

KEYNOTE ADDRESS
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AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE "WHO SPEAKS FOR ISLAM? WHO
SPEAKS FOR THE WEST?" AT SHANGRI LA, KUALA LUMPUR
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Excellencies
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen

Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh
and good morning.

It is a real delight for me to see so many renowned scholars and thinkers assembled in Kuala Lumpur to discuss such a pertinent issue as who speaks for Islam and who speaks for the West. It is auspicious that this dialogue begins on a Friday, which is observed by Muslims everywhere, every week, as a special day. To those of you who have come from afar, I bid you a very warm welcome. I do hope that your stay in Malaysia will be both pleasant and rewarding.

2. The two questions: "Who Speaks for Islam? and Who Speaks for the West?" are amongst the most fundamental issues in the interface between two great civilizations - the Islamic World and the Christian West. Their answers are not only important in determining the relationship between Islam and the West but are also vital in shaping the future of humankind because Christians and Muslims make up at least half of the world's people. There are 2039 million Christians accounting for 32% of the world's population and there are 1226 million Muslims making up 19% of the total.

3. When we ask you to search for the answers to the two questions, it is not our intention to point fingers at any religion nor to apportion blame on anyone regarding the state of affairs which now exist between the Islamic World and the West. What we seek is the truth which can serve the best interests of all humankind, and help bring peace to this troubled world of ours. Let us pray to God the Almighty, so that He gives us wisdom, courage and determination to discover the answers.

4. I do not suggest for a moment that "Islam" or the "West" are monolithic entities. There is tremendous heterogeneity in both civilizations. Both manifest diverse and sometimes contradictory trends and tendencies. Having made that clarification, allow me to continue to speak of Islam and the West in the way they are normally understood.

5. Let me say at the outset that while there are a multitude of voices that speak on behalf of Islam on the one hand, and the West on the other, there are certain voices, which I feel, do not do justice to either Islam or the West.

6. I hold the strong view that, in the case of Islam, those who deliberately kill non-combatants and the innocent; those who oppress and exploit others; those who are corrupt and greedy; those who are chauvinistic and communal, do not speak on behalf of Islam.

7. In the case of the West, I do not regard them as defenders of Western civilization those who invade and occupy someone else's land; those who systematically cause innocent children, women and men to be killed; those who oppress other people and exploit their resources for their own selfish ends; or those who are racist in outlook and bigoted in their religious beliefs. Anyone who seeks to dominate and control, who attempts to establish global hegemony, cannot claim to be spreading freedom and equality at the same time.

8. Who then speaks for Islam? Who then speaks for the West? The Noble Quran speaks for Islam. At its core is an eternal message of justice and compassion, of equality and humanity, of peace and solidarity. There is, besides, the Prophet's exemplary life and mission which reflect the quintessence of Islam. Through their struggles and sacrifices, the illustrious caliphs from Abu Bakr to Salahuddin Al-Ayubi (Saladin) also succeeded in bringing to the fore the authentic face of the religion.

9. In a sense, the great accomplishments of Muslim civilization - in science and medicine as in agriculture and architecture - served to enhance the image of Islam. The scholars who were responsible for these accomplishments such as Al-Kwarizmi and Ibn Sina should be regarded as the true voices of the religion.

10. It follows from this that in the contemporary world, it is those who uphold justice, who fight tyranny, who seek liberation from oppression, who are honest and upright, who are universal and inclusive in word and deed, are the ones who represent the real message of Islam.

11. One should also add that those who protect the rights of the human being, those who treasure the dignity of women and the welfare of children, those who preserve the integrity of the family, those who help the poor and feed the hungry, those who live in harmony with the environment, are also speaking on behalf of Islam.

12. In a nutshell, all Muslims anywhere who sincerely endeavor to live according to the universal values and principles of the Quran are the true spokespersons of Islam. What this means is that the overwhelming majority of Muslims, who by and large lead decent lives, are already speaking for the religion.

13. To express the principles of life that are important to ordinary Muslims as demonstrated in Islamic civilization, I have personally sought to promote an approach which I call "Islam Hadhari" which we have defined as "a comprehensive

approach to the development of mankind, society and country based on the perspective of Islamic civilization". The 10 principles of Islam Hadhari embody universal values which have endowed the religion with strength and character through the ages. The ten principles are, namely :

- i. Faith and piety in Allah;
- ii. A just and trustworthy government;
- iii. A free and independent people;
- iv. A vigorous pursuit and mastery of knowledge;
- v. A balanced and comprehensive economic development;
- vi. A good quality of life for the people;
- vii. The protection of the rights of minority groups and women;
- viii. Cultural and moral integrity;
- ix. The safeguarding of natural resources and the environment;
- x. Strong defense capabilities

14. I consider this fresh approach as a necessary part of the reform and renewal that is needed in Islamic countries and in Muslim societies as a whole. Malaysia feels that it is well placed to begin this journey of reform and renewal because it is a multi-racial and multi-religious country in which we treat our diversity as an asset to be nurtured. In fact, we are merely building upon the tolerance we have observed and the inter-faith co-existence which we have practised in the country for decades. We wish to show by example that a Muslim country can be modern, economically competitive, democratic and fair to all its citizens irrespective of their religions.

15. Islam Hadhari is not a new religion or mazhab. It is not a new ideology. It is not meant to pacify the West. It is neither an approach to apologize for the perceived Islamic threat nor an approach to seek approval for a more friendly and gentle image of Islam. It is the way for practising the religion in these modern times but firmly rooted in the noble values and injunctions of Islam.

16. Islam Hadhari is what Muslims should emphasize in the contemporary world, the pursuit of knowledge being one of the most fundamental. It is another way of saying that there are certain civilizational principles in the religion whose realization will bring greatness and glory to the Muslim Community, the Ummah, today, just as they had propelled the Islamic civilization to such splendour and magnificence in the past.

17. Western civilization too has its share of greatness and majestic accomplishments. We must acknowledge that in the West, principles such as freedom and equality have found concrete expression in the rule of law, public accountability, acceptance of political dissent and respect for popular participation. We must also acknowledge that many great statesmen and reformers of the past made sterling efforts to redistribute wealth, to equalize opportunities and to achieve equity and social justice. They may be regarded as the true spokespersons of the West. Admittedly, the West is also the civilization that has given birth to a whole host of scientists and researchers, from Newton to Einstein on the one hand, and from Marie Curie to Alexander Fleming, on the other, who have contributed immensely to the well-being of humankind.

18. However, for a lot of Muslims today, this is not the face of the West that they see. It is the hegemony of the centers of power in the West that is most visible to them. They see the subjugation of Palestine as an indirect concretization of this hegemony. They see hegemony manifested directly in the attack upon Afghanistan and in the occupation of Iraq. These are some of the realities which confront the Muslim masses today.

19. Of course, there are other manifestations of hegemonic power which have also made a deep impression upon the Muslim mind. These include foreign military bases in Muslim countries; the dominant presence of huge Western corporations; the pervasive impact of currency markets; the ever expanding security tentacles of the super-power; plus certain negative traits and influence of western culture and ideas.

20. At the popular level, the West is perceived as "biased" against Islam and the Muslims. Muslims feel, rightly or wrongly, that they have become the victims of double standards and selective persecution. More specifically, Muslims see those responsible for the devastation of Jenin and Fallujah, and the humiliation of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, as the ugly face of the West that speak for the West.

21. Similarly, many in the West see Islam as synonymous with violence. The Muslim is viewed as a congenital terrorist. They think Osama bin Laden speaks for the religion and its followers. Islam and Muslims are linked to all that is negative and backward. For example, Muslim men, it is alleged, oppress their wives. Women it is said, have no rights in Islam. Some so-called Western "experts" on Islam argue that Muslims invariably discriminate against non-Muslims. They say Muslims are intolerant. They say Islam is incompatible with democracy and modernity. The demonization of Islam and the vilification of Muslims, there is no denying, is widespread within mainstream Western society.

22 It is the duty of all people of goodwill to work hard to change these negative perceptions on both sides of the divide. Undoubtedly, the task is not going to be easy. For these perceptions have deep roots. Since the advent of Islam at the beginning of the 7th century, Christian, and to a lesser degree, Jewish antipathy towards the religion and its Prophet, Muhammad, has grown into active antagonism. The crusades, Western colonialism, the imposition of Israel upon the Arab world, post-colonial hegemony and the Western desire to control oil and gas, especially those supplies coming from the Muslim countries, have all contributed in one way or another to the huge chasm that has emerged between the West and Islam. The targeting of so-called "Islamic terrorists" in the global fight against terrorism aggravated the situation and the senseless violence of the terrorists themselves has made things worse.

23. Quite clearly, we will not be able to change the situation by mere talk, dialogue and being nice to one another. We must be brave enough, and we must be honest enough, to admit that as long as there is hegemony, as long as one side attempts to control and dominate the other, the animosity and antagonism between the two

civilizations will continue. This is why hegemony must end. Mutual respect for one another should replace hegemony. Reciprocity should become the ethical principle that conditions relations between the West and Islam. The West should treat Islam the way it wants Islam to treat the West and vice versa. They should accept one another as equals. Respect, reciprocity and equality: these are the essential prerequisites for a happy and harmonious relationship between the two civilizations.

24. It is significant that in both civilizations, there exist men and women today who are working towards a genuine transformation in relations, which will bring to an end the animosity and antagonism of the past and the present.

25. There are many in the West for instance who realize that the exercise of hegemonic power and the demonization of Islam are not conducive for inter-civilizational peace. It is these voices that the world should listen to. Likewise, there are numerous groups and individuals in the Muslim world who are deeply distressed by the violence and terror perpetrated by certain fringe groups within the Ummah, just as they are equally uncomfortable with the sweeping denunciations of Christians, Jews and the West. They do oppose hegemony and occupation but their words are authentic voices of Islam.

26. Certain voices, both in the West and in the Muslim world, are not given the prominence they deserve. The mainstream media should give much more attention to them. It is only too apparent that these two groups - one in the West and the other in the Muslim world - share a common perspective on some of the critical challenges facing both civilizations and the world at large. Both are opposed to hegemony. Both reject violence and terror. Both yearn for a just and peaceful world. Both are united by a common bond. It is this common bond that makes them bridge-builders.

27. It is such fine men and women who are capable of reaching out to one another, who are willing to transcend the civilizational divide, that we need badly at this juncture in history. It is a pity that there are not enough of them. One of our most urgent tasks is to multiply the bridge-builders. We must develop through the family, through education and the media tens of thousands of men and women who can be critical of the weaknesses and wrongdoings of one's civilization and, at the same time, are empathetic towards "the other" civilization. When the bridge-builders reach a critical mass, their collective power would become so overwhelming that it would destroy the walls erected by those who are hell bent on keeping Islam and the West apart.

28. At that point, when the bridge-builders reign supreme, the people of the West will speak for Islam and the Muslims will speak for the West.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

29. Let us start now by curbing the extremists in our midst. We must put a stop to

the mockery of any religion or the sacrilege of any symbol held sacred by the faithful. Let us not underestimate the power of religion as an imperative for people to act. In the face of fanaticism and hysteria, we must take action to counsel moderation and rationality. The rhetoric of war will not help. The writings of the mighty pen based on prejudices will also not help.

30. On that note, let me conclude by congratulating the Malaysian "Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations" and "Dialogues: Islamic World - U.S - the West" for organizing this very important conference and for bringing together to Malaysia a prominent group of people who are serious about the subject of dialogue between civilizations. I would like to propose that this conference be held as an annual event. A dialogue such as this can serve as a Confidence Building Measure.

31. For those who have come from abroad, I invite you to take this opportunity to look around you and witness for yourself the Malaysia that you might have heard of. I hope you will be able to bear witness to our efforts at nation-building in which inter-faith and inter-ethnic harmony lies at the core of our national development programme.

Thank you.