

Inspiring Our Youth to Inspire Others:
Using networks to bridge the Educational and Interfaith Divide

A Speech for the 3rd Congress of Muslim Philanthropists

My warmest greetings to you, Mr. Chairman, dignitaries, our honored guests, and all members of philanthropic organizations:

Let me begin by saluting all of you in this room. Each one of us contributes to philanthropy in his or her own way, some with their time, some with their financial donations and others with their prayers. By attending this conference you have demonstrated that you are willing to give of all three of these, truly a generous gesture. Participating in this forum, gives us the opportunity to dialogue with one another as well as Allah and together we can be true to the topic of this conference, "Building A Better World: New Horizons-Sound Strategies." We must remember that we were given the task of helping to improve this world by our great creator and must make our best effort to ensure that we are not only just good Muslims but also good people.

When I was asked to attend this conference I can say that I felt two emotions, firstly and most obviously, I was honored to be received by such an august body at this internationally recognized conference. Being among all of you today makes me feel so blessed that I have this gift of intercultural dialogue with the diversity of people in this room. Secondly, I felt perplexed as to which topic I wanted to highlight in my presentation. Undoubtedly there are so many topics in this world today that need to be addressed by philanthropists that it can be overwhelming at times. But in my desire to build a bridge to everyone in this room today on an academic, communal and spiritual level, I felt that the topic of using our

resources to support our youth and bridge the digital divide best represents the spirit and nature of this conference.

Zakat and Philanthropy

As the Holy Koran says, “Let those who give alms, both men and women, and lend unto Allah a goodly loan, it will be doubled for them, and theirs will be a rich reward. (*Qur’an 57:18*). As we all know Zakat is an essential aspect of Islam; we know that rather than seeing this as an obligation we should look at it as a pillar of our faith. It is an opportunity to demonstrate how much we love our fellow man by showing how concerned we are with his/her welfare. It makes us both strong in heart as well as humanistic in our ability to recognize the weakness that others may have. Should we recognize that our sisters and brothers are in need, it is our responsibility to help them; we have been bound by Allah. As a brotherhood and sisterhood, we all must work together to support the members of our tribe that need assistance because one day we may find ourselves in the same position. Islam, as one of the most peaceful religions, is about the great humanity that can be seen in all things.

We should remember that Zakat does literally have a meaning of financial assistance but that as good Muslims we must also have our figurative zakat that means rather than just giving of our wallets we must also give of our time and our hearts. Assistance can take many forms. This sentiment was also echoed by the Mother Teresa, a role model for all of us, who said, “Let us not be satisfied with

just giving money. Money is not enough, money can be got, but they need your hearts to love them. So, spread your love everywhere you go.” In order to truly make the world a better place and build our bridges, we must spread love with the zakat that we give. Without love, there is no Allah.

It is an understatement to say that there is need in the world today. Yet one group that desperately needs our love and Zakat is the world’s youth. As we think of ways in which we can improve the future of mankind we must begin with our children since they will be the leaders of the future. We need to ensure that we, just a saintly Mother Teresa, can be good role models for our youth. By modeling our behavior to them via philanthropy, we can ensure that our future will be brighter. They will learn from us how to be both good people as well as good Muslims and we can demonstrate to the world that Islam is about peace and the brotherhood of all men and women. By helping all our youth not just all our Muslim youth, we will truly be helping ourselves.

Philanthropy and Millennium Development Goals

People are motivated by many things, I though have three key paradigms that I have always held close to my heart. As a man I want to help our world become a better place, as a father, I strive to be a role model for my two sons and as a Muslim, I hope to help others in my daily life. I see the opportunity to exercise all three of these mantras in my business, personal and spiritual life.

Recently I was invited to speak at the UN on the topic of diversity and the UN Millennium Development Goals. While doing research in order to prepare my speech, I was struck by the parallels that Islam has to the Millennium Development Goals. While some individuals are not in favor of the UN or its programs, I would for a minute have you consider just how these MDG resemble the idea of Zakat. As you well know, the lofty and wide-reaching program has eight main goals that range from eradicating world poverty and hunger to protecting and creating a sustainable environment. By trying to help the less fortunate members of our world and improve their lives we can demonstrate our good Muslim behavior. While often people are so ready to mention the large divide between “east” and “west” they often are quick to dismiss the bridges that remain between all humanity. One token we can take is that as Muslims, we can be impressed that our holy prophet was one of the original proponents of philanthropy by making it obligatory nearly 1,400 years ago; truly the mark of a great man.

The one goal that has specifically called to me and which is of personal interest is MDG 8, which is to “Develop a global partnership for development”. The idea is that by improving the lives of individuals in developing countries, we can improve the lives of all humanity. We need to retain our own dignity and ensure that all members of the human race have certain rights.

I think these goals are clearly in line with Islamic Philosophy because around the world Muslims already provide a great deal of financial assistance to charities both Islamic and non-Islamic. So in a sense our intangible yet strong network acts as a de-facto global network established to help our brothers, sisters and children. We give because we care about our future. The MDG goals have the same philosophy of taking the responsibility to create a global network to help.

What efforts can help us achieve our goals?

As I have repeatedly mentioned, the youth is our bridge to the future. We need to help to develop programs in which we can inspire and connect with our youth so as to create the next generation of philanthropists. We need to nurture in them the same feeling we have when we think of our own philanthropy. One way we can do this is by giving them the opportunity to see how philanthropy can help them.

I have often found in my life that if I have an investment in a cause, I am more likely to give of my time and financial resources. As a child, I won a merit scholarship to study at an elite German high school. It was a bit of a dream for me at the time because I could see no way of attending due to my family's circumstances. It has been nearly 40 years since my graduation and would you believe that I still support the school. The education and opportunity that it gave me is part of the reason why I am speaking with you here today. I believe that

without this opportunity, I would have had another life. I am eternally grateful that someone believed in me enough to sponsor me.

We need to develop programs that reach out to our youth in need around the world and create bonds so as to ensure the bridges and connections. Programs that help with training or education are ones that I am most inclined to support because they help provide the individual with real skills that are applicable to their life.

Kids Parliament as an example of Training Programs and Role Modeling

One of the ways in my own life that I have been involved projects that create dialogue and opportunity is the development of the Kids Parliament. It is not a Muslim charity but it has the potential to allow a new form of dialogue to develop among the children of all nations. As individuals from diverse backgrounds we all know dialogue is the first step to understanding and as Muslims we know that a peaceful world is not possible without understanding our neighbor.

Our project has a worldwide reach with a truly international flavor. We have set up an organization that is based on listening to the voices of kids from around the world. As they are the future leaders of the world, it is clear that adults should provide them with the resources today to be the leaders of tomorrow. By supporting this program we are essentially saying we care about the leaders of tomorrow. As I gave myself as an example, 40 year on and I still support the

institution that took a chance on me. The kids that participate in Kids Parliament, and the potential is millions, will always remember the opportunities they were given as a KP member. We can truly institute an ideas change that is based on mutual understanding and respect. By being able to come together and discuss their similarities and differences, children will be able to develop long-lasting friendships and learn about one another.

Since parliamentary debate is one of the liveliest and freest forms of expression around the world. It gives individuals an opportunity to be heard as well as understand the viewpoints of others. The ironic aspect about parliamentary governments is that they allow the expression of certain viewpoints, those who have been elected to office. They at time do not represent all segments of the population.

An essential part of our global population and one that has a great deal to say about the future are our kids. Yet in today's national structures there is no outlet for kids to express their thoughts, feelings and hopes for the future. The mission of Kids Parliament is to build a community of children where they can meet each other, exchange ideas, understand and respect each other's opinions, and experience multicultural views in a moderated and peaceful way. This safe and open forum will help to show the leaders of tomorrow that the leaders of today are dedicated to supporting a strong kid's network where their voices can be heard. These values of understanding and cross-cultural dialogue truly lend themselves to our religion and need desperately to be supported.

In a sense the Kids Parliament is an educational experience for children. They will be learning about the basic functioning of many of the world's most important forums for expression. A lack of education is one of the obstacles that many of the world's youth faces today. Not just education in the traditional sense but also education about other peoples and faiths. I believe that by supporting programs that help educate our children we can help bridge the educational divide that plagues many of the countries of the developing world, both Muslim and non-Muslim.

The children that participate in Kids Parliament have the opportunity to educate themselves about unique policies but also about the diverse and wonderful cultures of their fellow man. The organization will help to teach the value of intercultural dialogue and well-being, and provide key values such as charity and environmental protection. The open forums both online and at Kids Parliament events will allow kids a dialogue with new faces. This dialogue might subtly lead to a related objective of setting up a kid exchange program where individuals are encouraged to visit their friends from other nations in order to take part in peace and understanding projects.

Why Good Philanthropy makes Good Muslims.

As we can see philanthropy is an essential aspect of who we are as Muslims. Zakat is a pillar of our faith and makes us understand how Allah has blessed us so that we can do good in the world and create the next generation of philanthropists. Yet the programs as well as the manner in which we choose to

support are also important. By helping our fellow man we in fact are helping ourselves. The better educated our youth is means that they will be able to make informed decisions about our collective future. The healthier they are, the more likely they will be able to make those decisions in the future. I know that each person in this room has a real dedication to philanthropy and I salute you once again for your efforts. While we all may decide to support the causes closest to our hearts and minds I implore you to think of our youth and the projects that we can devise in order to create powerful movements that bridge the education and interfaith divides that are at the root of many of the problems facing the world today.

As we are all different in background and culture we need to find a common thread that will help us create unity in an increasingly segmented world. We must remember that as children of this earth, coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress and working together is success. May peace be with you all and I thank you for your philanthropy.