

THE OXFORD ISLAMIC FORUM ON "THE ISLAMIC WORLD AND GLOBAL COOPERATION: PREPARING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY"

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I feel privileged and honoured to be here today to speak at this Oxford Islamic Forum entitled 'The Islamic World and Global Cooperation: Preparing for the 21st Century'. I hope this topic will generate a lot of interest and discussions as currently there are many contrary views and debate on this subject.

2. Let me start by looking at the Islamic World itself. There are at the moment not less than 56 countries which are members of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). Not all these countries have Muslim majorities and fewer still officially accept Islam as the state religion. But Muslims are sufficiently influential as to cause the Governments of these countries to seek membership of the Islamic community of nations. All told, Muslims make up more than one billion of the world's population. But they are far from being a monolithic group, being broken up as much by their own loyalty to their countries as they are by the differences in their interpretations of Islam or indeed allegedly by the degree of commitment to the faith. They certainly do not make up one cohesive Islamic civilisation which can pose a meaningful threat to other civilisations or indeed anyone. They are too busy fighting and undermining each other to be a threat.

3. There is also not a single Muslim country that can be classified as developed. A number are very wealthy being well-endowed with natural resources. But almost all are lagging behind in modern knowledge, technological skills and in many instances effective Government. In fact in quite a few countries a state of near-anarchy prevails. By no criteria can any of these countries be classified as developed.

4. Poverty, ignorance and instability have become such a common feature in the Muslim nations that it is assumed this is a natural consequence of following the teachings of Islam. It is therefore not surprising that today the world associates Islam with backwardness. This angers many Muslims. They think that it is an unfair judgement. They are right of course. It is unfair. It is not due to the teachings of Islam. But the fact remains that the Muslim nations are poor, are backward, are weak, are disunited, are dependent on non-Muslims for all kinds of things including their own security and the continued existence of Islam itself. With the powerful weapons in the hands of the non-Muslims it is entirely possible for them to wipe out the Muslims from the face of this earth. It is only by the Grace of Allah Subhanahu wa Ta'ala and His mercy that those whom we labelled as the enemies of Islam have not done so. But the Muslims themselves have done nothing to help themselves. If at all, they have weakened themselves more and more by their constant feuding among themselves, by their confusing and contradictory interpretations of Islam and by their failure to obey the injunctions to help themselves even as they pray to Allah for His protection.

5. The Quran is very clear on this. Verse 79 Sura IV An Nisaa stated that "Whatever good happens to thee is from God but whatever evil happens to thee

is from thy soul."

6. That Muslims were at one time the most advanced people in all fields is a fact of history. Apart from being the best strategists and warriors, they were the most learned, the most enlightened and the most liberal of the people in the world then. It is difficult now to think of Muslims as being enlightened and liberal. But consider the situation and the civilisation of Europe in the Middle ages. What we now call the West was then one of the most backward communities of nations in the world. They were hopelessly superstitious that they banned the sciences as witchcraft, and books were kept locked because knowledge was feared. They regularly burnt witches at the stake. Only the priests may know about their religion and other subjects. Since knowledge meant power the priests ruled directly or indirectly and they imposed a reign of terror through the Inquisition for centuries. Such was the oppression by the priests that many migrated, seeking freedom from Christian intolerance.

7. By comparison with the Muslims of the period, the Europeans were indeed primitive, superstitious and anything but liberal. They were certainly feudal and oppressive. Their oppressive Governments led their own Christian subjects to welcome conquests by Muslims, going so far as to abet in these conquests. Even the Jews preferred to live under Muslim rule and left Spain together with the Muslims to settle in North Africa. All these must indicate the tolerance and liberalism of Muslims and their Governments in the past, in the great days of the Muslim Empire. Everything was not rosy of course. There were oppressive Muslim rulers too. But for long periods non-Muslims in Muslim countries were free to go about their business and to practise their own religions.

8. When Islam came to the Arabs over 1400 years ago they were wallowing in superstition and ignorance. Living in the arid and inhospitable desert, forced to wander in search of water and meagre pasture for their animals and food for themselves, they had broken up into a number of feuding warring tribes. Such were their feuds that for generations they would fight their sworn tribal enemies even when the cause of their enmity had long been forgotten.

9. They developed their own codes of honour which were at once gracious and cruel. They would be the most considerate of hosts to strangers who seek shelter from them and yet if they believe they had been slighted they would take revenge in the most cruel and unforgiving manner.

10. For these Arab tribes, the main cause of shame was always their women. They regarded women as mere chattel, as property to use in exchange for alliances, as the objects of their lusts. Yet in their wars they always feared capture of their women by the enemy. This they regarded as most dishonourable and shameful to their family and their tribe. But in order to avoid this possibility they would rather kill their daughters or sisters, who may dishonour them or were likely to cause shame to them. And so it was their custom to bury alive their infant girls, to commit infanticide in order that the chances of being dishonoured later would be less.

11. They were inordinately fond of praise for themselves. And so the beggars could always expect the rich or the prominent to throw their coins if their praises were sung. Flattery was the best way to win them over always.

12. Their superstitious fears lead them to attribute godly powers to various objects of stone and wood. And they would regularly visit the places where these objects were kept in order to offer sacrifices, including human sacrifices, for their salvation, for protection from the unkind elements which buffeted them. And when the feuding tribes met during their pilgrimage they would fight and kill each other.

13. There were among them a few who professed the Christian or the Jewish faith, who believed in one Almighty God, who were people of the book. But the ignorant Jahilliah Arabs preferred to believe in the gods of their ancestors. They rejected the messages of the apostles who came before Muhammad although it is clear that they knew of them. That they knew of the Christian faith is clearly shown when the Christian Waraqah was consulted about the voices heard by Muhammad.

14. This then was the primitive, superstitious, feuding people and tribes to whom Muhammad was sent with the message of Islam. It is no wonder that he found difficulty in convincing them to give up their beliefs and custom, to honour and save their women, to reject lust and the taking of innumerable wives, limiting them to only four and even then only if they could do justice to all four, which he pointed out they never could. "Ye are never able to be fair and just as between women" - (Sura IV Verse 129). And so they should take only one. Knowing their fondness for alcohol and the difficulty in giving up this vice, they were enjoined to forego alcohol little by little until it was forbidden altogether. A sudden injunction to stop alcohol would not have been accepted by them.

15. They were instructed to befriend their enemies if the latter accepted the faith. And under the leadership of the Prophet they became united, forgetting their feuds and their tribes. This is clear from Verse 103 in Sura III Ali Imran "be not divided among yourselves. And remember with gratitude God' s favour on you; For Ye were enemies and He joined your hearts in love so that by His Grace, Ye became brethren."

16. In Medina their society was finally organised with proper laws detailing crimes, the methods of judgement and the punishments. Always justice and quality of mercy was stressed. Those who repented should be pardoned.

17. The feuding, barbaric tribes which accepted Islam united and became a nation under the Medina constitution, the first written constitution in the Islamic world. Thus was the core of the first Muslim nation created. From Medina the prophet sent envoys to neighbouring countries urging the rulers of these countries to accept Islam. The prophet followed scrupulously the teachings of Islam in peace and in war. No one should be forced to accept Islam. This is made clear in Verse 256 of Sura II Al-Baqarah "Let there be no compulsion in

religion."

18. Unfortunately his followers were not so patient and ready to tolerate the taunts and the opposition of those who rejected the teachings of the Prophet. While the Prophet fought only defensive wars and was ever ready to make peace and enter into treaties to settle disputes, his disciples were more aggressive, believing in spreading the faith through force of arms. And so within the first century of the Hijrah the definitive Muslim Empire was conquered largely through force of arms. While the conquests resulted in the spread of Islam and the enlargement of the Muslim Empire, they also presaged the trend towards disregard for the teachings of Islam. Anything and everything was accepted as legitimate if the perpetrators invoke the interest of Islam. And so today the Greatness of Allah is often proclaimed as some dastardly act is committed often against other Muslims. Sura II Al-Baqarah - Verse 41 "Nor sell my signs for a small price." Again in Verse 224 "And make not God's (name) an excuse." Sura III Ali Imran "They will not sell the Signs of God for a miserable sum".

19. Only angels and the prophet could not be corrupted by the success of the Islamic enterprise. Of the four enlightened Caliphs who succeeded to the leadership of the Muslim Ummah, only Abu Bakar Assadik died a natural death. The other three, companions of the Prophet, were killed by those envious of their position. Clearly there were members of the Muslim ummah who did not respect authority as enjoined by Islam. They were prepared to assassinate their own leaders, something the Quran forbids.

20. By the time of the fourth Caliph, Saidina Ali, the warring had become as serious as the tribal feuds of the old pre-Islamic Arabs. The Muslim ummah was split permanently into two. The opponents of Ali followed Muawiyah and became known as the upholders of the traditions of the Prophet - Ahlul Sunnah Wal Jamaah. The followers of Ali, probably against the wishes of Ali himself, split off to form the Shiah Muslims, venerating Ali as the true successor of the Prophet.

21. From then on each sect not only sought to justify itself through numerous and contradictory interpretations of the teachings of Islam, but they invented many traditions or sunnah of the Prophet in order to justify the frequently unIslamic practices in which they indulged. So many were the traditions that by the time Imam Bukhari studied them in order to verify their authenticity there were said to be 600,000 of them. Of these Bukhari verified only 7000. Other scholars verified an even smaller number including a few which had been rejected by Bukhari. Obviously there were more than 590,000 false traditions which continue to be quoted off and on to justify dubious Islamic practices.

22. As the empire grew many seek to inherit the mantle of Caliphs and Amir ul Mukminin. Wars were fought between Muslims as the different claimants seek worldly power. Regional Governors ignored the authority of the imperial Government in Medina, Baghdad or Istanbul as the case may be. They began to rule independently, to set up their own domain.

23. New Islamic sects were founded and groups of Muslim jurists emerged who

emphasised the supremacy of the Syariah over the Quran even. The tolerant and forgiving nature of Islam gave way to the rigid interpretations of the jurists whose rulings could not be disputed. Only religious subjects were allowed to be studied. The sciences, mathematics and the arts were not only neglected but were proscribed. All non-religious subjects were labelled as unIslamic. The vast libraries fell into neglect or were destroyed. The Muslims became more and more ignorant even as the Christian Europeans availed themselves of the writings of Muslim scholars and progressed their Renaissance. The decline of the Muslims and their civilisation had begun in earnest.

24. Success and power corrupted the Muslim leaders and deviations from the teachings of Islam became more and more common. This gave rise to reform movements intended to bring back the fundamental practices of Islam. Caliphs were overthrown and new Governments set up, principally by the Al-Murabitun (Almoravids) and then the Al-Muwahhidun from North Africa and Spain. Unfortunately, the reformist Governments either became corrupted themselves or they interpreted Islam to suit their extremist views. Whatever, they too contributed to the decline of the Muslims and their empire. Weakened by their narrow-minded interpretation of Islam, rejecting so-called unIslamic knowledge and skills, they lost the capacity to defend their territories in Spain.

25. Finally in 1492, Grenada the last bastion of Muslim Spain, fell to the armies of Ferdinand and Isabella. Bo Abdul, the King who never led his army on the battlefield was forced to surrender and departed for North Africa. The Muslims remaining behind were eventually forced to forsake their religion or face death. Thus ended the last Muslim enclave in Western Europe.

26. But the Europeans were not about to leave the North African Muslim states in peace. France and Spain extended their domain to the Magreb and eventually all of Arab North Africa from Egypt to Morocco fell under European rule.

27. However, even as Muslim Spain ceased to exist, Turks began to expand and build a new Muslim Empire. Turkish armies conquered most of the Balkan and actually knocked at the Gates of Vienna. The Mediterranean Sea was dominated by Turkish naval forces, regular and irregular.

28. But the courts of the Turkish Sultans soon became corrupted by their wealth and their love of luxury. The Sultans no longer led their armies into battle, nor were the armies made up of Turkish soldiers. The children of Christian citizens were recruited and brought up as Muslims and trained as professional soldiers. In time these Yeniceri or Janisaries came to dominate Turkish politics and engineered several palace coups.

29. The religious advisers of the Turkish Sultans were sycophants who readily approved everything the Sultans did. Thus huge harems were maintained to satisfy the lusts of the Sultans, and the brothers of newly enthroned Sultans were all murdered in order to ensure that the Sultan would not be challenged.

30. While these practices were approved and even encouraged by the religious

authorities, attempts at modernising the armed forces were opposed as unIslamic. When proposals were made to change the baggy trousers for less clumsy pants and the fez replaced by peak caps, there was mutiny in the armed forces.

31. In the end the formerly invincible Turkish army was armed with obsolete weapons and was no match for the disciplined, professional European forces, equipped with ever more effective weapons. Beginning with the failure to capture Vienna, the Turkish Empire began to decline. The process seemed inexorable. By the end of the First World War the Turkish Empire had broken up into a multiplicity of little states all of which came under French or British overlordship. Turkey itself was almost lost to the Greeks but for Mustafa Kamal.

32. The Muslims who emerged from the Arabian Peninsular were initially true adherents of the teachings of Islam. They were tolerant of the people of the book, and were broadminded and willing enough to learn the skills, the sciences, mathematics and the arts of the non-Muslims, particularly those of the ancient Greeks. They did their own research and contributed greatly to the body of knowledge in many fields. They became technologically advanced as a result.

33. Unfortunately, with the advent of the Muslim jurists and the so-called reformists, studies other than those specifically related to religion and its practices were frowned upon and eventually proscribed. With this the Muslims regressed. True, it was the abuses and deviations from the teachings and practices of Islam, particularly by the elites which brought about the reform movements and the ascendancy of the Muslim jurists. But what was achieved was not a return to the true teachings of Islam. The reforming fanatics and jurists simply wanted an Islam that was more rigid in the observation of certain practices and rituals while precluding anything that they considered as unIslamic. And so not only did they proscribe so-called non-Islamic knowledge, but they considered anything that did not seem to have originated in the Muslim past as unIslamic as well. Thus the modernisation of the Turkish army was considered unIslamic. They ignored the injunction in the Quran that the Muslims must always be prepared to defend themselves. Instead they clung to the form rather than the substance of the teaching. It was more important to relive the past than to consider the present.

34. The Quran speaks in parables, the real meaning of which must be interpreted in the context of the situation faced by the Ummah through the ages. But most interpreters insist on the literal meaning of the words in the Quran. And so the defense of the Ummah lost its importance to the need for 'steeds of war' as stated in Sura VIII (Anfal) Verse 60 "Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power, including 'steeds of war' , to strike terror to the enemies".

35. It is a fact that once upon a time there was a great Muslim empire. It is also a fact that that empire is no more. Defeats in the fields of battle and in the conduct of diplomatic relations had not only whittled the empire down but had broken up the Empire into ineffective Muslim states which for a period of time became

colonies of Western powers. The fragmentation and colonisation of the Muslim world is no doubt due to the machinations of the Europeans and their military power. It was the Europeans who manoeuvred the Arabs into fighting against the Turks for their independence.

36. Muslims all over the world often talk longingly of the Empire they had lost, of their past greatness, of their domination of the world. They had ruled Spain for 800 years and much of Eastern Europe for almost 400 years. They even talk of their past mastery of the sciences, mathematics and the arts, their past prowess in battles and their victories. They point to the artifacts of their past glory, the astrolabe, the armour and swords of their past commanders such as Salah el Din Al Ayubi and the great architectural tributes to their engineering and construction skills as evidence of their worldly achievements.

37. And then they think of the reality of the present. They and their nations are backward, disunited, weak and are pawns in the political games of the Europeans. They are powerless to help Muslims when they are being slaughtered by their enemies. They see their holy Palestine divided and given to their sworn enemies, the Jews. Their initial belief that they could defeat tiny Israel proved unfounded. The Israelis defeated them again and again, aided and abetted by the Europeans.

38. Not only is the Empire gone but whatever little respect and honour that they had is now gone. They are openly caricatured as bumbling incompetents whose chances of recovering past greatness will forever remain pipe dreams.

39. And the more they think of their parlous state, the more angry they become. Frustrated, they feed on their anger, frequently getting themselves into a state of frenzy. And like most angry people they react irrationally. They resort to acts which gain them nothing at all except to intensify the hatred others had for them.

40. Terrorism was not invented by the Muslims. The first hijacking of aircraft was by an American. But the Muslims learnt this quickly enough as they did other terrorist acts. Soon terrorism, the invention of the non- Muslims, became synonymous with Islam and the Muslims. Far from being ashamed for giving them and their religion a bad name, the Muslim extremists went on to commit more frightening crimes. They would think nothing of killing the children of their enemies in order to strike terror in the hearts of their tormentors. But their acts have availed them of nothing except the increased hatred of their enemies, who retaliated with equal ferocity. And this increased the anger of the Muslims even more, driving them into committing worse acts.

41. It would seem that for some extremist Muslim winning their fight or achieving their objective are not important, not relevant. It is the fight that counts. The more they create hatred for themselves, the more will they be condemned and abused, and the greater will be their hatred for their enemies. And the more determined will they be to continue the fight against their enemies.

42. One is again reminded of the tribal feuds of the pre- Islamic days. There was

no objective, only hatred for the enemy tribe. And so they mount fights and kill for generations without seeking settlement or even victory.

43. For as long as the obsession with hurting the enemy prevails, for so long will the Muslims fight their enemies. There will be no peace for peace is not the objective. The only end is the total destruction of the enemy. That this is not likely to happen is irrelevant. The important thing is that enemies must be fought against, irrespective of the result.

44. But is this in accord with the teachings of Islam? True in Verse 190 of Sura II the Muslims are urged to "Fight in the cause of God those who fight you" and in the next Verse "And slay them wherever you catch them, and turn them out from where they have Turned you out". But immediately following this Verse Muslims are told by the Quran (Verse 192) "But if they cease, God is of- forgiving, Most Merciful".

45. And again in Verse 193 "But if they cease, Let there be no hostility, Except to those who practise oppression". (And we know who practises oppression today).

46. But despite these Verse 194 says- "But fear God and know that God is with those Who restrain themselves".

47. It is natural for the Muslims to yearn after their past greatness, their Empire and their dominance over the rest of the world. But they must know that Imperialism is a thing of the past. Neither the Muslim Empire, nor the British Empire, no any Empire can be resurrected.

48. All that we can hope to aspire to is the development of independent Muslim countries to the level of the developed countries of the world. This is not an impossible task. Muslims are not created by Allah to be inferior. Indeed the opposite seems true if past history is anything to go by. If they want to, Muslims can master all the skills and technologies now monopolised by non-Muslims. If they want to, Muslims can govern their countries well and effectively. But they must decide to do this, decide that Allah created this world for them too, and that it is their duty to show that Islam is a great religion which can bring greatness to those who profess and practise it.

49. The Quran says in Verse 11 of Sura XIII. "Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves." Again it must be remembered that "Whatever good comes to thee is from God; but whatever evil happens to thee, is from thy soul". Sura IV Verse 79.

50. They can develop their different countries to the desired level without attempting to come together as an empire. Of course they must cooperate with each other as they are all members of the Muslim Ummah. Their loyalty to their own country should not extend to warring against other Muslim nations purely due to national ambitions. They can strengthen the OIC and help the members in distress. But that is as far as they should go. Coordination and cooperation, but no Empire.

51. The Muslim countries -- independent, strong and developed -- must take their places as members of the World Community of nations. They must remain Muslim of course and they must uphold Islam. But they must be true Muslim fundamentalists - i.e. they must do what is right and reject what is wrong. The Quran says in Sura III Verse 104, "Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong." Islam has always upheld what is right and just. Islam has never advocated that we should plot or support each other in doing what is wrong. And so if Muslims do what is wrong, other Muslims must condemn it. And they must condemn even if the victims are not Muslims. For the Quran enjoins "let not the hatred of others make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice" (Sura V Verse 9). Sura V Verse 45 stresses "If thou judge, judge in equity between them, for God loveth those who judge in equity".

52. In this modern world Muslims have a real mission. They must bring back the spiritual values to a world that is fast becoming Godless and thoroughly materialistic; so arrogant that it thinks it knows all the answers to everything; a world which will develop the ultimate means of destruction and place it in the hands of irresponsible and insane individuals; a world tittering on the brink of a Man-made Apocalypse.

53. These people think that they know enough to play God Himself. Already they believe they can create anything that God creates. They may want to create a world according to their wishes. And they have become insufferably arrogant, accepting no one as being greater than them.

54. They forget that for all their brilliance they cannot answer the question "why". They cannot answer why there is life in the world, why there is a universe, why matter acts in the way it does, why oxygen and hydrogen form water and a myriad other chemical and physical reactions. They may know how all those things happen but never why. They are not the genius they think they are.

55. And because the human race is becoming more and more arrogant, religion and spiritual values are needed even more. And Islam can provide the spiritual values, to those who believe and to those who don't. The Islam that can provide these values is fundamental Islam, the truly fundamental Islam which advocates peace, charity and caring, not the Islam which commits crimes and calls out the name of Allah to justify it.

56. The 21st Century is not relevant to the Muslims. It is just a period in time. But the 21st Century will see many changes and the Muslims will be a part of these changes whether they like it or not. It is better for them to face the 21st Century with their eyes wide open and with a clear vision of what they want to do and the role they wish to play. And if they chose to play a constructive role while retaining their faith, their spiritual values and their true brotherhood, they would be able to contribute positively to the development of mankind, to put it on an even keel again and to prevent the self-destruct course which the human race appears to be heading for. The Muslims can be a force for human good in the 21st Century.