briefs with recommendations or are they also activists? IAIS, in my view, can effect change in two ways: as with any good think-tank, government officials will approach individuals from IAIS if they are comfortable with them and ask for their private advice and to write something. The other more public role – which you must have, if not you are not a think-tank – is the one that looks at issues and produces studies on those issues and those papers get distributed within the civil society groups and government. You help in the educative process and inform policy-makers better. When I see my own work, I can be asked to consult with NGOs or with the government who ask my opinions or I can also write on how I see certain issues with the hope that these materials will influence change-makers. Your writings need to be brief and you need to write good executive summaries and you are lucky if the relevant addressees read the executive summaries.

ZN: Thank you, Professor Esposito.

Round Table Discussions on ‘Religion in the Public Space: Europe and Malaysia’
(Kuala Lumpur, 1–2 March 2011)

Abdul Karim Abdullah (Leslie Terebessy), IAIS Malaysia

The IAIS Malaysia–EU Round Table Discussions stretched over two days. The first took place at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre and was a public event. The speakers were Professor Osman Bakar, Deputy Chairman of IAIS, Professor Dr Maurits S. Berger, Professor of Islam in the Contemporary West and holder of the Sultan of Oman Chair for Oriental Studies at the Institute for Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University. The second part of the event took place at IAIS. The speakers were Professor Dr Mohammad Hashim Kamali, Chairman and CEO of IAIS Malaysia and, once again, Professor Berger. The conference, co-organised by IAIS Principal Research Fellow Dr Christoph Marcinkowski, was jointly hosted by the European Union, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and IAIS Malaysia.

HE Paul Bekkers, Ambassador of the Netherlands to Malaysia, delivered the welcoming address on the opening day of the conference. Osman Bakar then highlighted in his talk the need to address the increasing importance of religion in the public space, particularly in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious environment. Europe, he noted, is experiencing a decline of secularism and the return of religion to the public space. The emergence of a new cultural diversity and pluralistic religious landscape in Europe is taking place partly due to the influx and settlement of new religious communities from other continents. The Islamic revival beginning in the
1970s that swept Malaysia and the rest of the Islamic world pushed religion to the
centre stage of public consciousness and impacted the other religious communities
in Malaysia. The dual legal systems separate in an uneasy fashion the jurisdiction of
the civil courts from that of the sharīʿah courts. The qurʾānic message to humankind
and to different religious communities is to work together for the common good. The
question is, how can the common good be realised without us first securing a
common public space? Osman Bakar stated, “without doubt, Islam stands out as the
most influential force in helping to broaden the role of religion in the public space
and also to elevate the public profile of religion. The Islam-policies of successive
Administrations from that of Tunku Abdul Rahman to Najib Tun Razak have helped
to elevate Islam’s public profile to new heights. As in Europe, the issue of the place
and role of religion in the public space has assumed new importance in Malaysia
that calls for an enlightened treatment by all citizens.”

Professor Berger for his part spoke on “Religion in the Public Space: The Case
of Europe”. He stated, “A long history of religious conflicts in Europe ended
with a delicate balance of state and religion, based on a solid framework of legal
rights. Islam, a very recent religious newcomer on the European scene, now stands
accused of disrupting this balance and rejecting the legal framework.” Many of the
cleavages in relation to Islam manifest themselves in the public space. He argued
that Europeans confuse different discourses in their discussions of Islam. “The
political-legal discourse refers to the rule of law and the clash of freedoms that may
occur within that framework. For instance […] orthodox Muslims and Jews may
not want to shake hands [with a female], but social custom demands such ways of
greeting even if no law obliges to do so.” Professor Berger emphasised that while
some cleavage existed between the values of Islam and the West, tensions were
experienced primarily at the cultural level.

The event resumed on the following day at IAIS. Professor Kamali noted in
his talk that in Malaysia religion is a state matter under the Federal Constitution.
There is also the institution of the Islamic muftī (nine altogether as some states do
not have a muftī), sharīʿah courts, as well as a Religious Council in each state.
Professor Kamali stated that the qurʾānic concept is that religion is “good advice”.
He emphasised the role of ijtihād in delineating the role of religion in the public
space. He pointed out that initially religion occupied private space in Malaysia
but in the 1970s, with the rise of the Islamic revivalsim, it was pushed into the
foreground. According to the medieval Muslim scholar al-Māwardī, the Islamic
state protects religion and manages the temporal affairs of the community. In Islam
the state is a civilian state; it has no authority to issue religious edicts. Twenty years
ago Malaysia inclined toward secularism but in 2001 Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad,
the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, declared Malaysia to be an ‘Islamic state’.
In Islam, the state has no normative existence but only a derived existence. The
Grand Mufti of Egypt declared that the history of the state in Islam is a history of departure from the norms of sharīʿah. In the state, the public good (maṣlaḥah), justice (ʿadl), people’s welfare, and human rights based on dignity play prominent roles. The siyāsah sharʿiyyah or sharīʿah-oriented policy also plays a significant role. He also mentioned that the state in Islam can only enforce the obligatory and the prohibited among the five values, which also include the permissible, the reprehensible and the recommended. In Islam the state has a limited function and is a welfare agency in civil society.

Participants in the round table discussions asked many probing questions and made keen observations. Group leaders subsequently presented the results of the discussions. In his concluding remarks, HE Paul Bekkers expressed hope that further discussions on this very relevant topic would be held for the benefit of all.

Syed Hamid Albar is a distinguished figure in the world of Malaysian and international politics. Aside from several other key positions, he served as Malaysia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1999 to 2008. During his term in office, his country played an influential leadership role as Chair of ASEAN, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). Also during his tenure, Malaysia hosted the OIC Foreign Ministers’ Meeting on Terrorism in 2002 and established the South East Asia Centre for Counter Terrorism (SEAR CCT), headquartered in Kuala Lumpur, to primarily focus on training and capacity-building.

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference – the second largest intergovernmental organisation after the United Nations – was established in 1969 and comprises currently 57 member states. Since its inception, the OIC has been the major organisation of Islamic countries which voices and articulates Muslim opinion on issues affecting those nations. As a founding member, Malaysia was the Chairman of the OIC from October 2003 to March 2008.

As pointed out by Hamid Albar during his well attended lecture, which he delivered at the Asia-Europe Institute of Kuala Lumpur’s University of Malaya, the member states of the OIC face multiple challenges in the twenty-first century. To address those challenges, the third extraordinary session of the Islamic Summit held in Mecca in December 2005 laid down the blueprint called the Ten-Year Programme of Action which envisages joint action of the members, promotion of