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Bridging the Muslim and Western World for Peace and Development

A keynote address at the World Muslim Leadership Forum:
Muslim World in the Face of the New World Economic Order

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CONVENED BY



FAITH REGEN
FOUNDATION



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Bridging the Muslim and Western World for Peace and Development

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WORLD MUSLIM LEADERSHIP FORUM:
*Muslim World in the Face of the New World Economic Order.
Bridging the Muslim and Western World for Peace and Development*

IT IS MY GREAT PLEASURE TO BE IN LONDON TO PARTICIPATE AT THIS World Muslim Leadership Forum*, and I welcome this opportunity to share my thoughts on the important topic of “Bridging the Muslim and Western World for Peace and Development”.

We live in a world of many divides. Indeed, it would appear that divides are the norm rather than the exception. There is the North/South divide, the East/West divide, the developed world/developing world divide, the communist/non-communist divide and the religious divides, to name but a few.

Looking at the world across time would present us further divisions. Interestingly, it would appear that there is nothing permanent or immutable about divides. The Cold War divide lasted forty years and it is largely over – though some would say it still persists through the remnants of the ideological divide. The earlier colonial divide was more persistent. It lasted four centuries. But it is also essentially over.

The divide I wish to address today pertains to the gulf between the Muslim and Western worlds. This divide traverses time as well as space. It was here before and it is here with us again. Bred during the Crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries, it was at that time a war – long, bloody and cruel – was waged between the Cross and the Crescent in the name of God.

* World Muslim Leadership Forum on *Muslim World in the Face of the New World Economic Order*, 7 October 2010, Somerset House, London. Organised by Faith Regen Foundation, Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute, Whitepaper Consultants and supported by The Cordoba Foundation.

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Today’s divide between the Muslim and Western worlds is not a war, though violence shades it. It is also not religious, though it has largely Christians on one side and Muslims on the other. Further, it is not confined to Europe and what we now call the Middle East; it covers the North American continent and Australasia as well, and the entire geographic Muslim world from Morocco to Indonesia.

Between the conflict in the Middle Ages and the divide that exists now, there was also the colonial period, when Western Europe invaded and colonised most of the rest of the world including the Muslim world.

The topic I was given assumes the present divide and invites me to focus rather on bridging that divide. Allow me, however, to dwell first on the factors that have contributed to the present divide, for until we identify these factors and understand them we will not be able to consider how best to bridge it.

Identifying these factors is not as easy as it might seem. In a

conflict coloured by history, hostility, prejudice and vested interest it is sometimes difficult to agree on the factors responsible. There is a tendency for denial, blaming the other and deflecting attention and discourse from areas that are too close for comfort. The prudence to be politically correct and the need to be mindful of sensitivities also inhibit candid dialogue. Sometimes we talk about everything except the elephant in the room.

Yet be candid we must, for this discourse on the causes has gone on for too long without conclusion. In the meanwhile, the costs and casualties continue to mount. It is almost as if we cannot bear to confront the truth, in case the truth is us. We have literally hundreds of conferences in many cities across continents. Often we ask the same questions, and discuss them over and over again. Is it a clash of civilisations? Of cultures? Is it a particular religion that is the problem, because it cannot tolerate, it cannot come to terms with modernity and it preaches violence? Is it because, as has been said, that the other hates the West's way of life, its democracy and its values? Is it, rather, some deeply-felt grievances against perceived injustices inflicted in the past and persisting into the present?

Or is it the vast asymmetries of power and wealth? Is it oil? Is it some other strategic interest like vital sea-lanes and critical land routes? Is it rage over essentially domestic factors irrationally directed at an innocent foreign power or powers? Is it a lack of democracy, poverty and poor governance? Or a failed or failing state?

Whatever our answers to these questions, and whatever numerous research and opinion polls reveal, they seem to have little effect on inducing much needed policy changes that can arrest the slide. Instead the gulf between the two worlds only becomes wider, the distrust stronger and the destruction and casualties greater. Indeed, whereas before, the gulf appeared to be most visible between fringe terrorist groups on the one hand and the state interests they target on the other, it now seems to have permeated society more broadly. A cartoonist chooses to profane another religion and is put on the hit list; minarets are banned in seemingly liberal cities; a planned house of worship

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is almost never to be; and an obscure pastor wants to burn the holy book of another faith.

Successive opinion surveys by many quarters, most notably by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, continue to show strong antipathies between the United States and the Muslim world. Barack Obama's election as president led to an increase in positive attitudes towards the United States, but they have only been temporary. The opinion surveys show that the issue that most alienates Muslims around the world is the Arab-Israeli conflict, followed by the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The enormity of each of these conflicts, what more their cumulative impact on the Arab and Muslim psyche, is perhaps not fully understood in the West and in the rest of the world because the Western and global media fail to cover the colossal scale of the human tragedy and physical destruction. This is in contrast to their extensive coverage of terrorist acts, especially on Western targets and the anniversaries that are poignantly portrayed.

To understand the depth of feeling in the Arab and Muslim world, one could perhaps compare the 3,000 dead in Manhattan with the estimated 6,000 and more dead Palestinians killed by Israeli forces since the First Intifada began in 1987¹, the estimated 15,000 to 35,000 civilians dead in Afghanistan since

¹ B'Tselem – The Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories; http://www.btselem.org/english/statistics/first_Intifada_Tables.asp

it was invaded in 2001² and the estimated 98,000-107,000 civilians dead in Iraq since its invasion in 2003³. Not to mention the millions of refugees and displaced persons, the many thousands of homes and buildings razed or turned to rubble, and the lands in the West bank and Gaza seized and occupied.

We might well ask, what would happen if an Iraq was inflicted upon the United States, or an Afghanistan upon the United Kingdom? How would the people react and how would the media cover it? What would be the sentiment if the forces that invaded them and killed their people are embraced and celebrated as heroes when they return home?

This agony and this injustice are seared in Arab and Muslim hearts and minds. It is little surprise then that a divide has developed between the Muslim world and the West. It is little surprise too that radicalism and extremism have spread in this fertile environment -- and militancy and terrorism have found root on the periphery.

As has been the experience in Europe, foreign invasions breed armed resistance. Iraq and Afghanistan are no exception despite the existence of groups that are happy to work with foreign forces. Occupation and illegal settlement has the same effect in Palestine and on sentiment in the Arab and Muslim world, especially when peaceful negotiations routinely fail, illegal settlements continue to be built with impunity with state support, and the United States and its Western allies do virtually nothing to stop the tragedy and instead sanction the perpetrator.

Under these circumstances it is no surprise that teachings in Islam which permit the taking up of arms in defence of territory, life and property when peace fails, just as international law does, gain appeal. Memories of past injustices and perceptions of present extreme disparities of power and wealth easily re-surface, and negative stereotypes and prejudices of the West are born and nourished.

² Wikipedia; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilian_casualties_of_the_War_in_Afghanistan_\(2001-present\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilian_casualties_of_the_War_in_Afghanistan_(2001-present))

³ Iraq Body Count Project; <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/>

This is the perspective of vast numbers of Muslims.

On the part of the West, the issue that most evokes negative and hostile attitudes towards the Muslim world presently is terrorism, specifically terrorism linked to Muslim groups. The terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 were a watershed event as far as US and Western attitudes towards Muslims are concerned. Washington was shocked by the brazen manner in which the citadels of its financial and political power were attacked, and its response was mighty and swift. The rest – the “war against terror”, the attack on Afghanistan and the invasion and occupation of Iraq – is history.

A vicious cycle of reciprocal events ensued. NATO and America’s other allies such as Australia were mobilised, and terrorist attacks were mounted by Muslim groups against US, European and Australian interests in various countries such as

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Spain in Europe and Indonesia in Asia. The terrorist groups associated their cause with Islam and called themselves by Arabic or Muslim names although Islam forbids the killing of innocents.

The Qur'an is clear and unequivocal here: *"He who has killed one innocent soul, it is as if he has killed all humanity. And he who has saved one soul, it is as if he has saved all humanity..."* (Qur'an 5:32). Yet the ignorant, the gullible and the enraged become sadly vulnerable to false teachings.

This unfortunate association of terrorism and the killings of unarmed civilians with Islam and Muslims strengthened negative stereotypes of the latter in the West. From here it was only a short step to link Islam, Muslims and the Muslim world with poverty, underdevelopment, lack of democracy, intolerance, discrimination against women and human rights abuses besides terrorism – notwithstanding that all these qualities are the antithesis of Islam and everything that Islam abhors, and are found in abundance in traditional and underdeveloped non-Muslim societies as well.

The Western and international media have been a major factor in wittingly and unwittingly disseminating these negative stereotypes. The ubiquitous television carrying narratives as well as images has been an instrument for the mass transmission of these stereotypes around the globe.

Both Presidents Bush and Obama have taken pains to stress that the war against terror is not against Islam and Muslims. President Obama took a personal interest in dissuading Pastor Terry Jones from burning copies of the Qur'an and in defending the building of the Islamic community centre near Ground Zero in New York. However, other administration voices were less discriminating and more overt in their statements.

The Christian Right and evangelicals like Reverend Jerry Falwell have been leading influences on anti-Islamism in the United States. Today there are clear signs that Islamophobia has reached worrying levels in the United States and Europe, and Muslim communities no longer feel safe in many neighbourhoods.

The gulf between the West and the Muslim world has become pronounced and unmistakable. It is not as violent, nor is it as much a fight to the finish, as the Cold War was, where the battle had to be waged until one ideology triumphed and the other was vanquished. The confrontation between the two sides is also not as binary, nor is there a line drawn in the sand that clearly divides. The Muslim mainstream is as much against terrorism as the West is and indeed has suffered far more casualties. Several Arab countries are also allies of the United States and state-to-state relations between the two sides are in most cases very good.

But the issues are serious. They involve support for occupation of Arab and Muslim land and dispossession of Muslims; foreign invasion and occupation that has killed many thousands and wrought much destruction; constant fear of terrorist and suicide attacks against soft targets as well as vital and iconic structures; and negative stereotypes of each other that affect religion, culture, race and dignity.

Bridging this divide and reconciling the West and the Muslim world will be a difficult and complex task. To be effective and sustainable it will require understanding, commitment and cooperation on many fronts. The state, the media and key sectors of civil society have important roles to play. Simultaneous and reciprocal action will be required from both sides if trust is to be

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instilled and confidence maintained.

Obviously such mobilisation and collaboration on a grand scale are difficult to accomplish. Advances made in some areas can easily be nullified by reverses in others. Just one small incident is all that is needed to set back months of hard work. The greatest impediments to smooth progress will be surprise terrorist attacks and violent incidents in Palestine and Israel, or conflict and instability in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

However, doing nothing is not an option. The antagonism is hugely costly politically, militarily and economically. The scars are already deep and existing wounds cannot be allowed to fester while fresh ones continue to be inflicted on both sides. The healing must begin in earnest, and it must begin soon.

The Muslim world must tend to at least three bridges. The first is the bridge between Muslims and their government. The second is the bridge between Muslim countries themselves. The third is the bridge between the Muslim world and the West.

All three bridges are important and they reinforce each other. Each bridge needs to be strong. But the most critical bridge is the first bridge. Until the first bridge is strong and healthy, the other two will not be sturdy.

Ideally, Muslim countries should tend to the first bridge first and make themselves internally cohesive and resilient, and peaceful and prosperous. Only then will they have the capacity

to tend to the second and third bridges. In reality, however, this luxury does not exist. Countries need to tend to all three bridges simultaneously.

The challenge for the Muslim world is that the majority of its countries are not robust internally. Most are developing countries with limited resources and deficiencies in political, economic and social governance. Many have low and medium human development and some have serious problems with poverty, health, security and stability; only 9 of the 57 member countries of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) achieved high human development status in the UNDP Report for 2008/2009. These problems are not unique to Muslim countries. They can be found in all countries with low human development and unstable domestic and external environments.

The Muslim world can manage its relations with the West and the rest of the international community better if the second bridge too is sturdy. Unfortunately this bridge needs tending in some regions. Cooperation is weak and solidarity poor in many cases. More seriously, the Muslim world itself is divided by rivalry and even conflict among some neighbours. The Sunni/Shi'i and Arab/Persian rivalry is a great divisive factor, and differences in policy towards countries of the West and on issues such as the Palestinian/Israeli conflict make the Muslim world ineffectual and vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation by outside powers.

We are concerned today though, essentially with the third bridge. Bridging the gulf between the Muslim world and the West entails addressing the primary factors that divide the

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two sides. I have identified the problem as essentially political and security in nature, and not religious, cultural or economic although all these condition the political and security problem.

I believe that to close the political and security divide, the Muslim world and the West need to focus on at least two major areas. First, they need to address the specific political and security issues, namely international terrorism, the Palestinian problem, Iraq and Afghanistan. Second, they need to engage in dialogue and more effective communication.

Let me begin with the first area.

For the West, terrorism is at the core of the problem. But we know only too well that an enduring solution to terrorism anywhere cannot be found without addressing the factors that are driving it. In the case of terrorism directed at the US and allied targets – as distinguished from terrorism directed at their own governments and other targets – the threat will only subside if there is a just solution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine and the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, together with the spillover in Pakistan, are resolved quickly. A massive counter-terrorism drive aimed at the symptoms and manifestations of terrorism can only do so much. The beast will not die.

On the Palestinian issue, the United States need not turn its support from Israel to Palestine. America will not abandon its ally. As President Obama said in his famous Cairo speech in June 2009, “America’s strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable”.

What we can reasonably expect from the United States is that it be more even-handed and require both sides to equally respect international law, implement United Nations resolutions and impose – with the rest of the international community – the severest of sanctions against any party that does not. If the United States is able to do this and demonstrate that it is truly an honest broker, it could begin the process toward a speedy and just resolution of the Israeli/Palestinian problem.

If the United States is unable to do this because of domestic politics, it could hand over responsibility for finding a peaceful and just solution to the United Nations, and provide full support to all UN initiatives for peace in the area.

If either idea could be implemented by the United States, a central and stubborn issue in the relations between the United States and the Muslim world would be removed. If the United States cannot, the gulf will remain.

Unfortunately, Iraq and Afghanistan as well as Pakistan now have been added to the sixty-year-old Israeli/Palestinian conflict as the issues that most estrange the Muslim world from the West.

To be sure, Iraq and especially Afghanistan were in need of better governance before they were invaded. But the US and NATO invasions have compounded the challenges confronting these countries and the region rather than moderated or resolved them. Tension and distrust between the West and the Muslim

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world have become much more pronounced, and each drone attack that kills more innocent civilians in Pakistan aggravates the situation even more.

Hope for a long-needed change in US policy was kindled when President Obama assumed the presidency. America's imperial overstretch and the foreign policy and security disasters that are looming in the region have persuaded President Obama to boldly seek "a new beginning" in US relations with the Muslim world. In President Obama's own eloquent words this will be "based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles – principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings."

Consistent with this, President Obama has launched a policy that explores engagement and accommodation for mutual peace, a policy which the Muslim world welcomed and was eager to reciprocate. Unfortunately the President is facing strong criticism of the policy at home and opposition and resistance from Israel abroad. He is being criticised, among others, for weakness and "appeasement".

Relations between the West and the Muslim world will depend very much upon whether President Obama is able to overcome the challenges and stay the course. It will be tragic both for the West and the Muslim world if "the new beginning" he courageously embarked upon comes to grief.

The Muslim world is already cooperating fully with the United States and the West in the campaign against terrorism. Countries like Pakistan, however, face enormous constraints. Elsewhere, in countries like my own, our commitment has always been clear and unwavering, and it predates 9/11. Terrorism, including what we call "international terrorism" which is directed at the United States and its allies, is our common enemy.

Moderates in Muslim countries have often been asked to speak up more against terrorism and extremism. Actually the moderates do dominate the discourse, but the media gives less coverage to their voices. This notwithstanding, it is not only

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moderates in the Muslim world that need to confront their extremists more squarely. The moderates in the West must do likewise, and challenge not only the extremists in their religious establishment, but also those in the powerful media and government that champion hard-line foreign and security policies which lead to much violence and conflict abroad. The inability to recognise them for what they are, as militant extremists, and instead accord them great respectability, is one of the reasons why aggressive policies are pursued with little restraint.

The serious divide between the West and the Muslim world is also the consequence of a failure to communicate and dialogue effectively. The Muslim world is more at fault here, for its lines of communication with the West are limited and the language it uses frequently grates in the West.

The West is much better resourced and skilled in the art of communication. It dominates the global media, and it reaches out to the Muslim world in the latter's own languages and idiom more widely and effectively. The Muslim world by comparison has few channels in the English or any of the other European languages. Importantly, the Western media is also often quicker with the news, the analysis and commentaries, and is able to establish its narrative as the "correct" narrative.

The electronic and print media in the West, however, has done much more harm in spreading negative images and perspectives of the other, if only because of its greater potency and wider reach. The false and sweeping linkage of Islam and Muslims with terrorism, the portrayal of Islam and Muslims (rather than traditional culture and local conditions) as backward, undemocratic, intolerant, wanting in respect for human rights, and discriminatory of women, owes much to some in the Western media.

Similarly, the image and narrative on critical issues like Iran, Gaza, Israeli policy and actions, the Middle East peace process, terrorism, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, US and NATO operations, and casualties inflicted upon the population and destruction of the land, are greatly coloured by the interests and values that the media represent. The Arab and Muslim world are heavily disadvantaged in this respect, and their cause and interests are thereby greatly impaired.

Organised dialogue between the West and the Muslim world fare better, but are often similarly skewed as well. The agenda for discussion on Muslim-West relations is frequently focused on what is wrong with the Muslim world rather than on what needs to be made right on both sides. Time is taken up with discussion on topics like terrorism, Islam, education in the Muslim world, democracy and human rights and the position of women. There is hardly any scrutiny of the policies of the West, the role of the Western media or the influence of extremism in the West. The problem, and what needs to be fixed, is with the Muslim world, not the West.

Both sides have plenty to do to correct the picture and help narrow the gap. The Muslim world has more ground to cover. Besides drastically improving the quality of its media and its outreach into the Western world, it has to make a much better job of explaining and clarifying the perceived linkage between Islam and terrorism; the incidence of militancy and terrorism in the Muslim world compared to elsewhere; what is permissible and what is prohibited when Muslims are compelled to take up arms in defence; *jihad*; the values and principles that

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Islam stands for; the issues and obstacles in the Middle East peace process; the situation on the ground and the issues and challenges confronting the world in Iraq and Afghanistan; the issue with Iran; and so on.

The media in the West and the Muslim world, as well as intellectuals and other important stakeholders, could also engage each other and work together to correct misperceptions and stereotypes on both sides, and promote mutual understanding.

Let me conclude with what unites our two worlds rather than what divides them. Most of us share a common Abrahamic tradition. Many Muslims died as well on that fateful day in the month of September. Many more Muslims than people of the West die at the hands of terrorists. We are one in the fight against terrorism and extremism. We value peace and happiness. Life is precious to all of us.

Energy, trade and investment are the lifeline of our economic well-being. We have a common interest in helping each other develop and prosper, for in a globalised and integrated world we prosper best when we prosper each other. Similarly, we cannot have peace and security at the expense of one another.

Let us embark in earnest on building the bridges that will bring us closer together.

His Royal Highness **Raja Nazrin Shah**

PRO CHANCELLOR, UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA.

His Royal Highness Dr Raja Nazrin Shah is the Raja Muda (Crown Prince) of the state of Perak Darul Ridzuan, Malaysia. He served as the Pemangku Raja of Perak (Regent) from 1989 to 1994 when his father, His Royal Highness Sultan Azlan Shah, became the 9th King of Malaysia.

Dr Shah holds a B.A. degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from Oxford University, a Master in Public Administration from the Kennedy School of Government and a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. His research interests are in the area of economic and political development in southeast and northeast Asia, historical national income accounting and economic growth in developing countries.

Dr Shah has written widely and spoken on a wide range of issues including the role of constitutional monarchy in Malaysia, nation building, education, Islam and economic development.

He recently assumed the role of Financial Ambassador of the Malaysian International Finance Centre (MIFC). He is the President of the Perak Council on Islam and Malay Custom and also the President of the Perak State Islamic Development Corporation. He has been Pro-Chancellor of University Malaya since 1989. He is the Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Malay College, Kuala Kangsar. He was President of the Outward Bound Trust of Malaysia from 1989 to 2002.

Dr Shah was conferred an honorary degree of Master of Business Administration by the Cranfield Institute of Technology, United Kingdom (1993), an honorary degree of Doctor of Economics by Soka University, Japan (1999) and an honorary membership of Magdalene College, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom (July 2005). Dr Shah is also Eminent Fellow of the Institute of Strategy and International Studies, Malaysia



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