

**SPEECH BY YABHG TUN DR MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD  
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**“Islamic Renaissance: Triumph over the Odds, Synergy in Action,  
Progress for All”**

I would like to thank the World Islamic Economic Conference for this invitation to speak on “Islamic Renaissance: Triumph over the Odds, Synergy in Action, and Progress for All”.

2. This is a longish subject for me to talk about. I did not choose this rather involved topic. I hope I can do justice to it. The title seems to suggest that Islamic Renaissance is on and that it is triumphant and bringing progress. But frankly I have not noticed any rebirth of Islam or Islamic civilisation.

3. It is now more than 14 centuries after the Prophet Mohammad s.a.w. brought the message of Islam to humanity. In that time the message has undergone very many interpretations, so many in fact that there is now not one Islam, but a few hundred. As a result the Muslims are deeply divided, so deeply that very often they war and kill each other. They don't treat each other as brothers as enjoined by Islam.

4. Yet Islam had brought about a great civilisation. At the time when the European Christians were wallowing in the ignorance and superstition of the Dark Ages, when the Jews were wandering all over the world trying to find a home, and being forced to move on and migrate from country to country, the Muslim ummah or community was expanding and occupying vast stretches of the then known world. It seemed as if nothing could stop them.

5. They reached France in the west after having conquered and occupied Spain, the Balearic Isles and Sicily. They crossed Central Asia and spread into Western China and India. And they moved into the densely populated spice islands of Southeast Asia. Surely no other religion or civilisation had spread as fast and as widely.

6. It was not all by the sword either. Mostly it was peaceful conversion of the locals by traders rather than dedicated missionaries.

7. The expansion of Islam is even more remarkable because the first to accept Islam were the Jahilliah or the Ignorant Arab tribes. These were very primitive people who were always at war with each other. Their custom included burying alive female children. They raided and kidnapped women and they worshipped any oddly-shaped stones.

8. This very primitive people upon being Islamised went on to build a great civilisation, produced brilliant scholars who studied Greek and other languages so as to gain access to the sciences, mathematics, medicine etc, to research and develop new knowledge and subjects, excelling in astronomy, algebra and algorithm.

9. These originally nomadic desert people became sedentary and built great cities complete with libraries and universities. They built roads, irrigated land and developed international trade, along the Silk Road and the sea lanes to India, Southeast Asia, China and Japan. They were great navigators.

10. Then the great Islamic Civilisation they had built went into decline. Of course other civilisations too went through the same process of growth and dominance and then decline. One should not be surprised therefore that the Islamic civilisation also declined. Perhaps we should leave it at that. But the religion continued to be the faith of an ever growing number of believers, 1.3 billion of them today.

11. Among these Muslims there seem to be a yearning to recapture the great and glorious past. If Islam could bring greatness to the ignorant Arabs cannot it do the same once again for the Muslims? The desire is greater now because all Muslims feel they and their religion are being humiliated and trodden upon with impunity.

12. But what is a Renaissance? Some Muslims believe there has already been a renaissance, at least a resurgence of the faith, for more Muslims seem to be practising outwardly at least the teachings of Islam. There are more mosques and more Muslims congregating every Friday and even for the daily prayers.

13. Where before women did not cover their heads, today most Muslim women cover up and the wearing of the chador or burka is still common. The wearing of head scarfs at schools has become a must even in non-Muslim countries and is causing problems.

14. The number of pilgrims going for the haj and the umrah has increased considerably. And there are other signs of Muslim piety and desire to live the Muslim way of life.

15. There are Muslims who believe that if they piously practice the rituals and injunctions of Islam they will regain the greatness of Islam. They believe they would be saved without them having to do anything else.

16. But Islam is not just about Islamic dresses and rituals. The Islamic way of life covers every aspect of life, not just those concerned with the worship of Allah. A Muslim must enjoy hassanah or the good life in this world as much as he must

obey the injunctions of Islam against committing sins and to gain merit and hassanah in the next. It can hardly be said that the Muslims are enjoying worldly hassanah presently. They are among the most backward people and their faith has been made synonymous with terrorism.

17. Now the Quran also clarifies that Allah will not change the fate of the Muslims unless they make efforts to change it themselves. If today the Muslims are backward and oppressed it must be because they have not made efforts to overcome their backwardness and to fend off oppression.

18. But what should they do. Around about the 15<sup>th</sup> Century AD the learned ones or the ulamas interpreted read or "Iqraq" i.e. acquiring knowledge to mean only the knowledge of the Islamic religion. Knowledge of other subjects were undesirable and would gain no merit in the afterlife. Following this the Muslims gave up the study of science, mathematics, medicine etc. And almost immediately their civilisation began to decline.

19. At about the same time the Europeans decided to acquire the knowledge accumulated by the Muslims. Christian priests translated the Arabic texts into Latin and then into other European languages. With this knowledge the Europeans were able to drag themselves out of the Dark Ages and achieved their Renaissance.

20. The worldly decline of the Muslims therefore coincided with the modernisation and development of the European Renaissance. Over time the gap between the Islamic civilisation and modern civilisation widened. The Industrial Revolution was not participated in by the Muslims so that their countries did not manage to industrialise.

21. If the Muslims equate Islamic Renaissance with the revival of their material achievements during the glorious period of the Islamic civilisation besides their spiritual purity, than they have to reinterpret "Iqraq" or Read to mean acquisition of all knowledge. It wouldn't do for them to study only the works of the old Muslim scholars. They are all out of date. They must try to catch up with the new knowledge accumulated by the Europeans and others along with their technological skills if they want to achieve their renaissance.

22. Today there is not a single Muslim country which is considered developed. There are quite a number of very rich Muslim countries but they have no industrial capacity or technological know how to qualify them as developed countries. This sorry state of affairs is due to a lack of desire to acquire needed knowledge and skills and to apply them to the development of industrial and other capacities.

23. The Muslim countries which are rich are all consumers of goods and not producers. Because of the enormous wealth from their resources they do not

see the need to work even. They pay foreigners to do their work for them. Their wealth is distributed to their people largely as gifts. This is generous and caring perhaps. But to acquire wealth without work is dangerous. It causes atrophy of the brain and failure to develop skill. Over time these people will not be able to do anything themselves. They will always be dependent on others.

24. With the rich Muslim countries undeveloped and the poor underdeveloped and will very likely remain so if the same attitude persists, there is really no likelihood that there will be an Islamic Renaissance.

25. However if there is real will among the Muslims, their countries and their Governments, it is entirely possible for them to achieve a rebirth or a come back within a reasonably short space of time. To do this they must :

- i) Return to the Islamic concept of the ummah, the Muslim community and to a certain extent downgrade the Western nation-state concept and the consequent narrow nationalism. This will mean the wealth which actually belongs to Allah and the rich are merely the Custodians, can then be deployed to all the members of the Muslim ummah;
- ii) This deployment should be through investments in needed infrastructure in the countries unable to finance them. The custodians should earn a fair return from these investments.

These infrastructures are wealth generating. Even while under construction they will create jobs and businesses in the poor countries. Their maintenance and operation will also do the same. These infrastructures should include railways, roads, ports, airports, power plants especially hydro, water supply and irrigation. With these well-managed infrastructures there will be a lot of spin-offs and growths in the economy of the poor Muslim countries.

- iii) Since the rich Muslim countries are under-populated, they should develop human resources in the heavily-populated poor Muslim countries. Schools, universities and skills-training institutes should be set up and generous numbers of scholarships should be provided so as to produce educated and skilled human resources who can work in their own countries or in the countries contributing to this scheme. If there are no job opportunities in the Muslim world the trained personnel should be allowed to work anywhere in the world.
- iv) Muslim countries with the ability to do so can invest in industries in countries with big populations. If there is no know how or technological capability in the rich countries they can have joint-ventures with the people who have, whether Muslim or not or they can buy the technology. It is important that Muslims learn the management of these industries.

26. If these steps are taken it is entirely possible for a few Muslim countries to achieve developed country status. But Muslims must be careful not to follow blindly the liberalism of the developed countries of the West. For the renaissance to be meaningful Muslims must preserve their religion and culture, particularly their moral values. We have seen the collapse of such institutions as marriage and family from too liberal thinking following too much material success. We also see the worship of greed to the point where the materialists are prepared to say that "greed is great". Much of the problems which plague the world today is due to pure greed. The currency traders are motivated by pure greed. The Muslims must reject the moral values which follow the decadence of the developed countries of the West.

27. Assuming that the Muslims triumph over odds, what would it mean for the rest of the world. If the Muslims fail to correct the misinterpretations of Islam that is found today they may turn violent and threaten the world. But if the Muslims go back to the basic teachings of Islam, to become in fact Muslim fundamentalists, then the whole world will benefit. Contrary to popular beliefs in the West and even among Muslims, Islam is for peace and it abhors violence and terrorism.

28. Islam is a religion of peace. The allegations that Islam was spread by the sword, is not wholly true. The Muslim traders who converted the Malay rajas in Malaysia and elsewhere were not even dedicated Muslim missionaries. But by precept and by example they were able to show the goodness of Islam. Impressed by the material success of the Arab and Indian Muslim traders, the Malay rajas embraced Islam. The Quran emphatically states that there is no force in Islam.

29. I may mention here that the European traders who came East and also who went West ended up by conquering their trading partners, colonising their land and expropriating native land in order to set up new European countries. The Muslims had not used force to convert. After the re-conquest of Spain the Muslims and the Jews there were given three choices: leave Spain or convert to Christianity or have their heads chopped of. Quite a number of Muslims and Jews converted and had to eat pork to prove that the conversos were genuine.

30. A Muslim Renaissance will not lead to violent attempts at mass conversion. But the prosperous Muslim would help to progress the world.

31. Malaysia has a simple approach in its relations with neighbours. It wants its neighbours to become prosperous. It is prepared to help so as to prosper its neighbours. It is not altruistic. It is really enlightened self-interest.

32. We have found that the troubles of our neighbours invariably spill over into our country. But when our neighbours are prosperous and peaceful we reap a lot of benefits. They become a good market, a source of investments and tourists for us.

33. A prosperous reborn Muslim world would be a big market for the countries with the goods and services to export. You know how much of the oil money of the Arab states go back to Europe and America. In an Islamic Renaissance which results in the Islamic countries enjoying their full economic potential, a huge market would develop. Even if these countries industrialise and try to produce their own needs, there will be a lot of things that they will have to buy from the rest of the world. There will be an increase in world trade. We can see the huge number of expensive passenger aircraft bought by a prosperous China since it chose to open up and adopt free trade regime. The same thing would happen when the Muslim countries regain their pre-eminence after their Renaissance.

34. What I have suggested in order to achieve Islamic Renaissance are doable. But for reasons which I don't understand the Muslims will not want to do it. It is easier to raise hands in supplication and ask for the bounty of Allah.

Thank you.