

Towards the Twenty-First Century: Islam and Vision 2020

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I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to the joint launching of the Institute of Islamic Understanding, Malaysia, and the opening ceremony of this congress.

The idea of the Institute of Islamic Understanding, Malaysia, was first suggested because of the confusion among Muslims and non-Muslims regarding Islam. This discord has led to misunderstanding and animosity not only between Muslims and non-Muslims but among Muslims themselves. Whether we like it or not, many non-Muslims consider Islam a religion that is closely related to backwardness, poverty, and weakness. Of late, some Muslims have also been closely associated with violence and irrationality—an act or thought which is without principles.

We are deeply disappointed with such incorrect views. But the truth is that Muslims and Islamic nations are far behind, weak, and dependent on others for their various needs. At the same time, Muslims themselves find cooperation and unity difficult. They allow themselves to be used as tools and to serve the interests of others. They are unable and often unwilling to help each other, which leads to disunity, animosity, disagreement. The administration of Islamic countries is usually weak and backward, chaotic and disorderly. No Muslim country can be considered a major power worthy of international respect. Rather, all are considered developing countries, even though some have enormous wealth. The main reason for this is that they lack technology and sophistication.

This was not always true, for in the past Islam and Muslims enjoyed a prolonged period of success and prosperity, respect and esteem. After the death of the Prophet, Muslims spread Islam from Spain to China. Through their missionary activities, military might, and efficient rule, they erected the largest empire in world history. Islamic countries evolved and were famous for their high and sophisticated civilization. They produced experts in administration, development, agriculture, industry, engineering, defense, science, mathematics, shipping, navigation, medicine, and other

fields of knowledge. Institutes of higher learning, complete with libraries and laboratories, were found from Spain to the Middle East. Knowledge from earlier civilizations, such as classical Greece and Rome, was studied, and new findings added on and documented in a systematic way.

After the Turkish tribes of western and central Asia accepted Islam, Islam expanded into eastern Europe. The new territories were rapidly developed, complete with roads, water supplies, buildings, walls and towers, shopping centers, lodging houses, and other facilities found in advanced lands. Then one by one, these Islamic territories fell into the hands of the Europeans. Spain was retaken by the Spanish, eastern Europe by the races there, and Turkish and Persian central Asia by Russia. Eventually all Islamic territories, except Turkey and the deserts surrounding Makkah and Madinah, were ruled by non-Muslims. How did such a strong and mighty power become so weak that it could be overrun by others? What was the difference between the early Muslims and those who came later?

We are confident that the early Muslims possessed a pure Islamic spirit and faith, as the teachings of the Prophet were still fresh and clear in their hearts and minds. There was no confusion over Islamic teachings, for the interpreters of Islamic law did not engage in polemics. Islam was simple and did not burden its followers or hamper their advancement. As they were not yet influenced by the burdens of secular matters and development, they strove to master knowledge and sought worldly happiness. The result was a balanced civilization that met the needs of this world and those of the hereafter. The success of Muslims in all fields of knowledge, in addition to their efficiency and development, were so outstanding that they overshadowed the followers of other religions.

Since Muslims were efficient, knowledgeable, and able to establish strong nations, they and their religion were respected. While Muslims accepted the claims of Islam as true, non-Muslims did not. What they respected was that Muslim nations were more advanced, stronger, and more efficient than they were. Non-Muslims believed in Islam's greatness on the basis of Muslim military success, not that a martyr had found success.

Today, some Muslims claim that it is not important whether others respect Muslims and Islam. What is important is one's faith and the hereafter. For those sheltered from external pressures, this is easily acceptable. However, there are Muslims who are suppressed and many more who are prevented from practicing their religion, and there is no Islamic nation able to provide protection or aid. It is important that non-Muslims respect Islam, for this will ensure that suppression will not occur, and that Muslims will not lose hope or become alienated from their religion. Regardless of people's respect or lack of respect towards Islam, the fact remains that no one likes his/her religion to be belittled and disrespected.

If at one time Islam could create an outstanding civilization, can it do so again? Those who are rational are confident that such a task is not impossible, although it will take a great deal of time and effort. However, no target can be met if no attempt is made to reach it. Everything begins with the first step. Although each Muslim wants to revive the golden age of Islam, there is one problem: how can this be achieved? If we continue our present practices, and if we do not strive towards that direction, success will not come easily. On the contrary, there is a strong chance that we will be left far behind.

The first step is to determine our targets. What do we mean by success and prosperity? Even though there are many countries that are classified as developed, we know that their intellectual and physical success has been accompanied by moral decadence. Surely this is not a good example of the success and prosperity that we seek. We must seek a balance with developed nations as regards obtaining knowledge, efficiency in science and technology, inventions, medicine, administration, the social sciences, economics, politics, and other fields that will make us strong and able to defend ourselves. We must seek this balance without subjecting ourselves to moral decadence or compromising our religious beliefs.

Efficient Islamic rule is essential for success and development. During the time of the Islamic empire, governments were clearly effective and fair. Non-Muslim citizens accepted Islamic rule. For example, when Jews were oppressed by Christians in Europe, they took refuge in Islamic lands, for they knew that they would receive justice instead of pogroms.

Hence the art of administration has to be studied so that Islamic nations will be ruled fairly and effectively. Justice for all should be the norm under Islamic rule. An Islamic administration must ensure that its nation achieves rapid development so that it can compete with the developed world. Nevertheless, efforts to retain the moral standards and high values demanded by Islam are not to be neglected. The culture and civilization of Islamic countries must be balanced between spiritual attainment and material development. Every action must be done with this in mind. The present world cannot be ignored, just as spiritual needs cannot be ignored. Both must be given equal importance.

Efforts to revive the golden age of Islam should be considered a noble task. Its reward is the successful implementation of this desire. If, in the process, one receives something in return, it is only coincidental and not the end itself. In fact, if Islamic nations are developed others will share this success.

To reach this goal, research must be done on Islam, its history and civilization, as well as on the reasons for its past successes. Such research must not be influenced by sentiment and bias. Facts must be accepted and

fiction rejected. Nothing is gained by claiming that Muslims today appear weak and unsuccessful when they are actually strong and successful. Likewise, nothing is gained by claiming that even though others may appear strong and successful, they are actually weak and backward. Self-deception has no place in scientific research. Only through sincere research and followed by action based on solid facts can we do something to revive the golden age of Islam.

It is my sincere hope that this institute will play a major role in this task. Towards this end, more research needs to be undertaken on the differing interpretations that confuse and weaken Muslims. Muslim history needs to be fully understood so that we can seek valuable lessons. Researchers at the institute must have open minds and the courage to question orthodox views, for what must be maintained at all times is the truth of Islam as taught by the Prophet. Teachings based on interpretation and created by those who came later are not equal to the teachings of the Prophet. As such, they can be commented upon, researched thoroughly, and then dropped if found to contradict the Prophet and the Qur'an.

Such an undertaking is not easy. Strong opposition will come from those who believe that what they teach is correct and above question. Any doubts raised about their beliefs will be considered contradictory to the principles they promote. That is why some people quickly dismiss new scientific findings. That the world is round like a ball, that the sky and the stars are further than they estimate, that human beings could reach the moon were all rejected at first but later accepted. Such acceptance does not deny the rightful teachings of Islam. These facts only deny the interpretations and understanding of Islam by previous scholars.

Many more changes in opinions may have to be made. Traditional interpretations may no longer be relevant. Many things that are now considered strange and impossible may become common realities. But Islam will always be relevant and precise, for it is never wrong; only those who misinterpret it are. As such, the Institute of Islamic Understanding, Malaysia, should not fear the opposition it may face once it discovers truth as a result of its studies and research on Islam, its practices and beliefs. As long as it pursues truth in order to develop the religion and the faith, as well as its peoples and countries, Islam will not be undermined.

The theme of this congress is very pertinent. Islamic nations and Muslims should prepare to face the twenty-first century. In preparation for this, Malaysia has a vision that it hopes to achieve by the year 2020: to be a fully developed nation. This does not mean material development that disregards spirituality, but a nation developed in terms of knowledge, efficiency, and affluence while retaining the moral values and religious teachings of Islam.

