

Seminars, Conferences, Addresses

World Conference on the International Islamic Calendar

The Astronomical Research Unit
University of Science Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia
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The University of Science Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia, and the Organization of Islamic Conference's Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation (COMSTECH), recently organized and hosted the World Conference on the International Islamic Calendar. The theme, "Towards a Unified World Islamic Calendar," was discussed during eight sessions by an international audience consisting of about two hundred dignitaries, ulama, policymakers, scientists, and professionals from twenty-five countries and ten major international organizations. It was also generously sponsored by fifteen other agencies, including the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT).

The conference was opened by Tun Dato' Seri Haji Hamdan Sheikh Tahir, head of the State of Penang. This marked the initiation of the systematic implementation process for the international Islamic calendar. Dato' Haji Musa Mohammad, vice chancellor of the University of Science Malaysia and conference chairman, thanked the planners in his welcoming address. He was followed by M. A. Kazi and Ambassador M. Mohsin, who addressed the conference on behalf of COMSTECH and OIC respectively. Kazi stressed the importance of developing a uniform and systematic international Islamic lunar calendar through continued and detailed study by those qualified to do so. Ambassador Mohsin pointed out the need to unify the existing calendars in the Muslim world. The OIC, he said, is in the process of making this a regular priority item in its agenda and is ready to give its full support.

The keynote address, "Internationalizing the Islamic Calendar: The Challenge of a New Century," was delivered by Mohammad Ilyas. He highlighted some of the work that had gone into developing the calendar program, explained what progress has been made on predicting the new moon's visibility, and related how this can be used for an international Islamic calendar. He also focused on the interrelation of science, the Sharī'ah, and policy and its implication for the question of implementation.

The conference also heard reports from members in Australia, Nigeria, Tanzania, the United States, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia,

Myanmar/Burma, Singapore, and Taiwan. Each person spoke about his/her country's current calendrical practices, technical support, and organizational system. Relevant issues for further consideration were also raised. A general overview was compiled and duly noted in order to coordinate and streamline the various activities in line with one of the conference objectives.

On the second day, the scientific and the Shari'ah aspects of an international Islamic calendar were discussed. The scientific aspect was elaborated upon by Ilyas, and the Shari'ah aspects were dealt with by Muhammad Burhanuddin and Tāhā J. al 'Alwānī, whose paper was read by Anis Ahmad. A. R. Khan Azhari gave additional comments that strongly supported the use of mathematical and astronomical computing in sighting the *hilāl*. Speakers raised issues related to the integration of these two aspects, and an overall agreement was achieved: scientists and Shari'ah scholars will cooperate in the preparation of clear and concise guidelines for establishing a firm basis for implementing *imkān al ru'yah* (naked-eye sightability). Some concerted regional efforts were also agreed upon so that the feasibility of developing an all-purpose Islamic calendar could be verified, reviewed, and improved.

The next two sessions were on coordinating efforts at the global and the regional levels. The former was introduced by Ambassador Mohsin (OIC) and M. A. Kazi (COMSTech), each of whom explained the OIC's political and scientific mechanisms. Abdullah O. Nassef (Rabitah) spoke on the Islamic Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Global System. The overall views expressed during these two sessions showed overwhelming support for a global implementation, although there are still a few outstanding issues requiring further research. The speakers agreed to implement the Islamic calendar at various regional levels, including Muslim minorities and regional NGOs, inter-Islamic cooperation on science, technology, and intergovernmental setups. These were affirmed by Datuk Haji Ahmad Nordin (RISEAP), Arafat R. Altamemi (IFSTAD), and Haji Yaakob Lazim (Malaysia) who delivered papers on these three aspects respectively.

This day also marked the official opening of the Sheikh Tahir Astronomical Centre (Pusat Falak Sheikh Tahir) at Pantai Acheh, Penang. Originally known as Pantai Acheh Astronomical Centre, it was officially renamed to honor Muḥammad Tāhir Jalāl al Dīn al Falakī al Azharī, a noted *'ālim* and *faqīh*, a regional pioneer in Islamic astronomy, and the first religious scholar to use logarithms in his calendrical calculation system.

The third day featured papers on the implementation mechanisms encompassing scientific research and the review process. Ilyas again highlighted the need for such implementation mechanisms and suggested some action plans. This was supported by Muhammad Baghdadi (Morocco) and Abdul Rahman I. Doi (Malaysia) in their outlines, respectively, of the availability of scientific

and Islamic research centers. The speakers identified what they saw as fundamental issues and areas for improvement and future undertakings, particularly in terms of funding, technical facilities, and manpower.

The sixth session focused on issues related to networking, i.e., the use of computers, information technology, and other resource needs. The first aspect was dealt with by M. Jamil Sherif (UK), whose ideas were expanded and presented by M. M. Qurashi (Pakistan). Naeem A. Khan (COMSTECH) spoke on the second aspect and the implementation of a working structure and plan for resource planning.

The conference adopted several resolutions: a) all Muslims, whether on an individual, governmental, or organizational level, should use *imkān al ru'yah*; b) astronomical calculations should be used when necessary; c) international Islamic organizations should mobilize resources and support for an international network of research and development institutions to further this process; d) universities and institutions of higher learning should offer courses in astronomy; and e) *hijrī* dates should be used alongside Georgian ones.

This conference is the latest step in a multiyear process. Beginning with the establishment of the International Islamic Calendar Programme (IICP) at the University of Science Malaysia (USM), it has gone through three distinct phases. Phase I (1974-83) identified the problems and undertook scientific research which resulted in a) a lunar visibility criterion review; b) a global prediction model; c) the discovery of the International Lunar Date Line (ILDC); d) data dissemination; and e) the implementation initiatives. Phase II (1984-89) saw efforts related to global networking and exposition, such as organized global data dissemination (books, charts, and circulars), regional and national institutional and expository seminars, and discussion meetings at the professional level. Phase III (1990-94) is concerned with the international implementation and review of the program and involves the Muslim political machinery at the national, regional, and global levels, as well as scientific and religious professionals. This phase was initiated by the World Conference on the International Islamic Calendar.

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