

**PUBLIC LECTURE BY YAB PRIME MINISTER – STRONGER TOGETHER: A VISION FOR THE MUSLIM UMMAH THROUGH TECH, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AT AL AZHAR CONFERENCE CENTRE, AL AZHAR UNIVERSITY, CAIRO, EGYPT**

By : DATO' SERI ANWAR IBRAHIM

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**STRONGER TOGETHER: A VISION FOR THE MUSLIM UMMAH THROUGH TECH, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT**

**PUBLIC LECTURE BY DATO' SERI ANWAR IBRAHIM,  
PRIME MINISTER OF MALAYSIA  
AT AL AZHAR CONFERENCE CENTRE, ALAZHAR  
UNIVERSITY,  
CAIRO, EGYPT**

**10 NOVEMBER 2024**

Esteemed faculty,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

To speak in the hallowed halls of Al Azhar University is among the rarest and most singular honours in the life of any Muslim. For over a thousand years,

Al Azhar has been a beacon of discovery. Here, a renaissance flourished long before the term was in vogue, an enlightenment ignited before the Age of Reason dawned upon the West. Here resides a millennium of accumulated learning, where men and women of wisdom have long strived to understand the Word of God, the teachings of the Prophet, and the mysteries of the universe.

Therefore, I must take a moment to express my deepest appreciation and most profound gratitude to the Shaikh al-Azhar Professor Dr. Ahmad Muhammad Ahmad At-Tayyeb for his gracious invitation to deliver this public lecture in this august institution and before such an illustrious, esteemed and erudite audience.

Shaikh Ahmad At-Tayyeb himself is a person of such a high stature that it is inadequate to try to pay tribute to his achievements. What I can say with utmost certainty is that the Shaikh is a paragon of the virtues of moderation on the path of wasathiyya: and this is translated into his dynamic and enriching contribution to the Ummah in helming Azhar al-Sharif, demonstrating the quality of the Ummah, not just in knowledge but spirituality, not just words but deeds, and not just this worldly but the hereafter. (Quran, Surah Al-Syams verse 7-10,)

7. By the Soul, And the proportion and order Given to it 8. And its enlightenment As to its wrong And its right 9. Truly he succeeds That purifies it 10. And he fails That corrupts it!

The Shaikh has demonstrated true grit and courage in voicing out the Palestinian suffering and in so doing helped to trigger greater traction of the plight of the Palestinians across Egypt and the region, in particular, among the intellectual community and students.

Azhar al-Sharif has made significant contributions to the Islamic world, and we in the Malay Archipelago have greatly benefited from it. Graduates of Al-Azhar have always been formidable in defending the faith, knowledge, and instilling the spirit and essence of Islam in their communities. Those of us who do not have the opportunity to study at Al-Azhar, aside from visiting it like myself, still benefit from learning from our teachers, our sheikhs, and gaining insight from the discourses of scholars.

The Ummah at large must never forget the traditional role played by Azhar al-Sharif – a centre for reform, a bastion of knowledge and creative thinking, and even more significantly, a defender of the Ummah against the onslaught of colonialism while preserving and asserting the Ummah's Islamic identity. The question for us in this present age is, what now? Is Azhar al-Sharif still able to undertake these crucial roles?

In this regard, we have learned from the great sheikhs of the not too distant past, like Sheikh Rashid Rida and Muhammad Abduh, who inspired us by advocating the reform and renewal of the Ummah towards an enlightened modernisation. Today, Azhar al-Sharif, continues to be driven by that same spirit of modernity, while operating in a different time and paradigm towards the advancement of science and technology for the uplift and progress of the Ummah.

Islam unifies the material and the spiritual, blending intellect with moral purpose to guide us toward a comprehensive understanding of our role in creation. Our educational institutions play a crucial role in nurturing this vision of knowledge. They must be places where students learn not only to excel but to serve, where critical thinking is paired with a strong moral compass. Through this integration of intellect and ethics, our institutions cultivate a generation of thinkers and leaders who are prepared to uphold the dignity of all and to build a world that reflects the unity and compassion that Islam envisions.

This is the role of Azhar as-Sharif. And that is the role that should be played by all institutions of higher learning. Consider for example certain world renowned institutions that have earned a pristine reputation for academic excellence but are seen unfortunately to be producing graduates who are morally bankrupt. This is where the criterion of excellence with a moral compass becomes absolutely essential.

The critical question is this: as the world transforms at an unprecedented pace, how is the Muslim world responding? These changes demand more than mere adaptation or imitation (taqlid); they call for resilience, foresight, and a grounded vision. To navigate these complex shifts, we must boldly pursue innovation as Muhammad Iqbal talked about tajdid and islah, nurture collaborative efforts, and remain open to progress. Yet, in doing so, we must also draw deeply from the timeless teachings of our faith, which offer a moral compass to guide us toward a balanced and harmonious society, rooted in justice, compassion, and unity.

In our time, the Maqasid al-Shariah helps address pressing global issues, from poverty and inequality to environmental harm. When we embed these principles into our institutions, they ensure that governance, social systems, and economic policies serve the collective good rather than individual gain. By rooting our decisions in these higher objectives, we build a society where compassion, equity, and integrity are at the heart of every action, safeguarding the rights and dignity of every individual and the well-being of future generations.

Leadership is not a privilege but a responsibility *taklif wa la tasyrif* that must be met with humility, wisdom, and a sincere commitment to the people. Governance in Islam transcends political structures and becomes a moral duty, where leaders are accountable not only to their people but to Allah. This model of leadership is rooted in service, justice, and mercy, a tradition exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. himself.

One of the most pervasive challenges we face today is Islamophobia. This prejudice distorts Islam, reducing its followers to harmful stereotypes that fuel suspicion and hostility toward Muslims worldwide. Islamophobia's persistence reflects a deep-rooted ignorance that obscures the rich and varied contributions of Islamic civilisation. Such sentiments fail to recognise the contributions Islam has made to global civilisation, from advancements in medicine and mathematics to the preservation of classical knowledge.

Our response to Islamophobia must be rooted to counterignorance with knowledge, wisdom, compassion, and understanding. Allah reminds us in the Quran

34. Nor can Goodness and Evil Be equal. Repel (Evil) With what is better : Then will he between whom And thee was hatred Become as it were Thy friend and intimate!

“Repel evil with that which is better” (Fussilat, 34), encouraging us to respond to hostility with patience, kindness, and wisdom. The intellectual and ethical legacy of Islam stands as a testament to the constructive role Muslims have played in advancing human knowledge and promoting peace.

Through proactive initiatives and intercultural exchange, we can break down harmful stereotypes and replace them with a genuine appreciation for Islam’s contributions to a just and peaceful society. With resilience and wisdom, we create a more inclusive society, where Muslims and non-Muslims alike coexist with dignity and mutual respect.

Today, the gap is stark, and the consequences are pressing. Only ten Muslim-majority countries rank in the high-Human Development Index category, a figure that has barely improved in over a decade and a half. With an average investment in research and development of just 0.5 per cent of GDP, Muslim-majority countries fall far below the global average of 1.78 per cent. This shortfall means missed opportunities, untapped potential and a worrying lack of preparedness for the future.

Yet, without decisive and sustained investment in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education, we risk falling further behind. It is essential to strengthen STEM education from the earliest years, dramatically increase R&D investment, and prioritise transformative fields

like biotechnology, chemical sciences, and information technology. These sectors are critical not only to economic growth but to addressing urgent issues – from healthcare crises to environmental degradation – that cannot wait for tomorrow’s solutions.

The digital economy poses yet another urgent challenge. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the Muslim world must prioritise investments in cybersecurity, digital infrastructure, and ICT skills. We must establish strong cybersecurity frameworks, build resilient digital infrastructures, and ensure that the next generation is prepared to navigate and shape a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Equally crucial is the need for large-scale, transnational collaborations in science. Joint ventures in space exploration, astronomy, marine science, and high-performance computing are not luxuries—they are necessities. These ambitious projects offer our nations the chance to develop cutting-edge technologies, improve economic security, and demonstrate the power of a united Ummah.

The Muslim world is often portrayed as a community fraught with discord and division. This, of course, is an oversimplification. While challenges persist, we must also recognise the positive strides made in recent times. This is something that we must all applaud and encourage.

Such progress underscores the power of diplomacy and dialogue to bridge even the deepest divides. These recent advances remind us that, no matter

how insurmountable differences may seem, even the most longstanding issues can yield to diplomacy, patience and a shared vision of co-existence.

Any denial of education and other basic rights to women is unIslamic and an abomination. Engagement is not about erasing our differences. When we speak of Muslim unity, we do not mean uniformity, nor do we envision a world where all Muslim nations move in perfect alignment. With nearly two billion people across diverse regions, expecting complete agreement on every issue is neither realistic nor desirable. A realistic vision of unity means finding common ground on core issues and working alongside one another – honouring our differences while striving toward shared goals.

Much like a family, where members may hold differing views but remain bound by love and shared responsibility, the strength of the Ummah lies in its diversity. Our unity is rooted in a collective commitment to peace, justice, and prosperity for all. Let us build on recent successes to rise above our challenges and shape a more unified, brighter future for the Muslim world.

May Allah guide us, grant us strength, and inspire us to fulfil our role as stewards of knowledge, justice, and peace. Together, let us strive to make this vision a reality for ourselves, for our communities, and for the generations that follow. Wassalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh.

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