



**ISTANA ISKANDARIAH
KUALA KANGSAR**

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS
BY
HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS
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THE RULER OF PERAK, MALAYSIA
AT THE
FIFTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON ISLAMIC THOUGHT AND
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“THE FUTURE IS OURS”

Bismillahi r-Rahmani r-Rahim.

Assalamu ‘alaykum warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh.

Your Excellencies, distinguished scholars, ladies and gentlemen:

1. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this, the Fifth World Conference on Islamic Thought and Civilization. As ever, I am most delighted to be here to address you all today, at this conference hosted by the university which bears the name of my dear father, the 34th Sultan of Perak, Al-Marhum Sultan Azlan Shah. It is truly an institution which is very dear to my heart, and, returning here for another of these prestigious, international conferences, I am heartened – indeed, proud – to see Jami‘ahAzlaniyah, this Islamic university, continue to flourish and thrive in an increasingly global context.

2. As the World Conference on Islamic Thought and Civilization takes place for a fifth time, I must laud the efforts of the organizers on their selection of a theme which is, at once, positive, proactive and cautionary. This conference



gathers together some of the world's finest thinkers, speakers and scholars, to reflect on the important challenge of "Securing the Future", and to share ideas about practical strategies for doing so. For the phrase "Securing the Future" reminds us that the future is, indisputably, not yet secure. The world is beset with many burgeoning crises. Global warming and pollution pose a very real and imminent threat to the planet, not only to plant and animal life, but ultimately to human existence. Poverty and financial instability continue to devastate the lives of many people the world over, with more than 780 million individuals globally subsisting on less than US\$1.90 per day.¹ Almost every day in the news we hear of discord between nations and peoples, such that, according to the data collected by the World Economic Forum, someone is displaced every three seconds, driven from their home because of war or persecution. As of the end of 2016, the number of people displaced by conflict worldwide was greater than the population of the entire United Kingdom.² Indeed, from all of these perspectives, the future seems far from secure.

3. I am especially heartened to note, therefore, that through its many excellent sub-themes including "Learners Today, Leaders Tomorrow", "Economy Matters" and "Cultural Language of Religion", this conference sets out to address a variety of serious global challenges for the future in discursive and proactive ways. I want to touch upon a number of these related topics this

¹Christoph Lakner, "April 2018 Global Poverty Update from the World Bank", *The World Bank Blogroll: Let's Talk Development* (30 April 2018), <http://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/april-2018-global-poverty-update-world-bank>.

²Charlotte Edmond, "The Number of Displaced People in the World Just Hit a Record High", *World Economic Forum Agenda* (20 June 2017), <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/06/there-are-now-more-refugees-than-the-entire-population-of-the-uk/>.



morning, and I am delighted that we can also look forward to papers by eminent researchers from a wide variety of countries, fields and academic institutions, which will explore these themes in greater depth and detail.

Ladies and gentlemen:

4. Although I have opened on a serious note, I come here today with a message of hope and positivity, a call for action. I come here to tell you, to urge you to believe that “the future is ours”. The future is ours to safeguard and shape, and ours, I hope, to enjoy. “The future is ours.” It is a short, seemingly simple assertion, and yet one which invites a number of questions – not least, what do I mean by “ours”? To whom, am I suggesting, does the future belong?

5. As a Muslim, I say that “the future is ours” in that I believe Islam has much to offer the world when it comes to tackling some of the biggest challenges of the future for mankind, particularly in economic and environmental terms. I have spoken in the past about the ways in which Islamic finance could play a vital role in addressing issues of poverty and financial instability on a larger, global scale. It is widely acknowledged, for instance, that Islamic banks generally fared much better during the financial crisis of 2007-2008, demonstrating greater resilience than non-Islamic banks, according to a report by the International Monetary Fund.³This, surely, is a sign that Islamic finance models could contribute greatly to the global banking sector as a whole, providing stability and security in the face of future economic uncertainty.

³“IMF Survey: Islamic Banks: More Resilient to Crisis?”, *IMF Research* (4 October 2010), <http://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/53/sores100410a>.



6. As well as offering the hope of future economic stability, Islamic finance may also hold some of the answers when it comes to addressing the serious problem of widespread poverty. Through the social finance institutions of *zakat*, *waqf*, and *sadaqah*, Islam enshrines charitable giving at its core, and there is no doubt that these mechanisms could be better mobilised to provide poor-relief to a greater number of individuals, both Muslims and non-Muslims, worldwide.

7. We should also note, moreover, the huge potential of *sukuk* bonds to generate wealth for the common good and for all people. Although *sukuk* are Shariah-compliant investments, a number of Socially Responsible Investment or SRI *sukuk* have been developed in recent years which are designed to raise money to fund socially beneficial projects for everybody. Take for example Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, which launched the first international *sukuk* intended for a charitable purpose in 2014, raising US\$500 million in its first year to help fund immunisation programmes in some of the world's poorest countries.⁴ I am delighted, also, to be able to mention the *Khazanahsukuk* as an example of an SRI-*sukuk*, which helps to fund schools and education right here in Malaysia. I sincerely hope that more *sukuk* may be used to such socially responsible ends in the future, and as *sukuk* issuance continues to increase, spreading to new markets such as the United Kingdom and South Africa, it seems that this hope could very well be realised. *Sukuk* bonds are emerging as a viable, popular and ethical investment option, and this is a contribution which

⁴"IFFImsukuk recognised by Financial Times", *GAVI The Vaccine Alliance News* (22 June 2015), <https://www.gavi.org/library/news/gavi-features/2015/iffim-sukuk-recognised-by-financial-times/>.



Islam can make to the future of the economy *and* to human welfare, on a truly global scale.

8. This discussion of *sukuk*, moreover, leads me into another area in which I believe Islam has an important role to play in securing the future of the planet: that of protecting and preserving the natural environment. As well as SRI *sukuk* bonds, recent years have also witnessed the inception of the so-called “green” *sukuk*, and I am very pleased to be able to say that Malaysia has been an innovator, promoting *bid’ahhasanah*, in this respect. Just last year, in 2017, Malaysia launched the world’s first ever Green *sukuk* as a collaboration between Malaysia’s Central Bank and Securities Commission, together with the World Bank. The proceeds from this *sukuk* will finance environmentally beneficial projects such as the development of renewable energy sources here in Malaysia.

9. But there is much more still to be done when it comes to tackling the ever-growing problem of climate change. This conforms to Islam’s philosophy of the Adamic man’s mandate as God’s *khalifah*, to act as stewards of the planet. Allah *subhanahuwa-ta’ala* reminds us of our God-given honour in the Qur’an with the words, “We appointed you as stewards (*khalifah*) in the earth...so that We might see how you behave!”⁵ With this God-given honour, we are entrusted also with a grave responsibility.

10. At present, humanity is damaging, not nurturing the planet, and this ultimately means damaging the future. Carbon dioxide pollution, generated particularly by the burning of fossil fuels, has resulted in rapidly rising global

⁵*Surah Yunus*, 10:14.



temperatures, leading to the melting of glaciers and ice caps, and to dramatic rises in sea levels. To give a tangible sense of the rate at which this crisis is developing, researchers predict that most central and eastern Himalayan glaciers will have entirely disappeared by 2035.⁶ This is a stark indication of the speed with which we must act if we are to address the escalating problem of global warming. Climate change and human activities such as deforestation are also having a devastating effect on the earth's biodiversity, leading to the extinction of the other living creatures with which we share this planet. According to the World Wildlife Fund, the rate of species extinction is somewhere between 1000 and 10,000 times higher than the natural extinction rate.⁷ The preventable loss of a species is truly a loss for our future. It is a God-given duty of Muslims to strive to reverse or, at the very least, to halt this environmental damage. The future of the planet is our divine responsibility.

11. When I say that “the future is ours,” however, I do not speak only as a Muslim. I speak also as a human, as a citizen of the world, as belonging to that Adamic family: for I believe that the future belongs to each and every one of us, irrespective of our religion, our race, and even our nationality. Indeed, if we are to take on the major challenges like climate change which pose a serious and imminent threat to our future, we must think and work beyond our modern borders and identity boundaries, and we must also, moreover, empower each and every individual to feel that their actions can make a difference. The former

⁶Daniel Glick, “The Big Thaw: As the Climate Warms, How Much, and How Quickly, will Earth's Glaciers Melt?”, *National Geographic* (accessed 15 July 2018),

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/global-warming/big-thaw/>

⁷“How Many Species Are We Losing?”, *WWF Global* (accessed 15 July 2018),

http://wwf.panda.org/our_work/biodiversity/biodiversity/



First Lady of the United States of America, Eleanor Roosevelt, once wrote in an inspirational phrase, that “the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams”, and although it might sound like something of a cliché, it is a notion that I would like all of us to hold on to today.⁸ The future belongs to those who believe that they have the power to shape it, to effect real, decisive change, and to have their voices heard.

Ladies and gentlemen:

12. We have just witnessed our fourteenth general election two months ago here where the citizens of Malaysia, the voters, brought about substantial, even unprecedented political transformation through the ballot box. From this defining moment in our country’s relatively young history, I do hope that the citizens of Malaysia feel empowered to make their mark, and to influence their nation’s future. As I stressed a little over a decade ago, “Malaysians of all races, religions and geographic locations need to believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that they have a place under the Malaysian sun.”⁹ It will require what our ulama call both *tajdid* as well as *islah*, to breathe new life into and to rejuvenate our institutions, and where necessary to improve upon them.

13. There is no denying, however, that there will be “growing pains” in our journey to make Malaysia a mature democracy to join the rest of the community

⁸ Quoted by Leonard C. Schlup, “Introduction,” *It Seems to Me: Selected Letters of Eleanor Roosevelt* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), p. 2.

⁹ Raja Nazrin Shah, “Prospects and Challenges for Nation Building”, Keynote Address at the ‘Young Malaysians’ Roundtable Discussion on National Unity and Development in Malaysia, Bar Council, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (3 April 2007).



of nations already in that Premier League of democracies, so to speak. That is why I believe that we should not leave anyone behind in this process, including those with whom we may disagree. We must avoid the unhealthy practice made in some countries where, following an important victory, “the winner takes all”. Everyone under the Malaysian sun should be part of this journey, and we should be mindful to involve all of the nation’s stakeholders in this historic journey.

Ladies and gentlemen:

14. I have spoken at this conference several times in the past about the vital importance of investing in and empowering the world’s youth. Young people, after all, really do represent our planet’s future. To reiterate a hugely pertinent quotation which I cited two years ago, by the director of the United Nations Population Fund, “Young people are the innovators, creators, builders and leaders of the future. But they can transform the future *only* if they have skills, health, decision-making, and real choices in life”.¹⁰ Of course, investment in education and healthcare is absolutely vital, as I have emphasised in the past; but it is this notion of involving young people in decision-making, and empowering them to feel that they do have “real choices in life,” which I wish to dwell on before closing. We often talk about young people being the leaders and policy-makers of tomorrow, but I suggest that we also need to do more to make young people feel actively consulted and engaged in decision-making today. Indeed, there are numerous case studies which demonstrate that

¹⁰Quoted in Sultan Nazrin Shah, “Opportunities and Challenges for Youth in our Future World”, Keynote Address at the Third World Conference on Islamic Thought and Civilization, Ipoh, Malaysia (18 October 2016).



mobilizing youth populations, for example, in national peace building and community cohesion projects, can be hugely effective, significantly improving the overall success of such efforts. Following the end of the Nepalese civil war a little over a decade ago, the thorough involvement of young people in peace consultations resulted in an 80% reduction in violent protests.¹¹ Meanwhile, earlier this year, UNESCO reaffirmed its commitment to continue and to reinforce its work with young people in community development in South Sudan, ensuring, “that their voices are not only heard but that they actually become drivers of change in their respective communities”.¹²

15. At the same time, there is also evidence to suggest that when young people feel disempowered, disaffected and ignored, they will inevitably seek to bring about change in other, less constructive, collaborative, democratic and even peaceful ways. Analysis of the Arab Spring of 2011 has suggested that youth unemployment was one of the underlying causes of the uprising, with unemployment rates at almost 30% in Tunisia, where the protests began. Notably, reports indicate that jobs were high on the demand lists of these early protestors. What is especially tragic about this fact is that, despite youth unemployment being a root cause and driver of the uprising, very little has changed in the aftermath of these events in the Arab world. Indeed, World Bank statistics indicate that youth unemployment rates are actually even higher now

¹¹Colette Rausch and Tina Luu, “Inclusive Peace Processes are Key to Ending Violent Conflict”, United States Institute of Peace (5 May 2017), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/05/inclusive-peace-processes-are-key-ending-violent-conflict>.

¹²UNESCO Office in Nairobi, “UNESCO Reaffirms Its Commitment to Support Peace Building in South Sudan”, *UNESCO News* (19 January 2018), <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/member-states/single-view/news/unesco-reaffirms-its-commitment-to-support-peace-building-in/>



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than they were in 2010-11.¹³ The message, it seems, is only too clear. When young people are consulted and actively involved in political and diplomatic processes, they can help to effect change which is significant, peaceful, and positive for all. When young people feel overlooked and disenfranchised, the routes they may take in their attempts to get their voices heard can actually result in a worsening of their already compromised situation.

16. In Malaysia, it would seem, but also around the world, we need to do more to enable young people to “become drivers of change”, to empower them to believe that the future really is theirs to influence and build. As leaders, scholars, and people with a platform, we need not only to champion those issues which we believe matter to today’s youth, but also to invite young people to speak and to be heard, to share their ideas in their own words, within democratic and diplomatic forums, and not outside of them. To underline the vital importance of this, I would emphasise that young people currently make up nearly half of the world’s population: as of 2017, 42% of the global population was under the age of 25, and that number is set to grow.¹⁴ We must, I think, do more to engage these many millions of people in shaping their tomorrow, today.

Ladies and gentlemen:

¹³Heath J. Prince, “Fading Hope: Why the Youth of the Arab Spring Are Still Unemployed”, *The Conversation* (1 July 2016), <https://theconversation.com/fading-hope-why-the-youth-of-the-arab-spring-are-still-unemployed-60588>

¹⁴Tariq Khokhar, “Chart: How Is the World's Youth Population Changing?”, *The World Bank Blogroll: The Data Blog* (7 May 2018), <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/chart-how-worlds-youth-population-changing>



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17. My thoughts today have not shied away from the many difficult challenges facing our world in the future. Youth disempowerment, financial uncertainty, political turmoil, global warming: these are just some of the serious issues which we must address, and quickly, indeed, if our world is to have a future at all. But my message is ultimately, I hope, one of optimism. It will undoubtedly take the efforts of us all, young and old, men and women, of every faith, nationality, race and creed, to secure our planet's future. The future is our collective responsibility; and, if we take up that responsibility now, the future will also, I believe, be our reward, in this life and in the next.

Thank you.