

**Workshop on “Conceptualising the Ummah,”
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This two-day event was organised by School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University, the United Kingdom, the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, and Royal Commonwealth Society, Kuala Lumpur. The workshop was a part of the joint project between the Universities of Durham, Edinburgh and Manchester, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the United Kingdom. This project seeks to examine how Muslims have dealt with the ideas of interconnectedness and unity, as seemingly contradictory trends have unfolded – as states and parochial identities became entrenched in the Muslim world and as broader networks have emerged. It aims to access the ways in which one of the central concepts of Islam, the ummah (the community of faith), has been conceived of by diverse intellectual circles as well as in the everyday practice.

This recent workshop, hosted by Royal Commonwealth Society and the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at University of Nottingham Malaysia’s Campus, Kuala Lumpur, explored the concept of the ummah that every Muslim, regardless of living in Muslim or non-Muslim country, assumes to be pivotal. The event featured ten themes presented by the intellectuals and researchers who work constantly in the field of political Islam, Muslim unity and the ummah identity. Speakers included Prof. Dr James Piscatori (Durham University), Prof. Dr Yahya Michot (Hartford Seminary), Dr Mohammad Talib (University of Oxford), Prof. Dr Syed Farid Alatas (the National University of Singapore), Assoc. Prof. Dr Gaik Cheng Khoo (the University of Nottingham’s Malaysia Campus), Dr Adis Duderija (University of Malaya), Kelly al-Dakkak (Oxford University), Ravza Altunta-Cakir (Durham University), Dr Syed Aun R. Rizvi (the University of Nottingham’s Malaysia Campus), Dr Sumit Mandal (the University of Nottingham’s Malaysia Campus), and Dr Elmira Akhmetova (IAIS Malaysia). Three questions that have repeatedly appeared guided the discussions were:

1. How extensive or encompassing is the intended unity or community?
2. How much difference among the Muslim groups is allowable in Islam?
3. Must community take institutional (or political) structure in order to achieve unity?

The political aspects of the Muslim unity and its affiliation with the

main principles of governance in Islam were deliberated throughout the workshop. Muslims often perceive unity in non-territorial terms as a spiritual interconnectedness, while some others see the ummah as in tenuous co-existence with established political entities or other parochial forms of community. Therefore some advocates of unity have even been accused of an ideologised, radical and fanatic campaign in the name of supposed orthodoxy as we can see such developments happening in the Muslim world since the colonial era.

The problem of sectarian division as a main challenge to the prospects of Muslim unity had been trashed out by the participants of the workshop. The presenters agreed that, in recent times, the long-lasting animosity and hostility between the Sunni and Shi'ah Muslims deepened even further leaving little hope for the unity of the entire ummah in the near future. The problem of radicalisation of the ummah due to the recent political developments in the Muslim World, particularly in the MENA region and Afghanistan, had been addressed by several presenters. Prof. Dr Yahya Michot raised the question of misuse of Islam and its principles by some contemporary political groups and individuals for their private gain, which he labeled as a *bazarisation* of the ummah feelings. Therefore, the way of moderation has been suggested to follow for Muslims by integrating and balancing the worldly and religious aspects of life, as well as of the physical and spiritual domains of existence.