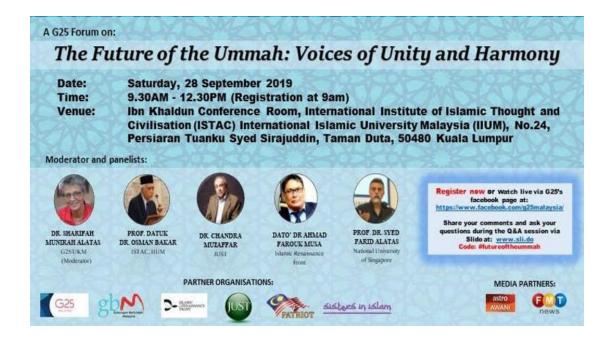# G25 FORUM

"THE FUTURE OF THE UMMAH: VOICES OF UNITY AND HARMONY"

SEPTEMBER 28th, 2019

Report & Summary of Findings

OVERVIEW

The forum addressed the current tensions within the Ummah, specifically relating to big power interests, sectarianism, economic backwardness and socio-political tensions in the Muslim world. Four distinguished speakers analysed the historical, intellectual, economic, social and political foundations of the growing unrest that the Ummah has been grappling with for several decades. They highlighted the role of global big power designs in perpetuating such tensions, as part of a larger geopolitical agenda. References were also made to the apparent ineffectiveness of the Amman Message as an instrument of peace and harmony. Finally, the speakers

addressed the current landscape of Islam in Malaysia, focusing on the need for Rahmatan Lil-Ãlamin based on Maqāsid Sharīa, with the aim of spreading the message of 'unity in diversity'.

BIODATA OF SPEAKERS

Prof. Datuk Dr. Osman Bakar, who earned a doctorate in Islamic philosophy from Temple University, Philadelphia is currently a Distinguished Professor and the holder of the al-Ghazali Chair of Islamic Thought at International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia. He was formerly Malaysia Chair of South-east Asian Islam at the Prince Talal al-Waleed Centre for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University, Washington DC and Deputy Chief Executive Officer (CEO), International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies, Malaysia (IAIS).

Dr Osman is an author and editor of 37 books and more than 300 articles on various aspects of Islamic thought and civilisation. He was a member of the Council of 100 Leaders of the West-Islamic World Initiative for Dialogue founded by the World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland. He has been named among the 500 most influential Muslims in the world since 2009. His two most well-known books, Classification of Knowledge in Islam and Tawhid and Science have been translated into numerous languages. His latest books are Islamic Civilization and the Modern World: Thematic Essays (2014), Quranic Pictures of the Universe: The Scriptural Foundation of Islamic Cosmology (2016), Islamic Perspectives on Science and Technology (co-editor, 2016), and Al-Farabi: Life, Works and Significance (new edition, 2018).

Dr. Chandra Muzaffar is the President of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST), an international NGO based in Malaysia, which seeks to critique global injustice guided by universal spiritual and moral values. He has published extensively on civilisational dialogue, international politics, religion, human rights and Malaysian society. Among Chandra's latest publications are, A World in Crisis: Is There a Cure? and Reflections on Malaysian Unity and Other Challenges. Apart from his role in JUST, Chandra sits on the board of a number of international NGOs concerned with social justice and civilisational dialogue. Chandra is the recipient of a number of international awards related to his scholarship and social activism.

Dato' Dr Ahmad Farouk Musa is a Founder and Director at the Islamic Renaissance Front, a think tank advocating reform and renewal in Islam. He is

an academic researcher at Monash University Malaysia and a cardiothoracic surgeon. He is actively involved in civil society and the emerging discourse on post-Islamism and has been involved in inter-faith dialogues especially in regard to Christian-Muslim relations and also intra-faith dialogues especially the Shi'a-Sunni discourse.

He was a Vice-Chairman of BERSIH 2.0 - a powerful coalition promoting free and fair election, and is a founding member of the Muslim Professionals Forum. He was also a former Commissioner at the Commonwealth Initiative for the Freedom of Religion or Belief (CIFoRB) based in Westminster, London and a former Director of the Centre for Combating Corruption and Cronyism (C4). He currently holds the position of a Research Fellow at Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Islam – STFI Sadra, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Prof. Dr. Syed Farid Alatas is professor of sociology at the National University of Singapore, where he has been since 1992. A Malaysian national, his areas of interest are sociological theory, the philosophy of social science, the sociology of religion and inter-religious dialogue.

Professor Alatas obtained his Ph.D. in sociology from Johns Hopkins University in 1991. He has published extensively, contributing to contemporary theoretical debates in historical sociology and comparative analyses of democratic and authoritarian regimes. Among his writings are Applying Ibn Khaldun: The Recovery of a Lost Tradition in Sociology, Democracy and Authoritarianism in Indonesia and Malaysia, The Rise of the Post-Colonial State and Alternative Discourses in Asian Social Science: Responses to Eurocentrism.

ORDER OF PRESENTATIONS & TOPICS

Speaker 1:	**Prof. Datuk Dr. Osman Bakar:** *Opening remarks; "Unity & Harmony as Foundations in Islamic Philosophy"*
Speaker 2:	**Dr. Chandra Muzaffar:** *"Geopolitical Impact on the Sunni-Shi'a Divide"*
Speaker 3:	**Dato' Dr. Ahmad Farouk Musa:** *"The Sunni-Shi'a Conflict"*
Speaker 4:	**Prof. Dr. Syed Farid Alatas:** *"Persecution of the Shi'a in Malaysia"*
Moderator:	**Dr. Sharifah Munirah Alatas**

1. OPENING REMARKS
By Prof. Datuk Dr. Osman Bakar

The first issue that concerns the issue of the future of the *ummah* is a vague issue, which makes it difficult to find answers to as it is an issue of the entire *ummah*, the future of which needs the contribution of all its members.

Nonetheless, reminders of the future are found in Islamic thought and history. According to a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the turn of every Hijri century will see a revival of the *ummah* in terms of spirit, knowledge and commitment, giving rise to a new energy that can be interpreted to mean a new energy that will last for a century. At present, the middle of the 15th Hijri century is yet to come. The future of the *ummah* is at present a question of a division in the vision of the *ummah*.

As for the second issue which concerns the voices of unity and harmony, the question arises as to how these voices can shape the vision of the *ummah*. In this regard, the question to ask is 'who are these voices of unity and harmony?' There is a need to look at this from the historical and philosophical perspectives as well as understand the areas of past knowledge that need to be considered. This is due to the fact that the current issues we are facing are rooted in past problems and any future issues that may ensue will be caused by present-day problems.

That said, we cannot hope for a better future for the *ummah* without contemplating the areas of knowledge in the past from which the voices of harmony and unity emerge. In identifying the voices of harmony we can, for the purpose of this forum, identify the voices in three major areas of Islamic knowledge and thought:

- Philosophy, which in Islam especially, is seen as a universal pursuit of knowledge and a key area of knowledge from which the voices of unity and harmony have emerged;

- Sufism or Islamic mysticism; and

- The *Maqasid al Shari'ah* which can be defined as an enlightened philosophy of the *Shari'ah* - the universal dimension of the *Shari'ah*, not *Shari'ah* in the sectarian or narrow sense as understood by many Muslims – especially in Malaysia.

The voices of unity have to emerge from these three major areas. Why? What are the characteristics of these voices? In the area of Islamic philosophy, Islamic philosophers, Ibnu Sina and Al-Farabi, among others, had a very open policy towards knowledge of other cultures as well as civilisations, and made that knowledge their own. In the case of the voices of Sufism, their spiritual perspective was universal. As for the scholars of the *Maqasid*, their understanding of Islamic law was most inclusive and universal.

In essence, the characteristics of these voices of unity and harmony are that they spoke from the perspectives of:

- Universalism: This is important as universalism is the antidote to sectarianism. When universalism prevails, sectarianism is marginalised. As such, it is most essential to learn about and understand the past voices of universalism.

- Inclusivism and not exclusivism: Islam by its very nature is inclusive. For example, the six articles of faith of Islam are inclusive, covering not only belief in the Qur'an but also in the sacred scriptures of other faiths.

- Social justice: These voices built bridges intra-Islamic civilisation and with other cultures and civilisations.

The present problems regarding unity, universalism, inclusivism and social justice have arisen due to the weakening and muting of the afore-mentioned voices of harmony and unity. Some nations have banned philosophy from their educational curricula, giving rise to other modern forms of philosophy in different guises. Sufism has also been banned in certain nations, muting their

voices and forcing its proponents to 'go underground'. The voices of universalism, inclusivism and social justice have effectively been muted.

In the past, the role of Islamic philosophy in promoting the perspectives of universalism and inclusivism was considered very important and actively promoted by the rulers of the day. Today, however, it is secularism that is promoted. The past did   not   witness   nor do we hear of any past patrons of knowledge promoting sectarianism. These enlightened leaders patronised and advocated universalism, inclusivism and social justice.

In reference to the *Maqasid al Shari'ah,* the *Shari'ah* has for some time now been addressed only from the perspective of exclusivism. However, in reality the *Shari'ah* comprises two dimensions – the exclusive and the universal dimensions*.* There are particular aspects of the *Shari'ah* exclusively meant for application by the *ummah* while certain other aspects, particularly with regard to legal injunctions and the law are universal, i.e. meant for the entire human race. Regrettably, this perspective has been marginalised.   It is hoped that the renewed interest in the *Maqasid al Shari'ah* will see this perspective of legal pluralism revived.

Distinguishing between Unity and Uniformity: The Way to Harmony

- Multiply the voices of unity and harmony to play an active role in society: With more of these voices playing an active role, we will be able to contribute to the future of the *ummah*, taking the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a spiritual and intellectual role model. The illustrious voices of unity of the past themselves looked upon Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a role model.

- Create unity out of diversity: Many Muslims are comfortable with uniformity and their thought process do not distinguish between unity and uniformity - a problem prevalent in most Muslim countries, including Malaysia today.

Unity does not equate to uniformity. Unity means acknowledging the existence of diversity and that we cannot create unity without diversity. We need to give space to the different constituents of diversity to make unity a reality. At the same time, we need to understand that Islam – as a way of life, provides the necessary means and intellectual tools to create unity out of diversity and make it happen.

● Revive the learning of, and interest in philosophy, history and Sufism, unmuting the restrained voices so we can unleash the expressions of unity and harmony for the concord of the *ummah* and universal goodwill.

Conclusion

The problems of the *ummah* have arisen from a neglect and muting of the past voices of unity and harmony that exist in the areas of philosophy and Sufism as well as a narrow interpretation of the *Maqasid al Shari'ah.* The pressing need is for us to ensure that the voices of unity and harmony are loud enough to raise above the existent discord and play a more active role in uniting the *ummah*.

2. GEOPOLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE SUNNI-SHI'A DIVIDE
By Dr Chandra Muzaffar

The influence of geopolitical factors on the division between the Sunni and Shi'a has been largely ignored although geopolitical events in recent decades have impacted largely on this divide. In contemporary times, two major events in particular have deepened the rift.

The first was the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran that the Saudis have interpreted as a challenge to their monarchical system. As for the US, other than Israel, Iran under the Shah was an important ally and served as a linchpin to Western imperial interests. With the advent of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the US lost its grip on an important collaborator in the region.

Before the Revolution, the Saudi and Iranian monarchies were on good terms with the US but the Islamic Revolution changed this. The 1979 Revolution was premised on the strengthening of Iranian independence and pride in Iranian culture and traditions. As such, Iran sought to be independent, especially of the Western powers, which was not to the liking of the US and the monarchies of the Gulf States.

The Revolution resulted in the fracture of the extant unity between West Asian countries. Concerted and continued efforts through collaboration between West Asian countries, supported by the major Western powers including Russia, aimed to bring about the collapse of the Islamic Revolution. Each of these actors wanted Iran to fail for their own reasons - ranging from power struggles to differences in ideology, and economic as well as political dominance. However, these efforts to cause the down-fall of Iran have been to no avail. Today, 40 years since the Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran is still in existence, remaining true to the principles of the Revolution.

The second event, the occupation of Iraq in 2003 by the US and UK alliance. inadvertently strengthened the resolve of Iran. As a result, Iran's influence today extended its outreach to include Lebanon and Yemen. The invasion plan had envisaged a re-drawing of the map of West Asia and North Africa. For Israel, it was important to gain control of water resources from Iraq and to strengthen its power position in the Middle East. Further, Saddam Hussein was a strong supporter of Palestine and this went against the US/UK alliance interests.

However, the consequences of the invasion were contrary to the plan. Those who had planned to overthrow Saddam Hussein unwittingly strengthened Iran's position in the Levant. With the majority of Iraqis being Shi'a, the elections held after the invasion saw those who replaced Saddam Hussein and his elites, as having close connections with Iran.

This was certainly not what those behind the invasion plan had expected. As stated by a US politician, Iran won the war without firing a single shot. The US planned the invasion but Iran won. Till today, Iran has continued to play a strong role in the region, with their formidable influence prevalent in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. With the influence of Iran stronger than in 1979, the enemies of Iran view this as a strong challenge and threat.

In the context of the conflict in Syria, the 'triumvirate of Iran, Hezbollah and Syria' is seen as forming a resistance against US and Western powers as well as their interests in the region. The situation had been presented to the world by the US in its efforts to gain support from other nations - including Malaysia and Indonesia - against Syria, as a Sunni-Shi'a issue, thus strengthening the division within the *ummah*. In actuality, this is not the case and there never was a Sunni-Shi'a issue in Syria, with many cabinet ministers, members of the armed forces and even Bashar Assad's wife being Sunni.

Malaysia should continue our support of Iran. We should not get trapped in the network of Western efforts to divide the Muslim world. We should look for common grounds to unite the two sects for the good of the Malaysian Muslims for we are one *ummah*. However, we have a segment of the *ulama'* in the country who are irrationally anti-Shi'a. We appeal to these *ulama'* to open their minds, to understand the Shi'a Muslims in Malaysia who have been subjected to arrests and infringement of their basic rights to observe their own rituals of faith. The religious leaders should be open-minded and try to understand what is happening and not be blinded by only one narrow perspective.

Rejecting the geopolitics of Western self-interest: The Way to Harmony

- Continue the dialogue: Much depends on the young in this regard. There is no basis in Islam for this antagonism towards the Shi'a. If we continue to succumb to this vicious and malicious line of thinking, we portray Islam as being against thinking and reflection, which it is not. We need to understand, reflect and act. Let us not be blind, narrow-minded and unthinking followers of Islam.

- Revive the Amman Message: We need to look back at the Amman Message signed by prominent leaders of the Muslim world. This has been neglected. We need to interpret the message with a view to uniting the *ummah*.

- Understand the connection between geopolitics and the problems of the *ummah* today. We need to disseminate knowledge concerning geopolitics so we are aware of the actual issues and not unknowingly aid in the efforts of big powers to further divide the *ummah*. There is an urgent need to cease making interpretations that are the opposite of reality. Most Malaysians do not make the connection between geopolitics and the problems of the *ummah* today. The connection is real, thus, we need to comprehend the geopolitical reality.

- Understand the origins of the antagonism towards the Shi'a. Sectarianism should not exist in Malaysia. The Shi'a are a very small community in Malaysia but they face immense antagonism. We need to understand the origins of this antagonism - whether it comes from the majority or a minority, from within the country or from without.

Conclusion

Geopolitical factors lie behind the Sunni-Shi'a divide. We need to understand the forces at play and the reasons for their machinations so we can prevent an exacerbation of the rift within the *ummah*.

3. THE SUNNI-SHI'A CONFLICT
By Dato' Dr Ahmad Farouk Musa

"Indeed this, your religion, is one religion, and I am your Lord, so worship Me".

Surah Al Anbiya: Verse 92

"And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided. And remember the favour of Allah upon you - when you were enemies and He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favour, brothers. And you were on the edge of a pit of the Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus does Allah make clear to you His verses that you may be guided".

Surah Ali Imran: Verse 103

These two verses of the Qur'an clearly underscore that the Muslims are one *ummah*. Many have read the verses but forget that we are one *ummah*, whether we are Shi'a or Sunnis or of whatever other sect. We can be considered as *ahlul qiblah* as we pray towards the same Qiblah although it has been imprinted in the thinking of some that the Shi'a pray towards Karbala and that their hajj is at Karbala, fallacies we need to rid ourselves of.

In addition, Sayyid Qutb, one of the leading Islamist ideological thinkers of the twentieth century, stated in *In the Shade of the Qur'an* that faith and brotherhood are the two pillars upon which the structure of the Islamic community is built and that should either one collapse, the entire community would collapse.

Surah Ali Imran Verse 103, as explained in an interpretation, provides the story of how the Aws and Khazraj, two Jewish tribes in Madinah during the time of

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), were engaged in a continued effort to create disunity among the Muslims. The verse is thus a powerful reminder that there would always be parties who continuously attempt to sow discord among Muslims. The reality today is the existing discord among Muslims is caused by the objectives of the current neo-imperialists, the Zionists and their supporters.

The seeds of disunity among Muslims were sown at the Battle of Siffin (Raqqa, in Syria) which was the first civil war in Islam between the supporters of Sayyidina Ali who was then the Caliph, and Muawiyah the Governor of Damascus who opposed him. The brotherhood among the Muslims that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had built was shattered by the circumstances leading to this incident. Another negative outcome of this Battle was that some, ignoring the view of scholars, began to view the supporters of Ali as Shi'a, causing a deep rift within the *ummah*.

However, as Rached Ghannouchi, Tunisian politician and thinker, in quoting al-Shahrastani - an Islamic historian, points out, this disunity was not caused by differences in *aqidah* or beliefs but was driven by political issues. The Sunni-Shi'a conflict today is also not a conflict of *aqidah* but is politically motivated. There was no large-scale Sunni-Shi'a conflict before the Islamic Revolution of Iran, 1979. The Shi'a had maintained a politically 'quietist' position.

The conflict between the Sunnis and the Shi'a was not a big issue in either South or Southeast Asia. On the contrary, the Islamic Revolution sparked a new energy and confidence in the independence of Muslims, with many Muslims in awe of Ayatollah Khomeini at having stood up to the 'Great Satan' of the time.

With Al-Azhar at the forefront, there were a number of efforts at Sunni-Shi'a reconciliation. These efforts, however, came to naught. Despite the Muslims

previously turning to Al-Azhar for guidance, most unfortunately this was not the case any longer.

Reasons for the Sunni-Shi'a Conflict

1. At the base of the conflict is the competition between neo-imperialists to gain power and authority over the wealth and resources in the region.
2. Discrimination in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq radicalised the Shi'a.
3. Collaboration between the US, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel to gain dominance over the region.
4. Generally overlooked is the plan to build a gas pipeline running from Qatar through Syria and Turkey to Europe to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian gas, a proposal rejected by Syria.

Understanding the Sunni/Shi'a Problem as a Political Conflict: The Way to Harmony

- Continue and increase dialogues and reconciliatory efforts

    - To prevent the escalation and spread of the Sunni-Shi'a conflict

    - To create understanding between the two sides.

- Embrace the Amman Message

- Governments need to respect the rights of all citizens irrespective of whether they are Shi'a or Sunni.

- Muslim countries should desist from using religion as an instrument of security and foreign policy. The Shi'a comprises about 10% of the global Islamic community and in Malaysia they are the smallest minority. Yet, among all of Malaysia's other minorities, they are the ones most denied of their basic rights.

- Focus on practical ways to resolve the conflict and build viable institutions for conflict prevention and peaceful relations.

- Muslim governments must play a role in preventing hate speeches towards Muslim minorities in their respective societies.

- Understand geopolitics and neo-imperialist manipulation to foment discord and increase sectarian divisions within the Muslim nations in their pursuit of their economic and political interests.

Conclusion

The Sunni-Shi'a conflict is not an issue of faith. It is primarily politically and economically motivated, driven by the desire to gain authority, power and control of water, natural gas and other natural resources. These form the basis of the current problem among the *ummah*, taken advantage of by neo-imperialistic economic interests and politics of big powers.

4. PERSECUTION OF THE SHI'A IN MALAYSIA
By Prof. Dr Syed Farid Alatas

Recent times have seen much persecution and increasing hatred of the Shi'a in Malaysia. The problem of the negative perception of the Shi'a has been created by certain politicians and religious figures involved in hate speech fuelled by wrong interpretation and disinformation. This has resulted in planting false ideas regarding the Shi'a.

Four points regarding the issue are raised:

- The first point is the banning of the Shi'a and declaring all of them to be unbelievers. This is certainly not within Sunni tradition. We must realise that just as some Shi'a have deviated from the faith, there are also Sunnis with deviant beliefs. For example, the Shi'a are seen as deviant due to certain *hadith* referred to in their books. In this regard, the Sunnis can also be seen as deviant as there are certain *hadith* that state the Qur'an is incomplete. Can we then draw the conclusion that the Sunnis are deviant?

- The second point concerns Shi'a phobia within the country that has been stoked by misunderstanding, ignorance or stupidity, as well as malice or evil. The term 'stupidity' is used here not in a deprecatory or insulting manner but rather in the scientific sense of the lack of knowledge and the inability to interpret knowledge.

One example of the misunderstanding of Shi'a beliefs concerns the practice of ritual self-flagellation and the consequent blood-letting during the festival of Ashura - a practice declared forbidden and not a legitimate practice by even some Shi'a *ulama*'. Ayatollah Sistani stated that it would be better to donate blood instead.

As for ignorance, there are Sunnis who claim that the Shi'a have 'added' to the *azan* or call for prayer without knowing that the Sunnis themselves have 'added' to the *azan.* For instance, during the call to the dawn prayer, '*Assalatu khairun minan naum'* or 'Prayer is better than sleep' is an addition to the *azan* during the dawn prayer.

Another example is the claim that Shi'ism was founded by a Yemeni, Abdullah bin Saba', who is said to have existed during the time of Sayyidina Ali to divide Muslims. There is absolutely no basis to this as there is no proof that he ever existed. Even Shi'a *ulama'* reject this. This fallacy has been spread by certain *ulama'* and scholars in Malaysia. We must reject it. If indeed he did exist, as some people believe, he created Saba'iah, which is considered a deviant sect.

This clearly demonstrates the stupidity of those fanning Shi'a phobia as it reveals their inability to make conclusions based on logic and available sources of knowledge.

As for maliciousness or evil, this is the most difficult to overcome. One factor for the emergence of maliciousness is its existence among certain politicians and religious figures. 'Maliciousness' refers to the attitude wanting to vilify the Shi'a even though those guilty of this know their aspersions are false. Their vilification is based on their false contentions such as the Shi'a have their own version of the Qur'an, that the Shi'a do not perform the hajj, and that according to the Shi'a, spilling the blood of Sunnis is lawful. These malicious individuals must certainly know that such beliefs are false although they continue to accuse the Shi'a of such practices. Their intentions are solely to vilify them.

- The third point is the problem of *kejadongan.* This term is a combination of *jahat, bodoh* and *sombong (*evil or malicious, stupid or ignorant and arrogant*),* a term coined by Prof. Syed Hussein Alatas. A *jadong* is one who, despite lack of knowledge, is malicious and arrogant as well as full of self-importance. This term can be used to refer to those who falsely condemn or malign the Shi'a. If those who are *jadong* wield no influence, no serious consequences may arise in society. However, danger lies with the existence of the *jadong* in political, religious and economic institutions.

For instance, if a politician labels a certain sect of Muslims as deviant and he holds that view honestly but he is wrong and just lacks knowledge and has no malicious intent, he is not *jadong* but is stupid. However, if he makes the assertion that a certain group is deviant with the aim of exterminating them and he is arrogant to the point of not considering the possibility of being wrong, the consequences of his action will result in problems for the group who become the victims of the *jadong.*

A society under the control of the *jadong* will also become *jadong.* If, for example, the religious education system propagates invalid or false

teachings, the people will also become *jadong*. As such, we must be aware of the process of turning members of society into people who are *jadong*.

What complicates matters for those who want to be free of being *jadong* is the reality that no matter how *jadong* certain politicians or religious figures may be, they are still held in esteem by certain parties.

There can be harmony between the Sunnis and Shi'a as we share common traditions. One common tradition is that both share a love for the *ahlul bayt*, or the holy family of the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH), particularly his daughter Faṭimah, her husband Ali (who was also the Prophet's cousin) and their descendants.

Another common tradition that has been forgotten by many Sunnis is the commemoration of Ashura, marking the day that Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), was martyred in the Battle of Karbala. While many Sunni 'celebrate' on the day, Shi'a *ulama'* say it should not be a day of celebration but should be a sad day and observed as such. Many Sunnis have forgotten Ashura although we love the *ahlul bayt.* All the above underscore the importance, for the unity of the *ummah*, to gain the right knowledge to avoid misunderstanding.

Dispelling Malicious Tendencies Among Our Leadership: The Way to Harmony

● Sunni Muslims who are the majority in Malaysia need to go back to our roots and understand our traditions so we can see the common ground between the Sunnis and the Shi'a.

● Rational Sunni Muslims need to go against the tide, speak out against the persecution of the Shi'a and seek peaceful co-existence. If enough speak

out, the politicians of the day are certain to contain the persecution and seek justice for the Shi'a, supporting their rights to practice their beliefs.

This will reduce greatly the Sunni-Shi'a divide in Malaysia, leading to a progressive and united *ummah*. Sunni Muslims who do not speak out now, will exacerbate the situation, causing the nation to slip further into extremist and oppressive tendencies. Once extremism takes root and spreads throughout society, Shi'a Muslims in Malaysia will not be the only ones who are persecuted. Other minorities and those with differing views will fall prey to unscrupulous politicians and religious figures out to meet their own agenda.

- We need to conduct dialogues between the Sunni and the Shi'a. However, there are two conditions to this.

    - First, Sunnis need to be knowledgeable of our own history and traditions, and to look for and accept our common traditions with the Shi'a.

    - Second, Sunnis need to understand the Shi'a more, through the works of their religious figures and scholars.

Conclusion

The persecution of the Shi'a in Malaysia is due to negative influences propagated by misunderstanding, ignorance and maliciousness. This has lead to the prevalence of false beliefs whipped up by the discourse of certain politicians, religious figures and scholars. These views are slowly becoming mainstream. So if we are not careful, the next generation of Muslims will be entirely intolerant towards Muslims who do not practise and believe in the same way that Sunnis do. We need to combat this through knowledge and understanding of our own traditions to seek common grounds while at the same time engaging in dialogue with the Shi'a and learning about their practices from them.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

1. **How we can overcome the problem of the division among the *ummah*, a problem which seems to be worsening? Could you also elaborate on Imam Mahdi who many Muslims believe will come to 'rescue' them.**

Prof. Dr Syed Farid Alatas

While the Sunni-Shi'a rift does exist in other Muslim countries, one important difference that distinguishes us (Malaysia) from other Islamic countries like Indonesia for example, is that in Indonesia, the Shi'a are free to exist, to practise their beliefs, establish education institutions and are protected by the system. The problem in Malaysia lies in the existence of ulama' who are *jadong*. Although such ulama' do exist everywhere else, the problem here is exacerbated by the religious system being controlled by regressive ulama'. We thus need to know how to overcome the problem by getting people to speak up and say they do not support the persecution.

Prof. Datuk Dr Osman Bakar

The problem of confusion and misconceptions regarding the Sunni-Shi'a issue is real and serious. This is made worse with the proliferation of false leaders who are not qualified to lead. A hadith of the Prophet (PBUH) states that the existence of false and unqualified leaders who do not spread the truth but falsehoods, instead, or who question the truth, will lead to the downfall of society.

We need to spread awareness of the historical perspective regarding Sunni-Shi'a relations which reveals cooperation and good relations between the Sunni and the Shi'a in the past. The need is to understand what has happened to reverse this, leading to the situation today. We need to spread the correct information and knowledge and all members of the *ummah* need to take action to overcome our shortcomings and disharmony in this regard.

2. **Question regarding the coming of Imam Mahdi**

Dato' Dr Ahmad Farouk Musa

My statement regarding Imam Mahdi is not going to be popular. No mention of Imam Mahadi is made in the Qur'an. He is mentioned in some of the hadith but

Ibnu Khaldun stated that all hadith concerning Imam Mahdi are *dhaif* (weak or doubtful in authenticity). The reason for the backwardness of the ummah is the fatalist view that it is all right if we are oppressed or we lose. Imam Mahdi will appear one day to set things right.

3. How can we implement Article 11 of the Constitution which guarantees freedom of religion so we can bring about peace and harmony?

Dato' Dr Ahmad Farouk Musa

While Article 11 of the Constitution regarding the freedom of religion needs to be implemented, the problem is that in the context of Islam, some authorities say that Islam falls under the jurisdiction of the states and thus they do not take any action.

This can be seen in the statement of the Minister (of Islamic Affairs), that since the authorities who conducted the raid on the Shi'a recently were acting according to their SOPs.

Prof. Dr Syed Farid Alatas

The Constitution does guarantee rights of freedom of religion but the law allows for the banning of certain groups e.g. laws that support those who call for the extermination of a certain religious group. Even the most democratic of societies have allowances for the curtailing of freedom or the banning of certain groups depending on their nature. But that is not the issue.

The problem in Malaysia is that the Shi'a can be banned as they are seen as deviant and that is the issue. We need to change public perception. It is pointless to debate with the ulama' as they are set in their ways. It is uncertain if they actually believe what they are saying or if they are stupid or just plain evil. We have to change public perception, particularly of the next generation. We need to go against the tide by re-educating people.

This persecution will not stop at the Shi'a. After this, they will come after other groups. They are already after the feminists; next will be after the so-called liberals and even Sufism will be banned. We have been going down the slippery road towards extremism and this is what happens when we let the *pejadong* take over. We need to effect change. The change may take one or two generations to manifest but we need to start now. If we don't, the situation will get much worse.

4. Should the government ban religious-based political parties?

Dato' Dr Ahmad Farouk Musa

Political Islam yes, Islam, no. With political Islam, discussions will revolve around hudud for example and not on real issues.

Dr Chandra Muzaffa

Religious parties are not the issue. If a party, whether religious or not, is democratic and listens to the people, it will triumph. However, if a political party fails the people, it will fail.

5. Should religious education be removed from schools?

Dato' Dr Ahmad Farouk Musa

Religious studies as well as the teaching of other languages should be relegated to after-school hours in the afternoon. The problem we have today is that, because of the inclusion of Islamic studies, national schools are perceived as Malay Muslim schools whereas in the past this was not the case. The focus should be on inculcating Islamic values and not focussing only on rituals.

Dr Chandra Muzaffar

It would be difficult to remove religious education from schools as religion is important. However, we need to instil religious values and a vision of life instead of focusing only on rituals. The focus on the latter has resulted in people looking religious outwardly but not having the values. These sorts are dishonest, corrupt, etc. We need to strengthen counter trends, to wake people up for change.

6. Should we bring back the system of education that we had in the 60s, with English as the medium of instruction?

Dato' Dr Ahmad Farouk Musa

We should go back to the system in the 60s with English as the medium of instruction. Islamic education should also be in English.

Prof. Dr Syed Farid Alatas

Even if we do not have parties that are Islamic or if we were to convert our education system to the English medium, the problem will not be solved. The issue is, it is not a problem of labels or language but it is a problem of mentality and orientation. As for using English to teach religion, we find a lot of literature on Islam written in English that is fanatical, aggressive, sectarian and divisive. A progressive understanding rather than an aggressive understanding of Islam can be promoted in any language. So, it's a matter of what mentality and orientation we want to convey to our children and students.

Furthermore, do we want to be a society uprooted from our language? There is a false assumption held even by Malays that scientific ideas cannot be conveyed in Malay, a prejudice held even by some Malays. This is a ridiculous assumption for as early as the 16th century, we had philosophers like Hamzah Fansuri and many others disseminating complex and abstract ideas in metaphysics and epistemology in Malay.

Regarding the comment made by a Minister that the authorities were going by their SOPs in carrying out the raids on the Shi'a. This is no argument to justify the actions. It conveys the wrong message to Malaysians and the international community. Malaysia has become one of the most extremist Muslim countries in the world. In the 1980s, Malaysia was looked up to as a model. We were seen as a religious and traditional society but at the same time as among the fastest growing among the developing nations. We were seen as being able to combine religiosity with modernity.

However, the happenings of the last 10 years or so has raised the comment that, this is what happens when you mix religion with politics. Now, Malaysia is seen as the model to be avoided instead. This persecution will not stop at the Shi'a. After this, they will come after other groups.

Dato' Dr Ahmad Farouk Musa

As for the issue of Ashura, it is fine if we fast on that day following the sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH). My point is many Malays, especially in the east coast, celebrate Ashura by making a porridge (bubur Ashura). This is cultural, not religious. We should not be celebrating Ashura. It is a day of sadness.

Regarding the quotations allegedly from a book by Ayatollah Khomeini, in my close association and correspondences with Shi'a scholars, I have never known them to vilify any of the sahabah or companions of the Prophet (PBUH) or any of his wives, A'ishah in particular. My opinion is that the quotations could be translations from writings by a fanatical Wahabi seeking to revile the Shi'a and

Ayatollah Khomeini in particular. I would like to believe that all this are concocted evidences against the Shi'a.

Prof. Dr Syed Farid Alatas

The issue of the Sunni-Shi'a conflict is both an issue of aqidah and politics. There are differences in aqidah, theology and fiqh or Islamic jurisprudence but these differences have been blown out of proportion, as Dr Chandra Muzaffar stated, due to the geopolitical situation and issues of power play.

As for criticism against the sahabah, we need to be mature and make a distinction between the common Shi'a who may be rude and revile the sahabah, and the scholars who make criticisms. Keep in mind that the Shi'a have a different interpretation of the sahabah compared with us. Even among the Sunni scholars, there are those who criticise some sahabah e.g. Abu Hurairah. So, we must not pretend that there is a big gulf between us and the Shi'a. As I stated earlier, let us know our own traditions.

As for the ahlul bayt, the quoted verse and the related hadith where the Prophet (PBUH) says he leaves behind two weighty things i.e. the Qur'an and his ahlul bayt, are accepted by both Sunnis and Shi'as. Also, the definition of ahlul bayt as comprising the Prophet (PBUH), Fatimah, Ali, Hassan and Hussein is also accepted by both Sunnis and Shi'a. In fact, the Sunni definition of ahlul bayt is closer to the Shi'a definition than the Salafi definition.

As for fasting during Ashura, not all Sunnis fast during Ashura. We have a variety of definitions, approaches and attitudes towards Ashura. To restate, we need to know our traditions. As a Sunni, I find it offensive that some of us celebrate Ashura and make up stories regarding Ashura such as Prophet Abraham was saved from the fire on that day and that Noah's ark landed during Ashura. These are all fictitious accounts.

The only thing we know for sure is that the brutal murder of Hussein occurred on that day. Because he loved Hussein very much, Imam Shafie was labelled a Rafidi (a derogatory term for the Shi'a). He responded by saying 'If loving Hussein makes me a Rafidi, then I'm the biggest Rafidi.'

These are all Sunni traditions. We need to wake up, to grow up and know our own traditions. Only then will we realise that we are no different from the Shi'a. As for the 'bad' things that the Shi'a do, even they understand that. Imam Khomeini forbade the insulting of A'ishah. So, know your own traditions before jumping to conclusions. If there are irreconcilable differences, let us be mature and accept them.

Throughout the centuries, Sunnis and the Shi'a have been living in the same neighbourhoods. In Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, they have been living together for

centuries and the Sunnis marry the Shi'a. The Shi'a go for the Hajj so how can we say they are not Muslims and how can our authorities prevent Sunnis from marrying the Shi'a?

Regarding the belief by some that the Qur'an is not complete, this is the view held by some, of both the Sunnis and the Shi'a. However, it is not true. One story states that the verses were lost and another says they were eaten by animals. Many references exist to this trans-sectarian belief.

Prof. Datuk Dr Osman Bakar

In the early 2000s, a muzakarah or discussion was held in Al-Azhar University attended by prominent Sunni and Sh'afi ulama' and also the then Deputy Minister in charge of Pusat Islam. The declaration made at the end of the muzakarah was that 8 sects of Islam (4 Sunni and 4 Shi'a) were recognised as being part of Islam. However, for some reason, this was not made public, particularly in Malaysia. We need to make this known and have follow-ups to this for the sake of the unity of the ummah.

Further, all this talk of differences between the Sunni and the Shi'a is a matter of mindset. Many do not distinguish between unity and uniformity. Of course we will be able to find quotes or whatever to support our opinion regarding the differences as we see them, but for how long can we go on doing so? This will not solve the problem.

What we need to do is to make the best conclusions to find similarities, not differences. Dialogue is the best answer. The definition of a Shi'a does not include vilification of the sahabah. Let us look for common grounds for unity and to acknowledge that differences are part of diversity to overcome the misunderstanding prevalent today. This will aid us in finding solutions for the issue at hand.

7. **What power does the public have to change the situation? When we speak up or have differing views, we are labelled as deviant and traitors. Furthermore, the issue is ignored by the powers that be. I am afraid to rise up as I'm afraid they will come after me and my family.**

Dr Chandra Muzaffar

In talking about changes, let's look at actual practices. Imam Khomeini instituted two important practices among the Shi'a. The first is he asked Iranians to observe the two ends of the Prophet's (PBUH) birthday. The Sunni and the

Shi'a celebrated his birthday on different days which were not many days apart. With this change, common ground was reached. The second is Imam Khomeini instituted Al Quds Day in recognition of the struggle of the Palestinians. This is commemorated worldwide by all Muslims.

In addition, the struggles to bring about change have never been easy. They have generally been long and hard. As for the negative consequences to the families and friends of dissenters, unfortunately, it does happen.

We must be hopeful. Let us consider the changes wrought in our lifetime. After many years, the proposals by civil society to make MPs in this country declare their assets, for the Election Commission to be independent, and for stopping the use of state funds and assets during election campaigns have all come to fruition.

I grant that in the context of religion, it is tougher to bring about changes as this involves emotions and psychology. Nevertheless, we must persevere and be persistent as struggle takes time. This is provided that we ensure there is space for dissent and the government of the day maintains some modicum of decency and honesty.

8. **Why do we need other sources when we should just go back to the Qur'an?**

Dato' Dr Ahmad Farouk Musa

Syed Qutb said the same thing - that we should go back to the primary source which is the Qur'an. However, there is one problem. When Imam Ali was confronted by the Khawarij, he told them to bring him a copy of the Qur'an, placed a sword on it and told it to speak. The Khawarij responded saying it can't speak. This illustrates that the Qur'an doesn't speak on its own. We give meaning to it; people interpret it, giving different interpretations. So we just cannot keep going back to the Qur'an in the hope the people will be united. Integration depends on us.

9. **Is there any international body that ensures all signatories to the Amman Message abide by it? Is it legally binding? Also, is there any agency in Malaysia that ensures the fatwas issued in the country are in line with the Amman Message?**

Dato' Dr Ahmad Farouk Musa

The Amman Message is not binding. The Amman Message:

- Recognises eight mazhab or sects of Islam. These are four Sunni (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi`i and Hanbali) and four Shi'a (Ja`fari Zaydi ,Thahiri and Ibadi).

- Based upon this definition, they forbade takfir (declarations of apostasy) between Muslims.

- We thus should not accuse Muslims of these sects as being kafir or unbelievers.

- Set forth the preconditions for the issuing of fatwas, thereby exposing ignorant and illegitimate edicts in the name of Islam.

We thus should not issue any fatwa just by quoting certain books or sayings of the Shi'a or Imam Khomeini and display our ignorance by issuing the verdict that they are kafir.

Prof. Datuk Dr Osman Bakar

The question of going back to the Qur'an as the sole source of knowledge, and not recognising or accepting other sources is a simplistic solution to the problem. Can Islam exist without any interpretation of the Qur'an? Certainly, the best interpreter of knowledge is the Qur'an itself, with the Prophet (PBUH) as the second best. But what about the role of ijtihad or the intellect so long as it is not contrary to the Qur'an or the hadith? This is how civilisation is built. Other than that, the solution is simplistic. Do we just erase 1,400 years of history and build it up again? So, we go by tradition. We accept what is good as part of tradition and remove what is bad from the treasury of our thinking.

The solution proposed will only undermine our respect for knowledge. This kind of thinking is what is spreading right now, making it destructive for the ummah.

Prof. Dr Syed Farid Alatas

Unfortunately, many countries including Malaysia who are signatories have not taken the Amman Message seriously. Many religious leaders in the country have wilfully ignored it. One person, a religious leader and campaigner against Shi'ism, was asked why they were against the Shi'a when the Amman Message has declared them to be part of Islam. He replied that it was different as the Amman Message talks of the Ja'fari while we are against the Imamis, displaying his clear *kebodohan* or stupidity. They are both the same. One is the jurisprudence aspect while the other is the aqidah aspect.

10. **What is the role of the intellectuals in uniting the ummah?**

Prof. Dr Syed Farid Alatas

The role of the intellectuals is to critique the situation, to expose the situation and to instil in the Malaysian public the facts as to the persecution taking place. The public should know that in the 1980s, a fatwa was passed stating that the Shi'a are part of Islam. In the 1990s, this was reversed. Why did the ulama' suddenly change their mind and suddenly declare the Shi'a as deviant?

In the context of the persecution of the Shi'a, it is part of the responsibility of intellectuals to expose the misunderstanding, the wrong interpretations, the evil, the distortions and the manipulation behind the issue.

There is a hadith that states that we can change things with the 'hand' (physically); if we can't, then we can change them with the 'tongue (through dissent); and if that's not possible, change them with the heart. In Malaysia, it is still possible to change things with action and with dissent. We need to bring people together for dialogue. We need to pressure the government. We can encourage the monarchy who have direct authority over the religious authorities, to play a positive role. They can see to it that we have progressive laws.

Dr. Sharifah Munirah Alatas

In Malaysia, we see increasing impatience in society which translates to apathy towards change, which is badly needed. Intellectuals need to play a role to keep talking about the issue. This is because Malaysians seem unable to analyse the issues to get to the root of the basic problems.

Dr. Chandra Muzaffar

When you ponder upon the Shi'a issue, we see it has a lot to do with the rise of religious consciousness. Religion has become more significant but the wrong kind especially with regard to the understanding of Islamic history.

Attempts to develop a counter-narrative have not been successful. So, what exists today is this dominant way of looking at Islam and the notion of Islam as rituals and forms, interlaced with ethnic identity. This interface between Islam and ethnic identity is crucial but seldom discussed. It is also a complex issue that needs to be dealt with.

It is very important to make use of all media channels to spread and share this consciousness - important because not even a single media channel has taken up the issue of the persecution of the Shi'a as a challenge.

End of Report

October 23, 2019