

**SPEECH BY
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Your Excellency Ambassador Malayvieng Sakonhnhinhom,
Chair of ASEAN-ISIS,

Dato' Jawhar Hassan, Conference Chairman,

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

1. This year's Asia Pacific Roundtable is special to many of us. It is the twentieth anniversary of the Asia Pacific Roundtable. It is an occasion for us to celebrate an initiative for security dialogue whose longevity is testimony to its great and continuing relevance. But this Roundtable is also special for another reason, this one a cause for sadness. We no longer have amongst us Noordin Sopiee, the main figure that made this Roundtable what it is today.

2. May I, on behalf of all gathered here, convey our heartfelt condolences to Puan Sri Shamsiah and the members of the family who are here. Their loss is ours as well. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in remembering our late and very dear friend, each according to our faith....

Ladies and gentlemen,

3. During the course of these three days you will be discussing some of the major challenges confronting regional and global security. I think you will agree with me if I said that perhaps the most profound and far-reaching in its implications is the current tension between what are broadly referred to as the West and the Muslim world. This tension is perhaps the least understood of the present conflicts. It is also one of the most distorted, because of the powerful emotions, prejudices and political interests that are brought to bear upon any discussion of the issue.

4. I would like to devote my address today to this urgent and growing problem. I will begin by reminding ourselves of previous examples of conflict between groups with different belief systems. I will then share with you my understanding of the current tensions between the West and the Muslim world, and the forces dividing the two sides and impelling them towards confrontation. I will end with some views on how we can arrest the slide and heal the rifts.

5. I hope both the West and the Muslim world will forgive me for being less than politically correct at times with what I am going to say. I believe that hewing closely to what is politically correct, what will not offend constituencies on one side of the divide or the other, and what serves the powerful best, has been part of the problem. I hope that at a forum like the Asia Pacific Roundtable, where we are encouraged to go beyond self-serving rhetoric to address the real issues, my candidness will not only be pardoned by all sides, but be welcomed as well.

Ladies and gentlemen,

6. Conflicts between people professing different beliefs are nothing new. They have occurred since time immemorial. Often however, the conflicts are not so much conflicts between followers of different faiths. Rather, they are conflicts between people of different ethnic groups, or people who have conflicting political and economic interests, who happen to be of different faiths. The differences in faith then become emphasised, and are used by the conflicting parties in different ways to serve their objectives and interests.

7. We can recall many such examples in history as well as in contemporary times. The Reconquista between Christians and Muslims that was waged over eight centuries revolved around territory although religion distinguished the two sides. The Crusades lasted two centuries. Again, two religious groups fought over territory and holy places. The French Wars of Religion between the Catholics and the Protestant Huguenots lasted for much of the 16th century and extended into the 17th.

8. More recent examples include the conflict involving Muslims, Roman Catholics and Serbian Orthodox in Bosnia-Herzegovena; Russian Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Chechnya; Jews, Muslims and Christians in Palestine; mostly Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir; largely Hindus and Buddhists in Sri Lanka; Muslims and Buddhists in southern Thailand; Muslims and Catholics in southern Philippines; Muslims and Christians in Indonesia's Ambon and Halmahera provinces; and Christians and Muslims in the former East Timor.

9. Sometimes the conflict is between people who are within the same family of religions, such as between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland and between Sunni and Shi'a in Iraq and Pakistan.

10. In all these instances religion is sometimes an important factor, but the conflicts are not over divinities or belief systems. They are not confrontations between the Cross and the Crescent, or between Brahma and Buddha. Instead, they are over issues such as power, territory, resources, rights and freedom from oppression or occupation. Indeed, the most important point we note is that, were it not for these other issues, the religious groups would not be in conflict with one another.

11. Political, economic and ethnic factors have also driven people of the same faith to fight each other. In fact, some of the bloodiest wars and conflicts were fought between Christians in Europe in the last century, between Muslims in the case of Iraq and Iran, and between Buddhists in Cambodia.

12. The same dynamics are at play in conflicts between different secular ideologies. The titanic struggle between communism and capitalism during the Cold War was less over the merits of either ideology although both sides broadcast their virtues. Rather, it was over empire and strategic sway. If the two powers behind the ideologies had not sought expansion or hegemony and were content to remain within their respective borders, there would have been little conflict. There is little conflict now for instance, between Europe and China, or between the United States and Vietnam.

13. But our focus today is on the prevailing tensions between the West and the Muslim world. Perhaps the best place to begin is by clarifying the issues and sorting the myths from the realities. Belying the tensions is the fact that much of the West and the Muslim world in fact work very closely together in every dimension. Our economic interests are heavily intertwined. Oil is only a small, though strategic, part of it. We trade with each other and invest heavily in one another. We engage with each other in countless multilateral institutions and forums. They embrace us in a web of multilayered cooperation for mutual benefit.

14. There is substantial cooperation and common purpose in the political and security fields as well. Virtually every Muslim government is fully involved in the global campaign against international terrorism, and is party to almost all international instruments relating to it. In fact, security cooperation with the United States in particular has increased significantly for most Muslim countries since the September 11 terrorist attacks.

15. Yes, there are many bridges that connect our two worlds. Many of us in fact live in each other's world. There are significant Muslim communities in many Western countries, working and voting as citizens. Europe is home to about 12 million Muslims. Another six million call themselves Americans. Today, the skylines of many Western cities are punctured by the minarets of mosques, lined alongside the spires of churches. The same landscape greets the eye in Indonesia, the largest Muslim nation, where every tenth Indonesian is a Christian. Here in Malaysia Christians, Hindus and Buddhists join Muslims in the Cabinet to manage the country and share political power.

16. We also often share the same world when we access the news, watch the movies and take part in sports. But it would be a blind person indeed who cannot see that despite all the bridges between them, the gulf between the West and the Muslim world has widened.

17. There are religious undertones to the current phenomenon, and stereotypes and prejudices abound on both sides. Both worlds, one largely Christian and the other essentially Muslim, have their extremists and militants. A small fraction of Muslims calls for violent jihad against the "infidel" Christians. The struggle against foreign occupation and military presence in Israel, Iraq and Afghanistan has also been called a jihad. Terrorist groups targeting the United States and its allies claim to be fighting a jihad. On the other side, there have been calls for a "crusade", the Christian equivalent of jihad. Some influential evangelical Christian leaders with wide followings have also called Islam – and I quote – "a very evil and wicked religion" and "a monumental scam". Similarly they have called the Prophet Muhammad – I quote again – "a terrorist" and "a robber and a brigand".

18. Terrorist attacks against Western targets perpetrated by groups in the name of Islam since September 11 have also triggered strong suspicion and distrust of Muslim minorities living in Western countries. There is now perceptible intolerance and antipathy towards Muslims driven by a new wave of Islamophobia.

19. Perhaps the worst manifestation of this religious dimension of the tensions between the West and the Muslim world was the controversy over the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. Already alienated by a host of other perceived injustices, the Muslim world closed ranks and erupted in anger, because pictorial depictions of the prophets of Islam, including Moses and Jesus, are prohibited by the religion. Associating a bomb denoting terrorism with the revered Prophet Muhammad incensed Muslims around the globe.

20. But to see the present problems between the West and the Muslim world in essentially religious terms would be to both distort and to misrepresent them. Just as the other conflicts in history involving people of different faiths were largely driven by other powerful factors, so are the present problems. I think you will all agree with me that the main factors bedevilling our relations today are political in nature.

21. We do not need to go into the long and occasionally tortuous episodes of our history to establish this. Suffice to note that in the last nearly sixty years and to this day, the primary issue driving a wedge between the two worlds has been the Palestinian issue. No other issue has alienated the Muslim world from the United States in particular as much as this issue. Palestine is also the issue that divides the Arab and Muslim world and Israel.

22. But I think you will agree with me that the further deterioration in our relations at present dates from the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, the "war" on terror, and the invasion of Iraq by predominantly Western powers. In the years since then other developments have aggravated the situation. Terrorist attacks against Western interests in Indonesia, the bombings in Madrid and London, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and the persistent unrest in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to arouse sentiment on both sides.

23. Two other major issues are presently further complicating relations. One is the pressure on Iran mounted by Western powers to prevent it from enriching uranium for peaceful nuclear energy because of suspicion that Iran will develop nuclear weapons. The West on the other hand turns a studiously blind eye on the nuclear weapons already possessed by Israel. One of the ironies of the situation is that this same nuclear weapon-armed Israel is condemning Iran for allegedly developing nuclear weapons. No Western power appears to notice anything odd about this.

24. The other major issue is the denial of assistance to the Palestinian people and the government of their democratic choice by Western powers, because Hamas is considered a terrorist organisation and because it has not recognised Israel and the road-map. Even taxes collected on behalf of the Palestinian government and people, which is legitimately theirs, is withheld by Israel in violation of all moral and legal principles. In the meantime what was already a critical situation in the occupied Palestinian territories is developing into a humanitarian disaster, and the situation is being allowed to descend into chaos. Moved by the plight of the Palestinian people, my Government has allocated 16 million US dollars to meet emergency needs. The funds will be channelled through the Palestinian President to the 16 local authorities.

25. One cannot leave this discussion of the factors aggravating relations between the West and the Muslim world without mentioning the unfortunate association of terrorism with Islam and Muslims. We must hold three main parties accountable for this: the groups that commit terror in the name of Islam; governments that attempt to demonise and thereby criminalise legitimate movements of resistance and national liberation; and the media.

26. Islam like any other universal religion abhors and prohibits terrorist acts against innocent civilians. But when groups championing the legitimate cause of Muslims and calling themselves by Muslim names commit acts of terror, it is difficult to prevent the association of Muslims and their religion with terrorism.

27. On the other hand, there are also armed movements comprising Muslims engaged in legitimate struggles against occupying forces and oppressive government, that do not commit acts of terror against innocent people. They are respectable movements deserving of our sympathy and support. Yet the governments that see them as a threat to their interests declare them as terrorists so as to stigmatise them, undermine their credibility and deny them international sympathy and support.

28. The media's role is well known. Their responsibility is to convey the truth. But even the best of them must tailor their reporting with an eye for sales. It is no surprise therefore that the media often go for the sensational rather than the important. Both the West and the Muslim world are at the receiving end of this phenomenon. Images of violence and gore, and abuse and scandal, get more than their fair share of media space.

29. But the global media, dominated as it is by Western perspectives and interests, often impacts more negatively on the Muslim world. We see only what we are permitted to see in Afghanistan and Iraq. This is often also the case in the occupied territories of Palestine. When Western countries make a demand upon say Iran or Hamas, the media often refers to the demands as coming from "the international community", echoing the public statements of the leaders of those countries. When Muslim nations voice a position they are never referred to as the "international community" although they are greater in number.

30. When I as the Chairman of the Organisation of Islamic Conference, as well as other Muslim leaders, condemn an act of terror or unruly demonstrations against the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, we are worthy at best of only a brief and passing mention. The terrorist act and the unruly demonstrations on the other hand are shown on television over and over again. The moderate voice in Islam is then criticised for not doing enough.

31. Let me proceed now to what can be done to heal the rifts between the West and the Muslim world. Some serious efforts are already being made, by both sides. One of them is to organise dialogues between the West, or countries in the West, and the Muslim world. The value of these dialogues can be immense if they focus both on the ties that bind as well as the issues that divide. We must strengthen the ties, and narrow the divide.

32. Among the ties that bind, it may not be sufficiently realised that we are actually closer than we think. For instance, we share the same religious heritage, and trace our roots to the same God. Islam embraces all the Jewish and Christian apostles and prophets. Muslims are commonly named after the Muslim prophets who are also Jewish and Christian prophets. We share common names, like Joseph (or Pak Jusuf here) and Yusuf, Ishmael and Ismail, Jesus and Isa, Abraham and Ibrahim, Moses and Musa, Isaiah and Ishak, John and Johan, as the late Noordin's son Johan there, is named.

33. Dialogues can also be useful to clarify issues. One of them is the much misunderstood concept of jihad. In the West and indeed in most of the non-Muslim world jihad is a bad word, thanks to the abuse of the word by terrorists and its distortion by both the Western media and analysts alike. For instance, it is fashionable for even those who consider themselves as experts on terrorism to identify terrorists as jihadis. Terrorism and jihad could not be further apart. As some of you already know, jihad essentially means struggle, struggle to improve oneself morally, spiritually and in the material world. It connotes all that is good, not only in Islam but in all other religions as well.

34. A part of the meaning of jihad however, what is known as "lesser jihad", is struggle to defend one's land, possessions and the faith. Defence of one's land, property and faith can extend to the use of arms if, and only if, peaceful means have been exhausted. Islamic rules of engagement in war forbid the harming of innocent people and civilians. Muslims are also permitted, indeed they are enjoined, to help

each other when armed jihad is unavoidable and legitimate, for they are of one Brotherhood and community.

35. It is these provisions of Islam that have been misunderstood or deliberately distorted by elements on all sides. Jihad cannot be equated with terrorism; indeed, jihad and Islamic rules of engagement are the very antithesis of terrorism. Islam condemns the taking of innocent lives and terrorist acts. Terrorists simply cannot be what we erroneously term "jihadis".

36. But Islam does permit the taking up of arms if necessary to defend oneself, one's possessions and one's faith when pacific options have been exhausted. Let me point out that this provision in Islam is no different from provisions in international law. Like any other people or country under manifest threat, Muslims are permitted to take up arms in defence. This right has the same legitimacy and respect that is accorded to it by international law. It should not be maligned or demonised when it does not serve one's political purpose. One cannot salute and support mujahiddeens, and call them brave warriors when they are fighting Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, but condemn others as jihadis and terrorists when they are fighting occupation and oppression elsewhere.

37. The world however must condemn, and condemn in the most uncompromising and unequivocal terms, terrorist acts against innocent civilians committed by any party. We must not provide assistance to those that engage in terrorism. We should not pick and choose according to what we consider are our strategic interests. This should apply to all, including Muslims. Muslim governments, Muslim organisations and Muslim people everywhere must condemn terrorism from every quarter, including their own. They should extend neither assistance nor provide sanctuary to terrorists.

Ladies and gentlemen,

38. Initiatives for dialogue are also useful when they address the issues that divide, the issues that breed hostility between the West and the Muslim world. Forums for dialogue however cannot be selective. They must address all major issues that are relevant to all sides. The issues on the table cannot be chosen with a view to foster change on the other side, but not on our own, so that our agenda can proceed unimpeded. We must not avoid discussing certain issues simply because they happen to be too close for comfort.

39. Thus the Muslim world cannot avoid discussing the role played by the distortion of the teachings of Islam to serve terrorist ends. We avoid discussion only to our own detriment. Muslims must be the first to protect the integrity and sanctity of the teachings of Islam.

40. Similarly, countries of the West should not skirt discussion of some of their policies towards West Asia that are regarded as unjust, and that contribute to anti-Western sentiment, insurgency and terrorism in the Muslim world. Avoiding dialogue on these matters only hurts the long-term interests of the West. Like the Muslim world, the West must uphold the values and principles it professes, or lose credibility and influence. The West must condemn oppression, illegal invasion and illegal occupation. And like the Muslim world, the West must condemn terrorism from any quarter.

Ladies and gentlemen,

41. If forums for dialogue are to be productive, there must not only be a genuine and sincere desire to discuss all relevant issues. There must also be a genuine and sincere desire to act and institute change. Dialogue cannot be a substitute for action. This leads me to what can conceivably be done, by both sides.

42. In my view, among the things that are urgent is to do more to restrain the extremes. The extremes dwell on both sides. The extremes that preach intolerance and hate during Friday sermons in the mosques and in the religious schools. The extremes that do the same in Sunday sermons in the churches and on radio talks. The extremes that believe in imposing their religious doctrines or secular ideologies by force, each absolutely certain of the rightness and morality of its cause. The extremes that too easily propagate terror and counsel war. The extremes that do great wrong in the name of what is right.

These extremes feed upon each other, and they grow fat on each other.

43. Reining in the extremes will not be easy. In times of confrontation and crisis the extremes have great appeal. The moderates have a tough time. The extremes fully exploit religious sentiment, nationalism and patriotism. They play on threats and fears. They wield considerable political power and influence in society.

44. In this regard, some countries in the Muslim world must do more to reform the curriculum and teachings in religious schools. They must be transformed from institutions for breeding intolerance and hatred to centres for cultivating human capital that can thrive in the modern economy. They can do this by infusing students, and indeed the entire society, with the true spirit of Islam.

45. This spirit is what I try to capture in the concept of Islam Hadari that I have introduced. I define Islam Hadari as a comprehensive approach to the development of mankind, society and country based on the perspective of Islamic civilisation. Islam Hadari is not a new religion. I am not starting a new sect. I may be many things, but I don't think I am crazy. Islam Hadari is firmly rooted in the noble values and injunctions of Islam, which if followed will enable Muslim communities everywhere to gain peace, dignity and well-being in the modern world and for all time.

46. Islam Hadari is founded on 10 fundamental principles of Islam which are grounded on universal values, namely:

1. Faith and piety in Allah;
2. A just and trustworthy government;
3. A free and independent people;
4. Vigorous pursuit and mastery of knowledge;
5. Balanced and comprehensive economic development;
6. A good quality of life for the people;
7. The protection of the rights of minority groups and women;
8. Cultural and moral integrity;
9. The safeguarding of natural resources and the environment; and
10. Strong defence capabilities.

47. I believe that the Muslim communities that observe these principles faithfully will flourish and prosper. They will be at peace with themselves. They will be at peace with the rest of the world too, if the rest of the world gives them a chance. This chance the rest of the world can give if it lives by the same principles, for they are universal principles. We will all then share a culture of peace and goodwill, tolerance and harmony, equality and respect, and justice and dignity. We will not oppress our people. We will not kill innocent civilians. We will not conspire to threaten and dominate one another. We will not invade another country, or occupy another people's land. We will not violate our own values and principles, or denigrate those of others.

If we can give each other this chance, the West and the Muslim world will be one.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you a dialogue worthy of this noble aspiration.

Thank you.