

Conference Report

International Conference on Muslims & Islam in the 21st Century: Image and Reality

The International Conference on “Muslims & Islam in the 21st Century: Image and Reality” was held at Putra World Trade Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, August 4-6, 2004. A total of 230 participants from 39 countries convened in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to deepen their understanding and practice of Islam and Muslims in the 21st century. A major strength of this conference was varied and differing views, including those of non-Muslims. About 10 percent of the total presenters including the Ambassador’s Discussion were non-Muslims. About 80% of the participants were male. A majority of the papers came from outside Malaysia.

Rationale of the Conference

This three-day international conference was held, according to the Chairman of the Conference Organizing Committee, at a critical juncture given the present international scenario of Muslims. It was spurred by the fact that Muslim culture and civilization that ruled the world at the start of the last millennium was crying for help at the start of this millennium. Islam and the Muslims are equated with extremism and terrorism. They are the target of negativism in the Western media. Thus, the Conference was meant for a comprehensive assessment of the deteriorating image of Muslims and Islam around the world. It aimed at inspiring critical reflections on the causes and consequences of the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media and to find solutions. The conference was organized jointly by the Department of Psychology, the International Institute for Muslim Unity, and the Alumni Association of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

A Unique Conference

The Conference was unique in several respects. One, as pointed out by the Honourable President of IIUM, it was one of the largest conference of its kind in Malaysia where over 120 papers were presented and discussed. This was in addition to the keynote speeches and panel discussions. Two, it was a conference which brought scholars of history, political science, economics, mass media, sociology, psychology, Islamic studies and other disciplines on one platform to deliberate on the image and reality of the Muslim World. Finally, the conference was comprehensive as it dealt with every conceivable aspect relating to the Muslim predicament in the 21st century.

Conference Themes and Papers

Altogether, 120 papers were selected and presented during the conference under eight major categories. The following were the main areas of paper presentations:

1. Muslims and Modernity

The major discussion revolved around the fact that Muslims have failed to come to grips with modernity. There is a lot of misunderstanding on the term that contributed to a gulf between Muslims and the West. There is a sense of “us versus them” mentality on the part of Muslims as well as Westerners. It was repeatedly emphasized that Muslims need to understand the West. Some scholars rejected the clash of civilizations hypothesis and believed that it was the difference of worldviews between Muslims and Westerners that maintains the gap—each community considering their own worldview as universal. Scholars also pointed out that Muslims need to be futuristic, not nostalgic. Some scholars believed that Islam and modernity are not opposed to each other. Failure to engage with modernity and the modern world has contributed to a delayed growth and internal conflicts within the Muslim societies.

2. Islam, Democracy and Politics

Under this theme, scholars presented papers and argued that Islam and democracy are not the polar opposites as often perceived. The two are similar in many aspects although the terminologies used are different. *Shūrā* and democracy have the same aim of ensuring that individuals develop to their maximum potential. Discussions

suggested that in order to change, Muslim countries need to resolve their internal debates and conflicts and allow freedom of expression. A major concern revolved around the lack of freedom and thought in many Muslim countries.

3. Terrorism and Islam

There were debates concerning the correct definition of “terrorism.” Scholars, however, agree that in order to understand terrorism, its root causes must be explored first, objectively. Some scholars pointed out that the Muslims are victims of all forms of terrorism, more than the other world communities. Suggestions were offered on how to eliminate this growing menace.

4. Conflict and Violence in the Muslim World

There have been decades of civil wars in Muslim countries, often in the name of religion. Does Islam encourage violence or peace? Are there mechanisms by which these conflicts may be resolved or at least regulated? Many papers addressed these issues in detail. Authors viewed that there is a lack of connection between methodology of “*Usūl*” and modern-day social realities.

5. Muslims as Minorities

Several papers argued for the need of host governments to respect the rights of Muslims; they were equally emphatic that the Muslims must open up and interact with the mainstream population and government authorities—this will only enhance a better understanding of the Muslim point of views. There was also a call for some Muslim countries to offer religious freedom to non-Muslim minorities.

6. Muslims in the Media

Scholars agreed that increased interaction with the press is essential; the press also needs to play a pro-social rather than a divisive role. The media needs to practice journalistic ethics if there is anything by that name in their dictionary!

7. Education and Human Rights in Muslim Countries

Muslim countries with traditional studies program need to incorporate contemporary social issues such as modernization and globalization. The issue of Islamic education and madrasah-based system and a lack of creative thinking in these institutions were discussed in detail. A wholesome education of the child was emphasized starting from home to school and in the larger environment. A balanced or

integrated curriculum rather than lopsided curriculum is essential. Education of women who can inculcate proper values and training in children is essential.

8. Human Rights

On the issue of human rights, some authors believed it is the Western/European mind-set that maintains individualism leading to human right violations. Religious pluralism must be tolerated in all countries. Islam is a religion of peace and promotes utmost freedom within the confines of the *shari'ah*. Ideally, Islam ensures human rights by holding each individual responsible to preserve the rights of others and by authorising the state to intervene in cases of violations of human rights.

9. Psycho-social Issues

Some discussions focused on whether Muslims suffer from identity and inferiority issues and whether there is an "illusion of progress" in some parts of the Muslim world as material progress is not the sole criteria of the progress of a civilization. Part of the problem for Muslims is a disconnection with the true teachings of Islam and obsession with the material world. Muslims need to follow the divine guidance in order to prosper in this world and prepare for the hereafter.

These and other questions were explored through a variety of channels:

6 keynote presentations,

3 panel discussions composed of scholars, Ambassadors, and activists, and

120 paper presentations.

In all, over 135 of the conference participants were presenters and facilitators sharing their knowledge and experiences with other conference participants.

The Inaugural Speech

The highlight of the whole conference was the inaugural speech delivered by the Honourable Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. He pointed out that the negative image of Muslims is due to both Western propaganda as well as a lack of unity amongst Muslims. He focused on the importance of education,

eradication of poverty and provision of political/civil rights to women in Muslim countries.

The Prime Minister pointed out that many problems in the Muslim world are due to centuries of colonialism, self neglect and poor governance. He emphasized the need to build trust, confidence and bridges of cooperation and understanding with others including the West for lasting peace and prosperity for everyone. Malaysia of course, is a shining example of practicing what the government preaches on issues of “capacity building” and religious freedom and tolerance.

Conference Recommendations

The conference organizers presented, on the evening session of the third and final day, the main recommendations of the conference as follows:

1. The Conference calls upon the Muslim world to cultivate an environment of tolerance of different views, beliefs, and interpretation in order to create a conducive environment for the exercise of *ijtihad* on contemporary issues like democracy, religious pluralism, creativity, social justice, gender issues, good governance, and special needs of Muslim minorities.
2. The Conference calls upon the Muslim governments to give due emphasis to capacity building. They should promote quality education, human resource development, economic growth, creativity, innovation, infrastructure, research and development, and advancement in science and technology.
3. The Conference calls upon the Muslim countries to cooperate with each other in resolving intra-Muslim conflicts and also in international affairs.
4. The Conference calls upon the Muslim societies to promote inter-civilization, inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogues to promote mutual understanding, peace and justice.
5. Acknowledging the power of the media in the contemporary world, the Conference calls upon the international media to report facts objectively with compassion, justice and professionalism besides refraining from profiling and stereotyping.

6. The Conference also calls upon the Muslim media to practice responsible journalism and by the same token calls upon the Muslim governments to guarantee freedom of expression.
7. The Conference calls upon the world powers to refrain from stereotyping and dominating the politico-economic situation of the Muslim world.
8. The Conference calls upon the governments in the Muslim countries to protect and uphold the independence and dignity of the Muslim world and to promote human rights and democratic institutions and processes.
9. The Conference calls upon the universities in the Muslim world to establish centers and institutes to study other civilizations and major religions.
10. The Conference calls upon the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) to establish a committee to follow up the deliberations and recommendations of the Conference and create an infra structure, such as website, e-mail data bank, and future conferences, to link up the Conference participants and others interested in pursuing its goals and ideals.

In his final remarks, the Chairman of the Organizing Committee, Dr. Amber Haque, observed that the conference resolutions are easier to formulate than to implement. In this respect, he reminded the audience that the International Islamic University Malaysia is the result of the Malaysian government's resolve to translate the recommendation of the Makkah Education Conference in 1977. IIUM is indeed a gift to the Muslim Ummah from the Malaysians. With its mission of Integration, Islamization, Internationalization, and Comprehensive Excellence, this university is striving very hard to prove its worth. He hoped that the University will try its best to act upon the recommendations of the international conference on "Muslims & Islam in the 21st Century: Image and Reality."

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