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## **Towards a Peaceful Future of Asean in an Era of Turbulence: The Need to Construct a *Wasatiyyah*-Driven Islamic Civilisation Across The Region**

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### **Abstract**

Today the phenomenon of “social and moral turbulence” has gone beyond the boundaries of banking and finance to embrace global politics, climate change and environmental disasters, international relations, inter-religious and intra-religious discord, food insecurity scenario, urban crime, lawlessness, and – not least – the daily hazards of living in an environment, system or culture with low standards of moral integrity in many cities of the Muslim world. For the Muslim majority communities of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, and the Muslim minorities of the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, the way the Islamic culture and civilization are going to develop in the context of ASEAN Economic Community of 2015 and beyond are going to be crucial for the survival of the Muslim *ummah* as a positive civilizing force. It is hoped that the formation of the ASEAN Community and its consolidation in the coming years would allow for greater public space for Muslim communities to play the role of *Rahmatan Li'L-'Alamin*, (Mercy to all Mankind) and *Ummatan Wasatan* ( Justly Balanced Community) in a shared and enlarged economic and cultural environment, such that the presence of Islam and the Muslim community would be perceived by the non-Muslim communities in ASEAN as a force that represents the message of peace, itahe should be changed respect and cooperation with non-Muslim communities.

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## **Towards a Peaceful Future of Asean in an Era of Turbulence: The Need to Construct a *Wasatiyyah*-Driven Islamic Civilisation Across The Region**

### **Introduction**

“By and large, what the world is facing today is a systemic crisis, a tectonic process of global transformation. It is a visible manifestation of our transition to a new cultural, economic, technological and geopolitical era. The world is entering a period of turbulence, which will be prolonged and painful. We should not be under any illusions.” (Putin 2012)<sup>1</sup>

“At the start of the 21st century, humankind finds itself on a nonsustainable course – a course that, unless it is changed, could lead to grand-scale catastrophes....we are travelling at breakneck speed into an age of extremes – extremes in wealth and poverty, extremes in technology and the experiments that scientists want to perform, extreme forces of globalism, weapons of mass destruction and terrorists acting in the name of religion....a drastic change is needed in the first half of the 21st century to set the stage for extraordinary events in the rest of the century.” (Martin, 2006)<sup>2</sup>

The “turbulence” that Alan Greenspan discusses in his *In The Age Of Turbulence: Adventures In A New World* (2008), refers to the recent crisis and collapse of global finance and banking

which have not yet fully recovered from the eruption of moral scandals arising from unrestrained greed and unethical financial innovations of the last decade; Today the phenomenon of “social and moral turbulence” has gone beyond the boundaries of banking and finance to embrace global politics, climate change and environmental disasters, international relations, inter-religious and intra-religious discord, food insecurity scenario, urban crime, lawlessness, and – not least – the daily hazards of living in an environment, system or culture with low standards of moral integrity in many cities of the Muslim world. For the Muslim majority communities of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, and the Muslim minorities of the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, the way the Islamic culture and civilization are going to develop in the context of ASEAN Economic Community of 2015 and beyond are going to be crucial for the survival of the Muslim *ummah* as a positive civilizing force.

It is hoped that the formation of the ASEAN Community and its consolidation in the coming years would allow for greater public space for Muslim communities to play the role of *Rahmatan Li'l-'Alamin*, (Mercy to all Mankind) in a shared and enlarged economic and cultural environment, such that the presence of Islam and the Muslim community would be perceived by the non-Muslim communities in ASEAN as a force that represents the message of peace, mutual respect and cooperation with non-Muslim communities. For such a positive perception to prevail, the following characteristics have to be maintained by the Muslim communities

<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister Putin's article in *Izvestia*, 6 January 2012, quoted in Alexander A. Kornilov, 25 January 2012, “Russia and Iran in Turbulent International Relations”. Retrieved December 12, 2013 from [www.bilgesam.org/.../index.php?.../turbulent](http://www.bilgesam.org/.../index.php?.../turbulent).

<sup>2</sup> J. Martin, *The Meaning of the 21st Century: A vital Blueprint for Ensuring Our Future*, 2006: 3-4. Dr. James Martin founded in 2005 the James Martin 21st-Century School at Oxford University, thus linking many institutes and academics around the world who are concerned with the future of the planet.

in ASEAN countries, particularly the Muslim majority countries of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam.

1. A way of life that strikes the desirable balance between the needs of spirituality and the necessities of materiality, and between praiseworthy tradition and necessary modernization;

2. The Muslim communities' commitment for peaceful coexistence and cooperation in multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation states;

3. The sincere commitment of Muslim leaders and government officials to uphold the rule of law, enlarge social and economic justice, and promote interreligious and intercultural respect of human dignity, cultural and religious diversities;

4. The emergence of a new Muslim generation of ethical political and economic leadership, which nurtures the culture of holistic knowledge and moral excellence, and prioritises the social welfare and economic wellbeing of the masses;

5. The flowering of the spirit of compassion among Muslims for the plight of fellow human beings, irrespective of religious or cultural differences; and

6. The determination of the Muslim communities, families, organisations or individuals to protect the natural environment and natural resources which are being ravaged by a combination of human materialistic greed, bad habits in the culture of high tolerance of uncleanliness, disregard for and ignorance of the seriousness of the state of ecological degradation, or the adverse consequences of continued practice of open burning of forests, dependence upon fossil fuels for transportation and generation of energy, as well as the increase in the emission of green-house gases or CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere.

Southeast Asia (with eleven

countries) as a geographical region and ASEAN (with ten nations in it) as its multi-state grouping have witnessed the spread and the resurgence of Islam in the different nations of ASEAN as well as the ups and downs of the Muslim way of life. With the emergence of the globalized trend of ISLAMOPHOBIA coupled with the rise in incidents of Muslim radicalism and militancy around the world in the last two decades, it is most unfortunate if this undesirable phenomenon has influenced non-Muslim masses and leaders of non-Muslim ASEAN countries to view the presence of Islam and the rise of Islamic consciousness in ASEAN region from the angle of distrust, suspicion or hatred. This attitude has clearly emerged in the current political and interreligious scenario of Myanmar.

The expectation of the non-Muslim leaders, intellectuals and the ordinary citizens of those non-Muslim ASEAN nations to see the more pronounced presence of Islam in their midst as representing the advent of the six above-mentioned characteristics has to be addressed by the Muslim leaders in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority countries. They have to respond positively to the above expectations because Islam in Southeast Asia is living side by side with other world religions in dynamic and symbiotic socio-cultural and national settings.

As the most widely practiced religion in the region, Islam is the faith of approximately 240 million Muslims, thus constituting about 40 % of the entire population of about 600 million people. It is the official religion in Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, but in Indonesia which is the largest Muslim population in the world, Islam is one of the six official religions. We believe the Muslim majority countries of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam which make up more than ninety per cent of the Muslim

community in the region, together with the Muslim minority countries of the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, Singapore, Kampuchea have the political, economic, intellectual and spiritual potentials to collectively work towards the reconstruction, reformation and development of the Southeast Asian branch of Islamic civilization. Towards fulfilling this transnational civilizational objective, we expect Muslim leaders, scholars, educationists and families of the Indonesian, the Malaysian and the Bruneian *ummah* to play the major and leading roles, while the minority Muslim communities in the other eight Southeast Asian countries – due to the political, economic, cultural and educational constraints imposed by the non-Muslim states – would be playing supportive and complementary roles.

The gigantic task of construction, reconstruction, reformation and development of the *wasatiyyah*-oriented civilization – a civilization characterised by justice, moral excellence and balance between the extremes of laxity and liberality on the one hand and the extremes of rigidity and radicalism on the other – across Southeast Asian countries is admittedly a daunting task with a long-term agenda. Nevertheless, it is a civilizational vision which transcends the national boundaries and interests, a global Ummatic vision which we hope would be commonly shared by the Muslim leaders, Islamic *da`wah* organisations and educationists in the region. It is a long-term planning and strategic perspective which takes into account the external challenges, the internal constraints and weaknesses, as well as the new opportunities opened up by the era of turbulence and turmoil that the modern world is undergoing. We believe that once the Muslim scholars and educationists have collectively envisioned and planned to attain this regional

civilizational goal of Islam before the end of the 21st century – a goal that is the logical conclusion of the Divinely ordained mission of *Khair Ummah* (the Best of Communities) cum *Ummah Wasat* (Justly Balanced Community), then the Islamic educational curricular and institutional reform and renewal in the ASEAN Muslim communities would have to be refined and readjusted to go beyond the national agenda and nationalistic politics to include the ASEAN regional scenario.

Admittedly, the task of Islamic civilizational reform in the Malay-Indonesian world is not an easy one, but we ought to start with the common vision that the Qur'an makes it incumbent upon the Muslim communities all over the world. In the context of the current civilizational crisis of the contemporary world which has been constructed largely on the basis of the dominant secular humanistic or agnostic worldviews, Muslim leaders, scholars and educationists ought to seize this opportunity to envision, plan and execute the agenda of the *Khair Ummah* cum *Ummah Wasat* as the way out of the modern world's civilizational collapse, and the regional phenomenon of interreligious conflict or discord.

The regional Islamic reform vision is, in fact, a continuation of past reformist efforts in the Malay-Indonesian world which have been carried out by the great *ulama`*, thinkers, educationists and organisations of the early 20th century. Therefore, the vision and the planning would have to capitalize on several positive cultural assets of the Malay-Indonesian world which consist of:

1. the historical foundation of peaceful spread of Islam in the Malay world;
2. the widespread influence of Sunni religious and intellectual tradition and sensibility as a unifying force in spite

of some local diversities;

3. the harmonious blending of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*‘ilm al-tawhid*), Islamic spirituality and mysticism (*tasawwuf*) and reformist thought (*islāh-tajdīd-ijtihād*) in Muslim religious education and culture;

4. the harmonization of Western democratic institutions with Islamic and Malay political tradition and thought;

5. the long experience of Muslim communities living side by side with non-Muslim communities and forging lasting political alliances;

6. the attitude of openness towards integrating local traditional values with modern technology and institutions;

the increasing ability of Muslim leaders, managers and professionals in introducing quality management techniques in managing complex modern educational, scientific, economic and political organisations; and

7. the determination of Muslim governments and organizations in ASEAN countries to mould and develop the more holistic human capital, equipped with the necessary spiritual, ethical, intellectual and rational knowledge and skills, to meet the requirements of civilizational sustainability in the increasingly competitive economic and technological environments in the coming decades of the 21st century.

### **The Spectre of Turbulence, Turmoil and Disorder Affecting Southeast Asian Region**

It should also be borne in mind, however, that in the process of reconstructing the transnational Islamic civilization, based upon the Qur’anic vision of *Khair Ummah* and the doctrine of *al-wasatiyyah*, the Southeast Asian Muslim *ummah*, being part and parcel of the whole region, will not be able to isolate themselves from the positive or

negative effects of, at least, six mega trends which are bound to influence the course of events and reshape the economic, political and cultural landscapes of ASEAN societies.

1. The first mega trend is the phenomenal rise of Asia Pacific region, together with the emergence of BRICs as another economic power house of the world and the new economic growth area, thus bringing the military, economic and technological assets and might of USA, Japan, China, India and Russia into potentially destabilizing configurations. The shift of super power economic and geo-political strategies to the Asia-Pacific region and the positioning or posturing of the military muscles between China, Japan and USA would place Southeast Asian countries in general and ASEAN in particular in a vulnerable position, given the new dynamics of political and economic contestations, while China, Japan and USA are major trade partners to many ASEAN countries. The ongoing process of getting several Asian and Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, to sign the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) is bound to affect the economy of the Muslim majority and minority communities in ASEAN<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA), is “an initiative to establish a free trade agreement (FTA) between 12 countries (excluding China) - Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United States and Vietnam - will see a market of 800 million people and combined gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$27.5 trillion (RM89.1 trillion). The agreement covers new elements such as competition, labour, environment, government procurement and intellectual property rights. The International Trade and Industry Ministry (Miti) has put together a Q&A (question and answer) to address public concerns and fears about the ongoing talks.” (Retrieved 31 October 2014 from <http://www.smecorp.gov.my/vn2/node/597>). The TPPA encompasses “40 per cent of the global

2. The second mega trend is the widening and deepening impact of the global process of democratization and secularization of political systems in Asia Pacific and Southeast Asia since the beginning of the 21st century. This has led to the fragmentation and division of Muslim political unity and strength in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, while Brunei, with its ideology which unifies Malay-Islam-Monarchy institutions and values into a stable integration, is spared of the internal religio-political crisis.

3. The third mega trend is the emergence of religious fundamentalism, extremism and militancy among Muslim, Christian and Buddhist communities in ASEAN countries with the consequential tension, distrust and ill-feeling adversely affecting inter-religious relationship in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Myanmar.

4. The fourth mega trend is the globalization of alternative social media – thanks to the information technology revolution – with unethical content, the message of unrestrained human freedom and expression, and the invasion of sensate popular culture and entertainment genres which are beyond state and parental control. The relativisation of

moral and ethical values and the spread of anti-Islamic propaganda pose a new educational and religious challenge to Muslim families, schools, universities and religious leaders and thinkers.

5. The fifth mega trend is the globalization of international and Western paranoia of Muslim identity, militancy, radicalism and extremism post 9/11, via the global media, as part of the transnational propaganda and discourse of Islamophobia and demonization of Islam and the Muslim world. This propaganda and the focusing of mainstream media to acts of violence or terrorism committed by radical Muslim individuals and groups have helped to sow the seeds of inter-religious discord and hostility in several ASEAN countries.

6. The sixth mega trend is the emergence of the ASEAN Community from 2015 and beyond. It was agreed by the ASEAN Leaders at the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN, to come up with the **ASEAN Vision 2020**. It was to be a common vision of Southeast Asian nations which are “outward looking, living in peace, stability and prosperity, bonded together in partnership in dynamic development and in a community of caring societies.”<sup>1</sup> The 9th ASEAN Summit in 2003 resolved that an ASEAN Community shall be established by 2020, but the ASEAN leaders at 12th ASEAN Summit in January 2007, decided to accelerate the establishment of an ASEAN Community by 2015. The **ASEAN Community** is comprised of the following three pillars, namely the ASEAN Political-Security Community for peace, stability and prosperity, ASEAN Economic Community for integration, inclusivity, free trade and

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*economy... has been the subject of negotiations for years. US President Barack Obama said in June he hoped to have an agreement on framing the deal, which has been slowed by debate on key details between the US and Japan, by November.” (Retrieved 31 October 2014 from <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/business/international/momentum-building-on/1434860.html>).*

*Although negotiations among the 12 countries are still on-going, Malaysia has expressed its reservations on some issues and its unwillingness to rush into the signing of the agreement. There is a strong fear among Malay leaders that the agreement would open up the Malaysian markets to the big and powerful corporations and businesses leading to the marginalization and demise of the small and medium enterprises owned by the Muslims.*

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved 1st November 2014 from <http://www.youtube.com/user/TheAseanSecretariat>?

market-driven economic cooperation, and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community which is “people-centred and socially responsible with a view to achieving enduring solidarity and unity among the nations and peoples of ASEAN by forging a common identity and building a caring and sharing society which is inclusive and harmonious where the well-being, livelihood, and welfare of the peoples are enhanced.”<sup>1</sup>

The establishment of the ASEAN Community by the end of 2015 would bring the ten different nation-states in closer cooperation with one another. The way in which the new ASEAN Community is going to be developed, either through mutual compromises or consensus will directly impact upon the future and the interests of the Muslim majority and Muslim minority communities in the respective countries. Therefore, the role of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei as the three Muslim majority nations in ASEAN in the formation and development of the ASEAN Community is crucial for the Muslim *ummah* in the ASEAN region, for they would have to negotiate the future road maps with the secular and non-Muslim majority nations of Singapore, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and Kampuchea.

The emergence of the ASEAN Community and the six mega trends discussed above should not be considered by Muslims in isolation from the following locally unfolding scenarios:

- the greater assertiveness in the spread of *Shi'ah* teachings into the Sunni communities in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines;
- the emergence and spread of the Liberal Islam Network in Indonesia since the last decade;

- the persistence of the Qadianiah-Ahmadiyah movement in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore in claiming themselves to be true Muslims, and the support given to it by the Liberal Muslims in Indonesia with the blessings of secular Western establishments;
- the political disunity and divisions among the majority Muslim population in Malaysia and Indonesia, and the Muslim minority population in the Philippines and Thailand;
- the public confusion with regard to the newly coined slogan of “Moderate Islam”;
- the new and recent inter-religious discord in Malaysia between the perspective of Muslim orthodoxy in upholding theological puritanism and the perspective of Christian contextualisation of the Gospel in the Malay world;
- the internal political tension between the proponents of secular nationalism or deconfessionalised and pluralistic *Pancasila* ideology, on the one hand, and the proponents of the Islamic political, economic and legal systems, on the other; and
- the long-standing religio-political tension between Muslim minorities in southern Thailand, southern Philippines and Myanmar and the central governments of those countries.

We need to bear in mind too that the nations in the ASEAN grouping have been adversely affected, for the last several decades, by the phenomena of social and moral turbulence with the spread of the cancer of corruption and abuse of power in politics, business, economy, public administration, sports, and entertainment industry. The urban youth sub- culture of drug abuse,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

hooliganism, sexual liberalism and addiction to sensate forms of popular entertainment have become a common feature of the big cosmopolitan cities of Southeast Asian

countries. The inter-ethnic tensions and religio-political polarisations in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar and Thailand are worrying signs of social, political and religious divisions and discord (Scott Thompson 2014).<sup>1</sup> The recent emergence of Myanmar Buddhist radicalism and militancy against the Muslim Rohingya community; the militancy and terrorism of the Abu Sayyaf in Mindanao; the attempts of the radical “*Jama`ah Islamiyah*” elements in Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia to disrupt the law and order in those countries further complicate the existential problems of the Muslim *ummah* in Southeast Asia (Abdul Halim bin Kader 2007; Gunaratna et al. 2013; Muhammad Haniff Hassan (2009).<sup>2</sup>

These are some of the major internal issues and problems which also serve as indicators of national and regional instabilities and tensions involving the strained or problematic relationship between Islam and the nation state, or between Muslim communities and the rest, or among Muslim groups, which could lead to greater turmoil and turbulence in the near future, give the scenario of uncertainties and highly unpredictable economic, political and religious configurations in the region, and – most recently – the subversive appeal of the so-called “ISIL” (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) movement to some impressionable Muslim individuals in some ASEAN countries, not to speak of the economic hardships and prolonged poverty of millions of the poor Muslim people in Indonesia, Myanmar, Kampuchea, Thailand and Mindanao. Muslim leaders, politicians, scholars, intellectuals and educationists in Muslim Southeast Asia are therefore confronted with new multifaceted and formidable challenges which no one single group of Muslims, or one single country, can solve them by itself.

As for the internal problems of Muslim communities indicated above, they only serve to tarnish the image of Islam and the Muslim communities, and reflect the serious weaknesses and defects in the practice of Islamic teachings and values among the leadership and the masses. The Islamic society, culture and civilization – despite the progress being made in the reform and improvements of Islamic education, construction of new Islamic institutions of higher learning,

<sup>1</sup> Despite the worrying signs of socio-political and inter-religious discord in Southeast Asia, W. Scott Thomson at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, USA, still considers “Southeast Asia is the place to smile” in his recent article (*New Straits Times*, October 8, 2014). From his analysis of the current world situation, he comes to the following conclusion: “Malaysia provides one of the world’s best examples of a tricky balancing act in providing stability in a multi-ethnic state. It is basically because it is a strong state; even its critics must admit the remarkable success of its leaders. It is gaining ground in the middle income division of the world’s states. The economic model says that countries well-endowed with natural resources are the first ones to fail, relying too heavily on what they can get out of the ground or grow on trees. But it secured independence with strong leaders who changed all that. This is quite an oversimplification, but the bottom line is a big success story.” W. Scott Thompson, “Southeast Asia is the place to smile,” *New Straits Times*, October 8, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> See Abdul Halim bin Kader (2007). *Fighting Terrorism: Preventing the Radicalisation of Youth in a Secular and Globalised World*. Singapore: Taman Bacaan Pemuda Pemudi Melayu Singapura; Rohan Gunaratna (et al.) (2013). *Countering*

*Extremism Building Social Resilience through Community Engagement*. London: Imperial College Press; Muhammad Haniff Hassan (2009). *Unlicensed to Kill Countering Imam Samudra’s Justification for the Bali Bombing*. Singapore: Nature Media Pte Ltd.

mosques, Islamic banks, Islamic insurance, better management of Hajj organisation and zakat collection systems, increase in the promotion of Islamic *da’wah* methods and forms, *halal* food, Islamic dress, religious songs, and the publication of hundreds of books and magazines concerning Islam and Muslim life – are in dire need of comprehensive and well-planned reform.

Looking at the external and internal crises as signals of the crumbling pillars of modern secular civilization, Southeast Asian Muslim leaders, scholars, educationists and organisations should perceive the challenges of managing in the new era of turbulence and turmoil as opportunities to construct a new or reconstruct the ethical, educational and intellectual content of Islamic culture and civilization, with the goal of making the Malay-Indonesian world – in the long run, if possible by 2050 – as the shining example of Islamic *Wasatiyyah* civilization which exemplifies:

1. democratic good governance based on the rule of law, separation of powers and accountability to the people;
2. ethical leadership of high moral integrity which abhors corruption and power abuse;
3. high level of civic consciousness and responsible civil societies based on the culture of God-consciousness;
4. balance and synergy of religious tradition, technological modernity and professional competency and excellence;
5. peaceful and harmonious co-existence with non-Muslim fellow citizens;
6. holistic educational excellence which is based on the integration of human intelligence, reason with Divine Revelation with a strong emphasis on character education;

7. a shared and inclusive economic growth based on Islamic principles of finance, and economic and social justice which help to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor within the Muslim communities and across the region, and

8. the ability of sustaining the natural environment and resources for the needs of future generations with innovative “green” technologies and policies.

The need to have better and stronger **transnational efforts** toward ameliorating the internal problems of the Muslim *ummah* in Southeast Asia and to be collectively prepared to undertake the task of civilizational reform and reconstruction has long been felt by ummatic Muslim leaders, intellectuals and international Islamic organisations in the Malay world. However, it is understandable that the concerned Muslim leaders, individuals, groups and organisations of each Muslim majority country or each Muslim minority country have been, and will continue, using different conventional ways and means to solve the internal problems or crises of the Muslim due to the different political, economic and social contexts, systems and conditions.

But the construction, reconstruction and reform of the Southeast Asian branch of global Islamic civilization – going beyond the normal discourse on Islamic personality, culture, state, or *da’wah* – is perhaps among the most important agenda to be pursued internationally. It is unfortunately given low priority in the national Islamic discourse since Muslim thought and action in Southeast Asia are normally constrained, defined and framed by the respective national interests and agenda. It is our submission that this *Wasatiyyah*-driven civilizational reconstruction efforts have to be pursued more rigorously in the

coming decades of the 21st century via systematic and planned transnational deliberations and strategies to be on par with or, at least, parallel to the concerted international efforts of ASEAN nations to move on to the higher levels of economic, political and cultural cooperation, in the framework of the ASEAN Community vision.

### **The Agenda for Promoting *Al-Wasatiyyah* as The Explicit Theme of Civilisational Reconstruction in Muslim Southeast Asia**

In light of the above challenges coming not only from the new geopolitical strategic importance of the Asia-Pacific region, the six mega trends including ASEAN's integrative initiatives for the realization of the ASEAN Community, but also from the internal weaknesses of the Muslim communities in the Muslim majority as well as the Muslim minority countries, we are promoting the agenda for a regional reconstruction of Islamic civilization of Southeast Asia based on the vision of *Wasatiyyah* (the Justly Balanced nature of Islam). The choice of *Wasatiyyah* as the vision is based on a few considerations:

1) The development of Islamic civilization in the Malay world was generally not associated with a specific theme, and is tied to and coloured by the Islamic religious educational and cultural environment of a particular country. It was therefore conceived as the extension, or another dimension, of the Islamic way of life of the Muslims in the region known as the Malay world.

2) The concept of *al-Wasatiyyah*, as compared to the concept of *Khair Ummah* (The Best Community), was not given enough or proper attention in Islamic religious, social or cultural education of the Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. Islamic *da`wah* and Friday khutbahs tend to emphasize the

concept of *Khair Ummah* with the mission of *al-amr bi-al-`ma`ruf wa al-nahi `an al-munkar* (enjoining the good/right and forbidding the evil/wrong).

3) The post 9/11 world and the Western media have been focusing on the phenomenon of increasing Muslim presence in Western societies, religious fundamentalism, radicalism, extremism, militancy and violence associated mainly with Muslim actors and groups. The emergence of Muslim militancy and radicalism in the middle of the 20th century in West Asia can be traced to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and during the dictatorship of Jamal Abdul Nasser, followed by the military rule of Anwar Sadat. The emergence of religious and political extremism in Egypt which led to the assassination of Anwar Sadat was critically analysed and criticized by Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi in his book, *al-ahwah al-Islamiyyah baina al-Juhūd wa al-Taṣarruf* (Islamic renaissance between rejection and extremism). The increase in the religious discourse on *Wasatiyyah* in West Asia in the last four or five decades was meant to reiterate the Qur'anic message of the justly balanced nature of Islam as a holistic religion and civilization. But the events of 9/11 and after have made the concept a convenient political instrument against the rise of Muslim radicalism, extremism and militancy.

We wish to explain that our desire to promote the vision of *Wasatiyyah* as the focus of Islamic civilizational reconstruction in the Southeast Asian region is not primarily aimed at addressing and overcoming the challenge of Muslim radicalism and militancy in Southeast Asian countries, although the theme and concept can and should be used as one of the Islamic strategies to combat the emergence of such phenomenon in Indonesia, southern

Thailand and Mindanao. Our primary aim is to restore and reemphasise the true nature, characteristics and role of Islam and the Muslim *ummah* as prescribed and ordained by none other than the One True God, Allah The Most Gracious, The Most Compassionate, so that the Muslim communities in Southeast Asia would be one of the leading examples of moral-spiritual goodness and excellence (*al-khairiyyah*), justice (*al-'adl*) and balance (*al-tawāzun*) – the three inseparable qualities of *al-Wasatiyyah*. One of the best available channels to convey this divinely ordained mission of the Muslim *ummah* and educate the masses on the high significance of the sacred mission and its relevance to the era of turbulence and turmoil the modern world has entered is through Muslim educational institutions, i.e., the Islamic religious knowledge curriculum of the schools and the courses at university levels in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore. Let us first get a better understanding of the Qur'anic concept of *Wasatiyyah* as explained by several translators and commentators of the Qur'an.

#### **The Meaning of *Ummah Wasat* According to some Qur'anic Commentators**

Verse 143 of *Surah al-Baqarah* is translated as follows by several translators:

1. Thus, have We made of you an Ummat justly balanced, that ye might be witnesses over the nations, and the Messenger a witness over yourselves... (Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Glorious Qur'an*)

2. Thus have We made you a Community of the "Golden Mean" so that you may be witnesses in regard to mankind and the Messenger may be a witness in regard to you... (Abul A'la Maududi, *Tafhim al-Qur'an*)

3. And thus have We willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that [with your lives] you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind, and that the Apostle might bear witness to it before you... (Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*)

4. Thus We have appointed you a middle nation, that ye may be witnesses against mankind, and that the messenger may be a witness against you... (Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*)

5. Thus We have made you [true Muslims - real believers of Islamic Monotheism, true followers of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his *Sunnah* (legal ways)], a *Wasat* (just) (and the best) nation, that you be witnesses over mankind and the Messenger (Muhammad) ﷺ be a witness over you... (Dr. Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali, & Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *The Noble Quran*)

6. Thus We appointed you a mid-most nation that you might be witnesses to the people and that the Messenger might be a witness to you.... (A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*)

Some of the interesting commentaries are as follows:

#### **Abul A'la Maududi**

The word "*ummah wasat*" is so comprehensive in meaning that no English word can correctly convey its full sense. It is a righteous and noble community which does not go beyond proper limits, but follows the middle course and deals out justice evenly to the nations of the world as an impartial judge, and bases all its relations with other nations on truth and justice.

The meaning of "We have appointed you as *ummah wasat* so that you may be witnesses in regard to mankind and the Messenger may be a witness in regard to you" is: On the

Judgement Day when all mankind will be called to account together, the Messenger, as Our authorised representative, will give evidence in regard to you to prove that he had imparted to you, by word and by deed, without any reservation, the whole teaching of sound thought, righteous deed and justice given by Us. Then you, being representatives of the Messenger, in your turn, will be required to give evidence to prove that you had done your utmost to impart, by word and deed, to mankind whatever the Messenger had imparted to you just as you had received it from the Messenger.

Thus, a person or group's being appointed by God a witness by itself amounts to its being exalted to the office of leadership and religious guide in the world. Though it is a position of honour, it carries very onerous responsibilities with it. It requires that the Muslim Community should become a living witness of piety, truth and justice before the world just as the Holy Prophet bore witness before it, and its words and deeds should suffice to demonstrate to the world the meaning of truth, justice and piety. It also implies that it is a great responsibility for which the Muslim Community is accountable. Just as the Holy Prophet was responsible for conveying the Guidance of Allah, so the Muslims are responsible for conveying it to the people of the world. If they fail to prove in the Court of Allah that they have discharged this responsibility to the best of their ability, they will be condemned there. And they along with their evil geniuses and accomplices shall be accountable for all the evils which prevailed during their term of leadership, if they had shown any relaxation in the performance of their obligation as witnesses of the Truth. On the Day of Judgement, Allah will surely ask, "What did you do to prevent it when you saw the epidemic of sin, tyranny and impiety breaking out in the world?"

### Muhammad Asad

Lit. "Middlemost community"-i.e., a community that keeps an equitable balance between extremes and is realistic in its appreciation of man's nature and possibilities, rejecting both licentiousness and exaggerated asceticism. In tune with its oft-repeated call to moderation in every aspect of life, the Qur'an exhorts the believers not to place too great an emphasis on the physical and material aspects of their lives, but postulates, at the same time, that man's urges and desires relating to this "life of the flesh" are God-willed and, therefore, legitimate. On further analysis, the expression "a community of the middle way" might be said to summarize, as it were, the Islamic attitude towards the problem of man's existence as such: a denial of the view that there is an inherent conflict between the spirit and the flesh, and a bold affirmation of the natural, God-willed unity in this twofold aspect of human life. This balanced attitude, peculiar to Islam, flows directly from the concept of God's oneness and, hence, of the unity of purpose underlying all His creation.

### **Other Implications of *Al-Wasatiyyah*: Just Balance Between Spiritual Needs and Worldly Needs**

"But seek, through that which Allah has given you, the home of the Hereafter; and [yet], do not forget your share of the world. And do good as Allah has done good to you. And desire not corruption in the land. Indeed, Allah does not like corrupters." (Q. 28: 77)

The Muslim *Ummah* being designated by Allah SWT as the "Just Community" is to uphold and preserve the pristine purity of the religion of *Tauhid*, and execute the commandments and Plan of Allah (S.W.T.), accompanied by a God-fearing mindset (*taqwā*), thereby **becoming the most suitable witnesses over mankind** regarding the

integrity and purity of Allah's religion, Truth versus Falsehood, Good versus Evil, and the practice of true Balance in this world and in the Hereafter.

Therefore, when we discuss the topic of *Wasatiyyah* or *Justly Balanced Nature* of Islam, we should not lose sight of *the obligation upon Muslims to become religious, moral and civilizational witnesses over mankind, with the attributes of justice and moral excellence as the fundamental qualities of the Muslim community*

**Just Balance or The Requisite Moderation in Personal Conduct and Behavior is Emphasized in Several Verses of The Qur'an, E.G.:**

*“And do not turn your cheek [in contempt] toward people and do not walk through the earth exultantly. Indeed, Allah does not like everyone self-deluded and boastful” (Q.31: 18)*

*“And be moderate in your pace and lower your voice; indeed, the most disagreeable of sounds is the voice of donkeys.” (Q. 31: 19)*

**Balance in economic consumption is indicated in the following verses:**

*“O you who have believed, do not prohibit the good things which Allah has made lawful to you and do not transgress. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors.” (Q. 5: 87)*

*“And eat of what Allah has provided for you [which is] lawful and good. And fear Allah, in whom you are believers”. (Q. 5: 88)*

*'A'ishah, the wife of Allah's Apostle (may peace be upon him), reported Allah's Apostle (may peace be upon him) as saying: Kindness is not to be found in anything but that it adds to its beauty and it is not withdrawn from anything but it makes it defective.*

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**Just Balance and Avoidance of Extremism is not an Excuse or Justification for Moral Laxity, Unethical Behaviour or Liberalism in Performance of Religious Duties**

It should be pointed out that the concept of “Just Balance” must not be misunderstood as justification for indulgence (*tasāhul*), carelessness or an excuse to be negligent in performance of religious obligations. With regard to performance of religious obligations, the nature of moderation in them is clearly defined and stated in the Sunnah (the normative statements and practices) of the Prophet (S.A.W.).

It is, therefore, the duty of objective and qualified Muslim scholars to make the necessary corrections or clarifications. Otherwise, *al-Wasatiyyah* could be understood as a license or permission given by religion to be lax in the performance of religious duties. In explaining the important concept of *al-Wasatiyyah*, we should be careful not to emphasise one quality at the expense of other qualities, because those three inseparable qualities of Justice, Excellence or Goodness and Just Balance are in fact organically intertwined and integrated. We are not doing justice to the Divine principle of *al-Wasatiyyah* if we choose to highlight only one aspect of its holistic meaning, namely “Just Balance” or “Avoidance of Extremism or Laxity” to the detriment of other qualities, although the issue of “Just Balance” is highly relevant to the present global threats from religious extremism, xenophobia, exaggerated human freedom,

ideological dogmatism, capitalistic consumerism or ethnic fundamentalism, in the West and in the East, or in the North and in the South.

Nevertheless, we should enlighten Muslim political leaders, elites or intellectuals who may not be very well-informed about important Qur'anic concepts or terminologies to be exercise caution with regard to the tendency or temptation to utilize the concept of *al-Wasatiyyah*, as understood to mean a general attitude of relaxed moderation which could be construed by the ignorant masses as encouraging toleration for the culture of average-mindedness or mediocrity in the religious lives of Muslims. They should also be made aware of the danger of unconsciously repeating the mistake of Gen. Parvez Musharraf, former President of Pakistan who propagated the national slogan of “Enlightened Moderation” (*al-wasatiyyah al- mustanīrah*) in order to appease the Western super powers. We would like to emphasise the importance of the right approach, namely the “Wasatisation of Muslim politics” instead of “Muslim Politicisation of Wasatiyyah”, because the Qur'an requires the development of Muslim thought, culture and civilization to be in accordance with the principles and values of Islam, and not the other way around, i.e. moulding or appropriating of Islamic principles or values to be subject to or in accordance with national interests, ideologies or local cultural norms.

### **The Content or The Course on Islamic Civilisation in Universities**

We hope that in the process of reviewing, revising or improving the course on Islamic civilization in universities in ASEAN region, in particular, the theme of *al-Wasatiyyah* is given greater prominence and the goal of actualizing the *Ummah Wasat* civilization as a regional transnational objective in the 21st century is also discussed. At the level of primary and secondary schools, the idea of the Muslim community being obligated to become the *Khair Ummah* and *Ummah Wasat* will have to be given greater emphasis. All these efforts would remain theoretical or rhetorical if there is no real efforts in the Muslim communities to realize the cultural paradigm shift from the culture of mediocrity, petty-mindedness, religio-political divisiveness, slavish imitation of Western civilizational norms and standards, the culture of corruption and abuse of power and natural resources, disregard for environmental sustainability and the legitimate rights of other creatures of Allah The Most Gracious Most Merciful, to the Islamic culture of *'ubūdiyyah*, *khilāfah* and *rahmatan li-al- 'ālamīn* which is translated into holistic and balanced educational, ethical and spiritual excellence as the characteristic of the new Islamic Malay World of the 21st century.

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