

THE ISLAMIC WORLD
DEMOCRACY AND
DEVELOPMENT



H.E. Dr. Abdullah Gül © OCIS

THE ISLAMIC WORLD DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

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by

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INTRODUCTION

F. A. Nizami

Director, Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure and privilege, on behalf of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, to welcome His Excellency the President of the Republic of Turkey, Dr Abdullah Gül, to address us here today on ‘The Islamic world, democracy and development’. It is a particular honour for the Centre that His Excellency, who is a member of our Board of Trustees, has agreed to give this lecture as part of a series by Distinguished Visiting Lecturers to mark the Centre’s twenty-fifth anniversary.

The subject you have chosen for this lecture, Sir, is most timely. The worldwide economic crisis has focused minds on the relation between democratic institutions and economic power. The Islamic world in its heyday was, as a cultural and legal environment, highly conducive to economic development. However,

it also recognized restraints on means and ends, and it placed economic relationships within the same moral framework as all other human relationships. The Islamic world today has much to learn before it recovers economic prosperity and before it achieves good governance, but its traditions also have something to teach about both.

His Excellency, Dr Abdullah Gül first had the opportunity to use his training in economics for the Islamic Development Bank in Jeddah, where he was responsible for major infrastructure and entrepreneurial projects in the Islamic world. He entered parliament in 1991, becoming his party's spokesperson on foreign affairs and its representative to the Council of Europe. In 2001, he co-founded the Justice and Development Party, which went on to win substantial electoral majorities. He briefly served as Prime Minister before becoming Foreign Minister in 2003, a post he held until his election to the Presidency in 2007.

The first decade of this century is rightly seen as the period when Turkish democracy matured, when all parties recognized the compatibility between the secular character of the Republic and the historic heritage of its people. Through two decades of impressive economic growth, a middle class has emerged in Turkey that is equally committed to its

heritage, its democratic, political and legal institutions, *and* to a future at the crossroads of Europe and the Islamic world. President Gül has been at the helm of the prudent adjustments in policy that reflect the maturity of Turkish political life and the cohesion between society and state – both unique achievements of the present government.

It would be hard to find someone more competent to inform us on the relations between the Islamic world, democracy and development. And we are very privileged to have him address us today. Ladies and gentlemen, His Excellency, the President of Turkey, Dr Abdullah Gül –

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H. E. Dr. Abdullah Gül

President of the Republic of Turkey

Dr. Nizami, Distinguished Professors, dear Students,
Ladies and Gentlemen –

I am very happy to be at Oxford University, again. Those who track my work will know that I have always been keen to follow the progress of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies and do so very closely. As a member of the Board of Trustees, I am happy to say that Dr. Nizami and his team have done a great job with the Centre's new building. As the President of Turkey, I also take pride in, as we Turks say, having put some 'salt in the soup' for the beautiful Turkish İznik tiles that bring an elegant ambience to the Centre.

Ladies and Gentlemen –

It is said that the purpose of education and research is to replace an empty mind with an open one. This is especially valid today regarding matters about the true nature of Islam.

For a quarter of a century, the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies has been performing a valuable task in this respect, with its in-depth studies of Islam, in a manner fitted to the centuries-old academic discipline of Oxford University.

Today, I want to talk about two issues that have been the subject of heated debates for some time.

These debates have sometimes led to fresh ideas and inspiring discussions. Yet, they have also led to bitter divisions among our societies. These issues are democracy and development. Many eternal Islamic values are just as valid today as ever, enlightening the path for a better world. They preach humanity, peace, progress, justice, generosity and empathy. Such is the wisdom of the great Turkish poet and sage Yunus Emre who, eight centuries ago, called upon all peoples from all faiths to embrace each other in love, respect and friendship, when he said: ‘Come here, let us make peace. Let us not be strangers to one another.’

With this understanding, I will try to discuss the concepts of democracy and development in the Islamic world.

As the President of the Republic of Turkey, I will challenge the propositions and debates as to whether Islam is compatible with democracy and liberal economic development. Towards the end, I will share my road map for Muslim societies for more democracy and development.

Distinguished Guests –

The concepts of ‘democracy’ and ‘development’, as we have come to accept them today, are the legacy of the European Enlightenment. Nevertheless, due to

the negative legacy of colonialism, most of the Islamic countries and societies felt alienated about these concepts. Therefore, for both terms, we need a qualified analysis. For this analysis, we have to look at the roots of the Islamic tradition.

The Islamic tradition is rooted the Holy Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him), but the Holy Book is not the only source. The rich Islamic intellectual and civilizational tradition is a composite of the influences of the vast Mediterranean basin, as well as Persian and Turkic influences, the Indian subcontinental tradition, and the Chinese heritage. Indeed, this diversity of the Islamic tradition is still vivid today.

In the Holy Book and in the most authentic versions of Sunna, the individual has the right and obligation to conduct his or her actions and is held accountable only to the Almighty in the eternal sense. And no one, neither a cleric nor a king, can intervene in this relationship. In that respect, 'absolutism' did not exist in the authentic Islamic state traditions. As a matter of fact, that was more or less the traditional practice of the Christian monarchs in Europe.

The concept of development in the Islamic tradition is closely connected with the idea of city and society.

As the great Turkish-Muslim philosopher al-Farabi said in his timeless work *The Virtuous City*, the goal of any political system is to enable its citizens to lead a virtuous life; a life based on wisdom, justice, equality, solidarity, respect and friendship. It is these values that shaped the classical Islamic world and made it a truly universal civilization.

Accordingly, the notions of development in Islamic tradition and that in European enlightenment have many commonalities and many fundamental differences, which are inseparable from each other.

In this qualified perspective, materialistic values such as ‘capital accumulation’, ‘private wealth’, and ‘individual freedoms’ surely contribute to the Muslim understanding of ‘development. However, those notions are always balanced with concepts such as the ‘collective potential of the city’, ‘the wealth of the society as a whole’, and ‘the minimum requirements for a life of wisdom’.

As for democracy, I would argue that this notion, in its most authentic meaning, in its original Greek connotation, had already been in place in the

Mediterranean basin. And the Islamic tradition was not alien to it. Starting from the 'Golden Age', or 'Asr-ı Saadet' as we know it in Ottoman Turkish, the basic ideas of 'city democracy' were very much in use. Our Prophet (peace be upon him) never acted for himself. He had his wise counsellors representing different sections of city society. The period of the First Four Caliphs was the seal of democratic governance in the Islamic tradition.

The Abbasid period revived many of the institutions of democratic governance. The district courts, suburban mayors, mechanisms of 'checks and balances' were in practice. There were no elections as we know today, but there were councils and advisory bodies. The example of Andalusia, on the other hand, was much broader and deeper in its experience of democracy, as it was more multicultural and multireligious. Moreover, in all the Islamic traditions the most emphasized and respected notion was 'justice' – not only for the Muslims, but also for the followers of other faiths.

Ladies and Gentlemen –

One can argue that, until the colonial period, the Islamic world had no problems with the daily, practical experience of democracy and development. It was an integral part of daily life and state

mechanism. It is a result of long process of the decline of Islamic states and the rise of colonialism that democracy, a legitimate heritage of the Mediterranean tradition, was transformed in Muslim eyes as the apparatus of the colonial occupier: it became worldly, secular, infidel, colonialist, and hence illegitimate. And more than anything else, democracy has lost its centuries-old organic tie with Muslim peoples.

Moreover, the colonial experience led to a distinctive lack of political, philosophical, intellectual and discursive production in many Muslim countries. It was not only the interests of the ruling classes and so-called 'liberators' in Muslim countries that blocked democratic governance, but it was also the lack of a native democratic understanding.

The colonial past has deprived the Muslim peoples of the ability to write their own histories and destinies. The only option presented to them were the ready-to-consume democracy and development recipes of the West which led to a deep-rooted alienation from these concepts in the Islamic world.

Distinguished Guests –

Our main task must start with breaking this deep-rooted alienation of the Islamic world as far as democracy and development are concerned. We must convince all our sisterly societies that the current world is very different from, and much more sophisticated than, the eras of the Enlightenment, and of colonialism or that of the Cold War. We have to engage in a pedagogic campaign to teach the true credentials of the Islamic tradition with regard to democracy and development. Furthermore, we must create political and economic conditions in which local ownership for democracy and human development can flourish in the Islamic world.

Now, as we all know, any effective remedy requires an accurate diagnosis of the problem. I would, therefore, like to underline some of the structural problems in the Islamic world.

First of all, I would like to emphasize that the level of economic and social development in most of the Islamic countries is way below their potential. Islamic countries, home to vast natural resources, are not getting the share they deserve from global welfare. Islamic countries which make up 22% of the world population, unfortunately, received only around 7% of the global economic output in 2009.

The average per capita income in the Islamic countries is below the average of developing

countries. Poverty in Islamic countries tops the list of the most serious problems that require a solution. Twenty-two of the OIC member countries are among the least-developed countries. Wars, violence and natural disasters taking place in the Islamic territories have further aggravated poverty. Also, the Islamic countries lag behind world standards in social fields of development like education and health. The rate of literacy in the Islamic countries is below the global average.

I would like to highlight a point in this respect. Sustainable development can only be ensured through consistent, transparent and accountable governments. In this respect, administrative structures that value political and social participation are needed. By doing so, the legitimacy of our governments will expand and they will become more stable and at peace with the shared values of our peoples.

Distinguished Guests –

As I first voiced in my speech at the OIC Foreign Ministers Meeting in Tehran in 2003, and have stressed on various occasions since, putting all the blame on others is the easy, yet futile, way out. Self criticism is the most honorable virtue and something the Islamic world should resort to more often. We must ourselves put our house in order.

To that end, we must be bold, confident and visionary. Fresh ideas and an open horizon should complement our spiritual richness, creating a synergy that will be our driving force worthy of this modern age.

I think the main starting-point is to be able to translate our peaceful, tolerant and compassionate heritage into effective mechanisms that will pave the way for more freedom, democracy and development. This would not just be a rational choice, but also a natural course of action.

In fact, development and democracy are the key slogans of the new phase of globalization that we are all passing through. This phase is producing its broad repercussions in almost every aspect of life. No society is immune to this tremendous transition. Democracy, human rights, good governance and accountability are neither a luxury nor an option anymore.

Let me mention here one crucial point, to perhaps make sense of it all: in my opinion, universal values consist of the aggregate achievements of humanity to which the Islamic civilizations made huge contributions. We must ensure that the universal values, a few which I have just mentioned, should be allowed to flourish as they are meant to do. In other words, we should not

interpret them in a tailor-made fashion to suit us best or resort to cultural relativism.

The first step in the right direction should be an all-encompassing initiative towards eradicating illiteracy, and the corruption and waste of human, natural and material resources. Fertile conditions for violence should be identified realistically and a conscious effort should be made to wipe them out, sooner rather than later. Countries with predominantly Muslim populations have had so much more than their fair share of conflict. Friction, antagonism and in the extreme, war, produced nothing but devastation, wasting human and material resources, depriving peoples of the bright future they deserve.

Efforts solely focusing on the security-politics dimension will be incomplete unless nourished by the economic and social channels. We must never lose sight of the fact that economic well-being and political stability go hand-in-hand. Therefore we must aim at higher living standards for all, as well as reducing income disparities and the urban/rural divide.

On the social front, we must keep in mind that progress is an empty word unless it is actually reflected in the well-being of the masses. Therefore

we must create a suitable environment to boost human development.

Gender equality is an imperative. Women must have the opportunity to do their utmost in advancement. They must have access to all rights, ranging from basic education to political representation. For instance, we take pride in the fact that women in Turkey achieved the right to vote and to be elected to public office seventy-six years ago. Equally we are disappointed by the fact that only 10% of our parliamentarians are women.

Children too, especially girls, must be given the chance to follow the future they wish to live. We must take the necessary measures to make sure that at least basic education is provided to all.

Ladies and Gentlemen –

Please do not take what I have said to the effect that Muslim countries have not done anything thus far. On the contrary, a closer look at Muslim countries will clearly show some very promising indicators in this respect. Many of these countries are developing economically with a growing and expanding middle-income group. Their GNPs are on a rise. This will surely ease the process of democratization in many respects.

But perhaps something even more noteworthy is the progress in education and vocational training with the special attention and resources being given to research and development projects in the Gulf and elsewhere.

Just look at the highly visible global impacts of the concept of microcredit pioneered by the Bangladeshi economist, Dr. Muhammed Yunus. He brought a fresh insight to the notion of providing credit to small farmers and vendors with no collateral and received the Nobel Prize for economics four years ago. Such opportunities development nurture democratic advancement, which in turn provides an even better environment for the progress in development. I am confident that this desirable trend will go on producing fruitful results.

And believe me, my confidence is strongly substantiated because this approach has been proven effective by Turkey. We have managed to build a strong economy and a solid democracy based on contemporary universal values and standards. This has enabled us to assume a central position in Eurasia and to increasingly contribute to international peace and security.

Ladies and Gentlemen –

In recent years, Turkey has become a source of inspiration as a shining and rare example in the Islamic world of a vibrant democracy and a flourishing free-market economy.

We will continue to struggle to bring distant parties closer together. Turkey has striven through the Islamic Conference Organization to further promote such universal values and worked hard for their insertion into the new Charter of the Organization. This was an important development in the right direction and a significant gain for the Organization.

Likewise, we launched the Alliance of Civilizations initiative with Spain five years ago. Our aim is to galvanize an international effort to facilitate interreligious and intercultural dialogue and the processes of conciliation.

Those are just a couple of examples of what Turkey has done and of what the Muslim world has the potential to do.

On the other hand, you will recall that a while ago, when talking about self criticism, I mentioned the futility of putting all the blame on others. I suppose you will concur with me now when I say that one party carrying all the responsibility is also very unjust. The West also has important work to do

in this respect. If the boat of democratic progress is to move forward, it will do with by both oars pulling together in tune and in the same direction.

The West must try harder to understand better. The term 'alienation' sums up everything that should be avoided. Being respectful and sensitive to different religions is at the core of the Western democratic ideal, so the West should live up to it. Looking at matters in terms of 'us' and the 'others' is grossly wrong.

The political economy of the global system continues to be unfair and unjust for many of Muslim countries. The lack of justice in the international arena, the politics of the privileged, and the impotence of international bodies, all contribute to the lack of democracy in Muslim countries. The plight of Palestine and the war in Iraq are two recent examples in point. These factors continuously undermine the belief of Muslims to democratic institutions.

Today, we are living in an era of constant change and transformation. One can easily see that interaction among societies has never been as dense and vibrant as it is today. This robust interaction brings about plenty of new opportunities for cooperation. And yet, the serious problems that we continue to face can still severely darken our

optimism. Furthermore, over the last couple of decades or so, these serious problems have become so compounded and multifaceted that even the slightest step in the wrong direction can be a torch thrown on fuel.

However, if all endeavours are carried out sincerely, both by the East and the West, then it means that many of the problems we face today are already moving on the road toward solution. In practical terms this means that whatever subject is being debated, the human dimension must always be given proper attention. Otherwise the already fragile situation can easily get worse.

In this respect, the prime method for tackling complex challenges actually boils down to one simple word: 'Dialogue'. Dialogue need not remain the rare commodity it may seem to be nowadays. It will open the doors of conciliation while closing the ones that lead to conflict. We must not be shy in discussing even the most rooted of problems with everyone, regardless of his or her faith. We must aim at finding common ground. Indeed, while trying to persuade the other, we may readily find that some of what we hear from the other is actually already within us. Recognizing and practicing that will no doubt make us better and richer individuals and

societies. It will also bring us one step nearer to the good character Islam commands us to cultivate.

Let me finish there. But before concluding, I wish to extend my sincere thanks to Oxford University and the Centre for their efforts to shed light on the rich, humane and compassionate character of our holy faith. It is through such studies, pursued in a contemporary and academic spirit, that efforts to darken the image of Islam will be rendered futile.

Thank you.