

# SIGNIFICANT EVENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

**The Fourth Abdullah Yusuf Ali Memorial Lecture:  
“English as a Modern Literary Language for Islam: The Significance  
of Yusuf Ali’s Translation of the Qur’an”  
(IAIS Malaysia, 16 April 2016)**

*Tengku Ahmad Hazri*

On 16 April 2016, IAIS Malaysia and Islamic Book Trust (IBT) co-organised the fourth Abdullah Yusuf Ali Memorial Lecture on “*English as a Modern Literary Language for Islam: The Significance of Yusuf Ali’s Translation of the Qur’an*” by Dr Surin Pitsuwan, an eminent diplomat and Islamic scholar who has served as Thailand’s Foreign Minister and ASEAN’s Secretary-General.

Pitsuwan took as a starting point Yusuf Ali’s remark in the Introduction to the very first edition of his translation: “I want to make English itself an Islamic language, if such a person as I can do it.” By now a classic and one of the most widely read English translations of the Holy Book, Yusuf Ali’s translation possesses a few distinctive features which Pitsuwan carefully distilled. Among others, the work was motivated by the need to make the scripture accessible to all yet preserve the beauty and aesthetic quality of the original Arabic.

More than mere translation, Yusuf Ali also offered background to the *surahs* (chapters) building on the rich heritage of classical *tafsir* scholarship to decrypt some of the hidden meanings of selected verses. A case in point is the Chapter on the Cave (Surah al-Kahf) which alludes to Musa’s resolve not to give up searching “until I reach the junction of the two seas (*majma’ al-bahrayn*)”, baffling scholars as to where exactly that location is. Through the *tafsir* of Baydawi, however, Yusuf Ali disclosed that the so-called “junction of the two seas” is not a literal geographical location but the meeting point between two streams of knowledge, i.e. discursive knowledge and mystic knowledge (*‘ilm al-laduniyyah*), the latter of which Musa learned from Khidr.

Yusuf Ali’s attempt to make English an Islamic language echoes a xenophilic tendency that was partly due to historical precedent but also partly justified by political consideration. With regards to the former, historically, in medieval Europe, Latin was the language of Islamic studies because it was the language

into which the works of Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Ibn al-Haytham were translated. Politically, on the other hand, there are Islamic scholars who have already been writing in English, such as Fazlur Rahman, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Ismail Faruqi, who were based abroad because the situation back in their homeland was not conducive to Islamic scholarship. Indeed, Pitsuwana was introduced to Abdullah Yusuf Ali by Muhsin Mahdi, a student of the philosopher Leo Strauss and an émigré scholar, who was symbolic of this scenario facing Muslims. Great Islamic scholars had to migrate because their own Muslim countries had become un-conducive to research with controversial ideas. That situation made, and continues to make, English an important language for the communication of new Islamic ideas.

**Book Launch and Panel Discussion – ‘Defining Islamic Statehood:  
Measuring and Indexing Contemporary Muslim States’  
(IAIS Malaysia, 31 March 2016)**

*Ahmad Badri Abdullah*

On 31 March 2016, IAIS Malaysia hosted a book launch event for Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, founder and Chairman of The Cordoba Initiative, who had published a new book entitled ‘*Defining Islamic Statehood: Measuring and Indexing Contemporary Muslim States*’. The book was launched by Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia and Chairman of IAIS Malaysia. In his speech, Tun Abdullah congratulated Imam Feisal for his success in bringing to fruition such an important project to provide realistic and practical guidelines on Islamic governance and statehood for the Ummah in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Imam Feisal in turn thanked Tun Abdullah, as well as Dato’ Seri Najib Tun Razak, the current Malaysian Prime Minister, for their patronage and endorsement of the project. He highlighted the fact that the project required a stellar working group comprising notable Muslim scholars, policymakers, and court judges. He pointed out as well that the project’s mission was to find a consensus regarding the definition of an Islamic state in the context of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in order to develop qualitative yardsticks for measuring the Islamicity of Muslim states. It was therefore a convergence of Islamic methodologies and scientific measurements.

Furthermore, the index developed in the project focuses on the degree of deliverables, measured against the five essentials of *maqasid al-shari’ah*, principles that have been unanimously agreed upon by Muslim scholars. The project utilised data provided by governments, supported by polling data in the