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## **The Muslim Family and the Challenge of Change**

Ladies and Gentlemen, Good morning.

It gives me great pleasure to speak to you today at this wonderful conference on the Empowerment of the Family in the Modern World - Challenges & Promises Ahead. As we all know, the family is the central unit on which the society is built, and strengthening this unit is key to building successful and healthy societies and individuals. All the major religions of the world, especially Islam, have consistently focused on the importance of the family unit and family cohesion as a first and essential step towards protecting the children and the moral fabric of society.

As an Arab American and a father of four children, one of them in college and 3 in high school, I believe there is no job more important to me and to my wife than raising our children to be healthy individuals who are proud of their dual identities, first as Muslims, and second as Arabs and as Americans. As you know, this is not easy, especially since the tragic events of 9/11, which have increased fear and lack of understanding on both sides; Americans fear Islam, and Muslims fear America. Raising children who are proud to be Americans and proud to be Muslims, therefore is not easy, but is essential if we hope to bridge the gap between Islam and the West, and the show the world that the two can co-exist in peace and in harmony.

So the challenge that Muslim families face in America and I think also increasingly around the world is how to raise good kids who are proud to be Muslim but also can be good citizens and can contribute to a healthy society and improved relations with other human beings around the globe. In this 21st century, we live in a global village, and we are all interconnected physically, spiritually, economically, and politically, and in every other aspect. The future of the Muslim world, and indeed of the entire world, depends to a great deal on what kind of children we are going to raise in our families.

So what are the challenges that we face as families, and especially as Muslim families, and how can we overcome them:

**Balancing work and family:** The biggest challenge in today's world is that it has become increasingly necessary for both parents to work outside the home. This means that parents do not get to spend sufficient time with their children to nurture them and to help guide them as they grow up. As we all know, quality time between the parents and the children is essential and ir-

replaceable. Nothing can replace the tender love, understanding, and support of both parents (especially the mother) as the kids grow. Neither schools and day care centers, nor baby-sitters, nor television and personal computers can provide the children with the love and the moral support that children need. I believe that at least one of the parents, and preferably the mother, has to be home with the children, especially in their first six years, in order to take good care of them. Being a parent and raising a child is the hardest job in the world and an essential service to society, and parents should be compensated (I mean should be paid) when they decide to make the ultimate sacrifice of putting their career on hold and staying home to take care of their children. But even in the absence of such compensation, parents must put the interest of their children over any other consideration, especially that of making more money.

Women Education is essential: Since the mother plays an important and critical role in raising the children, it is therefore extremely important that women be well educated not only in religious matters, but also in life and human sciences. If the mother is not educated, she can never serve as a good role model to her own children, and she cannot inspire them to succeed. An uneducated mother cannot educate her children. Therefore, it is essential that Muslim societies increase their efforts at girls and women education, because just as the family is the pillar of society, the woman is the pillar of the family. A mother who is strong, confident, knowledgeable, and well-educated is essential to building strong families and raising successful and confident children. The father, of course, can and must help, but in most circumstances the responsibility of educating and raising the children falls on the mother's shoulders, and that is why women must receive the best education in the world, and must be treated with dignity and respect. Islam teaches that paradise is under the feet of the mother, and when the prophet (pbuh) was asked by one of his companions for advice, he replied: "your mother, (3 times), and then your father".

Balancing Between Islamic Values and Modern Democratic Values: Raising Muslim children in the 21st century (whether in America or in the Muslim world) means that we have to combine the teaching of Islam and Islamic values and principles, with the values and principles of citizenship, of human rights, and democracy. When we teach our children about Islam, we have to be careful that not everything in our culture or in our traditions is Islamic. A lot of things are just part of the culture that existed before Islam or even after Islam came. Cultures and traditions must evolve and change or they become an impediment to progress and modernity. So, when we teach our children about our religious values and Islamic ideals and principles, we must make sure that we do not mix it up with a lot of what we inherited from our own parents, and which in many cases has nothing to do with Islam. In addition to being good Muslims, we also have to teach them how to be good citizens of their societies and of the world in which they live. This means that they must respect others who disagree with them or who have a different religion or faith. Being good Muslim means that you are a good and decent human being who loves and respects others and treats them just the way he or she wants to be treated. We have to teach our children that being a good Muslim means that you have to obey the laws of the country in which you were born or in which you live, and to do your best to improve yourself, and to improve your family, your neighborhood, and your country. This does not mean that you have to agree with all the laws or with all the policies of your country. To the contrary, you always have to ask yourself how can I make my country (whether it is the US or Qatar) better by changing the laws and the policies that need to be changed. This is also part of your Islamic duty because Islam teaches that civic duty (including removing garbage or harmful objects from the path of others) is an act of charity, and so of course if visiting your neighbor, no matter what his or her religion is.

Do not be afraid of Change: Change is a constant in life. It is a necessary part of life. Nowadays, and thanks to the technological and scientific advancements in many fields, change is happening

at a very fast pace. Some people are afraid of change, but in reality we must welcome it and we must steer in the right direction. Change is not always good, nor is it always bad. If we reject all change and all innovations because they are not part of our culture or our tradition, then our children will be doomed to fail. Instead, I believe, we must welcome change and innovations, but be selective in implementing change in a way that respects and strengthens our values and our societies. Some people view Islam or Islamic laws (shariah laws) as fixed and unchangeable. That is not true. Islamic laws and Fiqh has always changed based on the changing needs, conditions, and priorities of society. There are certain principles and values in Islam (or in any religion) that will never change, but most of the laws and jurisprudence (fiqh) are simply interpretations by various Islamic scholars throughout history. Those scholars even changed their opinions and issued different and sometimes contradictory edicts (fatwas) when they moved from one country, or even one village, to another. Because true Fiqh is the marriage between Islamic principles and the real but changing needs and challenges of society. Therefore, we need a new Fiqh and a modern Shariah that is true to Islamic values and principles, but also addresses the modern needs, conditions, and challenges that we all face. The opinions of the scholars who lived 10 centuries ago will simply not be enough to guide us or to guide our children into the 21st century.

Finally, Build strong not weak personalities: Too often, especially in Arab and Muslim societies, we tend to emphasize obedience and respect too much. Of course, they are both important, but at the same time, we must make sure that our children have strong personalities and are allowed to question and to rationalize all their decisions. Too many schools and families teach their children to obey without questioning, and end up inadvertently raising children with weak personalities, who are not able to make the right choices or to follow their own path. If we raise such children in America, or in the Arab world, they are more likely to rebel against their parents, and perhaps even their religion, when they become mature adults. Such children will not be confident of themselves or proud of their heritage and identity, and will face many difficulties at schools and with their peers and friends. Rather, the parents must encourage their children to ask questions and to develop their own identity and answers to those questions. Only then, will the children be proud of who they are and be able to stand their ground and stick to their values and principles when they are faced with challenging and difficult situations in their daily life.

With these five principles, I believe we can build stronger families in America and in the Muslim world, and we can help build bridges of understanding between people, cultures, and civilizations.

I believe that the work of the Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development, and this conference, can be an important catalyst for better families, better societies, and a better future for mankind.