

**SPEECH BY
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AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE OIC CONFERENCE OF THE MINISTERS
OF ENDOWMENTS AND ISLAMIC AFFAIRS
AT KUALA LUMPUR
6 MAY 2002**

1. It gives me great pleasure to address such a distinguished audience. I would like to take this opportunity to extend a warm welcome to all the delegates to this conference, which is being held here in Kuala Lumpur for the first time.

2. We are grateful to Allah the almighty for allowing us once again to meet each other. This conference, which is being held for the seventh time, is only held once every three years. I am sure that given the long intervening period since the last time we met, many issues affecting the development of the ummah have arisen.

3. This gathering therefore presents an important window of opportunity for key leaders of the Islamic world to meet, discuss and exchange views with an open mind. I am confident that the ideas to be put forward and deliberated can and will have a positive impact on the progress and development of the entire ummah.

4. These are challenging times for the ummah. The events of last September have starkly exposed the misconceptions and suspicions that others hold against Muslims. Our brothers and sisters in some parts of the world are forced to live under the yoke of tyranny and oppression. It is clear that collectively, we lack economic strength and global political influence, making efforts to counter these mistaken allegations slow and difficult. This is saddening because Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. Globally, it has the second most number of adherents. It can speak of a glorious tradition of innovation and achievement. However, we remain unable to capitalise on these strengths.

5. A major reason is that we have not always been able to face the rest of the world with a united voice. The levels of cooperation and collaboration between us can still be elevated further. We must work harder in these areas, because divisiveness and discord will ultimately destroy the ummah. It will render us weak and susceptible to the interference of forces who would benefit from that weakness.

6. However, it would be unrealistic to expect all Muslims around the world to share the same points of view on every single matter. We must accept that, as in any family and any community, there will be differences of opinion. Nevertheless, these differences can be resolved, especially through forums such as this one. In the broader interests of the global Muslim community, it is imperative to work out any differences through consultation and rational discussion. Indeed, all Muslims are brothers as provided by Allah the almighty in surah al-Hujuraat, verse 10: The believers are but a single brotherhood. So make reconciliation between your brothers, and fear Allah, that you may receive mercy.

7. We would be well advised to take heed these words. By holding fast to the commandments of Allah we can become a strong ummah respected by the world community, insyaAllah.

8. A sound and thriving economy is key to efforts to develop a progressive and successful ummah. Although it is presently true that much of the Muslim world is considered underdeveloped, this is a situation that can be rectified. We should learn from the early history of the Islamic development in medina.

9. Although the Jews were rich and were the ones who controlled the economy of medina at the time, the prophet - peace be upon him - did not depend on them to help the Muhajirin. Instead, he and his companions worked hard to build their own economy. The prophet and his companions engaged in trade to encourage Muslims to participate in various economic activities. Among others, goods such as food, textiles and assorted agriculture products were traded. Ultimately, Muslims succeeded in becoming a financially successful community, able to stand on its own. Thus, economic development became a solid bedrock upon which an advanced and prosperous society was built.

10. It is therefore apparent that prosperity is critical to ensure the progress of the ummah. We must not allow our Muslim brothers and sisters to wallow in deprivation. If unchecked, poverty will place immeasurable pressures on the very fabric of our societies. The Prophet Muhammad- peace be upon him - has reminded us in a hadeeth by saying: Poverty can lead to kufr (infidelity)

11. To avoid this disastrous occurrence, we must take fate into our own hands and not point our fingers at others. Why should we rely on others to provide welfare and humanity? The notion of helping one another should exist among Islamic countries. There might be differences in terms of culture and skin colour. However, we are brothers and sisters in Islam and accordingly, we must be prepared to extend assistance to them in their time of need.

12. We believe that the delegates of this conference will be able to think and propose appropriate measures to be implemented in order to provide solutions to such problems. For example, more efficient administration of endowments could provide the of a social net. Additionally, it may be worth exploring the possibility of establishing an Islamic loan fund to effectively assist poor Islamic countries. Who better to assist Muslims than Muslims themselves? This is the time to prove to the world that Islamic governments, Islamic countries and Islamic communities can effectively address the economic plight of the ummah.

13. It would be tragic if the billions of dollars in resources at the disposal of Islamic countries cannot uplift the quality of life of the ummah simply due to our failure to mobilise and manage those resources properly.

14. Many of the building blocks for sustained and lasting economic growth are present in the modern day Muslim world. Many of the 56 member countries of the OIC have been blessed by Allah with rich and diverse natural resources. Much of this bounty remains untapped and under utilised.

15. In addition, it is estimated that there are close to two billion Muslims living in the world today, approximately one-third of the world's population. This represents a sizable labour force and pool of talent to drive the engines of economic growth. This also represents a significant block of consumers in global terms, able to provide a viable market for Islamic goods and services.

16. Islam recognises the benefits that are derived from commercial activity. It is stated in the Al Quran: O ye who believe! Eat not up your property among yourselves in vanities: but let there be amongst you traffic and trade by mutual goodwill: nor kill (or destroy) yourselves: for verily god hath been to you most merciful.

In addition, the prophet - peace be upon him - said in a hadeeth: Ninety percent of the source of bounty is from trade.

17. For these reasons, I believe much can be derived from strengthening the bonds for increased trade and economic cooperation between Muslim nations. Muslims should be the primary market for the output of other Muslims. We should resolve to step up importing and exporting commodities amongst ourselves. We should seek to consume one another's goods and use one another's services wherever possible. We should broaden our horizons and visit each other's countries as tourists more frequently.

18. Perhaps part of the problem lies in our own attitudes. We sometimes place a greater premium on goods and services that originate from the developed world. It is an unfortunate stance to adopt, because many Islamic based institutions are just as competent and efficient as their counterparts from the rest of the world. For instance, many western banking groups have established units to cater for Islamic finance and investments. While these institutions can undoubtedly provide good service, why should they exclusive manage funds for the Muslim world? If an investment bank or asset manager from the Muslim world can perform the same function with the same level of quality, then it should be given a chance. Islamic corporations will never be able compile a track record and grow if Muslims continuously look to the non- Islamic world. Consequently, we would remain uncompetitive and dependent upon others to provide us the services we need.

19. In the long run, the well-being of the ummah rests in its ability to adapt and innovate. The world is a rapidly changing place, with the strides in technology and communications changing the way we live. As Muslims, we cannot afford to stand still and stagnate. We should be able to gain from and contribute to technological advances that are benefiting the rest of the world.

20. Muslims seem to be often stereotyped as being backward. Although this sweeping generalisation is patently unfair, a rigid and narrow interpretation of Islam can have the effect of restricting innovation. Indeed, misinterpreting the meaning and concept of Islam can stunt the growth of the ummah and close us off from worldly developments.

21. Absence of innovation should be a cause for concern to us. Resistance to creative thought is inconsistent to Islamic heritage. Names like Ibnu Sina, Al-Khawarizmi and Al-Battani resonate throughout history as giants who revolutionised medicine, mathematics and science. The Abbasid caliphate was the centre of learning and invention when Europe was stumbling through the dark ages.

22. It is my belief that the ummah must embrace modernity in order to survive. The wholehearted pursuit of knowledge should be high in our list of priorities we must be prepared to learn from the discoveries of others. Engage and participate in scientific debate to improve ourselves. There is nothing wrong with learning and absorbing from non-islamic sources, as long as the underlying principles are consistent with the

syariah. Islam does not prevent us from learning something beneficial from those who are successful as long as we do not sacrifice the principles and values of our religion. In fact, the great Islamic thinkers of the past studied the works from Greek and roman philosophers, in the same fashion that the Europeans of the renaissance gained knowledge from Ibnu Sina and his brethren.

24. If we can successfully revive the Islamic tradition of scientific innovation, then we would be well positioned to rekindle the embers of the golden era of Islamic civilisation.

25. In closing, I call upon all delegates to make this conference a forum that will give a new life to the development of ummah now and in the future. Allah the almighty has decreed in the holy Quran: Never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves

26. I wish you all an enlightening and productive conference, with the hope that you will be able to come up with many beneficial and creative resolutions.

27. By pronouncing Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim, I hereby declare this conference of OIC ministers of endowments and Islamic affairs open.

Wassalamu `alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh.