

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY  
YAB DATO' SERI ABDULLAH BIN HAJI AHMAD BADAWI  
AT THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE MUSLIM WORLD AND  
THE WEST: BRIDGING THE GAP  
AT SHANGRILA HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR  
3 SEPTEMBER 2008**

-----

Bismillah irrahman irrahim, alhamdu lillahi rabbil-`alamin, wassalatu wassalamu `ala sayyidina Muhammadin wa `ala aalihi wa sahbihim ajma`in.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome our honoured guests from abroad to Kuala Lumpur, and all of you, to this "Third International Conference on Islam and the West: Bridging the Gap".

2. This is the third time that Malaysia has had the privilege of hosting this series of dialogues. At the first conference two years ago in February 2006, I said: "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."

3. It is therefore a special pleasure for me to welcome all of you to Kuala Lumpur today, and to this gathering, because from my perspective every one of you here is a bridge-builder.

4. I regard each of you as committed to spearheading, catalysing and creating that required critical mass of bridge-builders with whose help the so-called gap between the West and the Muslim world will, God willing, be bridged. It is through your work in expanding, leveraging and focusing the work of bridge-builders worldwide that the divide will be closed. This will take time. But we must persevere.

5. We are all here because we are concerned about this deep and harmful divide existing between the Muslim world and the West. We know that the root causes are largely political in nature. But they should not be allowed to stand in the way of a close, productive, even strategic partnership between the two great civilizations.

6. I wish to take this opportunity to share with you some of my thoughts as to why this divide exists, and to reaffirm to you the conviction of my government that a conference such as this can contribute towards bridging the gap. With your support and commitment, we can and will continue to organize this dialogue series in the future.

7. First, we need to recognize that the divide originates in the hearts and minds of humans. It is as much a matter of feelings, attitudes and perceptions that each side has of the other, and which altogether inform our decisions and our actions. I have stated many times, in other forums, that it is not our faiths which bring us into conflict with one another. More often than not, it is geo-politics and the cynical manipulation of religious creed or secular ideology that trigger these conflicts and which bring about this divide. It therefore follows that if we alter the feelings, attitudes and perceptions that each side has of the other, the gap will disappear; probably not completely, but certainly to a very significant degree.

8. As responsible human beings, inhabitants of this planet, which is our abode in this physical world, we must make these efforts. Indeed, for Muslims, these actions are in keeping with the Creator's declaration in the holy Quran that:

"Certainly God does not alter the condition of a people until they alter what is within themselves" [inna-llaha la yughayyiru ma bi-qawmin hatta yughayyiru ma fi anfusihim (Sura ar-Ra`d 13:11)]

9. Can we succeed in doing this? I am convinced we can. In the rapidly changing, inter-connected, inter-dependent, borderless, but massively armed world that we live in today, we cannot afford to fail. That we must succeed is imperative if we wish to ensure a world in which our children and grandchildren can live peaceful, secure, prosperous and fulfilling lives.

10. Second, we must recognize that the negative attitudes and perceptions among Westerners and among Muslims which have created and sustained this divide, are the actions of a few bigoted players on both sides. They have been created and fuelled by several defining political events, and abetted by certain socio-economic and religious factors.

11. For example, when the Soviet Union imploded in 1989, a number of influential Western thinkers decided that Islam was their next existential enemy after Communism. Thus began the shaping of some of the negative western attitude and actions towards the Muslim ummah. This resulted in an equal and opposite reaction to the West from some dogmatic quarters of the Muslim world.

12. Muslims have been perceived as being against modernisation, hence against the West. This is far from the truth. Islam, as a religion and a way of life, is never, I repeat never, against progress and modernization. Indeed, Islam enjoins its adherents to seek knowledge, which is the foundation of all progress and development, both material and spiritual. But this biased view in the West persists, and, I must admit, it is not helped by the misguided actions of a discredited few from the Muslim side.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

13. There was a definite period in history when the Islamic world was a beacon of light. It was the Islamic influence upon Europe during the Middle Ages - from the Crusades in the Levant to the Cordoba Caliphate in Spain - that contributed to the Reformation and led to the rise of Protestantism, the European Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Yet, the antagonistic position vis-à-vis the Muslim world has been spread in spite of Western civilizations being as much a grandchild of Islamic civilization as it was of Greek and Roman civilizations. Of course, they have also been subjected to the Semitic religious influences of Judaism and Christianity.

14. It is a fact that there are more commonalities among the three great monotheistic religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism than among any other world religions because of their shared traditions and values, in spite of their differences. We should therefore nurture these common grounds in the interest of our common agenda of peace, rather than quibble and magnify these differences to serve some other political or strategic agendas. The Islamic World and the West must work to regain mutual trust, respect, understanding and cooperation that are vitally important for world peace and security. In order to move forward, both sides

must listen with an open mind and an equally open heart. We must stand together with a firm commitment to establish a culture of tolerance and harmony in order to better promote the well being of humankind, notwithstanding the differences or dissimilarities that exist between us as communities.

15. It has been stated many times, but it is worth repeating, yet again, that Islam as a religion respects cultural and religious diversity. The Quran is very explicit in recognizing the existence of religions other than Islam. At the core of Islamic teachings is an eternal message of justice and compassion, of equality and humanity, of peace and solidarity - contrary to what is being perceived by the West or misrepresented by a small, blinkered and intolerant segment of the Islamic world.

16. Given the fact that the Muslim world and the West share a lot in common, there is a need to reframe the discourse on the divide. We need to establish recognition that it is not one between total strangers but between parties which do share a historical, existential and philosophical worldview. If we can accomplish this, we would have taken one important step in closing the gap.

Ladies and gentlemen,

17. Why has my government begun and continued with this dialogue series? As some of you might be aware, this conference series hosted by Malaysia started as an idea that grew out of conversations we had with some concerned, prominent Muslims residing in the West, in the aftermath of the tragic and horrific events of September 11, 2001. It was felt, given its tradition of inter-ethnic and inter-religious tolerance and harmony, based on its philosophy of unity in diversity, that Malaysia was well-placed to play a constructive role in bridging the widening gap.

18. My Government is committed to continuing with these efforts for we believe they are a meaningful contribution to the process of confidence-building between cultures and civilizations. They will complement other efforts made by other countries and organisations, both in the Muslim world and the West. The past two years have been useful in that we have been able to move the dialogue process forward, one step at a time. It has been a period of listening to, and internalising, each other's points of view and perspectives, which are vital for reaching understanding.

19. Beginning with this third conference, we are taking another step forward. We feel that the time has come for us to identify some concrete ideas for re-building the bridge of understanding between the two sides, hence the sub-theme of this conference, namely, "From definition to Action". Therefore, this year's conference is action-oriented. It should focus on possible programmes or projects that, hopefully, could be endorsed, if not here in Kuala Lumpur at this time, then at a later stage. However, we should be careful not to be too ambitious. We should consider programmes or projects that are realistic and doable.

20. For the present conference, I have requested the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations of Malaysia, an agency of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to work in partnership with the Cordoba Initiative. I have asked them to pool their resources, share networking, and focus efforts and energies towards achievable goals, taking full advantage of their respective strengths. I trust this partnership will yield fruitful results, and make this dialogue series a worthwhile venture.

21. While undertaking this combined effort with the Cordoba Initiative, Malaysia is also committed to supporting the initiatives undertaken by the Alliance of Civilisations (AoC). We do wish to work closely with the AoC, as part of its worldwide efforts to create understanding between and among civilisations of the world. As a member of the Group of Friends of the AoC, Malaysia's own efforts in this regard will complement those of the Alliance and will be part of the AoC's own global programmes of action. We want to be contributing to the global efforts - to be a spoke within the overarching wheel of the United Nations - supported Alliance of Civilisations.

22. Ours will be a regional effort that will be fully reinforcing and sustaining those of the AoC in what might well be a long-term global undertaking. I look forward to conveying the outcome of your deliberations to the international community through the United Nations and the AoC, and seek their support and endorsement.

23. Malaysia believes that success in this endeavour requires the cooperation of governments working in partnership with the private or business sector, the religious sector, and civil society, and that this work has to be carried out in both the Western and the Muslim countries. It requires a comprehensive and dynamic approach, with each sector supporting and reinforcing, in a spirit of cooperation and competition for the common good of all the sectors.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

24. The Government and people of Malaysia are in full support of the noble mission of closing the gap between cultures and civilizations because it will bring direct and positive impacts on our own national situation. In this country, the most important aspect of our nation building process consists of closing gaps between ourselves as a people who live in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural polity. We do not, however, view this task as a burden. In fact, we treat our diversity as a national asset.

25. The common thread that binds Malaysians together is the belief and self-confidence that we have in our capacity to co-operate for the well-being of the people and development of the nation. We accept the fact that we need to work together to ensure that the country and its people continue to prosper and grow. Malaysians fully accept the reality that politics of accommodation determine the course of our national life. The country is therefore governed through a system of power sharing in a coalition government of 14 political parties, in which the Cabinet takes decisions on the basis of consensus.

26. The Malaysian experiment in nation building, which takes a holistic view of the needs and sensitivities of its diverse population is, in many ways, faith-based. The Government has used the progressive teachings of Islam as the basis for good governance to deliver benefits to all sectors of our multi-religious society without discrimination. The national philosophy is firmly rooted in the values and injunctions of Islam but compatible with modernity. We call this approach Islam Hadhari.

27. From the economic and social point of view, it is a system of inclusive development; in other words, one of harmonious social development. We are justly proud that our method of nation building in a pluralistic society has worked well these past fifty years of our existence as an independent country. The steady period of socio-economic growth in a climate of political stability bear witness to this fact.

28. I hope the Malaysian approach for good governance, which is benevolent and non-confrontational, can serve as an example and engender increased understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims world-wide. The approach is anchored in the belief, intrinsic in the Islamic religion, that good deeds are both an act of worship to the Almighty, as well as a service to humankind.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

29. In order to make discernible progress, I have asked that this Conference focus on results. This will be the difference between this and the previous two conferences we had hosted in this series. I do hope this conference will provide “deliverables” that will propel us towards more concerted and tangible efforts. I look forward to receiving the Report of your deliberations, and to exploring how the Malaysian government can be a useful and important partner in our future work together, and where suitable, take the lead on some projects and initiatives commensurate with our capacities to do so.

30. May I conclude by congratulating the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations and the Cordoba Initiative for their joint efforts in assembling at this conference a group of people with knowledge, experience and expertise. This fact gives me confidence that a fruitful outcome is assured.

May God bless you all and grant you success. Wassalamu alaikum. Thank you.