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**Title : 'DINNER TALK' "ISLAM AND THE GLOBAL POLITICAL ORDER:  
CLASH OF CULTURES OR CLASH OF INTERESTS?"**

"Assalamualaikum"

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Distinguished participants of the training course on "Effective Capacity Building for Senior Sudanese Officials",

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by saying as Muslims we have to accept the tenets of the religion that outlines in a comprehensive manner, the way we should lead our lives in order to achieve success in the temporal and spiritual domain that is, in this world and the hereafter. In this regard our action must be guided by these elements to achieve happiness in accordance with the true teachings of Islam.

2. The Islamic worldview is based on the principle of unity of the ummah with its diversity in culture and ethnicity. Muslims are required to advocate understanding and goodwill amongst mankind. It is our duty to communicate with each other with tolerance and humility. It is this diversity that allows us to practice cultural freedom without compromising our choices or values.

3. In this context it is pertinent that we should reassess ourselves, in order to determine whether there is in fact a clash of civilization or a clash of interests? No doubt because we live in a globalized world, Muslims have become more vulnerable to external influences, which may bring about change to our perspectives or mindsets of our religion, either negatively or positively. How do we manage these and establish a balance between our material and spiritual needs? Many questions have been raised as to whether the teachings of Islam are compatible to modernity and development? If we wish to be part of this globalized world, must we accept standards imposed by developed countries?

4. Today all of us are familiar with the terms such as global village, global neighbourhood, global environment, borderless world, which are premised on liberal democracy, capitalism, market economy, civil society and the likes of them. Due to this new phenomena, the concept of cultural boundaries between groups and nations become unclear.

5. The reality is that every aspect of our lives in the economic, financial, political, cultural and traditional areas have to take into account the challenges brought by globalization. The advances in technology have brought about compression of time and space. We have indeed become closer to one another whether for good or for

worst. Undeniably, local happenings can be shaped by events occurring in some distant places and vice versa. This sometimes caused backlash and turmoil with far reaching effects on societies and nations. What is important is for us to learn to manage them in order to avoid its adverse ramifications. The actions and remedies introduced by the IMF and World Bank to overcome economic and financial crisis in many countries are as seen an affront to the long held views on sovereignty of nation states. It can be seen that these changes had resulted in political and social upheavals that threatened the security and stability of the affected states.

6. This occurred at the time when we are witnessing the widening economic gap between the rich and poor countries. Similarly the advancement in ICT caused a digital divide between the developed and developing countries.

7. There is also the view of many developing countries that globalization process and modernisation is an attempt to spread western culture, values and capitalism, at the expense of global diversity. The question often posed by developing countries is, why can't a homogenous global culture incorporate all cultures and not only push for the Western way of social, cultural and economic lives. Is it not necessary for fostering greater understanding to acknowledge the diversities of the world we live in? We are often overwhelmed by a world based on individualism and liberalism, which are contrary to our own societal norms and values.

8. September 11 last year has definitely changed the world as we knew it. "Islam" and Muslims everywhere has been the subject of world focus. The global fight against international terrorism had justified the military action by the coalition in Afghanistan. Israel on its part also justified its occupation and military actions in the Palestinian territories on fighting terrorism. This brings about the escalation of violence in the Middle East. The situation on the Indian subcontinent is another example of the tensions grounded on the basis of the fight against terrorism. Similarly the growing politicisation of religion in South East Asia seems also to be said to be borne out by actions of extremist groups trying to overthrow legitimate governments in the Muslim countries. September 11 saw the increase of crimes based on racism and xenophobia in developed countries.

9. Unfortunately Muslims emerging slowly from the vestiges of colonialism, become the victims of injustices and oppression emanating within their own societies or influenced by events happening outside their countries. In short, Muslim communities have been the subject of private and public vilifications throughout the world.

10. Those Muslim communities living in the Western countries have begun to doubt whether they could achieve some measure of comfort with the modern world.

11. In our search to find our place in the context of modern society, many questions have been raised. "Can Islam and democracy be compatible?" "Does Islam respect human rights?" "Do Muslims have a greater propensity for violence than any other religious group?" and so on. With hindsight and some measure of wisdom, it is

relatively easy to reject the typecasting prevalent in many western countries, especially of those cultures and societies alien to them. What is clear is that Islam is not a static ideology assigned to be appropriate for only a certain time period. It is a dynamic religion that can be applied in all places and times.

12. Definitely there is a gap between knowledge on Islam and the opinion drawn from it. The work of some misled individual cannot be associated or be construed as the product of Islam. Ijtihad is one such mechanism that gives Islam its dynamism to plan our lives accordingly. What is most pertinent is for us not to separate the religious process from the social processes. Scholarship and growing exposure have levelled the playing field somewhat, and as the world grows increasingly smaller, the potential for greater understanding and tolerance exists. Yet, these tragic circumstances have created a situation of fear and paranoia, where the voice of reason and commonsense are disregarded. And the events of the past several months and the various reactions to them, undeniably illustrates the fragility of the contemporary situation. Islam is a religion of peace, compassion, justice and obviously acts of violence does not form part of the religion of Islam.

13. Notwithstanding the gravity of the tragedy it cannot be denied, the reactions have been extremely damaging to the international community for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. There seem to be an obsession with commentators in the West to describe "terrorism acts" committed by Muslims as "Islamic" terrorists, "Islamic" militants, the need for some kind of western military "crusade" and so on, as if this was commanded by the Islamic religion or as if acts of violence are only peculiar to the adherent of the religion of Islam with all its negative implications. This in fact implanted the feelings of hatred and prejudices against the Muslim, thus clouded the real issue confronted the global community. The responses on the attacks according to even significant western intellectuals by pointing out that a real solution can only come about through proper, honest handling of the issues involved. The current reluctance in many western countries to look at the root causes of terrorism or to confront the problems for what they really are can only threaten the continuing search for real and lasting solutions.

14. As Lewis Lapham writing in Harper's Magazine suggests, "For the past few months, the curators of the national news media have done their patriotic best to muffle objections to our worldwide crusade against terrorism, the editors of important newspapers removing contraband opinion from the manuscript of well known polemicists, the producers of talk shows softening the criticisms of American foreign policy for fear that they otherwise might be seen as displays of weak-mindedness, if not as proofs of treason". The anger displayed towards perpetrators of the attacks is understandable, but to simply lump together those who are innocent of the crimes purely on the basis of religious affinities is both unwarranted and unjust. It appears that rational deliberation is no longer acceptable. Double standards and selectivity is carried out with impunity.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

15. The view that Islam is hostile to the 'West' and against modernity or 'western civilisation' is not new. However the resurfacing perceived threats from Islam and its believers are relatively recent. My view is that, we cannot entirely blame the non-Muslims as part of the problem lie with the Muslims themselves. Muslim apologists along with Islamic militants have been indirect participants in constructing images of Islam, which not only benefit those hostile to the religion, but, perhaps more importantly, for Muslims themselves. At the root of this problem lay what Mohammad Arkoun refers to as the process of "imaging Islam". As he writes, "the 'imagery' of an individual, a social group, or a nation is the collection of images carried by that culture about itself or another culture – once a product of epics, poetry and religious discourse, today a product primarily of the media, and secondarily of the schools. Since the fifties, the powerful media are drawn continuously to report on the latest violent happenings – independence movements, public protests and revolts in numerous countries inhabited by Muslims. These have fed much of the western imaging of Islam.

16. This has not been helped by the sort of Islamic discourse common to various strains of movements in Islam, especially those engaged in the most divisive political battles, which consciously or unconsciously, prescribes the image of a monolithic eternal Islam to the exclusion of others. The reality is that Islam accepts the diversity of peoples as well as religions. The imperative is that the followers of Islam are commanded to respect and live in peace and harmony with people of different race and religion. As Edward Said reminds us, because of the deep-rooted prejudice held towards Islam by many in the West (buried in their symbols of cultural representation), the demonisation of Islam is psychologically comforting. In their mind it seeks to conform and confirm age-old beliefs about the religion and those who profess it". Even in learned publications, such as Foreign Policy, Foreign Affairs, Economist, etc. we find terms such as 'Islamic Fundamentalists', 'Islamic Extremists' and so on being brandished about with impunity, as if to suggest that they are the blacksheep of the international community going about in the world to create turmoil and chaos. It is important for me to categorically state that it is erroneous to equate Islamic fundamentalism with extremism. To be a fundamentalist as often said by Dr. Mahathir, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, is to practise the true teachings of Islam which advocates tolerance, peace and harmony between mankind. Unfortunately, sometimes whether done consciously or unconsciously observance and statements by western leaders do not help but rather aggravate the prejudices. The Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, for example, in the International Herald Tribune on 27 of September 2001: "The West, given the superiority of its values, is bound to Occidentalise and conquer new people. It has done it with the Communist world and part of the Islamic world, but unfortunately a part of the Islamic world is 1400 years behind". As Richard Bulliet correctly points out, this current emasculation of intelligent debate surrounding the issues related to Islam is in danger of turning opinion amongst significant sections of Western society towards a threshold where terrorists' threats from Muslim fanatics are generic to Islam. Of course all these pronouncements and statements had been retracted. They have accordingly reiterated that the fight against terrorism is not a fight against Islam or the Muslims. Notwithstanding these efforts, perceptions once created are difficult to erase.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

17. Central to the problem, which afflicts Muslims today, is in the attempt to understand what it means to be 'modern'. Over the past two hundred years vast swathes of the Islamic world have been under the vestige of some colonial power or other. The imposition of foreign authority and the decline of the Ottoman Empire – which, rightly or wrongly, served as an important symbol for Muslim communities across the globe – purveyed a sense of failure and powerlessness. And this sense of frustration is one shared right across the Islamic world. Resistance to colonial rule brought about the emergence of what was known as "Islamic Modernism" – which to some extent provided the initial anti-colonial impetus in the majority of Muslim countries (or at least, provided anti-colonial movements with the means to articulate their frustrations and unhappiness).

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

18. The twentieth century brought about rapid changes to the Muslim world. Not only did many Islamic countries have had to deal with and overcome the problems of colonialism, but the transition to independence have in themselves brought about other, perhaps more serious, complications. Encounters with ideas stemming from the West, challenged long-held ideas and traditional beliefs about how lives should be led and the aims that should be central to those lives. For countries who considered themselves intellectually and politically inclined to the 'West', the answer was Modernisation. But to a Muslim, what does it mean to be modern? How does a Muslim modernise, and even if he could, would he want to? He asks, 'Is 'Modernisation' compatible with the teachings of Islam?'

19. The term "Modernisation" is associated with contemporary life having railways, good communications, facilities, industrialization, technology, household equipment. On the other hand, 'modernity' (Modernism) is applied in the political and cultural processes by way of integrating "new" ideas, an economic system or education into society. It presupposes the acculturation of certain intellectual and political habits similar to those brought about by the European Renaissance.

20. The modern Muslim has had to define his relationship to his Islamic past, for at the heart of modernity is a principle of development which itself rejects the past. He lives in sharp discontinuity with his pre-modern past and his transition to contemporary conditions has been distorted both by its speed and, often, by a sense of radical dislocation, caused by a feeling of spiritual and political defeat at a time when the West appeared to be all-embracing and invincible. The break with the past was too sudden and abrupt. There is often no obvious compatibility between the two aspects, not just with Islam as a faith but also with Islam as form living in the consciences of millions. Most Muslims live an ambiguous life in which they maintain an attachment to the Muslim community without adhering totally to all the beliefs which flows from it. Therefore, everyday life and belief can be in sharp opposition".

21. Thomas Friedman argued that Globalisation (at least in terms as how he sees it) has one overarching feature – integration. The world has become an increasingly interwoven place, and globalisation has its own defining technologies – computerisation, miniaturisation, digitisation, satellite communications, fibre optics and the Internet. It is a process inexorably integrating markets, nation-states and technologies to a degree perhaps unmatched in history.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

22. Most Muslim countries are caught in a bind; the choices they believe they face are stark, in that either they must accelerate the developmental process (in order to compete successfully with the West) or be left behind technologically, socially and politically. Whether these premises bears any resemblance to reality is another matter, but the question of 'how to develop economically and politically' is a central preoccupation of the modern Muslim mind. In this post-modern, globalized age, through the advent of ICTs, we do not suffer from too little information, but rather too much. This do not mean that the liberation of information has not been a positive impact. On the contrary, in many ways its contribution has been immense. The potential for Muslim countries to benefit fruitfully is enormous. But this abundance of information in itself poses us with new challenges and difficulties. We are constantly bombarded with new images and information on just about everything we could possibly imagine. For those with the means to deal with this wealth of information effectively, this is truly a time of bounty; whilst for those struggling to come to terms with the modern world at its most basic levels (those who lack access to education, capital, power, and influence) this process, can if unchecked, lead to alienation and dislocation.

23. This brings us to the heart of our problem. It can be observed that the salient features of our situation in the Muslim world are: (1) that governments generally see themselves as agencies of development; (2) the idea of "development" refers almost exclusively to "economic development"; (3) that to a large extent this is determined by contemporary Western models (orthodox or otherwise), for which progress also means basically economic and technological expansion, and where intellectual and moral – that is, humanistic – values have sharply declined; (4) that in the mythological 'East', including the Islamic world, the problem have been further compounded by (a) the fact that new technology and its attendant phenomena are 'imported' and are not organically related to the traditional cultures of these developing societies and (b) the fact that many thinkers in the pre-independence period in these countries had popularised the slogan that the east is spiritualist while the West is materialist, and that if the East merely exports some of its spirituality to the West, and in exchange, imports some technology from the West, all will be right in the world; (5) that the masses in these countries are uneducated, ignorant and extremely conservative and do not meaningfully participate in their governments irrespective of whether they be rightist or leftist, dictatorial or democratic.

24. We make a fundamental mistake if we assume that the problems currently faced by the Islamic community internationally are necessarily separate from the historical experience of Muslims. The issues that are rampant today such as the unity of the ummah, the tension between reason and revelation, modernity and tradition,

democracy and human rights have been sources of concern for the community from the early medieval period – at least in its most fundamental form. The idea of an ideal education, providing adequate grounding in the religious, natural and philosophical sciences has been the subject of debate and discussion for many generations of Islamic thinkers. And as these wise sages recognised, the key to maintaining an effective society in the service of God is a sense proportion and balance. Ibn Taymiyya writing in early fourteenth century suggests: "[This provides] a principle for the necessity of [adopting] the straight and middle path and how to follow the Quran and Sunna [correctly] in the matter of God's names, attributes and unity in both utterance and belief; also to show that the Quran and the Sunna contain all guidance and that heretical splits and misguidance come about by abandoning it [the guidance of the Quran and Sunna].

25. These opinions have been restated in one form or another by thinkers throughout the history of the Muslim peoples. The problem for the ummah is that the experience of encounters with the European West and later the Americans have not been fruitful and in most cases, confrontational. Colonisation and imperialism have disrupted the natural flow of socio-cultural traditions, altering in fundamental ways the transmission of knowledge, authority, political and social orientation, and the mental habits that can only develop in an environment of historical continuity. The sudden dislocation caused by the imposition of barriers (almost overnight) by the colonial and imperial authorities traumatised this notion of continuity. What we have left is a vacuum, grappling with a living past that we can never recover and a future whose path we cannot control. We question ourselves about if there is something intrinsic to our cultures, our ways of life that impede our capacity to excel. And we try to relinquish our histories in order to rid ourselves of this baggage. This is perhaps the most damaging legacy of our colonial past.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

26. The most developed nations in the world, have almost without exception viewed their histories as a source of strength, not weakness. The Japanese, Koreans, Americans did not see their struggle to develop as an attempt to repudiate a failed past, but to resuscitate a golden age. Perhaps we should learn to do the same.

Thank you for your kind attention.