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## How We Can Coexist

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A little while ago, educated people had been discussing a paper prepared by the Institute for American Values entitled "What We're Fighting For" which was signed by sixty American intellectuals. It centers on a number of issues, among the most important of which is to explain the morality behind America's war on what they call terrorism and to call the Muslims to stand with them, adopt American values, and fight against what they describe as Islamic radicalism.

We welcome dialogue and exchange. Dialogue, in principle, is a noble endeavor where we can take a good look at our moral foundations and discuss them with the intent of establishing a more just and equitable relationship between our nations and peoples. From this point of departure, we the signatories to this letter - from the land of the two mosques and the cradle of Islam, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - present our point of view as an informed alternative with the intent of establish an atmosphere of mutual understanding that can be adopted by organizations and governments.

### The Dialogue

We are firmly convinced that it is necessary for people of knowledge and probity to enjoy a far-reaching depth of vision. This will not permit them to pursue choices made by individuals and circles, under the pressure of circumstances, that fail to take ethics and human rights into consideration. Such are the choices that lead societies to perpetual anxiety, deprivation, and inhuman conflict.

The language of their discourse is the language of power. This is a mistake, since making power the language of dialogue tends to permit the forces of conflict to play a difficult and uncertain role in the future.

At this important juncture in history, we call upon unbiased thinkers to engage in earnest dialogue to try and bring about better understanding for both sides that will keep our peoples away from the domain of conflict and prepare the way for a better future for the generations to come who are expecting a lot from us.

We must invite everyone to the process of dialogue that we present to our world, and do so under the umbrella of justice, morality, and human rights, so we can give glad tidings to the world of a process that will bring about for it peace and tremendous good.

To the extent that dialogue is necessary and effective, it must maintain a tone of respect, clarity, and frankness. These are the prerequisites for its success. Dialogue itself can only be built upon such a foundation, and those participating in it must be willing to accept criticism and correction unflinchingly.

Therefore we say clearly and in total frankness that we are prepared to discuss any issue raised by the West, realizing that there are a number of concepts, moral values, rights, and ideas that we share with the West and that can be nurtured to bring about what is best for all of us. This means that we have common objectives. Nevertheless, we, just like you, possess our own governing principles and priorities and our own cultural assumptions.

## Our Values and Guiding Principles

There are a number of basic principles and moral values that govern our dealings with other nations. These were set forth fourteen centuries ago by the messenger of Islam, Muhammad. This was before human rights organizations existed and before there was a United Nations with its international charters.

Let us look at some of these:

1. The human being is inherently a sacred creation. It is forbidden to transgress against any human being, irrespective of color, ethnicity, or religion. The Qur'ân says: *"We have honored the descendants of Adam." [17:70]*
2. It is forbidden to kill a human soul unjustly. Killing a single person is to God as heinous as killing all of humanity, just as saving a single person from death is as weighty as saving the lives of all humanity. The Qur'ân says: *"If anyone killed a person except as recompense for murder or spreading havoc in the land, then it would be as if he killed all of humanity. And if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the lives of all humanity." [5:32]*
3. It is forbidden to impose a religious faith upon a person. The Qur'ân says: *"There is no compulsion in religion." [2:256]* A person will not even be considered a Muslim if he or she accepted Islam under duress.
4. The message of Islam asserts that human relationships must be established on the highest moral standards. Muhammad said: "I was only sent to perfect good conduct."

The Qur'ân says: *"We sent aforesaid our messengers with clear signs and sent down with them the scripture and the balance so the people could establish justice. And We sent down iron wherein is mighty power and many benefits for mankind." [57:25]*

We read in another place in the Qur'ân: *"God does not restrain you with regard to those who do not fight you on account of your faith nor drive you out of your homes from dealing kindly and justly with them, for God loves those who are just." [60:8]*

5. All the resources of the Earth were created for humanity. The Qur'ân addresses this when it says: *"It is He who has created for you all that is on the Earth." [2:29]*

These resources were only created for human beings to benefit from them within the limits of justice and for the betterment of humanity. Therefore, spoiling the environment, spreading havoc on Earth, perpetrating violence against weaker nations and fighting to wrest from them their wealth and the fruits of their prosperity, is conduct that is reviled by God. In the Qur'ân we read:

*"When he turns his back, his aim is to spread mischief throughout the Earth and destroy crops and cattle, but Allah does not love mischief." [2:205]* and: *"Do not make mischief in the Earth after it has been set in order." [7: 56]*

6. Responsibility for a crime rests solely upon the perpetrator of that crime. No one may be punished for the crimes of another. The Qur'ân says: *"No bearer of burdens must bear the burdens of another." [35:18]*
7. Justice for all people is their inalienable right. Oppressing them is forbidden, irrespective of their religion, color, or ethnicity. The Qur'ân states: *"And whenever you speak, speak justly, even if a close relative is concerned." [6: 152]*

8. Dialogue and invitation must be done in the best possible manner. The Qur'ân says: *"Invite*

*to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good preaching and argue with them in the best manner" [16:125]*

We believe in these principles, as our religion commands us to. They are the teachings of Muhammad. They agree to some extent with some of the principles that the American intellectuals put forth in their paper. We see that this agreement gives us a good platform for discussion that can bring about good for all of mankind.

### **The Events of September 11 and their Implications**

It is completely unreasonable to turn the tragic events of September 11 into a means of categorizing our world's ideologies, civilizations, and societies. Those attacks were unwelcome to many people in the Muslim world due to the values and moral teachings of Islam that they violated.

At the same time, we find strange the hasty conclusions made about the motivations of the attackers, restricting them to an attack on American society and its universal human values. Without going into a lengthy argument about the matter, we see it as our right and the right of all impartial thinkers, as well as the right of all Americans, to inquire as to why the attackers did not choose some other country that adheres to the same Western values? Why did they not turn their attention to other nations and societies in Asia and Africa that subscribe to idolatrous religions, for they would have been more deserving of attack if the issue with the attackers was to fight against those who disagreed with their values. Moreover, Islam teaches that the Christians are closer to the Muslims than any other people. History tells us that the prophet of Islam, Muhammad, during the early years of Islam, sent a group of his followers to one of the Christian kings of Ethiopia, because his kingdom enjoyed an unparalleled recognition of rights. It also tells us that Prophet Muhammad sent a letter to the Christian king of Rome and one to the Christian king of the Copts. Both letters were received graciously. The Qur'ân speaks about the Christians as being the most morally virtuous in their dealings of all religious societies outside of Islam: "*You will find that the strongest among men in enmity to the believers are the Jews and pagans, and you will find that the nearest of them in love to the believers are those who say: 'We are Christians'.*" [5:82]

Why must we ignore this history and permit a superficial and premature reading of events? This is not all. The laws that Islam came with are there to establish a stable life for both those who believe in it and those who do not. Furthermore, the Qur'ân describes the Prophet Muhammad a "a mercy to all humanity". Yet, when one faction prefers to create a conflict with the Muslims or to ignore their rights, then Islam responds by resistance and self defense, which are among the objectives of jihad. The West must realize that by blocking the specific options and moderate aspirations of the Muslim world and by creating conflicts, they will bring about perspectives in the Muslim world that will be hard to overcome in the future and will create problems for generations to come all over the world.

It is unreasonable to assume that those who attacked the United States on September 11 did not feel in some way justified for what they did because of the decisions made by the United States in numerous places throughout the world. We by no means hold the view that they were justified in striking civilian targets, but it is necessary to recognize that some sort of causative relationship exists between American policy and what happened.

From another angle, if we were to assume that the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks against the United States were the work of some special faction from within Europe, China, or Japan, or even a religious faction of the Jews, would America's decision then have been to subject them and their nations to the type of aggression that they are now confronting the Muslims with?

This policy only supplies more evidence to the alleged perpetrators and their sympathizers for their claim that America is oppressing and aggressing against the Muslim world.

The events of September 11 should be an impetus for establishing a new assemblage of international institutions to establish justice and secure people's rights. They are needed to supplant institutions like the United Nations General Assembly and the UN Security Council that were established after the two World Wars to defuse the war between imperious nations. Those institutions failed to realize justice and security for the weaker peoples or protect their countries. Institutions are needed that will not act merely as a theatre for extending the reach of the great powers. How many peoples have become wretched and had their resources stripped away from them by force for the benefit those overbearing powers.

Likewise, those events should make us turn our attention to the fact that exaggerated strength, no matter how many ways it might manifest itself, is never a sufficient guarantee of security. A small group, if they have the will, can cause massive harm and injury to their opponents, no matter how strong those opponents might be.

We have learned from history that power is not the only way to guarantee security, since the types of guarantees that come with sheer power carry with them the seeds of failure and collapse and are always accompanied by resentment and discontent from one side and arrogance from the other. But when those guarantees are built upon justice, then the possibility of their success is far greater.

If the Americans view what happened on September 11 as a turning point for them in how they define their relationship with the Muslims generally, not merely with the group of people that actually carried it out, then can we be blamed when we see that the presence of the Jewish state of Israel on Palestinian land and the control they hold over it through the support of the major powers was and still is a decisive factor in defining and shaping our relationship with the West, as well as with its values and institutions?

### **Our Position on America**

We can easily see today that the Eastern block - Japan and China - seems more alien to the understanding of the Islamic World than does the West. There are many more bridges connecting the Islamic World to the West than there are connecting it to the East. There likewise exist mutually beneficial relationships and common interests between the Muslim world and the West. It should be assumed that the West perceives it in their best interests for there to be balance and stability in the Muslim World and that it knows that the Muslim lands have provided much for them, especially economically. The West is the primary beneficiary of Muslim economic strength.

In spite of this, every individual in the Muslim World perceives that China and Japan have not caused the Muslim World any clear problem, nor have they done anything detrimental to its concerns, countries, and societies. The average Muslim perceives Easterners to be more just, balanced, and more clement than the West. This feeling has been instilled in the minds of the individual members of Muslim society by the West itself.

If the United States sought to withdraw from the world outside its borders and removed its hand from inflammatory issues, then the Muslims would not be bothered whether or not it is a progressive, democratic, or secular nation.

The disagreement between us and American society is not about values of justice or the choice of freedoms. Values, as we see it, are of two types. First there are those basic human values shared by all people, values that are in harmony with the innate nature of the human being and that our

religion calls us to. Then there are those values that are particular to a given society. That society chooses those values and gives preference to them. We do not wish to compel that society to abandon them since our religion teaches us that there is no compulsion in religion.

It goes without saying that a number of those values are social preferences that are drawn from their given environment.

Likewise, we do not accept that others can force us to change our values or deny us the right to live by them. We see it as our right - and the right of every people - to make clear to others what we believe in order to foster better understanding between the people of the Earth, bring about the realization of world peace, and create opportunities for those who are searching for the truth.

The United States, in spite of its efforts in establishing the United Nations with its Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other similar institutions, is among the most antagonistic nations to the objectives of these institutions and to the values of justice and truth. This is clearly visible in America's stance on the Palestinian issue and its unwavering support for the Zionist occupation of Palestinian land and its justification of all the Zionist practices that run contrary to the resolutions passed by the United Nations. It is clearly visible in how America provides Israel with the most advanced weapons that they turn against women, children, and old men, and with which they topple down people's homes. At the same time, we see the Bush administration mobilizing its military strength and preparing for war against other countries like Iraq, justifying its actions with the claim that these countries are perpetrating human rights abuses and behaving aggressively towards their neighbors.

This conduct of theirs creates in others a mental image of the United States of America as a nation that respects neither international organizations nor the moral principles upon which democracy rests.

A number of the values mentioned by those American thinkers are not exclusively American values. They come from many sources and represent the contributions of many civilizations, among them the Islamic civilization. Muslims and many others throughout the world do not see these values in America, because those values are effectively concealed by America's actions. The ideal circumstances for cooperation will not be realized as long as American civilization remains in perpetual fear of growing weak or losing its hold on the world, and is perpetually concerned with keeping others from developing, especially the nations of the so-called third world.

### **Islam and Secularism**

The signatories to the American paper focused on the necessity of the separation of church and state, and they considered this to be a universal value that all the nations of the Earth should adopt. We Muslims approach the problem of the relationship between religion and the state differently. Our understanding is to protect the will of the majority and their rights while also protecting the rights of the minority. Islam is a comprehensive religion that has specific laws addressing all aspects of life. It is difficult for a nation to be respected and taken seriously by its people in an Islamic environment without adopting the laws of that religion in general. State adoption of the religion does not mean an infringement on the particular needs of the minorities who live within it or their being forced to abandon their religion and embrace Islam. The idea that there is no compulsion in religion is firmly planted in the Muslim mindset and is clearly stated in the Qur'ân. The separation of church and state that the American thinkers are calling to in their letter shows a lack of understanding of how religion acts as a formative basis for culture in Islamic societies. We see secularism as inapplicable to Muslim society, because it denies the members of that society the right to apply the general laws that shape their lives and it violates their will on the pretext of protecting minorities. It does not stand to reason that protecting the rights of the

minority should be accomplished by violating the rights of the majority. We see that the real concern of a religious minority is the protection of its rights and not the violation of the rights of the majority, since infringing upon the rights of the majority is not conducive to social stability and peace, whereas the rights of the minority in Muslim society are protected.

We believe that Islam is the truth, though it is not possible for the entire world to be Muslim. It is neither possible for us to force others to think the way we do, nor would Islamic Law allow us to do so if we were able to. This is a personal choice in Islamic Law. The thing that we have to do is explain the message of Islam, which is a guidance and a mercy to all humanity. However, we are not heedless of the necessities brought about by the present state of humanity and of the need to remove the obstacles that prevent people from properly understanding the message of Islam so they can, if they choose, adopt it of their own free will.

The Muslims have the right to adhere to their religion, its values, and its teachings. This is an option that it will be difficult to try and withhold from them. Nevertheless, what we present is a moderate and balanced understanding and go forward to propagate it, and the West shall see that it is very different than the notions that they have about Islam. This is if the West is truly willing to afford us, our religion, and our abilities proper recognition, or at least willing to study the facts of our religion and our values in a rational and objective manner.

Islam is not an enemy of civilization, but it rejects utilizing the notion of civilization for negative ends. Nor is Islam an enemy of human rights and freedoms, but it rejects transforming freedoms and rights into a tool for conflict just as it rejects relying upon a limited cultural vision as if it is a universal law that must be generally applied to all, forcibly if need be. Continuing to insist upon this vision, even if it is depicted as religiously tolerant, is no less extreme than what goes on in those radical religious groups.

Oppressing others necessarily means that a choice in favor of conflict has been made. It is the catalyst that inflames the strength of resistance, which crates conditions where causing injury to others takes little instigation. The West has to realize that destruction is the least technologically dependant product in the world. It can be produced in countless ways. This will give birth to more forms of radicalism within all societies, including those that adopt separation of church and state. Those might actually turn out to be the most proficient practitioners of this type of extremism.

### **The Just War and Terrorism**

The West often speaks of the problem of terrorism and radicalism. In our view, this problem is a serious one for the world and a number of measures must be taken to deal with it. At the same time, we wish to emphasize the following points that appear to us very reasonable:

First, radicalism is not intrinsically tied to religion. Radicalism can take many forms, political, economic, or ideological. These should be given the same level of attention, because they seek to overturn the moral principles and the systems that secure human rights throughout the world.

Also, religious radicalism is not restricted to one particular religion. We admit there are radical elements among Muslims; we are also well aware that every religious persuasion in the world has its radical elements. Those who study religious thought and culture attest to this fact. Therefore, is both unreasonable and unjust to irrationally push the issue of Islamic radicalism and then take a course of action that will further instigate it without dealing with all forms of radicalism in the world, both religious and otherwise.

Second, while we believe that the world is confronted by terrorism and radicalism in the broad sense that we have just described, we should also consider that there are a host of other

problems that the world is facing with respect to rights, freedoms, and basic human needs like education, health, and nutrition. All of these need to be addressed.

We are on the realization that many of the extremist Islamic groups - as they are called - did not want to be that way when they started, but were forced into that category by political or military forces or their media machinery that blocked their access to channels of peaceful expression. Such powers were able to do away with any possible opportunity for moderation and to strike at the rights of people. This is the major cause for the extremism of Islamic movements and groups. We are also on the realization that this same situation is right now occurring under the guise of the Western program known as the War on Terror.

Stability is the basis for rights and freedoms throughout the world. When we deny people stability and force them to live in perpetual anxiety, oppression, and misery, then they become more likely to act in an immoral and unethical manner. Bitter reality is what sets down decisions. Moreover, it is sometimes what shapes people's thoughts. When people wait a long time without their rights being addressed, it becomes highly likely that they will behave in ways that are difficult to predict and that lead to uncertain consequences.

We seriously call upon the West to become more open to Islam, look more seriously at its own programs, and behave more mildly with the Islamic world. We also call upon them to earnestly review their position on Islam and to open channels of dialogue with prominent Islamic thinkers representing the broad current of Islamic thought and intellectuals and decision makers in the West.

It is important for the West to realize that most of the Islamic movements throughout the Muslim world and elsewhere are essentially moderate. It is necessary to maintain this situation. Moderate movements should have their rights respected. Nothing should be allowed to inflame situations for any reason. People need to be able to conduct themselves rationally and with a sense of security.

We are committed to fighting against terrorism, whether it comes from the Muslims or elsewhere. However, as long as the matter is being referred back to moral values, then why not mention other radical extremists? Why not talk about the Palestinians who are exposed, especially in these days, to most loathsome kind of terrorism possible? Their cities and refugee camps are being torn to the ground, mass murder is being carried out against them, and a suffocating siege is being imposed upon their innocent civilians. This is not being carried out by some individuals or secret organizations. It is being executed by the state of Israel, a member of the United Nations.

If the purpose is to pull up terrorism from its roots, then all out war is not the appropriate course of action, but peace and justice is. The world must seek this in Palestine and elsewhere.

Terrorism, according to the restricted meaning that it is being used for today, is but one of the forms of wrongful aggression being carried out against lives and property. It is immoral to focus on one form of aggression and turn a blind eye to all others, even though they might be more destructive and repugnant. This is a clear case of selective vision and the use of double standards.

Third, concocting conflicts does no good for either side. Those who represent conflict are not always the best representatives of this faction or that. There is nothing better than justice, consideration of the people's rights and adhering to our moral values to dispel the specter of conflict. These principles must be maintained even in times of war when we are forced to go down that road.

In the West, instigating conflict stems from considering and protecting national - if not partisan - interests, even at the expense of the rights of others. The truth is that this policy is what creates

a dangerous threat to national security, not only for the West, but for the entire world, not to mention the tragic and inhuman conditions that it produces.

The men throughout the world who are behind these conflicts are, by their decisions and their policies, preparing the masses to turn against them. We must intelligently monitor their behavior and protect our civil societies and the rights and security of our people. We must realize that having conflict mongers in power around the world will bring about the worst situation possible for us in the present, as well as for the future generations who will have to face the effects of our personal calculations. Yes, we should be optimistic, but we must also be clear in accounting for our actions and assessing their affects.

Civil security is in a perilous situation throughout the world in the shadow of this scramble to create conflicts and draw up programs for dealing with them. We have to move beyond the slogans and realize that policies of conflict in the West are bringing about the destruction of civil security throughout the world in the name of fighting terrorism. The number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan because of American bombing increases without the American administration showing any kind of strain on its mores and values from its so-called "just war". In reality, it seems like they are merely creating circumstances in order to give a new validation for more confrontations here and there. And if the West considers September 11 as an affront to civil security in the West, then we can share with it that feeling and even the stance of rejecting attacks against civil security throughout the world. But it is important for the West to realize that civil security in the Islamic World has not seen stability for decades and a lot of the impediments to civil security have come about under the umbrella of Western policy and quite possibly due the direct actions of the West.

It is about time we realize that the use of military force or the power of the media provides no real guarantee for the future. Often matters take surprising turns, going off in directions that defy our estimation. It is as if the events of September 11 showed the uncertainty in this estimation.

Therefore, creating more avenues for dialogue and the exchange of ideas where scholars and thinkers can meet with each other is, in our opinion, the alternative to the language of violence and destruction. This is what compels us to write this letter and to participate in this discussion.

**See the list of signatories...**

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