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"Bridging the Dangerous Gap between the West and the Muslim World"

Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz at the World Affairs Council , Monterey, CA, Friday, May 3, 2002 .

We hear and read a lot today about the clash of cultures, or what Samuel Huntington called the clash of civilizations. Today, I would like to take a moment to go beyond the headlines—both to get some altitude and to look a bit deeper at what I believe is less a clash of cultures than a collision of misunderstanding between the Muslim and Western worlds.

My view on the subject of East and West, one that has been shaped by personal experience, is decidedly optimistic. But, that does not mean I am not a realist, or that I can't see the stark truth that confronts us today: There is a dangerous gap between the West and the Muslim world. We must bridge this gap, and we must begin now—the gap is wide and there is no time for delay. Whether we are successful in narrowing the critical divide between East and West will be a major factor in shaping the future.

Today, we are fighting a war on terror—a war that we will win. The larger war we face is the war of ideas—a challenge to be sure, but one that we must also win. It is a struggle over modernity and secularism, pluralism and democracy, real economic development. To achieve victory in this larger conflict, we must work to understand the many facets of the Muslim world, the well-chosen subject of this conference. My three years as U.S. ambassador to Indonesia gave me insights into some of these facets and some of these traditions.

One of the things I learned to say there, I would like to say now to all of you: As salaamu alaykum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh. For those of you who don't speak Arabic, and for those you of who do, but don't understand how I speak Arabic, that means, "peace be upon you and the mercy of God and his blessings." It is a traditional Muslim greeting, but it is one that speaks to all people of all religions.

Many people do not realize that Indonesia is a country whose Muslim majority is the largest in the world. But even many who know that do not know that Islam is not the state religion, that the state accords equal status to the five major religions of its people. Like so many who go to Indonesia, I developed a deep admiration for that beautiful country, its people, its many rich cultures and its tradition of tolerance. My experiences there and since have strengthened my appreciation of the common ground shared by East and West.

Today I'd like to tell you more about this view, and discuss three related thoughts: First, Islam's tradition of tolerance and moderation; second, what current voices of moderation are telling us, and, third, what we can do to reach out to those voices and strengthen them.

Let me take you back for a moment, some five centuries, to the year 1492. In that year, when Christopher Columbus first began keeping a diary, he recorded two historic events. The first, as you might well imagine, concerned the imperial decree of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, directing a journey of discovery, a journey that would reach out beyond the bounds of the known world. The second, although less well known, was just as important to those it affected: an order by the Spanish rulers that expelled all the Spanish Jews. When Beyazit, the Muslim sultan of Turkey, learned of this last decree, he countered it with one of his own, extending a welcome to all the Jews of Spain. It is said that he commented: "How can you call Ferdinand a wise king--the same king who impoverished his own land and enriched ours?"

Islam's tradition of tolerance and moderation

Beyazit's example shows that by the standards of that time—admittedly a harsh and brutal time—the Muslim world was one of the most tolerant and progressive parts of the world. Beyazit's attitude is reflected in a classic Hadith, or saying, which says: "these differences among my people is a mercy of God." God gave us different views of things so that we might discuss important issues in peace, find truth, and reach compromise. That is certainly not an exclusively Muslim principle. Indeed, it is a foundation of liberal democracy. The idea of peacefully debating differences is a foundation of Western civilization—and indeed, civilization itself.

It is an idea that was perhaps first given form in the classic philosophers of ancient Greece. What is perhaps less well known, is that during centuries when classical Greek thought largely disappeared from Europe, it was kept alive by the work of great Muslim thinkers like Alfarabi and Avicenna. That contribution came back to Europe and helped stimulate the Western Renaissance. Other progress could be seen in many areas in Islam's golden age—in commerce and administration, in architecture, in science.

I began as a mathematician, as my father before me, and I understand the great debt we owe to achievements of Muslim scholars—like Omar Khayyam, whose brilliant treatise "Algebra," and whose beautiful poetry in the "Rubaiyat" influenced generations upon generations.

I attempt this short history lesson because, after all, I know of your keen interest in the outside world,

but also your understanding of the evolution of ideas, ideas like pluralism and tolerance and self-government that are the result of many centuries of growth and development. In fact, President Bush drew on these same deep roots when he spoke to the nation in his State of the Union message last January. Addressing the full scope of the challenge we face in the fight against terrorism, the President declared: "We have a greater objective than eliminating threats and containing resentment. We seek a just and peaceful world beyond the war on terror. America will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere."

Last September, a great evil struck our shores. And we are fighting back. But, given the scope of the evil of the terrorism we now oppose, this fight for a just and peaceful world is not one to be waged only by America, or only by the West. This fight must be fought by all who aspire to peace and freedom throughout the world—for that aspiration is what the terrorists wanted to destroy. And this fight must be fought most emphatically in the Muslim world itself, and by Muslims.

East and West inhabit common ground

There are those who see the values that motivate East and West as irreparably fractured. They are not. Indeed, for most who dwell on this earth, justice and peace are an ancient dream—freedom, an ageless desire. There are those who seek to portray this war against terrorism as a war against Islam. It is definitely not.

In our own time, the United States has tried to help others achieve the dream of peace, regardless of their creed. In fact, in the last decade, the men and women of America's Armed Forces have gone into harm's way to defend people against aggression or war-induced famine. In each one of those cases, we did so because it was in America's interests and because it was the right thing to do.

But as it happens, in each one of those cases—whether it was Kuwaitis, or Iraqi Kurds, or Somalis, or Bosnians or Kosovars or, most recently, Afghanis—the people we were defending were predominantly Muslim. And we helped them, not because they are Muslims, but because they are human beings.

I am convinced that the vast majority of the world's Muslims have no use for the extreme doctrines espoused by groups such as al Qaeda or the Taliban. Very much to the contrary. They abhor terrorism. They abhor terrorists who have not only hijacked airplanes, but have attempted to hijack one of the world's great religions. They have no use for people who deny fundamental rights to women or who indoctrinate children with superstition and hatred.

The ideals of freedom and democracy have been the most powerful engines of change in the last 50 years, and should also give us hope for further development in the Muslim world. One possible model for the aspirations of the Muslim world for democratic progress and prosperity can be found in a country that has interested me for some 25 years now, a country that straddles the strategic crossroads between East and West—that country is Turkey. Our strong ally and friend faces great challenges, but forges ahead based on Ataturk's vision in which the old world accepts the new, and each one is enriched.

Those who would criticize Turkey for its problems confuse what is problematic with what is fundamental. They focus too much on where Turkey is today and ignore where it has been and where it is going.

What is fundamental to Turkey's success is its democratic character. A Turkey that overcomes its present problems and continues the progress it has made over the course of the last century is indeed an example for the Muslim world. Turkey offers a compelling illustration that religious beliefs need not be sacrificed in favor of modern secular democratic institutions.

Indonesia is another important example of a nation seeking to build a democratic government based on a culture of inclusion and participation. But it does so in the face of severe economic obstacles. Some 15 years ago, an American economist specializing in Korea told me that the Indonesian economy of that time resembled the Korean economy of the early 1960s, and he believed that Indonesia was capable of economic performance comparable to what Korea had achieved.

I responded that most Indonesians would probably disagree with him, and would point to some of the unique attributes of Korean culture. His response to that was that people should go back and read what had been said about Korea's economic prospects in earlier times. South Korea then was described as a hopeless basket case, lacking natural resources, riddled with corruption, and, worst of all, burdened with a Confucian tradition that did not respect the idea of work. This is the same Confucian tradition that more recently has been given a substantial share of the credit for the success of the Korean economy and many others in Asia.

There is every reason to believe that Indonesia, with its own traditions and culture, can move forward as South Korea has, because when people are free to work and keep what they produce, they work hard and organize creatively. And if we are serious about opposing terrorism, we also must be serious about helping Indonesia in its quest for a stable democracy and a stable economy.

Likewise in the Arab world, we must support countries that are struggling to make progress. In what may prove to be one of the most significant—though not well known—developments in the Muslim world today, the king of Morocco has established a Royal Commission to reform the laws pertaining to women. And, although a monarchy, Morocco has held open elections for the parliament and is preparing to do so again. It is no accident that the King of Morocco has spoken out strongly against terrorism.

In Pakistan, we see a country that has much further to go, but possibly has more at stake in this fight against terrorism than any other. And no leader has taken greater risks, or faces more daunting challenges from within and without, than President Musharraf. Pakistan's success will be a success for us all in the fight against terrorism and we must continue to support this leader ... and his country.

Jordan is another Muslim country that is making one of the largest contributions to the coalition in

Afghanistan. And its courageous king, Abdullah, has condemned terrorism in clear and heart-felt language.

Not long ago, Prince Talal bin Abdulaziz, one of the son's of the founder of the Saudi monarchy, speaking of his own country and the Arab world, addressed the imperative for change, saying: "We need movement because the world is changing and the world around us is changing. Kuwait has elections, Qatar has communal elections, there's change in Bahrain, Oman, Yemen.... The system has to progress and evolve."

Strikingly, by the way, even in a portion of Iraq—in the Kurdish-controlled areas in the North—we see an example of the kind of self-government Muslims can achieve. There, beyond the reach of the Baghdad regime, the people are healthy and they enjoy a level of prosperity that far surpasses the rest of Iraq. People there can speak their minds, newspapers are printing news freely, and posters representing candidates on all sides of the political spectrum go up everywhere. Even though this area is under the same sanctions as the rest of Iraq, its people are doing far better economically.

Reaching out to moderate voices and strengthening them

Up to this point, I've talked mostly about governments making progress. But to make real progress, we must reach out beyond governments to individuals. They, after all, are the real focal point of liberal democracy and the true engines of change.

To win the war against terrorism and, in so doing, help shape a more peaceful world, we must speak to the hundreds of millions of moderate and tolerant people in the Muslim world, regardless of where they live, who aspire to enjoy the blessings of freedom and democracy and free enterprise. These are sometimes described as "Western values," but, in fact, they are universal.

We need to recognize that the terrorists target not only us but their fellow Muslims, upon whom they aim to impose a medieval, intolerant and tyrannical way of life. Those hundreds of millions of Muslims who aspire to the freedom and prosperity that Americans enjoy are, in many cases, on the frontlines of the struggle against terrorism. We in the West have an obligation to help them—and a self-interest in doing so. By helping them to stand against the terrorists without fear, we help ourselves. We help to lay the foundations for the just and peaceful world that the President envisions after the war against terror has been won.

It would be a mistake to think we could be the ones to lead the way, but we must do what we can to encourage the moderate Muslim voices that can. This is a debate about Muslim values that must take place among Muslims. But, it makes a difference when we recognize and encourage those who are defending universal values. And, when we help give them moral support against the opposition they encounter, we are indeed helping to lay the foundations for peace.

Fouad Ajami, one of our leading scholars of the Arab world, wrote recently in The New York Times

about what he called the "stridency and anti-Americanism" now dominating portions of the Arab media. "There's a war on the battlefield," he wrote, "and that is America's to win. But the repair of the Arab political condition—and the weaning of the Arab world away from radicalism—is a burden and a task for the Arabs themselves. The only thing America can do is make sure it never gives this radicalism a helping hand."

I recently asked for some information about leading liberal Islamic thinkers, who they are, and what they are saying. I received a memo that contained some promising and useful information. It described in detail several Muslim thinkers who are arguing for freedom of thought, a democratic and humanist Muslim state, a modern liberal interpretation of the Koran. It was heartening to see such a good analysis. What was disheartening, was the fact that this memo was several years old. If the most recent memo we have on these brave advocates of freedom of thought dates back to the 1990s, someone must have decided that these people aren't very important. But they are extremely important, not just to the Arab world, but to us as well. They are essential to bridging the dangerous gap between the West and the Muslim world.

We must become more attentive to the moderate voices in the Muslim world, for the better we are at encouraging them, the more effective we can be, as the President put it, in "lead[ing] the world toward those values that will bring lasting peace."

I know from my experiences that there are serious discussions going on among Muslims throughout the world, who want to move the Muslim world away from extremism and into the modern world. In Indonesia, I once attended part of an all-day seminar on the thought of Ibn Rushd, a medieval Muslim scholar who championed the compatibility of reason and religion.

This was not just an academic discussion among intellectuals. I met a young Indonesian police officer who was attending the seminar, not out of an obscure interest in a long-dead philosopher, but to try to understand better the relation between his faith and modern science. This is just one of many instances where one can discover that a serious debate is underway about how devout Muslims can also be a part of a modern, secular society. So, if we can encourage this debate, we, in fact, marshal our forces. The first place we must look for allies is with governments already embarked on the path towards freedom and justice. But we must also reach out beyond governments, good ones as well as bad, to individuals as well. We must work to appeal to a broad population, as well as the voices struggling to rise above the din of extremism, voices that tell us the Islam of Muhammed is not the religion of bin Laden and suicide bombers

And, unfortunately, despite Islam's ancient tradition of tolerance, there are individuals today who are coming under ideological and even physical attack for defending tolerance. UCLA law Professor Khaled Abou El Fadl has pointed out that in Islam's first century and a half, 135 schools of law existed to give Islam so much of its cultural dynamism. Today, with so much learning from those and later schools dismissed as sinful, he fears that perhaps "we are in the dark ages of Islam."

But, the shrill rhetoric of extremism threatens to drown out such observations. Between his junior and

senior years at Yale, Abou El Fadl was arrested in his home in the Middle East, where he was finishing his final ijazas, and thrown in jail without apparent reason. He was released two weeks later, but only after suffering severe beatings. Even here in America, he has received threats and denunciations when he has spoken out.

At the World Economic Forum in February, Shafeeq Ghabra, a Kuwaiti resident of Palestinian origin, then head of the Kuwait Information Office in Washington, appeared on a panel that included two former Israeli officials, well-known for their roles in supporting the peace process. What Ghabra terms a "modest deed" set off a fire storm in Kuwait on the part of those, in Ghabra's words, "who have turned Islam into a political ideology." He was condemned by groups in Kuwait for his participation, and it led to attacks in the Kuwaiti press on secular Kuwaitis in general.

When the American Shayk Muhammed Hisham Kabbani, a noted Muslim scholar, spoke at a State Department-sponsored panel on terrorism in January, 1999, he addressed what he called the "authentic, traditional voice of Islam... which is moderation and tolerance and love ... and living in peace with all other faiths and religions." He went on to caution that there was, at that time, an imminent threat of a catastrophic terrorist attack on American soil by Islamic extremists.

Following his message, some Muslim organizations here in the United States publicly condemned him for "false and defamatory allegations against the Muslim community" and organized a boycott against him. Learning, tolerance, and progress—these are qualities extremists today consider subversive.

The system will progress when we become truly serious about supporting those "brave men and women" who advocate the values of "human dignity, free speech, equal justice, respect for women and religious tolerance" that President Bush spoke of in his January address.

Arab-Israeli conflict

One of the great obstacles to the dream of peace is the continuing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Over these many years, after the sacrifice of so many, it is clear that the solution to this conflict will not be achieved by the force of tanks and bombs. A lasting resolution of this conflict can only come through political means. And the outline of a solution has been clear for some time, and it is based on two fundamental elements: the acknowledgement of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state within secure and recognized boundaries; and, the creation of a Palestinian state that brings to an end Israeli occupation and provides a better life for its citizens and security for its neighbors.

Yesterday, President Bush spoke of a "vision," in his words: "of two states, Palestine and Israel, living side by side in peace and security. This vision, the President went on, offers the Palestinian people a new opportunity to choose how they live.... We want to work ... to build a Palestinian state that both lives at peace with Israel and lives up to the best hopes of its people."

Early last month, when President Bush announced that he was sending Secretary of State Colin Powell

to the Middle East, he expressed the hope that this would be a step toward achieving that vision of "two states, living side by side, in peace and security." At the same time, he recognized that achieving this vision will be a difficult process.

As the scenes of suffering and carnage we have witnessed in the Middle East so clearly attest: one of the greatest obstacles to that solution is terrorism. Those who have lived with such violence and hatred question whether they can trust a peace with those who sponsor suicide bombers or make a peace that seems to reward such behavior. Terrorism is part of the problem—a big part of the problem—not the solution.

After the violence of recent months, one cannot expect a rapid transformation of the situation. But Secretary Powell achieved a great deal in that direction in his trip to the Middle East. He prevented an escalation of the war in Lebanon; he lowered the temperature in the region; and, in doing so, he undoubtedly helped save lives on both sides and started the process of defusing the confrontation in Ramallah.

As it happens, some two weeks ago, I had a vivid experience of the emotions with which Secretary Powell has to deal, albeit mine was on a much smaller scale. Representing President Bush at a rally to show solidarity with the people of Israel and the global war against terrorism, my remarks presented the President's concern for the current situation and the broad range of our policy in the region.

When I pointed out that innocent Palestinians were also dying, I got a negative reaction from some in the audience. Or, to put it more bluntly, I got booed. Or like they say in my old neighborhood, I got the Bronx cheer. In all seriousness, that experience demonstrated vividly how violence inflames passions.

Our ambassador to Bahrain, Ronald Neumann, had a similar experience with Palestinian supporters while attending a school program in which a student asked those assembled to observe a moment of silence for the Palestinians. Ambassador Neumann suggested they remain standing for the Israeli victims of the suicide bombings. Reports of his remarks fueled strong reactions that included demonstrations. Another illustration of how inflamed passions have become.

For there to be peace, people in positions of authority on all sides must recognize its value. And while we realize that progress may only be made in small steps, there are also times when people must think of making great strides.

When Anwar Sadat traveled to Jerusalem to address Israel's Knesset in 1977, his bold and courageous move was a psychological breakthrough, and the Israeli response was overwhelming. The result was a giant step forward toward peace that has endured to this day.

I didn't understand Arabic at the time, but hearing the sincerity of Sadat's opening words was a powerful and emotional moment for me, and it inspired me to try to learn a little bit of Arabic. I even memorized a portion of his address, and developed an appreciation for the power and beauty of the

Arabic language. One of the most moving parts was its opening ... the way Sadat took the traditional Muslim greeting and turned it to his audience. He said very simply, but eloquently, "Peace be upon you and God's blessing, peace be upon all of us, God willing, peace be upon all of us in the Arab lands and in Israel." It was perhaps the first time an Arab leader had ever uttered the word "Israel" at all, much less in such a profoundly respectful way.

I knew that any language with that kind of power offers hope for the future. And even in English, the power of his words comes through. These lines I recalled at the Capitol. "Any life," said Anwar Sadat, "any life that is lost in war is a human life, be it that of an Arab or an Israeli. Innocent children who are deprived of the care and compassion of their parents are ours. They are ours," the president of Egypt said, "whether they live in Arab lands or in Israel." And then he made a point that bears reflecting on today. "There are moments in the lives of nations and peoples," he said, "when those who shoulder great responsibilities must have the courage to make decisions that fit the magnitude of the situation and never to forget that infallibility belongs to God alone."

As the son of an immigrant, I have a deep appreciation of how lucky and blessed we all are to live in this country—to live free from persecution and fear. I have long believed that, even more than our vast resources, more than the beauty we see all around us, more than our melting pot culture and our military might, America's greatest power is what it stands for.

Abraham Lincoln knew this, too. A few weeks before he became president, he wrote that, even as a boy, he thought the object for which men had struggled at the founding of this nation was, as he put it, "something even more than national independence." The object of their great struggle, Lincoln concluded as a young man and firmly believed until his death, "holds out a great promise," he said, "to all the people of the world for all time to come."

For people who cherish freedom and seek peace, particularly those who do so in the Middle East, these are difficult times. But, such times can also deepen our understanding of the truth.

This truth we know: that the single greatest threat to peace and freedom in our time is terrorism. So this truth we also affirm: that the future does not belong to the terrorists. The future belongs to those who dream the oldest and noblest dream of all, the dream of peace and freedom.

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