

**SPEECH BY
YAB DATO' SERI ABDULLAH BIN HAJI AHMAD BADAWI
BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN CULTURES AND CIVILIZATIONS
AT MEIJI UNIVERSITY, TOKYO
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Mr. Hiromi Naya, President of Meiji University,

Mr. Izumi Nagayoshi, Chairman of the Board of Directors, Meiji University

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great honour for me to receive from the Meiji University of Tokyo the award of its Honorary Doctorate. I feel especially touched by the magnanimity of Meiji University in organizing this special ceremony for the conferment of the degree. I also wish to thank President Hiromi Naya and Chairman Izumi Nagayoshi for giving me the privilege to deliver an address on this occasion. I humbly accept these honours as an expression of your regard not only for me but also for my country. I know that today's event will contribute to the building of further links and bonds of friendship between Meiji University and the people of Malaysia.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

2. A real and present danger to international peace, which has the greatest potential of affecting most directly the lives of peoples everywhere, is the growing schism between the Christian west and the Islamic world. I wish to speak on this subject today, even here in Japan which is neither part of the traditional west nor the world of Islam, because everyone has an equal stake to prevent this divide from developing into the gravest ever threat to global stability. Furthermore, it is most appropriate that I address the issue at this time when the Government of Japan has declared clear intentions to play a more active role in international diplomacy, including concerning the situation in the Middle East.

3. Let me first and foremost emphasize that it is wrong to put the blame on religion as the cause of the conflicts between peoples and cultures that exist in the world today. All genuine religions advocate peace and harmony among peoples as well as acceptance and tolerance of others. Indeed, religious teachings can and should be used to promote an appreciation of other religions, civilizations and ways of life of those professing other religions. This is the case with Islam. The Quran, which is the written foundation of the religion of Islam, is very explicit in recognizing the existence of religions other than Islam.

4. Yet, it has become common place to characterize anything Islamic as being antithesis to everything western, and therefore prejudicial to western interests. I would suggest that much of the prejudices against Islam in the west stems from a lack of understanding of the true nature of Islam as a religion professed by at least 1.4 billion people in the world or more than one fifth of humanity.

5. Westerners tend to view other peoples and other cultures only from the perspective of western benchmarks and philosophies. Western societies, especially in Europe, have generally embraced secularism as a way of life and basis of governance. These societies have largely removed religion from the public domain

into the confines of the home and the family. They therefore fail to comprehend and appreciate why religion plays such a central role in the lives of individual Muslims and in the functioning of Islamic societies everywhere in the world.

6. For the Muslims, the teachings of Islam serve as their guide for doing all things, whether conducting their affairs in the public domain or practising the religion in the privacy of their homes. For the Muslim faithful, irrespective of whether he or she is a political leader, a bureaucrat, a corporate citizen or a simple individual, he or she is first and foremost a Muslim. When dealing with Muslims, one cannot separate them from their religion because that is their way of life.

7. However, we must always make a distinction between Muslims who honestly defend their faith and those who exploit Islam for their own narrow agendas. Indeed, there are perpetrators of crime who carry out evil deeds in the name of Islam. These are not true Muslims. They are in fact the desecrators of the purity of the religion. They are definitely condemned by Islam.

8. We cannot find evidence in history which point to religion as the cause for the current conflict or for the rise of hostility between western and Muslim societies. I believe the explanation is to be found in more recent times, which is the repeated use of force or other machinations, by the powerful over the weak, to secure political, strategic or territorial gains.

9. In this connection, we must accept the fact that the plight of the Palestinians has come to epitomize everything that is unjust and unfair in the treatment of peoples and issues. In fact, the 2006 Report of the U.N High Level Group on the Alliance of Civilizations acknowledged that the issue of Palestine has taken on a symbolic value that colors cross-cultural and political relations well beyond its limited geographical scope.

10. The Islamic world sees the actions of Israel in the Middle East as being supported by powerful western countries, either openly or tacitly, supposedly in defense of the Judeo-Christian tradition against the spread of radical militant Islam, thus legitimizing all of Israel's actions, no matter how brutal.

11. When you add to this the invasion of Afghanistan, the conquest of Iraq, the aggression against Lebanon and the continuing occupation of the Golan Heights, the Muslim world sees a concerted complicity to humiliate Muslims as a people and Islam as their religion.

12. The international community must accept the fact that the festering Palestinian problem, among all factors, is the single most important factor perpetuating the tension between the west in general and the Muslim world as a whole. Any and all efforts at bridging the gap between the Christian west and the world of Islam must give priority to the resolution of the problem of Palestine. To ignore the facts regarding the genesis of the issue of Palestine would be denying the truth. And that would be a sure recipe for continuing failure in finding a solution to the problem.

13. The feeling of being humiliated, compounded by the continuing non resolution of the problems affecting Muslim countries, has transformed into resentment and hostility. This conflict began to acquire religious dimensions when the war on terrorism puts the blame on Islam as a religion harboring extremism. The situation has become clouded by the prevalence of prejudices and hatred on both sides of the

divide. This damaging situation must be rectified.

14. There are also signs that mutual fear, suspicion and ignorance across cultures have spread beyond the level of the political leadership and opinion makers into the hearts and minds of the population. This dangerous trend must be reversed.

15. In my country, Malaysia, we are especially conscious of the need for a proper understanding and appreciation of Islam because ours is a Muslim country in which no less than 30% of its population profess other religions or adopt other forms of worship. My government has embarked upon an initiative to educate the Muslims on the correct approach of practising the Islamic religion for worshipping the Almighty God, and for relating to other people as well as to the national and international environments in which they exist.

16. At the national level, we call this approach Islam Hadhari. The approach is a reminder to Muslims, and a revelation to non Muslims, that Islam in reality is a religion which is tolerant, progressive and peace loving. It is meant to enable Muslims to know the appropriate method of practising the religion as a way of life in these modern times. It exhorts them to be innovative, creative and relevant in this day and age of science and technology. Abiding by the principles of Islam Hadhari would add value to the human capital and would enable them to become more valuable assets to the society.

17. Islam Hadhari is not a new religion. It is not a new mazhab, not a new sect, not a new school of thought of the Islamic religion. It is simply an exposition of the true nature of Islam.

18. At the international level, we offer Islam Hadhari as Malaysia's contribution towards a better understanding of Islam by all concerned, that is by both Muslim and non Muslim societies and peoples. Islam Hadhari advocates good governance. It calls for putting into practice, among others, justice, freedom, love of knowledge, balanced development, a good quality of life for the people, protection of minorities and moral integrity. Islam Hadhari is a demonstration that the teachings of Islam can be used to develop contemporary models of governance and social change that are based on the needs and aspirations of ordinary Muslims. It is a call to apply the deepest wisdom of Islam to find solutions to present day problems.

19. In this connection, let me state that seeking the establishment of a just and equitable international order is a declared objective of Malaysian foreign policy. To be credible in carrying out this campaign, we are well aware that Malaysia must first establish peace and harmony in its own country. We genuinely feel we have accomplished that in Malaysia.

20. Malaysia is thus fully supportive of various efforts at the international level which are designed to generate greater understanding between cultures and civilizations, especially between those of the west and the world of Islam. This dialogue is essential to expose and establish the fact that Islam is a religion which espouses universalism, not exclusivism. Islam is a religion which does not make any distinction between any race or culture.

21. This dialogue between cultures and civilizations should take place at all levels of the international society such as between scholars, writers, activists, academics, journalists. Non-governmental organizations can play an important catalytic role in

this endeavour. Over and above that, the dialogue must have the support of governments.

22. The support of governments is crucial for such inter-cultural or inter-civilization dialogues to succeed because, as I have stated earlier, the root cause of the conflict between cultures and civilizations is not religious but political and strategic in nature. There is no possibility of creating a true alliance of civilizations except with the involvement of governments, ideally through multilateral processes of inter-governmental deliberations such as at the United Nations.

23. The discord which has divided cultures and civilizations may have gone beyond disputes between the leadership of governments to the hearts and minds of their populations. It may not be possible to achieve consensus except by way of persuasion. But the role of government remains critical because governments have the power of enforcement, including preventing the recurrence of future conflicts. Above all, the dialogue cannot be effective unless we are able to establish our common goals and values. And we need the governments of the world to provide guarantees that these goals and values become enduring.

24. Malaysia believes therefore that a dialogue which can effectively bridge the gap between cultures and civilizations is a discourse based in the multilateral process. Malaysia is fully committed to promoting the preeminence of multilateralism in the management of world affairs.

25. A genuine commitment to multilateralism by all members of the United Nations, especially by the big powers, will send a strong signal to all governments that the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations shall form the basis of the conduct of relations between nations. Such a commitment will also provide the foundation for a true international partnership for establishing the goal of global peace and for achieving international economic and social development.

26. I hope my lecture today has made the point that a successful dialogue between cultures and civilizations has now become another important precondition for achieving the global goals of peace, security and prosperity that we all seek.

I thank you for your attention.