

SPEECH BY
THE HONOURABLE DATO' SERI

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AT
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U.S. Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs

Colleagues and friends,

Assalamualaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh and Good Evening

It is indeed a great honour and privilege for me to have been asked to make some remarks and share with you my thoughts in this US-Islamic World Forum. The time has come for us to take a collective effort toward enabling an environment of understanding and peaceful coexistence, notwithstanding our diversities and differences. The Prime Minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Badawi, recently when opening a Conference in Kuala Lumpur on the similar subject of West – Muslim World relations, called for more “bridge builders” to close the

chasm between the West and the Muslim world. All of us gathered here can be these bridge builders for the attainment of a tolerant and harmonious global society.

2. My sincere appreciation to the Saban Center for organizing this forum, which can be utilized as a platform to bridge the gap between the Muslim World and the West especially in the light of the current circumstances.

3. Before discussing further on the subject, I like to mention two key dimensions, namely perceptions and realities. Within these context, let me highlight the following points.

Firstly: The prevailing perception within the Muslim world is that there is no balanced nor fair treatment of issues vital to Muslims. These perceptions become realities when they are routinely exposed to images of maltreatment of Muslim prisoners in Guatanamo, Abu Ghraib, Bagram and other places. They found the battle cry for human rights, respect for international law- is not applied in the same way when it involves Islam and Muslims.

Secondly: The lack of, or even the absence of a caring attitude towards legitimate grievances and discontent of Muslims. The perception is that issues of importance to Muslims are not given due weightage and are even considered irrelevant.

Thirdly: Muslims are perceived not to possess similar universal or humanitarian values either on democracy, human rights or good governance. This divide gives rise to the sense of ‘us and them’ or ‘the other’, thus contributing to the chasm between Muslims and the West.

Fourthly: Failure to understand or acknowledge the Islamic sensitivities. In fact, this is manifested in many parts of the world including where Muslims are minorities.

Fifthly: We need to deal with extremism forcefully, whether committed by Muslims or people from other faiths. We should not too quickly put labels of religion for misguided acts. This could avoid stereotyping and prevent Islamophobia spreading like wildfire.

Finally: Currently, Jihad is seen by non-Muslims as a license to commit acts of violence by Muslims. Jihad, in reality, is a motivational factor to free Muslims from the state of ignorance and to overcome injustices whether cultural or economic, sociological or political. Jihad is not a call for acts of violence or self-destruction. Indeed true Jihad could only be used for constructive and peaceful purposes or to defend oneself against violence or aggression.

4. All the points I outlined above are relevant and should be understood in its proper context which could germinate respect, understanding and goodwill between the West and the Islamic World. This would pave the way for a more conducive inter-civilizational dialogue. Let me categorically state that freedom cannot be viewed as something infinite or absolute. We must appreciate sensitivities on subjects that are tabooed such as anti-Semitism whether against Jews or Arabs, Islamophobia should also be itemized in the same category. To put it in simple terms, **you are free to stretch your arm but when it touches the nose of another, then that freedom ceases.**

5. The tragedy of the 9/11 on the US has inflicted common pain, anger and fear among the global community and no one – Muslims or non-Muslims can justify such acts. Henceforth Muslims have become targets. Worst, Muslim extremists and moderates have been lumped together and have been classified as the new “terrorist threat” – thus subjected to all forms of harassment, humiliation and prejudice.

6. The current crisis faced on the issue of caricatures published in Denmark and followed by other countries on the so-called principle of freedom of the press, was clearly offensive and derogatory, even by the standards of caricatures. When it first surfaced in September last year, we quietly sought retraction but it was just brushed aside. It only began to receive serious global attention after numerous demonstrations had erupted all over the world and resulted in the loss of innocent lives. It could have been resolved at the local level, if only wisdom, understanding and cooler heads had prevailed. Instead it was highlighted as an issue of freedom of expression that could not be interfered versus Islam, thus adding insult to injury. The effects of the publication and subsequent developments cannot be viewed simply as an emotional reaction by Muslims. The Islamic faith is seen as being humiliated. Unfortunately, the Danish government protested with incredulity at the

vehemence and outrage of Muslims all over the world with a remark to the effect that, well, it were not as if they had burned the holy book of the Muslims, the Holy Qur'an. How uncaring and insensitive this was.

7. What they failed to understand, in their ignorance, is that insulting Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and burning the Qur'an are, in fact, almost one and the same thing. What is at issue here is not freedom of speech or the press but that this is a credal matter, not just a matter of hurting a certain man who lived centuries in the past. Western notions of legality pertaining to libel and the like are thus completely irrelevant. To Muslims, our Holy Prophet (SAW) lives within and among us each day, we say his name repeatedly during the day through our prayers, and the person who wishes to convert to Islam must, in his credal testimony, testify not only that he believes that there is no other God but Allah (SWT), but also that Muhammad (SAW) is His Messenger. So there is a dire need not only for a greater awareness from the West but also for greater knowledge and education among them as to the precise nature of the Muslim creed.

Colleagues and friends,

8. Prevention would have been better than cure. In this connection, the US did well to acknowledge the offensive nature of the caricatures. Similarly, the Islamic world believes that violence is not the Islamic way to resolve this and other more fundamental problems. The teachings of Islam enjoin all Muslims to live as part of a harmonious community, regardless of our ethnicity and religious beliefs. Given the challenges of our times which threaten our common humanity, all of us, political leaders, scholars, religious leaders and including individuals in both the U.S., Muslim World and beyond must work together and educate ourselves on the importance of living together in a tolerant and harmonious society.

9. Islam's message to the world is that human relationships must be instituted on justice, fairness and practised with the highest moral standards. We also rely on our Western counterparts to play their role in avoiding any act of provocation that can cause serious harm and undermine the need of the hour to build a strong and enduring relationship between the West and the Muslim world.

10. In this era of globalization, characterized by the cliché of the ‘borderless world’, it is almost impossible for both the U.S and Islamic world to live apart. Nietzsche once said that “hell is other people”. Although he was referring more to the Hobbesian natural instinct of man as being a selfish animal, interested only in his own self-preservation, yet in the globalised world of today this is very relevant, for it has become increasingly difficult to live together peacefully amongst peoples of different creeds and religions. If all nations behave as the Hobbesian political animal and act purely with self-interest in mind, then the result must surely be anarchy and chaos.

11. Hence, the importance of knowledge and education to control this Hobbesian instinct whether at the individual level or at the level of nations. Therefore, it is the responsibility of governments together with civil societies to educate both at the helm of power and also those who seek instruction from them, of their rights and duties and of the precise relation between the two.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

12. We can no longer live in isolation or erect edifices in the shifting sands of time. We must re-examine our roles and decide how do we live with each other. No matter what our real judgment of each other, interaction will always be necessary. “No man is an island”. As such, we must strive to overcome the prejudices and intolerant in an increasingly diverse and pluralistic world. Interaction and dialogue are essential among nations given the profound technological advancement in recent years thus creating a level of inter-dependency unheard of previously in history.

13. In this regard, I would like to refer to what Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s had said about “transformational diplomacy” initiative where the United States will do things “with other people, not for them”. Secretary Rice’s initiative to harness America’s diplomatic power to advance partnership rather than paternalism is most encouraging. I believe positive and constructive engagements and accepting diversities as our source of strength will bring mutual benefits to all of us in the years to come.

Colleagues and friends

14. In Malaysia, an Islamic nation characterized by multi-ethnicity and religion, the principle of moderation which is at the epicenter of Islam is now being implemented under the Islam Hadhari approach. It emphasizes on development and civilization-building based on the Islamic worldview and focuses on enhancing the quality of life via the mastery of knowledge, human development, physical expansion and justice. Our practice of moderation (wasatiyyah) is in line with the teachings of Islam which emphasizes on universal values and do not conflict with our own multi-racial makeup. Islam Hadhari approach has been formulated to ensure that in its implementation, it does not create any misunderstanding or anxiety among any group in a multiracial and multi-religious society.

15. This approach has so far attracted positive reactions from Muslim and non-Muslim nations. Many Muslim states do not reject Islam Hadhari or Manhaj Hadhari as an approach to enhance and empower the Ummah, while some non-Muslim states have expressed interest to find out more and are of the view that this approach can form the basis of improving relations between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. This approach will enable more dialogue and enhance communication between the Islamic world and the West.

16. We strongly believe that moderation is the right response to combat and curb extremism. In our case, it has protected us from bigotry and hatred. It has allowed us to practice the true teachings of our religion. We are shouldering the responsibility to demonstrate, by word and by action, that a Muslim country can be modern, democratic, tolerant and efficient. Islam does not teach the Muslims to turn our backs against the rest of the world, neither does it enjoin us to preach hatred or commit crimes against humanity.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

17. In the years to come, Muslims will continue to play their part in building a stable and prosperous community based on justice, in collaboration and partnership with the rest of the world, for the attainment of human dignity.

18. This forum is exactly the right avenue for us to make a concerted effort in taking the first significant step towards establishing a tolerant and harmonious society. We need to

urgently bridge this great chasm that has been created between the Muslim Ummah and the West. In embarking on this crucial mission, we must guard against extremist and violent elements within our individual society. For the betterment of the next generation, we must meet the challenges in a rational, sober and sagacious manner, on the basis of mutual understanding, goodwill and respect.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

19. In conclusion, let me say I believe before we can even make an attempt to build a bridge of understanding spanning between the Muslim Ummah and the West, we must first establish a solid foundation premised on knowledge and tolerance for a lasting peaceful coexistence to materialize.

With that note, I thank you.