

The International Seminar On The Impact Of Globalisation On The Islamic World

Renaissance Hotel, Kuala Lumpur 11 June 2001

"THE ISSUE AND CHALLENGES IN THE 21ST CENTURY"

Let me begin by extending a warm welcome to all participants and speakers to the International Seminar on "The Impact of Globalisation on the Islamic World: The Issues and Challenges in the 21st Century". I hope that you will have a pleasant stay and a fruitful discussion here.

2. This Seminar is most timely as it addressess current trends in globalisation and the challenges that it has unleashed on the developing world which of course include the Muslim world, for all of them are developing countries, none being developed at all, although they may be very rich.

3. Muslims must remember that they missed the Industrial Revolution completely. While they were busy debating whether modernisation was compatible with Islam or not, while they were condemning each other over trivia regarding science and religion, while they considered for years whether electricity could be used in mosques or not, the Europeans were busy applying their new knowledge of things mechanical, of engineering, of reducing human labour with machines. They trained and reassigned their workers so as to work in factories, developed mass production techniques, constantly improved the quality of their products, reduced cost and built mass markets. They improved the speed and capacity of their transportation and captured foreign markets. And of course they produced better weapons and with this they put an end to the Muslim Empire. It was the Industrial Revolution which destroyed the Muslim Empire.

4. Now it looks like we are again going to be left behind in the Information Revolution, a revolution that will shrink the world and force the Muslims to be rubbing shoulders with all kinds of people, people not only of different religions but possessing new moral values which are totally repugnant to the Muslims.

5. In the past we could isolate ourselves and try to practise our religion and our values free from the polluting influence of others. It is not possible now. The TV and the Internet and even the telephone bring the private lives of alien people with alien cultures right into our homes, our bedrooms even. We may want to force our people to reject outside influence, we may even ban televisions and cinemas, but for how long can

we do it? The invasion of our world is already on but it will become even more pervasive. There is no escaping.

6. Now we have globalisation, a world without borders. Can we keep out things if we have no borders? Spy planes and satellites look down at us and see everything that we do. There is really no more privacy, and Muslims are very private people.

7. New ideas are being promoted and spread which strike at the very foundation of our religion. Can we deal with human rights which include freedom to choose one's own religion? Can we deal with the right to free access to information, including information about other religions or distorted versions of our religion, and pornography?

8. We see the advocates of globalisation furiously preparing themselves to take advantage of a borderless world market. They are all coming together, the great banks and the giant corporations. They are acquiring and merging and acquiring and merging again. Each one of them is already bigger than most countries. They can buy up countries if they want to. Certainly they can buy our politicians.

9. They are truly powerful and very influential. Their Governments have to do their bidding and so must other Governments. Reducing investments, pulling out capital, devaluing currencies, pressuring Governments to change and to legislate in their favour and a host of other things can be done by these giants which will be good for them but not necessarily good for the country in which they operate or in the world at large.

10. A globalised, borderless, deregulated world is what the advocates of globalisation are pushing for. How would we know when we are invaded if we have no borders? Invasion need not take the form of armies marching into our countries. We can be invaded by businessmen, by banks, by corporations, by ideas and values and moral codes which are alien to us. The effect is the same as a military invasion. In fact it is worse than that. Every aspect of our lives will be invaded. Our minds will be invaded. Even our religion will be invaded.

11. I admit I am painting a frightening picture of globalisation. It is frightening but it is entirely possible, unless of course the Muslim countries act in concert and participate in the shaping of globalisation, to redefine it, to tame it, to make it into an ideology which can benefit us as much as the rest of the world. We cannot reject globalisation outright but we can influence its

interpretation, we can regulate it, we can change its pace and we can reshape it.

12. Globalisation need not mean a borderless world. The borders could still be there and should be respected. With borders we can determine what can cross and what cannot. We will not be in full control of course. Information in all forms can cross borders unrestricted because of modern technology. But we can develop the software and even hardware which can keep out at least some of the dirt which come with the information.

13. With borders we can protect some of our industries until they are ready to compete. We can restrict or impose taxes on products which would compete unfairly with our businesses. We can stop the currency manipulators from impoverishing us at will, as they did in East Asia in 1997-1998. With borders there are many things we can do to sustain ourselves and to gain time to prepare for the seemingly inevitable - a totally deregulated globalisation.

14. There is no reason why globalisation cannot be regulated. It is nonsense to claim that the market will regulate itself. The market is about making profits; not about ethics, not about disciplining Governments. The market has shown that it is prepared for the players to fight to the death without anyone attempting to stop the fight. The market is not interested in the social consequences of maximising profits. Thus the currency traders are prepared to destroy whole economies, throw millions out of work, cause riots, arson and the killing of innocent people and the overthrow of Governments, so as to make profits which are only a minute fraction of what they had destroyed.

15. No. The markets cannot be relied upon to regulate itself or society or Governments. The regulation of the market must remain the responsibility of Governments. Governments, whether democratic or not, must care for the whole nation; all the people and not just the traders. If traders have to be curbed in the greater interest of society, then the Government must curb them with appropriate and adequate regulations and laws.

16. Monopolies and oligopolies must be broken down. The Muslim countries together with other developing countries must oppose the attempts to corner the market by setting up huge banks and corporations which prevent any new business from starting up or growing. There will be a price to pay of course. No doubt the huge and capital-rich corporations can be more efficient, reducing cost and improving quality. But we have been able to achieve a fair degree of efficiency and the quality of products have improved without these huge giant corporations

or banks. The process may be slower but efficiency and quality are not static. Even with the big corporations, research and development must be continuous in order to improve results and products all the time.

17. On the other hand in the absence of monopolistic giants the small can hope to build businesses independently, to innovate and to prosper reasonably. The whole world's population cannot become employees and wage-earners working for big corporations where they are just so many cogs in the numerous wheels of these giants.

18. Protection of local industries must be allowed, at least until they are ready to compete with the so-called multi-nationals. We know these multi-national corporations are no more multi-national than are our industries. Their labour force may be from many nations but their ownership and their direction remains with the very rich countries.

19. The pace of globalisation must be slowed now. It is advancing too rapidly. The developing countries are unable to cope even with the negotiations on World Trade. Against the numerous experts from the rich countries, their negotiating teams can make no headway. Divided, the developing countries including the Muslim countries are no match for the sophisticated arguments of the experts representing the rich advocates of globalisation.

20. Currency trading should be regulated and totally transparent if at all there should be currency trading. Currency is not a commodity which can be used as raw material or for consumption. Currency is mere tokens and their values are entirely artificial. Governments are the only authority which can assign values to the currency. Of course Governments can cause currencies to devalue by mismanagement but it is entirely possible for Governments to fix the exchange rate of the currencies. An international organisation can be created which will determine whether there should be a change in the exchange rate or not. Many things can be done with the International financial regime which can stabilise exchange rate and free international trade from uncertain exchange rates.

21. These are some of the things that can be done to render globalisation less dangerous to the developing countries. There are probably many more modifications which can be made to globalisation in order to ensure that it will benefit everyone, rich and poor, big and small, developed and developing.

22. But while we try to change or to stall globalisation, we cannot afford to wait for the results of our actions. We have to be prepared to deal with the dangers posed by globalisation and we have to learn all about the technologies and the applications they can offer. We cannot afford the kind of suspicions we had entertained about industrialisation and modernisation this time around. Of course there will still be those who would say that worldly success is not for us Muslims. For us the afterlife is more important. If disaster strikes us the Almighty will save us for we are Muslims.

23. Those who say this forget that Allah will not change the fate of those who do not strive to change their fate themselves. If we just make no attempt to handle the threat posed by globalisation, if we simply leave it to Allah's will, we really cannot expect the Almighty to save us.

24. Unfortunately there are many Muslims in these countries and I believe in most other Muslim countries who will not only do nothing to save themselves but who will actually actively try to prevent other Muslims from taking any pre-emptive action by violently opposing it. Since they consider that we should leave our fate in the hands of Allah, it is strange that they should actually be taking positive steps to prevent Muslims from saving themselves. They should leave it to Allah S.W.T. to stop us. But when it comes to propagating their belief they are prepared to act and they don't trust Allah to do it for them. But whether it is strange or not every time Muslim countries try to take positive measures to keep up with development in the rest of the world and to prevent themselves from being dominated by others, there will be groups of Muslim fanatics who will do their best or worse to keep Muslims backwards and vulnerable in the name of Islam. In fact these Muslims who want us to remain backward are traitors to Islam and the Muslims. Knowingly or unknowingly they are working for the enemies of Islam.

25. And so if we the majority of the Muslims want to avoid being swallowed up by globalisation we must learn to master it. The first things that Muslim countries must do is to learn all about Information Technology which is so intricately linked to globalisation.

26. Learning about Information Technology should not be confined to its application alone. We must have the capacity to develop the basic software which is so very essential and yet so very costly for us to acquire now. We must develop our own basic software on which to develop other softwares. We must in fact develop our own Internet or Intranet. There is no reason at all why we must use only the Internet for all applications.

27. This is a tall order perhaps but what some people can do others can also do. And we should be able to do better.

28. Beyond software we must develop our own hardware. We must design and produce the microchips without which there would be no Information Technology. We must develop all kinds of applications for the microprocessors, applications not only in computers and communication but also in engineering, in automated machines and robots, in precision engineering, in the manufacture of sophisticated instruments and appliances and a host of other applications.

29. From these we must develop our own manufacturing industries so as to reduce our dependence on others. In fact we must now catch up with the Industrial Revolution that we missed. Our manufacturing capacity must at least be equal to those of developed countries.

30. Perhaps this thing that I propose is a tall dream. It is of course a dream. But we do have the resources and the expertise, albeit limited at the moment. We are not going to beat the developed countries but we should be able to catch up with them in time, or at least not be left so far behind as we are now.

31. We have a duty to our religion to do this. Globalisation is not just about material wealth but also about values. We see the destruction of morality in the materialistic world. Today homosexuality is actively encouraged and in some instances even incestuous relation between siblings and parents and children are tolerated. It seems that in the name of human rights anything is allowed, nothing is barred. Marriage and families are no longer respected institutions. They are neither formalised nor considered necessary. Families are defined as two people or more living together without any recognised marriage ceremony or registration and begetting and rearing children of indeterminate parentage.

32. Muslim countries and Muslim Governments have a duty to ensure that globalisation will not result in the marginalisation of their countries as happened with the Industrial Revolution and Industrial age. We cannot afford it this time. If once again we miss this opportunity to keep pace with the radical and rapid advances now being made with technology and the sciences, and the changes they cause to the world's perceptions of things, the new ideas and concepts in human and international relations; if we miss all these and fail to handle them then we will not only be marginalised, but we will be dominated and hegemonised permanently.

33. We also stand exposed to the undermining of our religion and our value system. We may think we can isolate and insulate ourselves but this is a false hope. Even if we can keep our borders, we cannot prevent wireless communication from penetrating our society.

34. Already we have to accept and practise alien ideologies, concepts and values. Our systems of Government have to change and we have to constantly justify and apologise for our practices and values. Of course some of us are extreme and we should condemn them but the vast majority of us are moderate and rational. Our systems and our values are not absolutely bad although we have to rid ourselves of pre-Islamic and cultural values which are actually not Islamic but are tribal.

35. We the moderates and the rational must try to understand globalisation, the technology that is driving it and the inevitability of globalisation in some form or another. Understanding this we must prepare ourselves not only to fend off the dangers but to make use of globalisation so as to catch up with the developed countries in both Information Technology and industrial capacity. We must not miss this opportunity if we want to preserve our independence and the essence of our religion and values. Whether the impact of globalisation on us will be beneficial or not depends upon us. Blaming others will get us nowhere. Remember the Quranic injunction that Allah will not change the fate of those who do not try to improve their fate themselves. Remember also that all that is bad is due to our own doing, all that is good comes from Allah.