Building Bridges of Understanding

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In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

I am here today in order to try to clear up some of the confusion that exists as to the reality of Islam, the current situation of Muslims in the world, and what the vast majority of Muslims hold to be true. I am here with you today to tackle the issue of terrorism and extremism in order to build bridges understanding between the Muslim world and the West because in this time we live in a global society.

The Islam that we were taught in our youth is a religion that calls for peace and mercy. There have been, however, those who have taken up arms, killed innocent people, committed atrocities, threatened the public safety, damaged international relations and have thrown Muslim societies into turmoil. Many innocent people have lost their lives for no good reason. The rise of violent extremism in the Muslim world has caused confusion around the world, in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies, causing many to identify Islam with violence. Some commentators from the non-Muslim world have taken the actions of a small but highly visible and disruptive minority of people within the Muslim world to represent the beliefs of the majority of Muslims, claiming that Islam has been a violent religion from the beginning. This view has unfortunately been reinforced through the presentation of Islam in much of the mass media. This view of Islam as a religion of violence, retribution, and war is in complete opposition to the truth of our religion and, on behalf of the vast majority of the 1.3 billion Muslims throughout the world, who are ordinary, peace-loving, decent people, I am here to repudiate the actions of a misguided criminal minority and to refute the allegations leveled against our religion by those who have no true understanding of Islam.

The truth of the matter is that Islam has nothing whatsoever to do with the extremism that has come to be associated with it, to the extent that you can safely say to any terrorist, "you are not from amongst the Muslims." Terrorists are criminals, not Muslim activists. Their actions are against the basic teachings of Islam: firstly, they contradict the central theme of peace in Islam. Islam, in Arabic, means peace, peace is the greeting of Muslims amongst themselves, the last word spoken by a Muslim in his prayers, one of God's names, and one of the names for Paradise. Secondly, the Qur'an has permitted freedom of belief for all of mankind saying, "To you is your religion and to me is mine." Thirdly, the use of violence is prohibited in spreading the faith. The Qur'an explicitly states: "There is no compulsion in religion," and "Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good counsel and discuss with them in the most kindly manner," and "God does not prevent you from being kind to those who have not fought you on account of your religion or expelled you from your homes nor from dealing justly with them, indeed God loves the just." Fourthly – and this is very important – none of these extremists have been educated in Islam in genuine centers of Islamic learning. They are,

rather, products of troubled environments and have subscribed to distorted and misguided interpretations of Islam that have no basis in traditional Islamic doctrine. Their aim is purely political and has no religious foundation. It is to create havoc and chaos in the world. We must stand together as one against these people and not allow them to divide us.

My fear is that these extremists will convince the world that the entire Muslim world is the enemy; that a war on terror is a war on the entire Muslim world and anyone who supports the Muslim world against the prevailing view. I have, through my present position, set out to publish an authoritative picture of Islam which, I hope will give the world a better understanding of and empathy for Islam and the Muslim world and help us all to live together in peace, tranquility, and mutual cooperation. What we have learned about Islam has been taken from the clear, sober and scholarly understanding of the Qur'an, "O people we have created you from a single male and female and divided you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another." When God said "to know one another" He did not mean in order to kill one another. All religions have forbidden the killing of innocents. Rather we have been ordered to cooperate in a constructive manner "And if God did not repel some men by others, then the earth would have been corrupted."

Who should we trust? Should we trust the extremists or that upon which the entirety of Islamic civilization has been built over 1,400 years? The first Prophetic saying that is taught to a student of Islam is "Those who show mercy are shown mercy by the All- Merciful. Show mercy to those on earth and the One in the heavens will show mercy to you." There is also the advice that Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin of the Prophet, and one of Islam's most saintly and revered teachers, gave to the governor he was appointing in Egypt to be good to his people saying, "Do not behave like a wild beast plundering the food [of the people you govern]. Indeed, there are [only] two categories of people: either your brother in religion, or an equal human being. Accidental laxity may come from them, they will make mistakes, and their hands may commit [crimes] intentionally and by mistake. Pardon and forgive them, just as you hope God will pardon and forgive you." Who should we trust? Should we trust the extremists or the freedom of choice and belief that Islam has enjoined upon us? The Qur'an says, "Truth comes from God, whoever believes let them believe and whoever does not, let them not believe," even when debating with others the Qur'an says, "Indeed we or you are surely guided or in manifest error." One of the problems faced by religious communities today is the issue of authority. In both Islam and other religions we are witnessing a phenomenon in which laypeople without a sound foundation in religious learning have attempted to set themselves up as religious authorities, even though they lack the scholarly qualifications for making valid interpretations of religious law and morality. It is this eccentric and rebellious attitude towards religion that opens the way for extremist interpretations of Islam that have no basis in reality. These interpretations have been made in reaction to political crises, injustices, poverty, and frustration but have no foundation in the truth. Our role as religious leaders who have spent our lives carefully studying religious exegesis is to re-establish authority with those who are in true possession of knowledge.

The source of and justification for much of the extremism and political violence across the Muslim world and beyond is the tragedy of Palestine, which has not been resolved for the last 60 years. We need to understand this complicated situation in order to end the daily bloodshed on both sides. Egypt was quick to answer the call to peace nearly 30 years ago, but to this day we have not arrived at true peace as a result of the intransigence of all parties. Let me be clear by reiterating that Islam is utterly against extremism and terrorism but unless we understanding the factors that have led to terrorism and extremism we will never be able to

eradicate this scourge. This must be understood in order to build a better future that can bring an end to this grave situation that is destroying the world.

For over a thousand years ordinary Muslims have worshipped God, engaged in developing their society, and have sought to cultivate good moral character. This is made clear in the Qur'an which says, "I have not created man and Jinn except to worship Me." "He caused you to dwell on earth and to develop it." "He is successful who has purified [the heart and soul]." There are more than 6,000 verses in the Qur'an, only 300 of which are related to legal matters; the rest deal with developing good moral character. Likewise there are over 60,000 Prophetic traditions and sayings of which only 2,000 are related to legal matters; the rest deal with developing good moral character. For Muslims the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, is described is being a mercy sent from God to mankind.

From my long study of Islam and its history, I can attest that the history of Islam is free of ethnic cleansing, religious inquisitions, and forced conversions. This may seem contrary to the popular contemporary view of Islam but it is an opinion that has been confirmed by a study carried out by Richard W. Bulliet who demonstrated that while the body politic of Islam spread quickly, it took hundreds of years for populations to convert to Islam. Therefore, in reality the faith of Islam was spread by love, intermarriage, and family relations, not by the sword. We all need to learn from history and build a world for our children and grandchildren and call people to work for the betterment of their societies in a manner in which all are given their due respect and recognize their duties to one another. This is what we have understood from personal freedom. Can we achieve this? The hope that we can, serves as my inspiration, and I pray that you join me in this so that we can realize these goals.

Many people have raised the issue that there are certain verses in the Qur'an that allow Muslims to protect themselves when they are attacked. This is something that can be found in every religious law and civil code, and more recently we find it being sanctioned by the Geneva Convention. The Qur'an says: "Fight in the way of God against those who fight against you, but avoid aggression for God does not like the aggressor." "But if they cease then God is Forgiving, Merciful." This statement has been repeated many times throughout the second chapter of the Qur'an and forms the basis for the Islamic law of warfare, which is only for the purpose of repelling an attack and protecting one's self, one's home and family. There is another issue concerning how people understand jihad, which is, unfortunately, now one of the most familiar Islamic terms in the west. The Arabic word Jihad in Islam refers to the struggle against one's lower self. The meaning is fundamentally spiritual, referring to the purification of the heart, which was described by the Prophet Mohamed as The Greater Jihad, the highest and most noble meaning of the term. The permission for Muslims to struggle against and to ward off aggression has been described as the Lesser Jihad. This greater jihad gives Muslims the ability to struggle with and to ward off aggression The Prophet said "The best form of jihad is a true word in the face of a tyrant." Jihad is also used in Islamic discourse to describe the hajj of women to Mecca as it is a hardship for them. However, extremists have misused the word jihad and, unfortunately the mass media, being ignorant of Arabic and the subtlety of the term has now reduced the word to meaning terrorist violence and this has worked to the advantage of the extremists. The widespread and unchallenged interpretation of any kind of violence against non-Muslims as jihad has confused ordinary Muslims around the world.

We see ourselves as a people who have absorbed a multiplicity of civilizations; we have been exposed to and assimilated the great civilizations of the Persians, Indians, Chinese, and

Greeks into our cultural and intellectual life, and we benefited from all of them as well as contributing to them. Islamic civilization places people above buildings and worshippers above places of worship. This humanitarian and cosmopolitan worldview does not allow us to consider ourselves as superior to other people. We are proud of our civilization, but we do not reject other civilizations, rather all who work towards the constructive development in the world should be considered as our partners. Since our civilization is concerned with humanity it brings together both the spiritual and the material. We do not hate life nor do we seek to create social imbalance, and anyone who engages in this has gone against the teachings of our religion and what we have been taught of good moral character.

I visited London two years ago and encouraged the British government to facilitate Muslim participation in the mainstream and support existing and ongoing efforts in the Muslim community to that end. Islam needs to be presented in a deeper and more complete way and to be presented with more sensitivity and objectivity in both the media and the educational curriculum in order to reflect Britain's true multicultural character. The issue of British Muslim disenfranchisement needs to be seriously addressed, as well as the establishment of a British based authority for Muslims in Britain to turn to along the lines of Al-Azhar. There is no more powerful a weapon against extremism than correct education and the recognition on all sides that British Muslims and Non-Muslims belong to this country just as Muslims and Non-Muslims belong to the world. I believe that these recommendations were approved of at the time I made them, however I find it necessary to repeat them again today in the hopes that you will assist me in making them
a reality.

Thank you for your kind attention.