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THE ROAD TO ENHANCED
INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE
an Arab perspective

a lecture given in
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by

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Dr Nizami, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great pleasure for me to be giving this address at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. Eight years ago, before this very institute, HRH The Prince of Wales spoke on Islam and the West. That lecture, with its call for dialogue and mutual understanding between the Islamic and Western worlds, was warmly welcomed throughout the Muslim world. It represented one of the most informed and positive statements by a Western leader about the historical justification for and present necessity of a partnership between the Islamic and Western worlds. It evoked a positive response from governments and people through-out the Arab and Muslim nations. It continues to have direct relevance, especially in the present difficult international situation.

Let me also express my appreciation for the efforts this prestigious institute exerts to encourage the study of Islam and the Islamic world. You should take great pride in the fact that your cause and sense of purpose is of immeasurable contribution to world peace and stability. Although we live in what is called the information and communication age, it is paradoxical and sad to note the widespread ignorance about religions and cultures and the rarity of genuine communication between them.

It is with great keenness that I come to this institute and to this grand university to address an issue that is received with immense apprehension in our region, and I assume in many circles on the international scene: the issue of clash and/or dialogue of civilizations.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The Arab world today has a three-pronged immediate agenda—all three issues carrying the same importance and urgency. One is the international consensus against terrorism of global reach and the need to stand firm against this evil wave. The second is the revival of the Arab–Israeli conflict, which threatens the stability of the entire Middle East and beyond. The last issue of priority is the dialogue between civilizations. Today my focus will be on this issue.

We are concerned with the attempts to revive the misguided theories of an inevitable clash of civilizations. We are incredulous when we read the articles blaming the Arab and Muslim worlds for crimes committed by a few deranged individuals. We are shocked when we hear senior officials in some Western countries talking about the superiority of the Western civilization over the Arab or Islamic one. And frankly, we are alarmed when we read articles calling for dealing with terrorism by resorting to eighteenth-century strategies, namely recolonization of countries in whose territories terrorists may hide. Are we rolling back history? Have we not learned anything from the past?

I am here trying to respond to these dangerous claims and to call for an urgent and serious dialogue between our cultures. Let us look at the facts. It was not a coincidence that Huntington's article came at the end of the Cold War. The great and long-time political enemy of the West was van-quished. The war was over and no imminent or new major security

challenge was in the horizon. Indeed, no compelling or unanimous definition of national security threats. That article was a product of the John Olin Institute project on the 'Changing security environment and American national interests'. In examining America's security interests, the clash of civilizations was made to be perceived as the new threat. The article's first sentence reads, 'World politics is entering a new phase.' It truly was. While many around the globe foresaw that the next conflict will be primarily an economic one in view of the fierce competition between countries of the West, the article and its supporters decided to define the fault lines on cultural rather than economic or any other grounds.

Let me get down to the crux of the matter. Does the issue really evolve around finding an enemy? Does an enemy have to be created even if it does not really exist? And why? This is a very dangerous proposition. It is more so when the enemy is portrayed along religious or cultural lines. And here, I want to state categorically that Islam is not Communism. It is not a political or economic theory that stands to be affirmed or refuted. It is not the product of certain socio-economic conditions that will eventually change. It is built on deep-rooted beliefs espoused by hundreds of millions of people, not by a ruling group or groups, nor is it supported by political bureaus and protected by secret services and nuclear arsenals. Those who think that a clash of civilizations will ultimately result in one side emerging victorious over the other—the way Communism was defeated and eliminated—need to think again and again. The clash will only set the whole world on fire.

As regards the strange professions of superiority of one culture over all others, especially Islam. Well, this is a serious proposition that does not stand the test of history. History tells us a different story. It reveals Islam's rich and unique contribution to the world through a major process of cross-fertilization between East and West, which lasted for several centuries. The Islamic civilization, as Dr Nizami can perhaps tell you better, has been one of humanity's grandest achievements. The impact of Arab and Islamic civilizations on Western culture and the course of world history is well documented.

History flows in cycles. Those who are trying to tell us that it is a straight line—and what is past is past and will never come again—are ignoring the very nature of history. Each cycle is characterized by a unique interaction and chemistry between civilizations. When the West was dormant, the Arab civilization made a huge and highly significant contribution to history. Then it was the turn of the Western civilization to provide its input; and so on. I wish here to say a few words about the theory of the end of history, which I consider as yet another defective analysis of history. Abundant are history books that narrate the rise and fall of so many empires.

I am sure that the Ancient Egyptians, the Romans, the Ottomans, and the British, who each celebrated a great empire and distinct contribution to the civilization to which they belonged, felt the end of history at the demise of their empires. But history did not end with the fall of any of

these empires; it picked up with a new rising power. History never ends.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Post-11 September, we also came across numerous articles claiming how Arab or Islamic textbooks or media are behind the 'hate' sentiments towards the US and the West. These are fallacious arguments, which, left unchecked, can colour Western public opinion in a distorted fashion. Let me tell you, there is no hate for America, or the West, in the Arab or Islamic worlds. In fact, there is an abundance of admiration and goodwill for the American people, the American spirit, and their successes in many walks of life. There is equal respect and admiration for the advances that Europe has achieved in literature and arts, technology, and communications. However, what exists is a deep disagreement over policies of the West in general, and the US in particular, as regards the Arab-Israeli conflict. What you see is deep-seated frustration, anger, and disappointment as a result of the blind support or—as often is the case—not so benign silence regarding Israeli policies and the daily injustices committed against the Palestinians. What is rejected are the policies based on double standards. To clothe this deep disagreement in religious or cultural guises is to miss the point and fudge the issue. It is a naive and dangerous reading of the crisis we face today. On the one hand, it evades confronting the problem of major Israeli excesses and mistakes in strategy and tactics, and on the other, it avoids rectifying the attitude towards Islam, whose image has been allowed in your societies to be hijacked by the extreme and the superficial.

The judgement of Islam in your part of the world has been grossly distorted by some circles regarding the extremes as the norm. Extremists exist in every society and must be dealt with. Yet I am sure you agree that by no means should they be used to judge a society. Again, let us avoid double standards. Both Muslims and non-Muslims perpetrate terrorism. The difference is that if a Muslim does it, it is immediately attributed to his faith. When a non-Muslim commits the most heinous of crimes, such as the Oklahoma bombing, or other acts closer to you, like the attack on a provincial parliament in Switzerland recently, the fact that he was a Christian is ignored. McVeigh was never described as a Christian terrorist. Despite the protracted fighting in Northern Ireland, we have yet to hear the term Catholic or Protestant terrorist. At worst he is called militant.

Bosnia is a blatant example. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims were tormented and massacred. 'Ethnic cleansing' was even professedly adopted as official Serb policy. Yet at no time, and correctly so, have these massacres been described as Christian barbarism and terrorism. Terrorism has only one face, an ugly face. It should not be portrayed in any ethnic terms.

It is with the dangers that I have just outlined in mind that I have called for the convening of a board of Arab thinkers and intellectuals to meet at the Arab League in Cairo on 26 and 27 November to brainstorm about how best to face the challenges we all confront. This board has

three major issues on its agenda. The first is to consider the accusations against Arabs and Muslims and their cultures and civilization in all its aspects from within or without in the wake of the 11 September tragedy. Second is to plan a programme of action for a serious and practical dialogue of civilizations between East and West. The third objective is to work to refute the notion of the clash of civilizations and to assert that we are all in the same boat—that what unifies us and brings us together far exceeds what divides us or pulls us apart.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The call for a dialogue between civilizations is not a new one. Definitely not at this distinguished centre. The call for it today, however, is a most urgent one. In the past, many have regarded such an appeal almost as a luxury, an 'extra' item on the agenda of international relations. Today, we are paying the price for inadequately dealing with this issue. I propose that this dialogue be given prominence and placed at the top of the global agenda, not as a mere cultural theory but rather as an imminent strategic necessity.

Moreover, this dialogue need not be confined to the official or academic levels. It should be pursued at the grass-roots and the civil-society levels.

I believe that in addressing this issue it is imperative to differentiate between those who lack knowledge of the issue and those who are driven by a political agenda. We should reach out and educate the first group as we should be firm in isolating the second, who only do well in spreading hate and bigotry.

Second, the prerequisite of any serious dialogue is the respect of pluralism and diversity. Cultural diversity is a blessing and not a sin. Cultural diversity is what brings colour and joy to our ways of life. Indeed, the world would have been extremely dull if we were all the same. In preserving our different traditions, we celebrate the greatness and strength of our common humanity. We all are proud of our distinctive heritage, traditions and customs. One's culture defines one's identity: it is his *raison d'être*. It brings light and pleasure into his life and answers many of the obscure questions that life throws at him.

Having said that, pride in one's culture should not be allowed to nourish chauvinism and prejudice, encourage polarization between nations and cultures, or the marginalization of some peoples, as we are unfortunately witnessing these days. As Dr Nizami said so eloquently in one of his articles, 'The temptation is always there to look for and accept excuses for not letting others in on our own ground—to prefer our ignorance of the ways and traditions of others and to refuse the mental and moral effort of being challenged by legitimate differences. Surrendering to these temptations means continuing to live with suspicion and mistrust often for no better reason than the force of habit.'

The third important parameter for a healthy dialogue between civilizations is that it should be

pursued on the basis of equality and mutual respect. We all seek greater knowledge and wisdom. Our greatest enemy is arrogance or over-self-confidence. We must bear in mind a fundamental reality—the world we live in today is a result of the meshing of our cultures and civilizations. This interconnection is what constitutes our collective heritage and memory and is the basic foundation of our societies today. All civilizations and people should be proud of their achievements and contributions to the world. Yet each one must evaluate its shortcomings, for we are all capable of violence and nobody is immune from it. All have at one moment or other of their history let intolerance, hatred and contempt express themselves. Some in each culture have even sought to negate the humanity of others. It is also true that cultures do not develop at the same pace. They experience climaxes and decline, periods of radiance and expansion, and times of silence and withdrawal. It is therefore neither healthy nor productive to unleash arrogance or to play the blame game, for no one is perfect and no one enjoys a monopoly on wisdom.

Fourth, as we pursue this dialogue, let us adopt a ‘windows’ rather than a ‘mirrors’ perspective. A window often opens a whole new world, while a mirror often confines one’s horizons and reinforces one’s parochialism.

As much as Arabs and Muslims looking out of the window will not perceive Western culture as a mere materialistic one, the West looking out of their window shall see clearly that the association between Islam and violence is nonexistent. We should benefit from the many windows afforded by the information-technology revolution to better communicate with each other, rather than demon-ize one another.

Distinguished guests:

As we pursue our journey on the road of dialogue between civilizations, I am heartened that we are guided by a major landmark. In November 1998, the UN General Assembly issued a resolution declaring the year 2000 the Year of Dialogue among civilizations. In implementing the resolution, the secretary general of the UN formed a committee of twenty eminent persons representing the great cultures of our time and entrusted them with the challenging mission of preparing a document on this difficult task.

For a full year, which ended only a few days before the tragic events of 11 September, the committee engaged in a thorough and extensive study of the need for dialogue, and a search for the commonalities that help bring the members of different civilizations to join hands in a concerted effort to bring about a new awareness of the common dangers facing humanity and the dire need for a fresh mindset conducive to coexistence and cooperation.

This document was submitted yesterday to the UN General Assembly. It is a 250-page paper dedicated to all innocent men, women, and children who lost their lives because their only fault was being different from their murderers.

The call for dialogue should not, however, be aborted or weakened by the heart-rending events of 11 September. The message of 11 September was one of evil and aggression. We should send a message of resolve and hope for a new world order based on justice, equality, security, and law. The call for dialogue should acquire new momentum emanating from a genuine belief in the diverse achievements of mankind, cultural pluralism, and creative human diversity.

During these last few years, we have come to realize that while there has been an incredible and positive change of mindset among individuals and entire nations, we have also witnessed a bizarre spiral of tragedies linked to the fear of diversity and to the perception that diversity is a threat. This fear has taken on a number of ugly names and forms, such as ethnic cleansing, claims of cultural superiority, and clash of civilizations.

Today, we are at the crossroads of history. We have to make a choice. Either seek to build solid bridges of understanding, or fall into the abyss of never-ending conflict, with tragic consequences for mankind. The question we are facing now is whether we will be able to rise to the challenge that history has put before us. The paradigm we should aspire for is one of civilization and international legitimacy versus lawlessness and violence, and not the West versus Islam. I believe the choice is clear and we must not let this opportunity slip by. I would like to end with a verse of the Qur'an:

لِكُلِّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شُرْعَةً وَمِنْهَا جَا وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً
وَأَحَدَةً وَلَكِنْ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِي مَا آتَاكُمْ فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ
إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ

Unto every one of you we appointed a different law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could have surely made you all one single community; but he willed it otherwise in order to test you by means of what He has bestowed on you. Contend then with one another in doing good deeds.

Thank you.