Extremism and violence are universal phenomena that existed throughout human history. However human beings, both in the West and the East, are becoming more radical and much brutal in our days. Extremist acts are today committed as much by transnational and supranational groups as by official and legitimate governments, both in the West and in the Muslim world. As history reveals, balance and moderation have been clearly imprinted on the character of classical Islamic civilisation. For many centuries, Islam exposed itself as a religion of moderation, committed to establishing a system of truth and justice that shuns laxity on one side and extremism on the other. Yet, violence and radicalism are spreading like a cancer in the failed states of the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region and South Asian countries. The Arab Spring where people sought genuine democracy and good governance has morphed into a hotbed of extremism across swathes of the Middle East and North Africa. The safety and well-being of the entire Muslim world is today jeopardised by the creation of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – ISIS. This extremist militant group is responsible for many brutalities and transgressions, primarily hostile to the core principles of Islam and humanity.

International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) organised a closed-door Roundtable Discussion entitled “Extremism, Terrorism and Islam: Toward A Better Understanding of Issues” on 22nd January 2015 to contemplate the root causes of extremism and to search for feasible solutions to nullify the strongest magnet of extremism in the Muslim world. The panellists were Prof. Dr. Mohammad Hashim Kamali, Founding CEO of IAIS Malaysia, Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, President of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST), Prof. Dato’ Paduka Mohamad bin Abu Bakar, Department of International and Strategic Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya (UM), and Mr. Ahmad El-Muhammady, lecturer at Centre for Foundation Studies, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

Prof Kamali was the first speaker who expounded the subject of extremism from juristic and historical perspectives. He differentiated theological or religious, political and practical types of extremism, and acknowledged that, throughout history, extremism hardly commanded a credible majority in Muslim societies. Unless the root causes of radical extremism are addressed, radicalism is likely to carry its own momentum. Extremists tend to triumph not because of
their inherent strength, as Prof. Kamali underlined, but because of the weakness of moderates. He consequently called upon the religious moderates to combat their common scourge. Second panellist, Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, underlined three important dimensions of extremism occurring in the Muslim world. Firstly, most of the terrorist and extremist acts done by Muslims in our days are reactive behaviour provoked by countless injustices and brutality committed by the West and their own dysfunctional governments. Secondly, violence in the Muslim world arose from various types of manipulations, particularly of Islamic values and principles, by international actors as can be observed in the creation of Taliban or Al-Qaida by the United States. The third dimension of the recent wave of extremism, in Chandra’s view, is that Muslims today are largely exploited in false flag operations.

The third panellist, Prof. Dato’ Paduka Mohamad bin Abu Bakar, addressed the widespread expression of ‘Islamic terrorism’ as an example of misrepresentation of Islam and its fundamental values. There are no ways to end extremism completely but Muslims can learn how to reduce it by exercising noble values of Islam such as moderation, toleration and integrity. Based on his personal experience of dealing with those who are suspected in terrorist activities, the last panellist, Mr. Ahmad El-Muhammady, asserted that terrorism is a response to the global injustices faced by Muslims worldwide. According to him, people who are deprived from justice and basic human rights are more willing to join extremist groups such as ISIS simply because these groups promise to bring justice to them. The panel session was followed by a productive discussion among the panellists and the audience, which included representatives from 26 embassies in Malaysia. All agreed that the issue of extremism among Muslims is critical and requires an urgent resolution. Restoration of peace and stability in the Muslim world depends on the ability of Muslim governments to respond to the needs of their people as well as on the ability of the local and international powers to protect the rights and human dignity of their citizens.