

The International Seminar And Dialogue On 'Enhancing The Understanding Of Islam For The Media'

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First of all let me thank the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) for inviting me to deliver this keynote address at this International Seminar and Dialogue on 'Enhancing the Understanding of Islam for the Media'. I am sure this seminar will help the media, local or foreign, Islamic or non-Islamic to get a clearer picture of Islam and hopefully to contribute to the understanding of Islam among them all.

2. If I may paraphrase Churchill, "Never in the history of Mankind has such a small thing enabled such a huge number of people access to such a vast amount of information". I am sure Winston Churchill would forgive me for this distortion of his famous war-time statement about the British Royal Air Force. But truly the tiny microchip has enabled literally the six billion people on earth to gain access to all the information they want and more. It is up to humankind to make use of this facility for whatever purpose.

3. One would imagine that this is a God-sent opportunity for Mankind. In ancient times when man invented writing in order to record and convey a message other than by word of mouth, few found the new invention useful because few could read or write and the process of writing on stone and leaves was tedious and difficult and dispatching any worthwhile distance was quite impractical. But today written words, voices and even pictures can be transmitted instantaneously across the globe to any location. Thus all the knowledge that has been accumulated over three millennium and all that is presently being churned out could be learnt and utilised to enhance the quality of life of everyone, everywhere. The world would certainly become a better place because information is literally at everyone's fingertips. Simply tap the keys on the computer keyboard and free knowledge would be available to the keyboard operator. Along with knowledge will come all kinds of skills to make everyone more employable, more productive and more able to earn higher incomes. Individuals would be enriched and societies and nations too would become richer because of the knowledge and quality of the people.

4. We are told that the whole Library of Congress is available on the Internet. Software and search engines make it easy to gain whatever knowledge we want easily. Of course there are thousands of other sources of computer generated information available for hardly any payment.

5. It is a wonderful world, this world of instant and unlimited knowledge. The media is given a central place in the dissemination of information about everything through the printed words and pictures, through radio and television, and through the Internet. The media cannot be contained and confined. Borders of countries mean nothing to the media. The whole world can be reached by and through the media instantly, in real time and at any time. If words cannot

describe, pictures can speak a million words.

6. There is now a fantastic opportunity for the media to play a role in the spread of the truth about everything, to clear the air, to create understanding, to promote what is good and banish what is bad. There is a golden opportunity for the media to help build a better, a fairer and more just world. There is a great opportunity for the media to enrich the world, to enrich everyone everywhere.

7. There is so much misunderstanding in this world, misunderstanding arising from wrong information or inability to get the right information. And because of this misunderstanding countries and regions, peoples and races and the followers of different religions hate each other, glare at each other and very often fight each other. Yet correct information about each other can help reduce the animosity and suspicions and bring the groups together into a great family of people, humankind, to create a better world for everyone.

8. Let us take the general perception of Islam for example. No other religion is more misunderstood than Islam; misunderstood not only by non-Muslims but by Muslims themselves. And because of this misunderstanding there is constant conflict and confrontation between Muslims and non-Muslims and between Muslims and Muslims.

9. Stereotyping and labelling is one of the greatest weapons of the bigoted. Terrorism for example involves people of every religious group, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims and the sub groups of each. But whereas terrorism by Muslims are invariably linked to the religion of Islam, terrorism by non-Muslims are not linked to the religious beliefs of the terrorists even though they were perpetrated in the name and in furtherance of the interest of the particular religion. Hindus attacked Muslims in the name of Hinduism but they are not called Hindu terrorists. Aum Shinrikyo, a Buddhist sect in Japan poisoned people with gas but are not called Buddhist terrorists. The Catholics and the Protestants in Northern Ireland terrorised each other but are not called Christian terrorists. But if misguided Muslims attack non-Muslims or other Muslims they are all labelled Muslim terrorists. Why this discrimination against Islam by the media?

10. There are many other instances of the media being unfair to Islam, being discriminatory against Islam. And so Islam became not only a religion that is misunderstood but is a religion that is reviled by non- Muslims for no very good reason.

11. Yet the media has the greatest opportunity to correct the misinformation, the wrong perceptions of Islam. If the media makes use of this opportunity it can contribute so much to greater understanding between Muslims and the followers of other religions, and so bring about greater harmony and peace to the world. There must be many in the media who want to do good, to help resolve some of the problems of the world. By helping people to understand each other the media can achieve this.

12. Islam is a religion of peace. Muslims greet each other and greet others with a wish for peace. Peace be on you. We wish everyone peace. But nobody today would believe Muslims are peaceful people who wish everyone, Muslims and non-Muslims to have peace. I will admit that we Muslims are also to be blamed for the bad image that we have. There are among us people who act deliberately to cause Islam to be reviled by others. They do this in the name of Islam. But what they do is not Islamic. Extremism and intolerance is not advocated by Islam. We are enjoined to be tolerant and to abstain from using force. But small Muslim groups when put in authority would like to force everyone to be pious forgetting of course that forced piety is not piety at all. But despite this our detractors cannot be free from blame. They and their media have given the Muslims this bad image.

13. The Muslims are ready to correct that image but we need the cooperation of the media, particularly the Western media. If one looks around one will see that everywhere the Muslims are oppressed, are being ejected from their own lands, are in fact the modern diaspora. They are leaving their own lands because they are truly being oppressed by other Muslims but more frequently oppressed by the non-Muslims. They are the underdog. They are the ones who need to be sympathised with, to be protected. But instead they are the ones generally accused of oppression and deserving of the sad fate which befall them.

14. Look at Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosova, Chechnya, and many other countries which it would be undiplomatic for me to mention aloud. Everywhere the Muslims are oppressed. The story needs to be told. The killings in Srebrenica needs to be told. The arrest, torture and killings need to be told. While terrorists of Muslim faith are called Muslim terrorists, no one talks of Muslims who have been oppressed, massacred, and expelled from their homelands as Muslim victims.

15. Their only crime is that they are Muslims. Yes, in desperation they fought back, ferociously sometimes. They commit acts of terror. They often kill senselessly, indiscriminately, but they are not the only ones to do this out of anger and frustration. Can their story not be told factually, without bias, without the usual condemnation? Can the reasons for their apparently cruel acts not be told? Can there not be a description also of the way they were terrorised, their oppression by their enemies, their tormentors?

16. Let us take Iraq. I do not agree with Iraq' s war against Kuwait. Iraq may have a historical claim but many of us have historical claims over neighbouring lands. Malaysia has a claim over Southern Thailand. But that was history. We have accepted that it is part of Thailand and we will say nothing more about it. We will not support insurrections against Thailand. Surely Iraq must accept that Kuwait is now independent. But the fact is that Iraq attacked Kuwait and subsequently lost to a so-called international force. The attacking army could have advanced and captured the leader of Iraq. But it did not. Instead the so-called liberators of Kuwait imposed all kinds of restrictions on Iraq, restrictions which punished the civilians, the children, the old, the sick, the women. For ten long years the people of Iraq were made to suffer because its leader is not liked by the West.

17. Is this justice? To punish the whole population for the acts of one man who was not chosen by them and whom they cannot remove. Shouldn't the media tell the true tragedy of Iraq, the sufferings of the people? Shouldn't the press campaign for an end to sanctions. Even the United Nations officers charged with overseeing the 'criminal' activities of Iraq have condemned the barbarity against that country and have resigned. Yet the story of these people who resigned have not been told fully. And the people of Iraq continue to suffer.

18. Is it because they are Muslims that the media neglects their sufferings? We hope not. But sometimes we think that it is because they are Muslims. The sanctions against Serbia is not effectively enforced. Is it because they are Christians and their crime is after all only against Muslims?

19. It must be remembered that the majority of the Muslims, like the majority of Christians or Buddhists or Hindus are good people who mean no harm to anyone even though their images of each other are grossly distorted. Among any people in any community there will be those who are irrational, extreme and violent. The number of such people among Muslims are no bigger than among other religious groups. It is really necessary to understand why they are what they are.

20. Their extremism is un-Islamic. Islam does not advocate extremism and Islam abhor disorder. In Islam the preparations for war are required only in order to protect the Muslims. But if Muslims are attacked then it is their duty to defend. Acts of terrorism have no place in Islam. But there will be those who become so bitter and frustrated over the injustice perpetrated on Muslims and their lands that they ignore the teachings of Islam and try to fight its cause in their own way, in fact in the way that they see others fight. For terrorism is not a Muslim invention. They learnt it from others.

21. Hijacking aircrafts for example is not invented or initiated by Muslims. Non-Muslims started this. They were not described as terrorists, nor linked to their religion. The Muslims who hijack were not common criminals trying to enrich themselves. They had a cause and in all sincerity they thought they were risking their lives in the interest of the Muslims. If they put others into danger and inflict casualties among non-combatants, aren't the people who oppress them doing the same, oppressing them and bombing innocent civilians? This is their view of course but the Muslim world does not condone such acts. We try to negotiate. We try to explain. But we come up against a blank wall. There is a total unwillingness to hear our side of the story. The very powerful non-Muslim countries have a biased view against us. And the media from the West are invariably biased. Their reporting, their analyses, their stories are all skewed and distorted in order to make out that the doings of a few misguided and frustrated Muslims reflect the wishes and the direction of the Muslim 'ummah' of one billion people.

22. Yet the media can mitigate this by giving the real picture, telling the truth. But almost without exception the Western media aggravate matters by exaggerating and telling deliberately slanted stories about Muslim terrorists. Has the media forgotten that the terrorists in many of the colonies of the West have since been

described as statesmen and were in fact freedom fighters struggling to liberate their countries? And after achieving independence they are recognised as responsible leaders in the Governments of their independent countries. Who was Jomo Kenyata, President of Kenya, if not a terrorist?

23. Can it not be that the so-called Muslim terrorists of today, or of yesterday would become Muslim statesmen of tomorrow, leading their people and at peace with the rest of the world? Of course at this point in time it is difficult to imagine that they, the irresponsible fighters against oppression, the imitators of Western methods of fighting for a cause can be statesmen at all. But can we really say that it is impossible for such a thing to happen?

24. The fact that all must admit is that the Muslims and their world have not just been marginalised but have been truly oppressed. There is not a single Muslim power in this world. They are totally bereft of the capacity to protect themselves. They are totally dependent on their detractors and those who are covertly or overtly against them. Any kind of injustice can be perpetrated against Muslims and the perpetrators will not only get away with it but will be actually glorified.

25. In Bosnia-Herzegovina the world watched daily over television the horrors perpetuated by the Serbs against the Muslim Bosniacs. In one case a British officer was very upset and furious as he condemned the burning of a house where women and young children were still alive inside. Thousands were murdered by the Serbs in Srebrenica even as the European forces who were supposed to be protecting them retreated and looked the other way.

26. But for a very long time the Western European nations and America refused to act against the Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. They feared that the Russians might come to the defence of the Serbs. Elsewhere they were not afraid of the Russians. They freely bomb Iraq, an ally of Russia. But in former Yugoslavia they feared Russia's reaction. And so they allowed Serbian atrocities to go on. More than 200,000 Bosniacs, mostly the young people, were massacred and thrown into hastily dug graves.

27. Many people cynically commented that had Bosnia- Herzegovina been producing oil for the West, or if the Serbs were Muslims, swift action would have been seen.

28. Now we are seeing the Russians literally wiping out the Chechen from the surface of this earth. It is genocide that is happening in Chechnya. The insurgents in Chechnya are misguided. They know they could not possibly defeat the Russians. It was an uneven match - - one million Chechens against 260 million well-armed and ruthless Russians. But they wanted independence for their tiny state.

29. No country would like to give up a square inch of its territory. And no country will support any separation of any territory from any country simply because the precedent might be used to excise land in their own country. But the Russian Federation has been broken up and many independent states have emerged.

Why cannot Chechnya? Recently the world community has supported the separation of Timur Timor from Indonesia. There are other Muslim states who seem happy to be a part of the Russian Federation. But Chechnya wants to be independent.

30. Malaysia like all other countries does not encourage and will not recognise breakaway states because we are a Federation of States and we will not allow for any secession of any of our states.

31. But Chechnya is as entitled as are the other states of the Russian Federation or the Yugoslav Federation. The Chechens are a strongly independent people and coincidentally they are also Muslims. Cannot the problem of their secession be settled peacefully?

32. But today they are being bullied, being massacred, being physically destroyed by the Russians. How many have questioned the abuse of human rights, the abuse of power by the Russians? It is all so unfair and unjust. The injustice is felt by Muslims all over the world. But the true conditions in Chechnya have not even been properly reported. The media has apparently condoned such inhumanity, such brutality. Yet the same media reported repeatedly some minor injustice or apparent injustice committed by Muslims or Muslim countries. If anyone is detained without trial, it is unjust. When there is an open trial in full view of everyone, it is still unjust because there is no acquittal. With Muslim countries, nothing they do can ever be right in the eyes of the media.

33. It is not that the Muslims are asking for the media to be biased in their favour. All they are asking for is fair reporting. At the every least after a biased or an unfavourable report against them, they should be given an opportunity to be heard, to give their side of the story. Without doubt they will not be able to explain and justify all the things that they have done in the name of Islam and justice or whatever but the world could have an opportunity to make their own judgement. The media is powerful. When they act together they are even more powerful. And power as we all know corrupts. The almost absolute power of the Western media corrupts almost absolutely.

35. The media has its own agenda now. The media wants to shape the world. It is not what the world, or the leaders of the world, think that shapes the reporting by the media. It is what the media thinks, what the media considers to be right for the world that counts with the media now.

36. And consequently if the media is against anything or for anything, then the reports in the media will reflect this. But the media, like any other interest groups can be wrong. And when it is wrong and it insists on promoting its views the damage done can be considerable.

37. Today, world media is hugely Western dominated. They are not controlled by the Governments of the West of course, at least not overtly, but their views reflect Western bias, Western policies. Quite often Western views are anti-Muslims. And the media willingly propagates this anti-Muslim views.

38. Muslims are not Westerners almost by definition. Some may be pro-Western, very pro-Western sometimes but all are lumped together as Muslims, and their countries as Muslim countries. As such they are not deserving of sympathy, of fair reporting by the media. And because the reporting is not fair, is biased against the Muslims, it augments the misunderstanding and bias of the Western people against the Muslims. The media thus perpetuates the confrontation between Muslims and non- Muslims. Perhaps there is something to be gained from this but for sure more would be gained if the confrontation between Muslims and non-Muslims ends and we all regard each other as members of the human race as prone to do wrong as all humans can.

39. The media is powerful, is influential. It can contribute much to greater understanding between peoples, between the followers of the different religions. The media' s reach have been tremendously enhanced by modern information technology. If it chooses to do good it can truly bring about peace and understanding throughout the world.

40. The media can do much for creating greater understanding of Islam and the Muslims. Of course the Muslims must do something for themselves too. But the media' s role is so big and its power so great that good behaviour by the Muslims alone would come to naught if they don' t get the cooperation of the media.

41. The Muslims are not inherently against the West, the Christians or the Jews. The Muslims want peace as much as anybody else. We want a share of the bounties of this earth. We are not violent people given to terror and anarchic behaviour. Some of us may misbehave but no more than others do. We should not be tarred with the same brush. The majority of us are good, peace-loving rational people.

42. The media must give us our due and I am quite sure we the Muslims will respond positively -- not all of us perhaps, but certainly the majority of us.

43. We talk of the global village. None of us can be an island. We are close neighbours as all people living in a village are close neighbours. We need to come together and solve our differences as village people do. Villagers cannot be endlessly confronting each other.

44. The media can play a role here, a big role in the development of a village culture where Muslims and non- Muslims live and work together and share the fruits of their labour together, fairly and equitably.

45. With instant, worldwide unrestricted communication, a golden chance has presented itself. The media must not miss it. What you decide to do and to contribute towards the understanding of Islam and the Muslims by the rest of the world can shape the Global Village that is fast taking shape. Distort it and it will be distorted for the whole of this third millennium. Mould it into a thing of beauty and it will last forever.

46. That is the challenge facing the media. We Muslims pray and hope that you

will help us banish this distorted view of Islam and the Muslims by the rest of the world through the power and influence that you wield. May Allah Bless you and give you success in your noble effort.