

Conference Reports

The International Conference on the Muslim World and the West: Barriers and Bridges

The relationship between the Muslim world and the West has been strained especially since the events of September 11, 2001. It has led to misperceptions, suspicions and bigotry on both sides. The resulting climate of mutual distrust has been exploited by extremists preaching animosity and confrontation. This has led to the spiralling of violence at local, national, and global levels. The majority on both sides of the world are peace loving and would like to resolve issues through dialogue and mutual understanding. They, however, are helpless as they have no forum to communicate and engage the “Other” in constructive dialogue to overcome the barriers and build the bridges of understanding with mutual cooperation. It is with this goal in mind that the International Institute for Muslim Unity and the International Islamic University Malaysia hosted an international conference aiming at identifying the barriers and the potential common grounds to build bridges of understanding for a just and balanced social order. It was held at the Senate Hall and Banquet Hall of IIUM, September 5-7, 2006/12-14 *Sha‘bān*, 1427 AH.

The Conference Objectives and Participants

The international conference, among others, aimed to:

1. Identify and examine intellectually the barriers and bridges between the Muslim world and the West.
2. Discuss ideological, political, socio-cultural and economic barriers and bridges between the Muslim world and the West.
3. Highlight the necessity and importance of cooperation and communication between the Muslim world and the West.

4. Shed light on different areas and aspects for constructive cooperation and communication.
5. Propose to the policy-makers the practical mechanisms and means leading to the eradication of barriers and construction of bridges for a peaceful and prosperous world order.
6. Encourage continuous dialogue among the thinkers and the opinion makers from both sides in order to close the gaps and correct the images.

A total of 99 papers were presented by local and international speakers in this conference. The majority of papers were delivered in Arabic and 22 were in English. There were two keynote speeches, both in English, delivered by H.E. Dr. Abdul Aziz Othman al-Tuwaijiri, the Director General, Islamic Organization for Education, Science and Culture (ISESCO), OIC and Dr. Andreas Radtke, the first Secretary, German Embassy, Malaysia. In addition, there was a very lively round table discussion composed of four academics and four diplomats representing the Australian, the British, the Canadian, and the German embassies. The discussion centered on the roots of the barriers and the approaches to bridge building between the Muslim world and the West. There were eighteen sessions excluding the opening and closing ceremonies.

The Opening Ceremony

The Rector of IIUM, Prof. Dato' Dr. Syed Arabi Idid, welcomed the participants and noted that it is the need of the hour for Muslim and Western scholars and intellectuals to engage one another in a serious dialogue to cultivate mutual trust between the two great civilizations for a prosperous and peaceful future. He observed that the IIUM was the right place for such a conference because it is truly international, hosting students and scholars from over 90 countries of the world and imparting knowledge from both the Islamic and Western perspectives. The IIUM, the Rector emphasised, has been playing a major role in promoting inter-civilizational dialogue for a peaceful and prosperous humane world order.

The conference was officiated by the President of IIUM and Chairman of IIMU, Tan Sri Dato' Seri Sanusi Junid. In his remarks, the President noted that some of the powerful nations in the West

have forgotten the lessons learned from the previous two world wars as evidenced by their denial of people's right of self determination in many places in the Muslim world. To add insult to the injury, the West is using its military might to suppress the provocation of some angry and frustrated Muslims. This has led to the growth of mistrust and hatred between the Muslim world and the West. He observed that there is an urgent need for the two sides to engage one another in a constructive dialogue to rebuild mutual respect and trust in each other. The Muslim world is prepared for such a dialogue and would like to compromise its stand on various issues confronting the two worlds but not by sacrificing the sacred principles enshrined in the Shari'ah. He hoped that the intellectuals and scholars from both sides will engage in a constructive dialogue on the basis of mutual respect to rebuild a healthy and peaceful society.

The Papers

The participants through their papers and deliberations demonstrated their concern about a number of important issues that are of strategic importance towards the improvement of the situation in terms of the nature of the relations between the Muslim world and the West. About 15 papers dealt with the political and economic barriers and bridges not simply between the Muslim world and the West but also among the Muslims in predominantly Muslim countries and those who live as minorities in the West. Six of these papers dealt specifically with the role of the media in demonising Islam and Muslims as well as in promoting a culture of dialogue between the Muslim world and the West.

A majority of the papers (about 25) were on the theme of social and cultural barriers. The issues raised under this theme touched upon such issues as the role of Islam, international tourism, the crusade wars, historical interpretation or misinterpretation of major world events and the artificial divide between Islam and Christianity in destroying or constructing bridges of understanding between the Muslim world and the West. There were 14 papers that dealt with the role of religious institutions in creating barriers and building bridges.

As expected, participants also deliberated on the role of educational institutions in promoting dialogue or inhibiting mutual

interactions, between Muslims and the rest. The term “educational institutions” was broadly defined to cover the impact on the relationship between the Muslim world and the West by the role played by Muslim historians, the exchange of scientific and cultural information, the conferences organised in the West, and by the schools, colleges and universities in the Muslim world.

The remaining papers dealt with other issues including the role that could be played by the Muslim Communities in the West in promoting a positive image of Islam in their host countries. Issues within the Muslim communities such as culture, values, unity, disunity, citizenship, loyalty, integration, and assimilation also received due recognition from the participants.

Conference Resolutions

The concluding session of the Conference was chaired by the Deputy Rector of IIUM, Prof. Dr. Sano Koutoub Moustapha, who also read the conference resolutions. He thanked the participants for a fruitful dialogue and for their efforts in helping the conference achieve its major objectives.

The conference resolutions, in brief, condemned violence of all kinds perpetrated or sponsored by individuals, groups and states. The Conference called for the respect of human rights, sovereignty, religions, cultures and the ways of life of the people in the Muslim world and the West. It called upon world leaders, organizations and governments to work sincerely to achieve just and lasting solutions to such problems as the Israeli occupation of Palestine, invasion of Iraq, denial of the right of self-determination of the people of Kashmir, Chechnya and Kosovo.

The conference also recommended the establishment of foundations and institutions to support research and scholarship on the West, and promote inter-religious and intercultural understanding between the Muslim world and the West. It also urged the universities in the Muslim world to introduce courses and establish an Association of Muslim social scientists and scholars committed to the study of the West. It called upon the International Institute for Muslim Unity (IIMU) to create a data bank on scholars interested in researching and supervising theses and dissertations on building

bridges. Finally, the conference urged the organizers to establish a committee to coordinate and monitor the implementation of the above resolutions and to promote these ideas on regional and global bases through networking.

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Islamic Jurisprudence and the Challenges of the 21st Century: *Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah* and its Realization in Contemporary Societies

The international conference on Islamic Jurisprudence and the Challenges of the 21st Century was organized by the Department of Fiqh and Usūl al-Fiqh and the International Institute for Muslim Unity (IIMU), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), with *Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah* as the main theme. It was held, with the exception of the closing session, in the Cultural Activities Centre of the IIUM on 14-16 Rajab 1427/8-10 August 2006. The Conference aimed at achieving the following objectives:

1. To explore the theoretical and practical dimensions of the doctrine of *Maqāṣid* and its use as a framework for developing an integrated approach to the human and social sciences in particular and to the question of knowledge in general.
2. To rejuvenate *ijtihād* in research particularly in Muslim intellectual and academic life.
3. To examine the practical implications of the *Maqāṣid*-based understanding of the *sharīʿah* for *fatwā*, policy-making and legal reform in contemporary Muslim societies.