

# 'If We Are To Recover Our Dignity'

*Excerpts from Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad's keynote speech to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) on Oct. 16.*

The whole world is looking at us. Certainly 1.3 billion Muslims—one-sixth of the world's population—are placing their hopes in us, in this meeting, even though they may be cynical about our will and capacity to even decide to restore the honour of Islam and the Muslims, much less to free their brothers and sisters from the oppression and humiliation from which they suffer today. If we are to recover our dignity, and that of Islam, our religion, it is we who must decide, it is we who must act. . . .

We are enjoined to "read, *Iqra'*"; i.e., to acquire knowledge. The early Muslims took this to mean translating and studying the works of the Greeks and other scholars before Islam. And these Muslim scholars added to the body of knowledge through their own studies. The early Muslims produced great mathematicians and scientists, scholars, physicians, and astronomers, etc.; and they excelled in all the fields of knowledge of their times, besides studying and practicing their own religion of Islam. As a result, the Muslims were able to develop and extract wealth from their lands; and through their world trade, able to strengthen their defenses, protect their people and give them the Islamic way of life—*Addin*—as prescribed by Islam. At the time the Europeans of the Middle Ages were still superstitious and backward, the enlightened Muslims had already built a great Muslim civilization, respected and powerful, more than able to compete with the rest of the world, and able to protect the *ummah* from foreign aggression. The Europeans had to kneel at the feet of Muslim scholars in order to access their own scholastic heritage. . . .

## 'Fundamentalism' and Regression

But halfway through the building of the great Islamic civilization came new interpreters of Islam, who taught that acquisition of knowledge by Muslims meant only the study of Islamic theology. The study of science, medicine, etc., was discouraged. Intellectually, the Muslims began to regress. With intellectual regression, the great Muslim civilization began to falter and wither. . . . With all these developments over the centuries the *ummah* and the Muslim civilization became so weak that, at one time, there was not a single Muslim country which was not colonized or hegemonized by

the Europeans. . . .

Some would have us believe that, despite all this, our life is better than that of our detractors. Some believe that poverty is Islamic; sufferings, and being oppressed are Islamic. This world is not for us. Ours are the joys of heaven in the afterlife. All that we have to do is to perform certain rituals, wear certain garments, and put up a certain appearance. Our weakness, our backwardness, and our inability to help our brothers and sisters who are being oppressed, are part of the "Will of Allah," the sufferings that we must endure before enjoying heaven in the hereafter. We must accept this fate that befalls us. We need not do anything. We can do nothing against the Will of Allah.

But, is it true that it is the Will of Allah and that we can and should do nothing? Allah has said in Surah Ar-Ra'd, verse 11, that He will not change the fate of a community until the community has tried to change its fate itself. . . .

But, because we discouraged the learning of science and mathematics, etc., as giving no merit for the *akhirat*, today we have no capacity to produce our own weapons for our defense. We have to buy our weapons from our detractors and enemies. This is what comes from the superficial interpretation of the Quran, stressing not the substance of the Prophet's *sunna*h and the Quran's injunctions but rather the form, the manner and the means used in the 1st Century of the *Hijrah*. And it is the same with the other teachings of Islam. We are more concerned with the forms rather than the substance of the words of Allah, and adhering only to the literal interpretation of the traditions of the Prophet. . . .

Today we, the whole Muslim *ummah*, are treated with contempt and dishonor. Our religion is denigrated; our holy places desecrated. Our countries are occupied, our people starved and killed. None of our countries are truly independent. . . . Today if they want to raid our country, kill our people, destroy our villages and towns, there is nothing substantial that we can do. Is it Islam which has caused all these? Or is it that we have failed to do our duty according to our religion?

Our only reaction is to become more and more angry. Angry people cannot think properly. And so, we find some of our people reacting irrationally. . . . Every attempt at a peaceful solution is sabotaged by more indiscriminate attacks calculated to anger the enemy and prevent any peaceful settlement. But the attacks solve nothing. The Muslims simply get more oppressed. . . . Can they only lash back blindly in anger? Is there no other way than to ask our young people to blow themselves up and kill people, and invite the massacre of more of our own people? It cannot be that there is no other way. 1.3 billion Muslims cannot be defeated by a few million Jews. There must be a way. . . .

## 'We Must Use Our Brains'

If we use the faculty to think that Allah has given us, then we should know that we are acting irrationally. . . . For well

over half a century we have fought over Palestine. What have we achieved? Nothing. We are worse off than before. If we had paused to think, then we could have devised a plan, a strategy that can win us final victory. . . . We are actually very strong; 1.3 billion people cannot be simply wiped out. The Europeans killed 6 million Jews out of 12 million. But today the Jews rule this world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them. . . . We also know that not all non-Muslims are against us. Some are well-disposed towards us. Some even see our enemies as their enemies. Even among the Jews, there are many who do not approve of what the Israelis are doing. We must not antagonize everyone. We must win their hearts and minds. We must win them to our side, not by begging for help from them, but by the honorable way that we struggle to help ourselves. . . .

We must build up our strength in every field, not just in armed might. Our countries must be stable and well administered, must be economically and financially strong, industrially competent and technologically advanced. This will take time, but it can be done and it will be time well spent. . . .

The Quran tells us that when the enemy sues for peace we must react positively. True, the treaty offered is not favorable to us. But we can negotiate. The Prophet did, at Hudaibiyah. And in the end, he triumphed.

I am aware that all these ideas will not be popular. Those who are angry would want to reject it out of hand. They would even want to silence anyone who makes or supports this line of action. They would want to send more young men and women to make the supreme sacrifice. But where will all these lead to? Certainly not victory.

We are up against a people who think. They survived 2,000 years of pogroms not by hitting back, but by thinking. They invented and successfully promoted Socialism, Communism, human rights, and democracy, so that persecuting them would appear to be wrong; so they may enjoy equal rights with others. With these, they have now gained control of the most powerful countries and they, this tiny community, have become a world power. We cannot fight them through brawn alone. We must use our brains also.

Of late, because of their power and their apparent success, they have become arrogant. And arrogant people, like angry people, will make mistakes, will forget to think. They are already beginning to make mistakes. And they will make more mistakes. There may be windows of opportunity for us now and in the future. We must seize these opportunities.

But to do so we must get our acts right. . . . Allah has not raised us, the leaders, above the others so we may enjoy power for ourselves only. The power we wield is for our people, for the *ummah*, for Islam. We must have the will to make use of this power judiciously, prudently, concertedly. *Insyallah* we will triumph in the end.