On 22 April 2014, a group of twenty officers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries participated in a one-day seminar, entitled Understanding Islam, organized jointly by Prime Minister’s Department of Malaysia (JPM) and the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia at Sekolah Latihan JPM, Jalan Lengkok Bellamy, Kuala Lumpur.

This third intensive training programme for ASEAN member countries oriented toward two essential issues in the contemporary discourse on Islam, which are the Islamic principle of waṣaṭīyyah and the contemporary Sunni-Shi‘ah tension. The delegates were welcomed by Datuk Hasanah Binti Abd Hamid, Director General of Research Division, Prime Minister’s Department. The subject of waṣaṭīyyah or moderation and balance in Islam, and its relevance to contemporary calamities had been conferred by two prominent scholars, Professor Dr. Mohammad Hashim Kamali, CEO of IAIS Malaysia, and Professor Dr. Tan Sri M. Kamal Hassan, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC).

Professor Kamali stated that waṣaṭīyyah or moderation is an aspect of the self-identity and worldview of the Muslim community, which is also valued in all major world religions and civilisations. It is a virtue that helps to develop social harmony and equilibrium in society and human relations. Therefore waṣaṭīyyah as avoidance of extremism, as Professor Kamali pointed out, has considerable moral import which can also constitute the basis of valuable legal guidelines for the conduct of individuals as well as societies and nations.

Professor Kamal Hassan in his lecture emphasized the urgent need to understand and apply the concept of waṣaṭīyyah in the current world situation. He asserted that the mission of Islam as a peaceful religion which advocates inter-religious tolerance is being distorted by non-Muslim states, media, NGOs and religious fundamentalists in the world. Therefore, understanding the holistic structure of waṣaṭīyyah and the organic unity of the qualities of justice, excellence and balance or moderation is important for Muslims to strive for comprehensive civilisational goodness and excellence as a divinely prescribed condition to carry the great status of “witness unto mankind”.

Dr. Elmira Akhmetova, research fellow at IAIS Malaysia, spoke on Sunni-Shi‘ah divide in Islam. Through highlighting the topic from historical background,
Dr. Akhmetova stated that Shiʿism began as a political faction rather than a truly religious movement; and, in spite of the minor disagreements, Sunnis and Shiʿis have lived together side by side in peace and harmony, intermarrying and living in the same neighbourhoods up to the 21st century. Current tension between Sunni and Shiʿah Muslims, according to her, is a product of very recent global events. To achieve regional and global stability, as Dr. Akhmetova suggested, the Islamic concepts of moderation and ikhtilāf, the recognition and tolerance of disagreement among the scholars, should be practiced to create a milieu of diversity and pluralism in religious and intellectual assessment. The seminar was well accepted by the delegates, who participated lively in each session through asking questions and sharing their experiences and practices related to the topics.

Seminar on Women’s Leadership in Islam  
(15 May 2014, Kuala Lumpur)

Tengku Ahmad Hazri, IAIS Malaysia

On 15 May 2014, IAIS Malaysia organised a seminar on Women’s Leadership in Islam in collaboration with Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia. The speakers were Professor Mohammad Hashim Kamali, CEO of IAIS Malaysia; Che Asmah Ibrahim, Deputy Chairman of the Women Committee, IKRAM; and Associate Professor Dr Raihanah Abdullah, associate professor at the Department of Shariah and Law, Academy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya.

The first speaker, Professor Kamali defined leadership in a broad sense to include intellectual leadership, a domain which even historically has witnessed significant contributions by women, such as in the sciences of hadith. The renowned hadith scholar, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani enlisted over 170 female hadith scholars, one of whom even mastered a number of other disciplines. A study by Jalal al-Din Suyuti reveals that no woman has been involved in hadith forgery.

Attempts to preclude women from leadership have invoked scriptural arguments—a strategy which Kamali deconstructed in detail. Verses that may have been misunderstood or misinterpreted include the one proclaiming that “men have a degree over women” (al-Baqarah 2:228) (which must actually be read in the light of another verse, al-Tawba 9:71 declaring that men and women are protectors (avliyya’) of each other) and that “men are caretakers (qawwamun) of women” (al-Nisa’ 4:34) (which actually goes on to say that this is only because the men provide by way of maintenance (nafaqa)).

This recognition for female leadership must nonetheless confront cultural impediments. Towards this end, progress is being made, as seen in the case