

**SPEECH BY
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1. Address such a distinguished audience at this 4th International Islamic Political Economy Conference. To our brothers and sisters from firstly, allow me to thank the organisers for inviting me to Europe and other parts of the world, I extend a warm welcome from the Government of Malaysia. I am certain that your presence will give this conference added significance and contribute to profound and intellectual deliberations over the next few days.

2. I would also like to congratulate the organisers for choosing a pertinent theme, Asia-Europe Muslim Partnership, for this conference. I believe that trans-continental cooperation between Muslim communities is increasingly important in the light of the rapidly changing landscape of the global political economy. Globalisation, liberalisation, the digital revolution and the attendant cultural changes that are occurring has precipitated the need for the ummah, worldwide, to strengthen our bonds of fraternity and cooperation. Unity of the ummah is imperative if the Islamic civilisation is to face new challenges and flourish in this brave new world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

3. The respected Arabist, Stanley Lane-Poole, in his seminal work the moors in Spain recounted the fleeing of Granada's ruler, Boabdil, from the gates of the Alhambra in 1491 after secretly agreeing to hand over the city to the forces of the inquisition in return for his safe passage out of Spain. It is said that the spot whence Boabdil took his sad farewell glance bears to this day the name "The last sigh of the moor". A few weeks later, Muslim political sovereignty in Spain came to an end. And eight years later, any tolerance or pluralism that allowed Muslims to continue to hold on to their faith was destroyed by the choice presented to them; that was either convert to Catholicism or be expelled.

4. The inquisition ended with it nearly eight centuries of Islamic presence in Europe and ushered in the marginalisation of Islam from the world order. By the time the Ottoman Empire was described as the "sick man of Europe" by Tsar Nicholas of Russia in 1833, Muslim nations would never regain significant power or influence to prevent the colonisation, oppression and subjugation of the ummah that has lasted until today.

5. Islam's loss of geopolitical strength was accompanied by a corresponding intellectual decline and decay. There emerged an almost reactionary conservatism and the setting in of a deference to taqlid or a doctrine of blind following. The great scholars and ulemas retreated into the world of literalism and legalism, so much so that Islamic thinkers were detached from the modernisation brought about by the western civilisation. This prevented Muslims from being able to contextualise our faith in the contemporary world. And with this intellectual rigidity, any move towards framing an Islamic worldview in response to rapidly changing circumstances was dismissed.

6. This detachment and moral posturing that has suffocated the dynamism of our faith threatens to prevent the success of Muslims in dealing with the problems of globalisation and the challenges brought by the information revolution. As Muslims we must acknowledge the realities of the condition of the ummah. We need to examine the political and socioeconomic condition of the Muslims the world over. We need to contextualise the plight of our brothers and sisters within an increasingly capitalist and materialist society. Only such a thorough examination can yield a framework of priorities that the ummah can, together, work within.

7. If we are to usher in a renaissance for Islam, the fraternity and unity that we are trying to build must be based on a new worldview that acknowledges the forces of change today. Let us form a consensus on how Islam can regain its significance as a mainstream alternative to the global political economy. This can only be achieved if the ummah is able to articulate a lucid role for Islam in the contemporary world. Let us return to the spirit of the Holy Quran and present a Islam that is dynamic and modern. We must project a living Islam, not one that is static, obscurantist, rigid and entrenched in literalism.

Ladies and gentlemen,

8. If an Islamic worldview is to emerge that can temper the amorality of globalisation with compassion and justice, the Muslims of Asia and Europe must endeavour to form an intellectual consensus. Indeed there is much for us to learn from one another. Most of our European brothers and sisters have lived as Muslim minorities. Many have been allowed to practice their faith in an atmosphere of political pluralism. Alhamdulillah. However, many have been subjected to genocide, oppression, discrimination and systematic attempts to prevent the performance of religious duties.

9. The Muslims of Albania, Bosnia, Chechnya and Kosova were long left to suffer. They prayed in silence amid the prevailing atheism of communism only to find that jingoistic nationalism would later prove to be a more deadly enemy of Islam. With some degree of peace having been achieved, we are now seeing the germination of Islamic revivalism in Europe. European Muslims who have hitherto suffered or been silenced are now re-building their lives and, in some cases, embarking on self-rule. While there remains places where Muslims are still persecuted, we have reason to thank Allah SWT for the deliverance of freedom and justice to those who can now practice their faith without fear.

10. Muslims elsewhere in Europe live in increasingly pluralist societies in which racial and religious tolerance are being encouraged. In some countries demographic changes brought about by immigration has led to political environments that are more at ease with diversity and the presence of a large minority of Muslims. While we welcome these trends towards greater accommodation of Muslims worldwide, I fear that it will remain just that: mere accommodation and tolerance.

11. The reality is that Islam is still greatly misunderstood and Muslims are still regarded as threats. Moreover, globalisation brings with it not a universal culture of pluralism, but one rooted in materialistic individualism. If a new consensus among the ummah does not emerge, globalisation will stymie any resurgence that we may be seeing and the marginalisation of our faith will continue.

12. If we are to prevent this from happening, we need to resolve misunderstandings that Muslims, ourselves, have about our religion. And we need to place this new understanding amid the condition of today's ummah. We must admit that Muslim countries count for some of the poorest nations in the world. Islamic thought and its influences on the sciences has never approximated the golden age that came to end more than 500 years ago when Muslims were at the forefront of science and philosophy, the art of war and in commerce and trade. The inquiring minds of Ibn Sina who wrote a medical canon, or Al-Farabi, whose philosophy still challenges the best minds of rationalism, have never been matched or surpassed by contemporary Muslims. Today Muslims are mere recipients of knowledge. There have been no seekers and creators of knowledge. Furthermore, an alien popular culture has permeated the hearts and minds of Muslim youths resulting in greater disaffection and detachment from their faith. And where Islam is most pronouncedly felt, it is in the form of obscurantism, terrorism or rigid conservatism.

Ladies and gentlemen,

13. Any attempt at resurrecting the glory of the Islamic civilisation must begin by identifying the priorities of the ummah. And this can only be done by performing a socioeconomic audit of Muslim countries and communities. We will find that an increasingly liberalised global economy will demand efficiency and competitiveness that may be above and beyond the capabilities of the ummah today. Certainly, economic survival is something that confronts every Muslim state and community today.

14. Since 1970, Malaysia has implemented an affirmative action policy designed to uplift the living standards of the indigenous population who are predominantly Muslims. We have endeavoured to provide opportunities for our ummah to empower themselves with skills and knowledge. However, these efforts were nearly undone when the Asian financial crisis swept through the region. Alhamdulillah, we survived but the crisis laid bare the absence of any morality or compassion in globalisation. The unfettered capital markets brought by liberalisation has encouraged avarice and little else. Capitalism's search for efficiency has shown that there is no place for equity or compassion.

15. We are also now witnessing how information and communication technologies are permeating into our lives. Again, Muslims will stand to lose. Muslim countries are far behind western countries in building the necessary infrastructure and critical mass of knowledge workers. The majority of content on the internet is generated by the United States, promoting cultures that can further erode the ummah's faith in our religion.

16. The solution to these realities should not be reactionary. Muslims must not lash out at globalisation or the digital revolution. We must instead attend to our priorities, and first and foremost is the continued need to uplift the lives of Muslims and to provide quality opportunities that would enable Muslims to succeed. The Holy Quran clearly states: Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves.

17. By focusing on socioeconomic issues and the physical well-being of the ummah, we will come nearer to realising the Maqasid al-Shariah. Only by forming a new intellectual consensus on achieving the Maqasid al-Shariah can Muslims square up to the challenges of this new era. Without a holistic approach that addresses faith, life,

intellect, posterity and wealth, falah, or human well being, and hayat tayyibah, or the good life, cannot be achieved.

18. Muslims are also being held back by what we perceive as the rigidity of our religion. The notion that the Islamic concept of law is absolute and hence immutable has resulted in intellectual inertia among the learned. The net effect has been a religion that is out of tune with the rapidly changing circumstances of the ummah. We must remember that Islam was once the dominant worldview because it responded with dynamism to scientific discoveries and modernisation. Muhammad Iqbal, in his reconstruction of religious thought in Islam states that "Since things have changed and the world of Islam is today confronted and affected by new forces set free by extraordinary development of human thought in all its directions, I see no reason why the attitude of finality in the legal schools should be maintained. The teaching of the Quran that life is a process of progressive creation necessitates that each generation, guided but unhampered by the work of its predecessor, should be permitted to solve its own problems".

19. In other words, we must acknowledge the importance of contemporary ijtiḥād. Without the exertion of independent reasoning and reinterpretation Islam will remain in stasis, unable to retain the faith of the young or encourage an intellectual tradition that will see the flowering of thought and the acquisition of knowledge. I believe that a maqasid-oriented ijtiḥād is essential for Muslims to face the challenges of today. Such a policy orientation departs from the rigidity and orthodoxy that places little emphasis on the broader goals of the maqasid.

Ladies and gentlemen,

20. If Muslims are able to understand this for themselves and form a new consensus within this framework, I believe that Islam will have a more central role in the global political economy. We must approach present challenges with a broader set of objectives enshrined in the maqasid, and our approach needs to be characterised not only by ijtiḥād, but also by Fiqh al-Awlawiyyat, or the understanding of priorities.

21. And it is very clear that the priority for Muslim communities the world over lies in improving our lot. This means policy-orientation that can promote socioeconomic development in education, human resource development and R&D. This means training Muslims to become proficient in new technologies and producing well-qualified professionals in all fields. This means developing an economy that is resilient and competitive, yet just and equitable. These are all objectives that we have tried to achieve in Malaysia. We believe that we have our priorities right and that Islam enjoins us to build the capacity and capabilities of Muslims. We constantly strive to infuse our Muslims with dynamism and encourage them to attain excellence in whatever they do.

22. Sadly, the greatest threat to Muslims, in Malaysia and elsewhere, are Muslims themselves. I am afraid that the ummah will not be able to see beyond the rigidities that have been erected by the reactionaries. Their inability to aspire for a holistic objective based on independent reasoning and the understanding of priorities threatens to fossilise Islamic teaching by promoting a thoroughly anti- intellectual approach that merely highlights the prohibitive aspect of our religion.

23. I hope that you will not shirk from the challenge of discussing this dichotomy at this conference. Without concerted efforts by intellectuals to push against the forces of conservatism and obscurantism, we will not be able to usher in a meaningful resurgence of Islam in the face of new challenges.

24. I believe this is a shame because Islam has much to teach the world, and much to offer to rectify the evils of globalisation and the prevalent world view. Issues of social justice, equality, fraternity and freedom are areas in which globalisation, as it exists, today, cannot deliver. It is an area in which Islam can and must guide the way. The al- Quran states: O ye who believe! Eat not up your property among yourselves in vanities: but let there be amongst you traffic and trade by mutual good-will: nor kill (or destroy) yourselves: for verily god hath been to you most merciful.

25. This spirit of compassion, cooperation, justice and peace must guide the global political economy. But the world's acceptance of Islam and its message can only occur if we, as Muslims, set an example that is worthy of emulation. We must unite and cooperate. And we must develop, not only spiritually, but physically by creating an ummah that is educated, successful, modern, moderate and free from the ties of conservative dogma that can chain us to perpetual mediocrity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

26. I note with expectation that one of the aims of the organisers is to establish an Asia-Europe Muslim Foundation; perhaps this can be called the Transmadina Foundation. It is hoped that this foundation will help forge many levels of partnership whether it is academic, business or governance.

27. Again I would like to congratulate the organisers: The International Islamic Political Economy Network; the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia; the Islamic Arts Museum; the Penang Malay Chamber of Commerce; Da'wa Foundation; and ISDAG-UTM. I would also like to congratulate the Albukhary Foundation for graciously sponsoring this conference.

28. I wish each and every one of you a fruitful meeting. Bismillahirrahmanirrahim, with this I declare the conference open.

Thank you.