifth, balanced and comprehensive economic development;
- vi. Sixth, a good quality of life for the people;
- vii. Seventh, protection of the rights of minority groups and women;
- viii. Eighth, cultural and moral integrity;
- ix. Ninth, safeguarding natural resources and the environment; and
- x. Tenth, strong defence capabilities.

Islam Hadhari can help bring Muslims into the 21st century and integrate them into the modern economy. Islam Hadhari promotes tolerance and understanding, moderation and peace. It is the perfect antidote to extremism and militancy. This is Malaysia’s contribution to this dialogue on enlightened moderation.

Let me now turn to the subject of dialogue and networking between Muslims and non-Muslims. The OIC needs to gain the trust and confidence of non-Muslims, too. In a world dominated by such slogans as ‘the clash of civilisations’, Islamophobia has increased significantly. I believe that the OIC is best placed to correct misconceptions about Islam in the non-Muslim world, particularly in the West. Inter-civilisational dialogues should underscore the importance of justice and human dignity. No one can deny the fact that these common values have been fundamental to all religions throughout history.

Deeper analyses will prove that there is much in common between the ideals of Western secularism and those espoused by Islam. For example, Rousseau said that ‘man is born free’, while Islam teaches that ‘every child is born innocent’. The OIC should take the lead to reach out to Western intellectuals and institutions, both secular and religious, to develop a shared understanding about such basic issues as human rights, human dignity and family values. Western



notions of right and wrong can indeed co-exist with the Islamic injunctions for man to abide by God's word at all times.

We must recognise the need for the OIC to conduct a self-evaluation and assessment. Structural or name changes make little difference if there is no parallel commitment for reform among the member states. The OIC can withstand all the challenges and survive provided there is genuine commitment to uphold true Islamic ideals and civilisational norms.

We need to prove our relevance not only by our words but also by our deeds. We are, today, 57 strong, with no dearth of interest on the part of others to be associated with us in one form or another. The continuing challenge is to ensure that our relatively large membership does not handicap us in our process of decision-making by consensus. We must show that we are not a mere debating society, but an indispensable forum of Muslim countries. We must be able to demonstrate that we have principled positions, practical programmes and concrete activities.

The OIC needs to reinvent itself in order to be more successful in serving its intended purposes. It is imperative that we undertake a close examination of ourselves while identifying the external causes for our weaknesses. The OIC may need to refine its focus. We may need to make adjustments to our organisational structure. We certainly need to keep under constant review our methodologies in developing specific strategies. Above all, we need to be sincere and begin a process of enlightenment for ourselves. The agreement reached by the OIC to embark on this important task by constituting the commission of eminent persons is indeed a step in the right direction. We should also look upon this exercise as an opportunity not only to reinstate the good image of Islam but also to restore our dignity as Muslims.

I do hope that this meeting would make a concerted effort at filling the gaps and building the bridges. We need to close the great divide that has been created between the Muslim world and the West. In embarking on this crucial mission, we must guard against extreme motivations or extremist elements. We must meet the challenges in a sober manner and in a coordinated fashion. In this regard, there is no better place to start than by strengthening our resolve to strive for the betterment of the Ummah.

During the rest of its tenure as chairman of the 10th Islamic Summit, Malaysia commits itself to work for the evolution of the OIC into an organisation that is truly relevant to the needs and aspirations of the Ummah. Malaysia will strive to make the OIC a body that is able to win the respect and confidence of the world.

On that note, with the recitation of Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim, I hereby officially declare open this meeting of the OIC Commission of Eminent Persons and wish all of you every success, Insha-Allah.