

The International Forum On Islam (Kalif 2002)

Sheraton Imperial, Kuala Lumpur 19 July 2002

"The State of the Muslim World Today: Knowledge as a tool of Muslim Political Empowerment."

2. What is the state of the Muslim World Today? I don't think it would be wrong to state that the Muslim world is at its lowest ebb, and is probably continuing to decline and to fall. Ever since the Turkish Muslim Empire fell before the onslaught of the European nations, not only was the Muslim world broken up into small and ineffective nation-states but it has never been able to stage a recovery, much less to re-establish itself on the world stage. Individually the Muslim states have not been able to make any progress or impact.

3. In fact for many of the peoples of the Turkish Empire, their cooperation with the Europeans in order to free themselves from Turkish rule, only resulted in a change of colonial masters from Turkish to British and French. It was only after a long time and with great difficulty that they managed to extricate themselves from European colonial rule.

4. Independence has not enabled them to develop and to regain the political clout of the old Muslim empires. Instead they have been faced with internal problems which prevent them from making any progress. Even when they are richly endowed they have not been able to make any real progress in terms of their influence in international affairs. Not a single Muslim country is to be found among the developed nations of the world.

5. When the Industrial Revolution took place the Muslim World was still relatively undivided. But Muslims as a whole were either unaware of the Revolution or rejected it. For a long time much of the results of the Industrial Revolution whether in terms of material gains or systems were rejected by Muslims as unIslamic.

6. Electricity for example was not used by the Muslims because for some unknown reason it was considered to be against Islam. Mosques could not be lighted with electricity. It was haram according to the Muslim learned ones. Only about 30 years ago there was at least one Muslim country which insisted on using oil lamps instead of electricity.

7. Mechanised vehicles were also considered as haram and may not be used to carry the coffin of the dead. Paintings of human and animal figures were prohibited, as was the wearing of non-baggy trousers and peak-caps. The progress in weaponry

in the West was not duplicated in the Muslim world. Instead when finally a change of weapons was allowed they had to be sourced basically from the enemy.

8. We may think that it is unrealistic if not silly to label industrial products as haram, but in those days they were fanatically serious in considering them as haram. Indeed the Turkish Yanisari revolted when western-style uniforms were introduced. The ulamas had condemned these western things and Governments must obey these injunction or risk being labelled unIslamic. And so we lost valuable time as the Industrial Revolution passed by us.

9. Not only did we miss the Industrial Revolution but we also missed the developments which followed which we also looked upon with suspicion. Not so very long ago in Malaysia television sets were thrown into the river because some religious teachers declared them to be haram. It sounds silly now but it is amazing how many people believed these ignorant teachers.

10. Today and rightly so we are even more concerned about what is haram and halal but unfortunately we often go overboard. Thus in Afghanistan so powerful is the belief that no part of a woman may be seen by strangers that the women themselves refuse to take off the burqa even when they are allowed to. Yet in other parts of the Muslim world it is permissible to leave the face and the hands uncovered. Who decreed these dress codes which so occupy the minds of Muslims that they neglect those injunctions of Islam which are so important for their safety and security?

11. Thus the injunctions of Islam on more important matters are ignored with impunity. Thus brotherhood of Muslims is openly disregarded. Muslims who declare themselves as brothers in Islam often make it their duty to fight and kill other Muslims. They would in the name of Islam condemn these Muslims as infidels in order to justify their enmity towards them. If we go by their criteria for being Muslim then there are probably no Muslims in the world. In any case Islam forbids the frivolous labelling of other Muslims as infidels.

12. Similarly we are enjoined by Islam to seek knowledge. A well-known hadith states that we must seek knowledge even from China. At the time of the Prophet what was the knowledge available in China? Certainly not about Islam. China had at that time already developed a good system of Government, great scientific knowledge, a high level of agriculture. They had produced paper and ink and explosives and a variety of scientific instruments.

13. But Muslims ignore this important injunction to seek knowledge. At the beginning, yes, they did seek knowledge. And so there were great Muslim physicians, scientists, mathematicians, astronomers, geographers etc during the great days of the Muslim empire and civilisation. In fact the great empire and civilisation was partly the result of these scholars, these seekers of knowledge. But later knowledge was interpreted as religious knowledge only and the study of other kinds of knowledge was regarded as either sinful or as lacking in merit, as not contributing to the afterlife. And so the pursuit of knowledge other than the specifically religious was neglected. To this day we neglect such knowledge and Muslim students studying these non-religious subjects feel guilty and try to make up by devoting as much of their time as possible to various so-called Islamic activities in order to earn merit. The result is that Muslim students hardly ever achieve excellence in the sciences etc, including in the research so necessary in order to compete with the rest of the non-Muslim world. Later in life these graduates are not able to contribute to the recovery of the past glory of the Muslims. Worse still they are not even motivated to do so.

14. One of the important fundamental teachings of Islam is the need to be equipped with the weapons and defense capability in order to instill fear in the enemy and to defend the ummah. This teaching is obviously neglected for even a race with just 13 million people in the whole world can defeat the forces of 1.3 billion Muslims. In fact just about anyone can oppress any Muslim country and there is nothing the Muslim countries can do beyond crying and appealing for justice.

15. Because of all these and many more the Muslim World of Today is hopelessly weak and backward. Can knowledge empower the Muslims Politically? It can of course. But one has to remember that there is no single cause for anything that happens in the world. Lack of knowledge alone is not the cause and acquiring knowledge alone will not empower the Muslims. Certainly knowledge that is not applied will benefit the Muslims not at all.

16. Together with the acquisition of knowledge there must be also a change in attitude, a change in the mindset and values which always hold us back whenever we seek to empower ourselves. The majority of the Muslims of today do not believe in worldly well-being, including worldly security. They do not believe that Muslims can ever be as advanced as the developed countries. Instead they believe there is already a Muslim renaissance as evidenced by the obvious piety of more Muslims and their return to the dress codes which are considered Muslim.

17. I spoke about our attitude towards the Industrial Revolution. The suspicions of the products of Industrial Revolution is the result of the wrong interpretations of the teachings of Islam. Thus when we are enjoined to seek knowledge we defined it as knowledge about religion only. When we are asked to defend ourselves, we stress instead the weapons of the armies of the Prophet, considering riding skills and the use of bows and arrows as important and not the capacity to defend. Even when Islam enjoins upon us to be just, we ignore justice but uphold the procedures only. Clearly our teachings do not emphasise the real priority in Islam. We are taught to uphold the forms rather than the substance of the religion we believe in.

18. Before we can pursue knowledge we have to understand the teachings of Islam regarding the reasons and the need to acquire knowledge. Frequently we are told that we must not seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge. But we must know that at some stage the knowledge we acquire may come in useful. Why study the structure of an atom when it does not promise anything that can be useful to us? But we know now that our failure to study the structure and the forces contained in the atom has made us vulnerable to total destruction by the nuclear devices developed through the knowledge of the elements and basic structure of materials and their properties.

19. We must also banish this idea that the only knowledge that we need acquire is about Islam. Neglect of other knowledge has led to our lack of industrial capacity, our capacity to invent and produce weapons to instill fear in the enemy and to defend ourselves. We must stop thinking that the acquisition of knowledge other than religious knowledge gives no merit in afterlife. Surely if the knowledge we pursue can contribute to the fulfilment of the Quranic injunction to defend ourselves such knowledge must give us merit in the afterlife. There is no need to feel guilty when we study these other subjects. We should indeed consider that it is an important ibadat, an Islamic injunction that is no less meritorious than the study of religion. Indeed our ability to study religion depends on our capacity to defend ourselves.

20. It is only if we succeed in changing our mindset regarding the acquisition of non-religious knowledge that we can seriously pursue knowledge to a level that has been achieved in the countries of our detractors. And when that is achieved and is followed by the application of the knowledge then it can be a tool for our empowerment. The correct interpretation of what is enjoined by Islam with regard to the acquisition of knowledge is therefore crucial. We must not allow ourselves to be again side-tracked by the skewed interpretations of Islam

which had lead us to miss the Industrial Revolution, to reject electricity and mechanical products, and to reduce our capacity to defend our faith and ourselves. We must accept the reality of life today. We cannot anymore reject those things which have come to be used universally. Islam is not just a religion for the 7th Century of the Christian Era. It is a religion for all times. With time things change. After 1400 years of Islam we cannot expect to live in the same environment and under the same conditions as were found in the 7th Century. Islam has provided for this change, if only we interpret Islam properly. Islam is not a rigid religion. There are many provisions in Islam to take care of all situations.

21. There is a story of a Malaysian lady who went to a European country. It was time for midday prayer and she was in a restaurant. She insisted on not missing prayer time and prayed in the toilet of the restaurant. Apparently she had not been taught that when a Muslim is away from home he or she may pray ahead or after a particular prayer time, may shorten the prayer and pray for two prayer times together. Allah has given us this facility so as not to burden us. It is we who chose not to avail ourselves of Allah's bounty. It is not Islam which obstructs our progress. It is the wrong and rigid interpretations which we are taught which hinders progress.

22. Similarly in education, in the search for knowledge, Islam is not to blame but it is the narrow interpretation of Islam that has resulted in Muslims being so backward in many fields of knowledge crucial to their own well-being.

23. Of course knowledge can be a tool to empower us politically. But pure knowledge will get us nowhere unless we learn how to apply that knowledge to our own advantage and for the betterment of our life.

24. If knowledge is to be for our empowerment then it must contribute towards our economic, social and security needs. Knowledge is not static. It is accumulating and expanding all the time. The quest for knowledge must therefore be continuous. There has to be specialists who are experts in particular fields. In the quest for knowledge there must be a division of labour. Some must master the sciences and the different branches of science, mathematics, medicine, etc. Within the Muslim community which number 1.3 billion every field of knowledge can be pursued. And new fields must be uncovered all the time. And certainly there must always be an adequate number who pursue religious knowledge. This division of labour within the ummah will result not only in an empowered society but a balanced one.

25. The discovery of new knowledge must not be left to others. In the past it was knowledge pioneered by Muslims which was acquired by the Europeans to enable them to power their industrial development. To this day the knowledge pioneered by Muslims such as Algorithm developed by Al Khwarizmi is being used in the design of the circuits on the microchip. It is Algorithm which makes IT hardware and software possible. But Muslims themselves have not used the knowledge pioneered by the Muslims. In many cases we don't even learn them.

26. While we can learn to apply such knowledge there is no reason why we cannot pioneer new knowledge and the applications. If we are able to do this then once again we can gain an edge over the others as we once did when Muslims pioneered and dominated the many fields of knowledge. Muslim migrants to other countries are pioneering new knowledge simply because their own countries provide them with no facilities or opportunities.

27. Clearly when we reach the stage of pioneers, knowledge literally means power. But even before that the mastery of knowledge will enable us to compete on equal footing with others. We would certainly be empowered and we would be able to lift ourselves up out of the very inferior position that we are in.

28. The pursuit of knowledge and following that the acquisition of the skills to apply the knowledge will take a considerable period of time. We have to remember that knowledge is not static. It is moving all the time and today the speed of discovery and development of new knowledge is exponential. It will take time to acquire knowledge. We have to accept the need to be patient. It may take a decade or even a century. Remember when we were at the peak during the great days of our Islamic Civilisation, it took the Europeans several hundred years to catch up. But catch up they did and then they passed us completely. We will have to accept the need to struggle for a considerable length of time. But fortunately knowledge is much less hidden now than it was before. Most of the knowledge there is is well documented and easily available. Modern technology makes all knowledge, except a few which are concerned with defence applications, easily accessible.

29. The next problem is the vastness of the field. We have to divide our manpower, within the country and between the countries in order to be able to cover the knowledge in all fields.

30. If we are prepared to overcome all the problems which can hamper our acquisition of knowledge and we are patient enough

then God willing, Inshaallah, knowledge can empower us. There is no quick fix. One particular people waited for 2000 years. We will not have to wait that long if we understand the need for knowledge and we learn the lessons of history.

31. I hope your conference will be realistic about this. It is easy to agree that knowledge is a tool for our political empowerment. But mere agreement is not going to lead us anywhere. We really do not need more seminars and conferences which will end up with the obvious conclusions. We need to act and how we should act to implement the obvious is what should occupy our minds and our time now.