

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS
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“ISLAM AND DIPLOMACY: IN SEARCH OF HUMAN SECURITY”

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

I warmly commend the organizers of this conference for shining a spotlight upon one of the most pressing challenges confronting the Muslim world. The violent conflicts that afflict some Muslim countries are discussed in many conferences. They feature in the global media every day. In fact they feature in the global media virtually every hour of every day, and in my view rightly so, for almost every day Muslim lives are lost, Muslim limbs are maimed and Muslim land and property destroyed.

2. But few international forums—and far less the global media—look at the problems the Muslim world is encountering in a way that is more profound and comprehensive, as that of a paucity of human security. Fewer still approach the subject of human security in the Muslim world from the standpoint of the role that Islam and diplomacy can play in

promoting it. The theme of this conference is therefore both novel and welcome.

3. Before I proceed, I should like to take a moment to place the problem of human security, as I see it, in perspective. It is interesting to note here that the concept of human security first came into international vogue as a result of the work of a Muslim economist, Dr Mahbub ul Haq. He conceived both the concepts of human development as well as human security that have been so central to the UNDP approach to developmental issues since the 1990s.

4. Unlike the Human Development Index of the UNDP—which has now been widely accepted and adopted—an index of human security is still very early work-in-progress. Even an understanding of what human security means and what it encompasses is the subject of debate and discussion. Until the dust settles on this subject, I should like to be guided essentially by the initial concept as outlined by the UNDP in 1994 and developed further in Version 2 of the Human Security Index.

5. I must stress, however, that the Human Security Index probably cannot yet be regarded as a sufficiently robust measure of the real state of human security among different countries. But it does give some general picture of the situation. Its importance at this stage lies more in its ability to depict the relative gravity of conditions in different countries based on the criteria employed.

6. In my view, briefly expressed, human security centres on the security of the human person and the community. This is unlike the

conventional notions of national security which pivot around the security of the state. Human security includes traditional national security concerns such as security from external aggression, security from external intervention, security from foreign occupation as well as security from internal strife: but it also embraces much more.

7. It includes the security of livelihood provided by steady jobs and meaningful employment; the security from disease that is provided by good and widely accessible health facilities; food security; protection from crime and domestic violence; freedom from political repression; the right to practice one's religion freely; and the right to clean air, safe water and a sustainable and healthy environment.

8. Human development as postulated by the UNDP is thus closely correlated with human security. The former seeks to develop the human person; the latter to protect him or her from threats to that development. Human security facilitates human development, while human development releases more resources to improve human security. Human security tends to be better assured in peaceful countries that rank high in human development, but it can also lag behind. The United States, for instance, ranks no. 3 in the latest Human Development Index; yet its composite Human Security Index ranking is 147 out of 232 countries and dependencies. The ranking reflects very poor scores in several areas including very high incarceration rates and wide disparities in income and wealth.

9. Thus understood, human security, or human *insecurity*, knows no nationality. It knows no religion. And it knows no race or ethnicity. Although the peoples of the developed nations of Europe and North America are less vulnerable, human insecurity also tends to recognize no geography. Unemployment in the European Union, for instance, is expected to reach an average of 12.2 per cent this year. That is four times the unemployment rate of Malaysia. In Spain and Greece every fourth person in the workforce is unlikely to have a job.

10. Human security, whether in the Muslim world or elsewhere, is something that is complex in the sense that it cannot be advanced by just the one tool of diplomacy. Diplomacy, indeed, is perhaps not even the most important instrument. Much of the hard work must be done at home in each country, through sound and equitable political, economic and social policies.

11. The primary actor and driver may indeed be the state, but there are a host of other important domestic and external players that make an impact upon human security in every individual locale. The mix of political, economic, social and security factors that affect human security differ markedly among countries and communities, Muslim as well as non-Muslim.

12. I will elaborate on some of these general points presently, but let me turn now to the quest for human security in the Muslim world.

13. As we know, Muslim communities are found virtually everywhere on the globe and amidst differing conditions of human security. Like

many non-Muslim majority countries, Muslim countries and Muslim-majority countries often fare worse in the Human Security Index than they do in the Human Development Index. This reflects their relatively poorer performance in areas such as political freedoms, income distribution, access to information and personal security compared to indicators such as per capita GDP.

14. Whereas at least ten Muslim-majority countries make it to the top 70 in the Human Development Index ranking, none are in the top 70 in the Human Security Index ranking. Seven countries managed to be ranked between 80 and 100. As in the case of the Human Development Index, many Muslim countries are ranked in the bottom third of the Human Security Index table.

15. The picture that emerges shows that the comprehensive well-being of the people in a number of Muslim-majority countries leaves much to be desired. Many millions of Muslims do enjoy high levels of material security as minorities in affluent Western countries and as majorities in high income and peaceful Muslim countries like Malaysia, Brunei, Turkey, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

16. But when factors like extensive poverty, unemployment, income inequality, poor education opportunities, inequitable access to health care, violent conflict, political repression, abuse of rights, lack of information empowerment, and the position of women are factored in, about a billion Muslims in a majority of the Muslim countries, or two-thirds of the total global Muslim population, are at risk.

17. The tragic human security conditions in conflict-ridden and occupied Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and war-torn Syria, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan—the last four are occupied, but, only by themselves—are only too painfully evident to us all. But there are also hundreds of millions of Muslims who live in vulnerable communities or areas in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Indonesia, Yemen, Nigeria, Niger, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Benin, Chad and Senegal.

18. Put bluntly, the Muslim world is home to a disproportionate share of all the seven areas of human insecurity identified by the UNDP. Vulnerabilities to aggression, foreign intervention and occupation, sectarian, tribal and ethnic strife, joblessness, poverty and severe income disparities, disease, crime, undemocratic regimes, political repression and violation of rights, discrimination against and abuse of women, and even natural and environmental disasters are all too common and even pervasive in large parts of the Muslim world.

19. In the Arab world, including the imploding crucible that is Syria today, as well as in Afghanistan, the destruction that Muslims have managed to inflict upon themselves has been colossal. This has been aggravated by some countries that have colluded with foreign powers and involved themselves in the affairs of fellow Arab and Muslim nations.

20. The Sunni-Shi'a faultline that runs through the Arab crescent and the Persian Gulf has been a major destabilizing factor. It pits Muslim against Muslim not only within countries but between countries as well. Together with historical tribal enmities, it underlies much of the unrest in

the Arab world today. The confrontation between Arabs and Persians, for example, is an age-old enmity that has further embroiled West Asian nations in intra-Muslim struggle and conflict.

21. The Sunni-Shi'a sectarianism, tribal animosities and Arab-Persian power plays have undermined not just the national resilience of Muslim countries in West Asia and North Africa. They have also rendered the countries even more vulnerable to the machinations, military intervention and occupation by foreign powers and weakened their capacity to present a collective response to Israel.

22. Next to war and violence, nothing degrades human security and human dignity more than extreme poverty and widespread unemployment, for their effects are often hunger, malnutrition, starvation, illiteracy, disease and crime. Such conditions also contribute to a highly combustible political environment. In this regard, poverty and unemployment levels are unacceptably high in much of the Muslim world. No less than 40 to 65 percent of the population live below the national poverty line in nearly a third of all Muslim countries or those with a sizable Muslim component, for which there is reliable information.

23. Democratic governance, protection of human rights and support for gender equality are also key attributes of human security and human development that are in short supply in many of those countries.

24. Taken together then, the human security landscape of the Muslim world is a grim and dismal one. However, this situation has nothing to do with Islam. It is, in fact, the very antithesis of all that Islam stands for.

Instead, the problems have more to do with factors such as sectarian, tribal and class rivalries; the consequences of colonization including borders drawn without regard to the glue that natural demographic patterns would have yielded; the strategic location and resources of the Gulf region that make them perennial targets of predatory powers; the insecurity of small states that seek alliance with foreign powers; the dislocation that the imposition of the state of Israel created and the half century of violence that has followed in the absence of a political solution; the grip of unhealthy tribal tradition and customs that distort religious interpretation and inhibit human development; and the absolute lack of resources in some sub-Saharan countries.

25. As I observed earlier, the improvement of human security, as also in the case of human development, is a task mainly to be done at home. Indeed, diplomacy is one of the means which can be used for that purpose. It normally comes into prominence, however, only when a country is at war or is under military threat, or when there is foreign intervention in internal conflicts. For those Muslim countries and their peoples that are in this unfortunate situation, like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Sudan (and thus South Sudan), diplomacy becomes a crucial instrument.

26. But good diplomacy—I am using “diplomacy” here interchangeably with foreign policy—can also be important for alleviating other aspects of the human security conditions that prevail in many Muslim communities. Diplomacy has become indispensable in this globalized age when the politics, economics and security of nations and communities are

becoming increasingly enmeshed. Although domestic policies are primary, human security and human development are impossible to pursue without engagement with the outside world and without interaction with other important actors. This is especially the case for the less developed nations with scarce or limited resources that make up a large proportion of the Muslim world.

27. If diplomacy—that is diplomacy as in foreign policy—is important in the pursuit of human security, what has Islam to offer to the endeavour? How can Islam affect diplomacy so as to provide better human security in the Muslim world and beyond?

28. When I surveyed the literature on Islam and diplomacy, the work that stood out was the *Rusul al-Muluk*, or *Messengers of Kings*. Written in the tenth century, or about 300 years after the demise of the beloved Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), it describes the diplomacy that was practised by the Arabs and Muslims from pre-Islamic days to its own time. It also presents and makes use of examples of Arab diplomatic practice drawn from the Qur'an and other sources used by Muslim scholars.

29. The work examines extensively the use of emissaries, diplomatic exchanges, the types of treaties and agreements that the Prophet and other Muslim leaders entered into with Muslim and non-Muslim tribes and empires, the principles of diplomatic negotiations, the codes that guided war and peaceful settlement, the granting of asylum, and the treatment of prisoners, refugees and minorities.

30. Much of the diplomacy that is described in the book existed before Islam, and it also continued to be practised by non-Muslim nations after the revelation of Islam. From translations of ancient writings such as *Letters from Early Mesopotamia* and the *Amarna Letters*, we learn that there was a thriving culture of diplomacy that had been practised as far back as the 3rd millennium BC, in the very region we now call West Asia and North Africa. The diplomacy depicted in that literature, practised by the ancient kingdoms and empires of Mesopotamia, Babylonia, Assyria and Egypt, among others, included diplomatic codes of conduct, exchange of emissaries, arbitration and mediation, negotiation of treaties and treatment of political fugitives.

31. Diplomacy in somewhat less ancient times developed in similar modes in the great civilizations of China and India. For example, the “realist theory” of International Relations can be traced back to Sun Tzu in 6th century BC China and Kautilya in 3rd century BC India. The Persian, and the Roman and then the Byzantine Empire, of course, were famous for their diplomatic endeavours.

32. The revelation of Islam, however, brought a sea-change in the conduct of foreign policy and the practice of diplomacy as Muslim political sway expanded in West Asia and beyond. Islam’s conception of humanity, the *Ummah*, its world-view and its ethos and values were infused into foreign policy and diplomatic practice. The personal character of the Prophet (PBUH), guided by the principles and teachings of Islam, also left its imprint. The *Rusul al-Muluk*, the Islamic work which I referred to earlier, is not an ordinary manual on diplomacy; rather, it is a

work that boldly argues for a very modern theory of International Relations, by rejecting warlike policies in favor of low-key but firm diplomacy with the pragmatic outlook of constructive *realpolitik*—all done with the aim and intention of securing the common goal of human security among all mankind.

33. The ultimate purpose of Islam is the well-being and salvation of all humankind, irrespective of national, ethnic or even religious identity. Islam's horizon is the Universe: it does not stop with the Muslim *Ummah*. This is the bedrock upon which universal human well-being (including what is now called "human security") is to be built, both domestically and abroad, across nations. Development, peace, security, justice and human dignity are for all peoples regardless of race or gender or even faith. Human beings are created by God to fulfil the dual role of the person as the servant of God (*al-'Abd*) and as His representative (*al-Khalifah*) on Earth.

34. The goals of Islam that have a bearing upon the prevailing ideas of human security— as well as human development—are founded on two concepts. One is that of human well-being: *Sa'adah*, which can also mean success, happiness, prosperity or felicity. The second is the Muslim concept of the good life in this world and in the next world: *Hayatun Tayyibah*. The balanced fulfillment of both the material and spiritual needs of all human beings will lead to human well-being and the good life that fulfils human security needs.

35. A fundamental core of human security is freedom from want, and this is best assured by education and knowledge, which can help secure jobs and a better livelihood. In Islam the pursuit of knowledge, both spiritual and material, is nothing short of a religious obligation. Acquisition of knowledge is considered a form of worship and will bring a Muslim closer to God.

36. Islam also enjoins ethical action (*'Amal Salih*), morality (*Akhlak*), justice and fairness (*'Adl*), moderation (*'Iffah*), integrity (*Amanah*), and provision for the poor and the disadvantaged. The payment of *Zakat* or charity by the rich for the poor is obligatory. Islam's principle of *Tawhid* further demands that there be no exploitation among human beings. All these teachings point to a basic concern with what we call "human security".

37. In the field of foreign policy, diplomacy and war, the Islamic tradition privileges negotiations and peaceful resolution of disputes over war. It further specifically forbids the taking of innocent life and damage to property. It also enjoins humane treatment of prisoners and due protection for refugees. Our tradition counsels just peace, when the circumstances allow.

38. The Islamic faith, thereby, provides a unique religious, normative and legal reference for the formulation and implementation of foreign as well as domestic policies to protect and promote human security.

39. So what roles can Islam play in the contemporary diplomacy of Muslim countries in their pursuit of human security? I can think of at least three.

40. First, the great achievement of the Prophet (PBUH) in bringing peace and reconciliation to the warring tribes and communities of Arabia can be invoked to inspire and reinforce efforts to reduce enmity among Muslim countries and communities and make their relations harmonious. There is no more necessary and important effort than the active pursuit of reconciliation for healing the wounds caused by conflicts, bloodshed and violence. This is especially pressing for the conflicts in West Asia and North Africa, where Sunni-Shi'a sectarianism and tribal conflicts are tearing nations apart and bringing them into conflict with one another. What is happening in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan with the involvement of other Muslim countries as well as outside powers is producing the very antithesis of the peaceful aims and teachings of Islam. It strikes at the very core of the human security concerns of the affected multitudes, which include millions of displaced persons and refugees.

41. Second, Islam is all about human dignity, human development and human security. Yet in so many countries of the Muslim world, it is these very things that are in shortest supply. The values and teachings of Islam can be more effectively mobilized to spur greater efforts by Muslim countries, acting individually as well as collectively, through such institutions as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), to bring more and better development. These efforts could embrace marginalized minority communities such as

the Rohingyas in Myanmar and the Muslims in southern Thailand and in the southern Philippines.

42. Among the programmes that should be highest in priority are those aimed at improving educational and health facilities, reducing income inequities, bringing greater protection and emancipation for women, strengthening representative government, and enhancing standards of governance. These, in fact, are some of the causes that are already being championed by organizations such as the Islamic Development Bank, but progress will continue to be slow unless there is greater commitment from many member countries.

43. Third, the non-governmental infrastructure for human development and human security greatly needs to be developed in many Muslim countries. Organizations in civil society and the private sector have a vital role to play and an important contribution to make. In areas such as education, healthcare, welfare activities, protection of women and children, crime prevention and environmental conservation the participation of voluntary organizations is necessary and invaluable, especially when they are supported by the business sector and the state. Muslim nations, again, individually as well as collectively, can do much to foster and strengthen this infrastructure within their own countries and sometimes even in others.

Concluding remarks

44. If we take our humanity seriously, and are motivated by the guidance conveyed in our sacred traditions, then we should expand our

conception of security to embrace its human dimensions. A foremost requirement for promoting human security is the recognition of diversity and difference in our global context, as well as within the boundaries of individual nations.

45. To this end we should cultivate awareness and understanding of the worldview of others, and learn to respect their various traditions. This is why inter-cultural competence and training for understanding other religions and worldviews is important — both for non-Muslims to appreciate Islam, and for Muslims to appreciate cultures and peoples belonging to other traditions.

46. Indeed the search for human security is the gateway to the future of a reformed global order. The combined experiences of human societies in the modern era in the economic, political, social and cultural domains of life are pushing towards recovering the basis of security reflected in basic human needs and hopes. Peace will only be achieved between nations, and among the diverse peoples within nations, when security is understood in these terms.