Remarks by His Highness the Aga Khan:
Opening of the Aga Khan Centre, London
26 June 2018

Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim

Your Royal Highness,
Lord Ahmad, Foreign Office Minister, Mr Sadiq Khan,
Mayor of London,
The leadership of Camden,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

What a pleasure it is to welcome you to this celebration!

We celebrate today a beautiful new architectural accomplishment. As we do so, we also honour those who have made this Centre possible - and the values that have inspired their work.

Two of those values which deserve special mention today - the value of education as a force for cooperation and healing in our world - and the value of architecture as a source of inspiration and illumination.

Both of these values - education and architecture - have been significant in the life and work of today’s guest of honour, His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales. As you know, Prince Charles’ commitment to creative education - through organisations such as the Prince’s Trust and the Prince’s School of Traditional Arts - has transformed the lives of countless young people from many backgrounds - over many years, and in many places.

Prince Charles has also consistently affirmed the transformative power of architecture - including the rich traditions of Islamic architecture. You may know, for example, about his development of an award-winning Islamic garden at his home in Highgrove.

The value of education, of course, is at the heart of this project. We are proud to open here a new home for two important educational institutions associated with the Aga Khan Development Network and the Ismaili Imamat. One is the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations of the Aga Khan University. The other is the Institute of Ismaili Studies. The UK offices of the Aga Khan Foundation will also be located here.

These institutions - through their teaching and research, their rich library and archival resources, as well as their tours and public programmes - will enrich the lives of people from the entire world.

For those of us who have seen these institutions grow from infancy, it will be a special joy to see them pursue their mission from this beautiful setting.

And what a mission it is!
One of the central challenges that faces our world today is the challenge of harmonising many highly diversified voices within an increasingly globalised world.

I use the word “harmonising” carefully - for our ideal here is not a chorus that sings in unison, but one that blends many distinctive voices into an intelligent, resonant whole. But to do that requires a deep understanding of what makes each voice distinctive. And that is the essential function of the educational endeavours that will make this place their home.

The challenge is particularly important in the area of religion – and it has been especially challenging for Islamic-Western relations. For centuries, the Muslim and Western cultures were largely separated geographically – although there have been memorable periods of integration as well - on the Iberian Peninsula and in South Asia - among other places. But those were hopeful exceptions to what some observers came, over time, to describe as an inevitable pattern of clashing civilisations.

When I came to my role as Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslim community - just sixty years ago - I found it impossible to accept the notion of inevitably clashing civilisations. My own early life experiences were in both worlds – and so were those of millions of Muslim peoples. So rather than talk about clashing civilisations, I began to talk - again and again, as some of you may recall - about a clash of ignorances. And the assumption behind that phrase was that ignorance could yield to understanding through the power of education.

That continuing conviction is what brings me here today. I believe that is what brings all of us here.

My strong expectation is that, from this new home, our education-oriented institutions will contribute powerfully to building new bridges of understanding across the gulfs of ignorance.

As that happens, one important source of inspiration will be the place from which these institutions will be working - and that brings us to the second value I mentioned earlier - the inspiring power of architecture.

The places from which we look out at the world - and the places into which we welcome the world – can deeply influence how we understand ourselves - and our world.

And what place could be more ideal for both our educational hopes and our architectural enthusiasm than the place where we meet today - in the heart of London’s “Knowledge Quarter.” King’s Cross is one of the central connecting points for a city which itself has been one of the great connecting points for the entire world.

This place has been shaped by many diverse influences – and among them we now welcome the rich traditions of Islamic architecture.

One of those traditions - one that is appreciated by both the Islamic and the British cultures - is the special importance of the garden. We see the garden not merely as an adjunct to other constructions, but as a privileged space unto itself.
And that is why I have emphasised, since our role began here in 2010, my own hope that the value of garden spaces should be embraced here. As we perambulate together through these spaces today, I trust that you will share my delight in seeing how that hope has been fulfilled.

What we will see as we walk along are not only beautiful buildings - but also a unique series of gardens, courtyards and terraces - eight of them, in all, across our two buildings. Each one of them, moreover, has a distinctive identity: each one is inspired by a different region of the Islamic Ummah.

Taken together, this winding ribbon of special spaces is an eloquent tribute to the rich diversity of the Muslim world.

What they will make possible for those who walk these pathways, the people who will live and work here and public visitors as well, is a wonderful journey of refreshment and discovery.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, an extraordinary Islamic garden already exists in this part of the world, the one that Prince Charles created at his own home. But, since it is something of a journey to get out to Gloucestershire, we thought we might save people the trip by locating something here! For now they can actually see eight Islamic gardens right here in the heart of London!

As we open this remarkable site, it is a privilege to salute those who have brought us to this moment. I would recognise, in particular, our fine relationship with the government of this borough, this city, and this country, as well as our rewarding partnership with the people at Argent. We are grateful, as well, for the talents of Maki and Associates, Allies and Morrison, Madison Cox and Nelson Byrd Woltz, as well as Rasheed Araeen and the late Karl Schlamminger. I would also like to thank our splendid team of staff and volunteers, including my brother Prince Amyn, who have stewarded this project to completion.

And we especially salute the magnificent generosity of supportive donors from around the world.

Finally, as we open this building, I proudly welcome a guest whose commitment to the promise of inter-cultural education - and to the power of architecture - resonates ideally with the spirit of this place and this moment.

Ladies and gentlemen, His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales.

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