World Conference on Islamic Thought and Civilization: The Contemporary State of Muslim Affairs

Kolej Universiti Islam Sultan Azlan Shah (KUISAS) organized and hosted the Second World Conference on Islamic Thought and Civilization (WCIT) during August 18-19, 2014, at Casuarina Hotel, Ipoh, Malaysia. Under the leadership of chairperson Wan Sabri bin Wan Yusof (associate professor), the organizers chose Ibn Khaldun's notion of the rise and fall of civilization as the general theme and asked potential presenters to explore the contemporary state of Muslim affairs. The over 200 selected presenters, ranging from the social sciences to the applied sciences, were slotted into various parallel panels. After welcoming and introducing the sponsors and various presenters, Nordin Kardi (vice-chancellor and rector, KUISAS) spoke on the Arab Spring and other problems that continue to afflict the Muslim world: a low to medium level of socioeconomic human development, an absence of good governance, intra-Muslim conflict, and an attitude of the "Muslim world and the rest." He suggested that Muslims begin building strategic bridges to deal with them.

The first keynote speaker, Sultan Nazrin M. Shah (pro-chancellor, University of Malaya), echoed some of Kardi's points and reflected critically upon the Organization of Islamic Cooperation member states' general poor performance in producing scientific publications as a typical example of the deplorable state of knowledge production among Muslims as a whole. He advocated participation, transparency, equitable treatment, good governance, and sound education to remedy this generally negative condition.

The second keynote speaker, Serif Ali Tekalan (vice-chancellor, Fatih University, Turkey) spoke on "The Role of *Waqf* in Islamic Civilization: Turkey's Experience in *Waqf* for Education." A great deal of evidence shows that Turkey has used "endowment policies" to transform its socio-educational and religious landscape. Both Muslim-majority and minority communities should be able to benefit from its experience. The final keynote speaker, Zamry Abdul Kadir (chief minister), who closed the conference, remarked that Muslims should return to the Qur'an and Sunnah to rebuild Islamic civilization. He optimistically stated: "[I]ronic as it may seem, despite the multitude of conflicts … are we actually looking at the … resurgence of Islam?" He observed that the conference's main result was "a call to re-examine the essence of Islamic

civilization … (one) that highlights the importance of knowledge, morals and values, which are the key cornerstones of any civilization."

In a "special paper edition," Ahmad Zahid bin Hamidi (minister of home affairs) posed several pertinent questions, such as "What is exactly the state of contemporary Muslim affairs?" "What are the … factors to this state?" "How can we resolve the Palestine crisis…?" and "How can we best … resolve … Islamophobia?" Remarking that the contributing factors consist of faith, education, leadership, and the Muslims' effective plan cum action, he advised Muslims to, among other things, take a reality check, identify root causes, calculate the future negative impact if they do not change their condition, and to lay out possible Shari'ah-compliant options. He then proposed three "milestone projects": that Muslims join the "Digital Revolution Management," subscribe to a comprehensive "Islamic Shariah Governance Index," and jointly set up an "International Islamic Innovation Hub."

The approved papers were slotted in seven parallel sessions. I have selected from the "Islamic Civilization" list a few that I found informative and appealing. Fatimah Abdullah (International Islamic University of Malaysia [IIUM]) evaluated "The Path of Islamic Moderation: Future of Islamic Organizations and Movements." She claimed that "holistic objective and spirit of the Shari'ah" is seldom comprehended as the core of implementation, for Muslim groups stress certain aspects at the expense of others (e.g., emphasize Islamic knowledge but do not factor in Islamic spirituality). To correct the resulting imbalance, she urged them to take on board cognitive, affective, behavioral and spiritual components. The provision of a few examples of organizations that did not apply the four components when implementing their programs would have been helpful.

Her paper connected with Muhammad M. Ali and Sayyed M. Muhsin's (IIUM) "The Root Causes for the Rise and Fall of Civilization: A Qur'anic Perspective" that could have been read in tandem with Alla Eddin M. Esmail's (KUISAS) "Reasons for Civilization's Fall: From the Perspective of the Glorious Qur'an." Both contended that knowledge (in the holistic sense) and universal characteristics (e.g., ethics, morality, and spirituality) are inextricably linked. They opined that these two variables are the main ingredients for the rise of civilization and the lack of either one leads toward civilization's destruction or fall. They outlined the Qur'anic paradigm that, according to them, contains foundational/operational principles and five levels of categories (i.e., Islamic revealed knowledge, a universal-oriented approach, a universal worldview, socio-development principles, and educational cum scientific-technical development). A concrete example of how "Islamic civilization" as such and

historical Muslim empires in particular had applied these principles, as well as why they were subsequently abandoned, would have been helpful.

Ibrahim Soghar's (IIUM) "Formation of the Systematic Mind in Islamic Thought: The Case of Ibn Khaldun" claimed that the lack of systematic thinking contributed to the decline of Islamic civilization. But despite his fair argument, he neglected to weave into his texts the views of other Ibn Khaldun scholars, among them Muhsin Mahdi's *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophic Foundation of the Science of Culture* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957 and Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press 2006) and Seyed Farid Alatas' *Ibn Khaldun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013).

Elmira Akhmetova's (International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies, Malaysia) "Stability and Human Security in the Muslim World: A Critical View on Nationalism and Tribalism" argued that universal principles, as couched in the revealed religious traditions, can offer a panacea for the disharmony and conflict that have (and continue to) tear the Muslim world apart. She investigated the relationship between the ideology of nationalism and the wellbeing of societies and drew upon the ideas of Said Nursi (d. 1960) and Musa Jarullah Bigiev (d. 1949), two ideologues who essentially highlighted the negative impact of nationalism and racism. Besides defining nationalism and its link with Islam, she commented on the two idealogues' negative perceptions of nationalism and referred to the Arab Spring as a catalyst for the return of tribal consciousness. While her ideas were indeed quite interesting, she neglected to list some of the external factors that have propped up nationalistic sentiments and tribalism as witnessed among the Kashmiris and the Kurds.

Given the large number of presentations, various problems emerged. First, unrelated papers were slotted into the same parallel session, such as the one featuring Shaker A.A.H Kubaisi's (United Arab Emirates University) "Public Freedoms and Its Impact on the Renaissance of Civilizations in the Light of the Sunnah," Asamer Z. Ahmed's (Modern Academy of Engineering, Egypt) "The Project for Preservation of Historical Cairo," Nada Khayat's (Jubail University College, Saudi Arabia) "Multiple Islams: [An] Evaluation Study," and Hamoud K. H. Al-Nafli's (Sultan Qaboos University, Oman) "The Study of Professional Ethics and Values of the Employees of the Public Sector in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries." Second, the organizers failed to create dedicated sessions for specific themes/topics tied in with a specific discipline. One example suffices: Approximately fourteen papers focused on *waqf* (endowment) were slotted into numerous separate panels. One wonders why, for arranging thematic panels on this and other topics would have benefitted both the presenters and the participants.

Third, the 2.5-hour-long panel sessions featured an average of ten presentations (in my opinion too many to allow for any meaningful discussion during the Q&A sessions). Fourth, some presenters did not appear or only turned in abstracts (as happened when I presented my "Southern Africa's Muslims: Emergence, Development and Transformation"). Fifth, the abundance of co-authored/co-presented papers by Malaysian researchers could be problematic. Although there is nothing wrong with such teamwork, such presentations should be discouraged because they raise issues of the intellectual ownership of ideas and because a smaller team's findings might yield better results.

Overall, it seems that the conference's guidelines were not really clear, as some of the accepted papers did not fit in with the theme, such as Ismail Serageldin's (Library of Alexandria, Egypt) "Do Not Mess with [Im]Perfection," Musli N. Yahya et al.'s (Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia), "Whole Body Vibration Risk in Grass-Cutter Operator: A Preliminray Study', Sr. Nor N. Chuweni et al.'s (Universiti Teknologi MARA and University of Malaya) "Performance Analysis of YTL Hospitality REIT and Axis REIT," and Nurhanis Ishak et al.'s (KUISAS and Universiti Utara Malaysia) "Throughout Maximization of M/G/C/C State Dependent Queuing Network."

Be that as it may, this event did achieve the following goals: it brought together a set of scholars who explored, engaged, and debated the nature of the rise and fall of Muslim civilization; created a platform in which their ideas triggered important discussions; provided a forum for individual scholars to network and collaborate; and enabled scholars and researchers to, in the words of Wan Sabri bin Wan Yusof (associate professor) "revive and revitalize the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah to bring the Golden Era of Islamic Civilization to rise once more."

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