

Wasatiyyah as Religious Moderation in Islam: A Textual-Comparative Analysis of Qur'anic, Prophetic, Classical, and Contemporary Sources

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the concept of wasatiyyah as a framework of religious moderation in Islam by integrating its foundations in the Qur'an, Prophetic traditions, classical exegesis, theological-ethical thought, and contemporary interpretations. The study is motivated by the need to present a comprehensive understanding of wasatiyyah that moves beyond normative description and demonstrates its relevance to contemporary socio-religious challenges. Using a qualitative library-based approach, this study employs textual, thematic, and comparative analysis of primary sources, including Qur'anic verses, particularly al-Baqarah 2:143, and relevant hadiths, as well as secondary sources, including classical tafsir works, theological writings of al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah, and contemporary perspectives represented by Yusuf al-Qaradawi. The findings show that wasatiyyah is a foundational Islamic principle characterized by justice, balance, mercy, and wisdom, not a mere compromise between extremes. Classical scholars interpret it as a moral and communal responsibility rooted in justice and excellence, while theological thinkers emphasize its role in harmonizing reason, revelation, and ethical conduct. Contemporary interpretations further expand its application to education, social interaction, and interreligious coexistence. The discussion highlights that wasatiyyah functions as a multidimensional paradigm that protects religious life from extremism and negligence while promoting ethical balance and social harmony. In conclusion, wasatiyyah represents an active and principled form of moderation that integrates theological commitment, ethical discipline, and social responsibility. It offers a relevant framework for Islamic education and plural societies, enabling Muslims to maintain religious integrity while engaging constructively with diverse social contexts.

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Introduction

The concept of wasatiyyah (الوسطية) occupies an important position in Islamic thought because it expresses the principles of balance, justice, and moral equilibrium in religious life. The term derives from the Arabic root wasat (وسط), which denotes a middle, balanced, excellent, and just position. In the Qur'an, this concept is explicitly articulated in Surah al-Baqarah 2:143, where the Muslim community is described as ummatan wasatan (أُمَّةٌ وَسَطًا), a justly balanced community entrusted with the responsibility of bearing witness to humanity. This verse indicates that moderation in Islam is not merely a practical attitude, but also a theological and ethical principle rooted in revelation. Contemporary scholarship confirms that wasatiyyah represents a normative Islamic paradigm that integrates justice, balance, and ethical responsibility in both individual and collective life (Kamali, 2015; Helmy et al., 2021).

In contemporary Muslim societies, wasatiyyah has gained renewed relevance in response to various challenges, including religious extremism, social polarization, ideological rigidity, and the weakening of ethical balance in public life. The discourse of religious moderation is particularly important in plural societies, where Muslims are required to uphold religious conviction while engaging constructively with diversity, modernity, and social change. In this context, wasatiyyah does not mean compromising Islamic principles or relativizing truth. Rather, it refers to a disciplined Islamic framework grounded in 'adl (العدل, justice), rahmah (الرحمة, mercy), hikmah (الحكمة, wisdom), and tawazun (التوازن, balance). Recent studies highlight that moderation in Islam functions as a mediating framework that prevents both radical exclusivism and secular relativism (Auda, 2008; Saeed, 2006; Nasir & Rijal, 2021; Siswanto, 2020; Mukhibat et al., 2023; Mulyana, 2023).

Although the concept of wasatiyyah has been widely discussed in Islamic scholarship, many studies tend to present it either as a general moral ideal or as a contemporary policy slogan without sufficiently tracing its conceptual development across the Qur'an, Hadith, classical exegesis, theological reflection, and modern reformist thought. Existing discussions often cite major scholars such as al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, al-Qurtubi, al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyyah, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi, but the relationship among these sources is not always synthesized systematically. As a result, the intellectual continuity of wasatiyyah from scriptural foundations to contemporary applications remains underdeveloped. Recent academic works emphasize the need for a more integrative approach that connects classical Islamic scholarship with contemporary socio-religious challenges (Hefner, 2021).

This article addresses that gap by offering a textual-comparative and thematic analysis of wasatiyyah as an Islamic paradigm of religious moderation. It examines how the Qur'anic foundation of ummatan wasatan (أُمَّةٌ وَسَطًا) is interpreted in classical tafsir, reinforced through Prophetic guidance, elaborated in theological and ethical thought, and reformulated in contemporary Islamic discourse. By doing so, this study seeks to show that wasatiyyah is not a passive middle position between two extremes, but an active principle of justice, balance, and responsibility that protects religious life from both ghuluw (الغلو, excessiveness) and taqsir or tafrit (التقصير / التقريط, negligence). This analytical approach aligns with recent scholarly efforts to conceptualize moderation as a dynamic and normative Islamic framework rather than a mere sociopolitical construct.

The contribution of this article lies in its attempt to integrate scriptural, exegetical, theological, and contemporary perspectives into a coherent analytical framework. Rather than treating wasatiyyah as an isolated concept, this article positions it as a comprehensive Islamic worldview that shapes belief, worship, ethics, education, and social relations. This framework is especially relevant for Islamic education and moral formation in plural societies, including Indonesia, where religious moderation is increasingly discussed as a response to extremism, intolerance, and social fragmentation. Empirical studies in Southeast Asia demonstrate that

wasatiyyah-based education contributes to fostering tolerance, civic engagement, and social cohesion (Nasir & Rijal, 2021; Siswanto, 2020; Mukhibat et al., 2023; Mulyana, 2023).

Accordingly, this study is guided by three main questions. First, how is wasatiyyah grounded in the Qur'an and Prophetic tradition? Second, how have classical and contemporary Muslim scholars interpreted and developed the concept of moderation? Third, how can wasatiyyah be understood as a relevant framework for contemporary Islamic education and social life? Through these questions, this article aims to clarify the conceptual meaning, scholarly development, and contemporary significance of religious moderation in Islam.

Method

This study employs a qualitative library research design using textual, thematic, and comparative analysis. It is structured as a conceptual study that examines the meaning, development, and contemporary relevance of wasatiyyah (الوسطية) as a principle of religious moderation in Islam. Rather than conducting fieldwork, this study focuses on selected Islamic textual sources and scholarly interpretations in order to construct a systematic understanding of moderation from scriptural, exegetical, theological, and contemporary perspectives. This approach is consistent with studies that emphasize the importance of textual and conceptual analysis in understanding Islamic moderation (Kamali, 2015; Auda, 2008; Hallaq, 2018).

The data sources are divided into primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consist of Qur'anic verses related to moderation, especially Surah al-Baqarah 2:143 on ummatan wasatan (أُمَّةٌ وَسَطًا), and authentic hadiths that discuss balance in worship, warnings against ghuluw (الغلو, excessiveness), and criticism of overcomplication or tanattu' (التنطع) in religious practice. These sources are used as the scriptural foundation for identifying the normative meaning of wasatiyyah in Islam. Contemporary scholarship confirms that these scriptural foundations remain central in framing the discourse of Islamic moderation (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; Saeed, 2006).

The secondary sources include selected classical and contemporary Islamic works. Classical exegetical sources include the tafsir works of al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, al-Qurtubi, and al-Sa'di, which are examined to understand how the Qur'anic concept of wasat (وسط) has been interpreted in the classical tradition. Theological and ethical sources, particularly the works of al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah, are analyzed to explore how moderation is developed as a principle of belief, moral discipline, intellectual balance, and religious practice. Contemporary sources, especially the writings of Yusuf al-Qaradawi on wasatiyyah, are used to examine how the concept is reformulated in relation to modern issues such as education, social coexistence, plural societies, and the prevention of extremism. This layered approach aligns with academic discussions that highlight the continuity between classical Islamic thought and contemporary moderation discourse (March, 2019; Brown, 2009).

The selection of sources was based on three criteria. First, the sources had to directly discuss the concepts of wasat (وسط), wasatiyyah (الوسطية), i'tidal (الاعتدال), tawazun (التوازن), ghuluw (الغلو), or taqdir/tafrit (التقدير / التقصير). Second, the sources had to represent different layers of Islamic intellectual tradition, including Qur'anic texts, hadith, classical tafsir, theological-ethical thought, and contemporary Islamic discourse. Third, the selected works had to have significant influence in Islamic scholarship and relevance to the article's focus on religious moderation. Sources that only mentioned moderation incidentally or did not contribute directly to the conceptual analysis were not prioritized. This selection strategy reflects methodological rigor recommended in qualitative and conceptual research (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

The analysis was conducted in four stages. First, relevant Qur'anic verses and hadiths were identified and classified according to major themes, including justice ('adl, العدل), balance (tawazun, التوازن), mercy (rahmah, الرحمة), avoidance of excessiveness (ghuluw, الغلو), and avoidance

of negligence (tafrit, التفريط). Second, classical tafsir interpretations were compared to identify convergences and differences in the meaning of ummatan wasatan. Third, theological and ethical discussions from al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah were analyzed to understand how moderation functions as a principle of belief, knowledge, worship, and moral conduct. Fourth, contemporary interpretations, particularly those of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, were examined to assess how wasatiyyah is applied to modern educational, social, and multicultural contexts. This multi-stage analytical process enables the study to trace conceptual continuity and transformation across different layers of Islamic intellectual tradition.

The comparative analysis was carried out by tracing conceptual continuity and development across the selected sources. The study compares how each source defines moderation, what forms of extremism or negligence it criticizes, and how it positions balance as a religious, ethical, and social principle. This procedure enables the article to move beyond descriptive compilation toward analytical synthesis. The findings are then organized into four analytical axes: scriptural foundations, classical exegetical interpretation, theological-ethical elaboration, and contemporary educational-social relevance.

To maintain the trustworthiness of the analysis, this study applies source triangulation by comparing Qur'anic, hadith, classical, and contemporary sources. Interpretations are presented carefully by considering their textual context and intellectual tradition. The study does not treat wasatiyyah merely as a modern policy term, but as a concept rooted in Islamic sources and developed through scholarly reflection. This approach allows the article to clarify the meaning of religious moderation while showing its relevance for contemporary Muslim societies. Previous methodological studies also emphasize that triangulation and transparent analytical procedures strengthen the validity of qualitative and conceptual research (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

Results

This study finds that the concept of wasatiyyah is firmly rooted in the Qur'an, the Sunnah, classical tafsir, and the broader Islamic intellectual tradition. Its Qur'anic foundation is explicitly articulated in Surah al-Baqarah 2:143, which describes Muslims as ummatan wasatan (أُمَّةٌ وَسْطًا). The term wasat in this verse signifies justice, balance, excellence, and moral responsibility, rather than a passive middle position. It establishes moderation as both a defining identity and a communal responsibility of the Muslim ummah, particularly in its role as a witness (shahadah) over humanity.

The Prophetic traditions reinforce this principle by warning against ghuluw (الغلو, excessiveness) and tanattu' (التنطع, overcomplication). These traditions emphasize that excessive strictness, exaggerated religiosity, and unnecessary complication contradict the spirit of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad exemplified moderation through balanced practices in worship, family life, social engagement, and ethical conduct. His example shows that religious devotion must remain aligned with human capacity, moral responsibility, and social benefit.

Classical tafsir further clarifies the meaning of wasatiyyah. Al-Tabari interprets wasat as justice and excellence, while Ibn Kathir emphasizes balance, moral accountability, and the special responsibility of the Muslim community. Al-Qurtubi highlights ethical justice in speech, judgment, and action, whereas al-Sa'di underscores balance in belief, worship, and social conduct. These interpretations consistently show that wasatiyyah encompasses justice ('adl), excellence (khayriyyah), balance (tawazun), and responsibility (shahadah).

In theological and ethical discourse, al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah both affirm moderation as a central Islamic principle. Al-Ghazali emphasizes harmony between reason ('aql) and revelation (naql), as well as ethical balance between excess and deficiency. Ibn Taymiyyah stresses adherence to the Qur'an and Sunnah while avoiding exaggeration, innovation, and negligence in religious practice. Contemporary scholars, particularly Yusuf al-Qaradawi, extend this concept

into modern contexts by presenting wasatiyyah as a comprehensive framework for education, social interaction, civic responsibility, and engagement with plural societies.

Overall, the results show that wasatiyyah is not a fragmented or incidental concept, but a coherent Islamic paradigm that develops from scriptural foundations to classical interpretation, theological reflection, and contemporary application. Across these sources, moderation is consistently associated with justice, balance, wisdom, responsibility, and protection from both excessiveness and negligence.

Discussion

The findings indicate that wasatiyyah is not merely a moral recommendation, but a comprehensive Islamic paradigm that integrates theology, ethics, and social practice. The Qur'anic concept of *ummatan wasatan* establishes moderation as a normative identity, which is further operationalized through the Sunnah and elaborated by classical and contemporary scholars. This finding aligns with scholarly discussions that position wasatiyyah as a foundational principle for addressing extremism, strengthening ethical balance, and promoting social harmony (Kamali, 2015; Auda, 2008).

Contemporary research highlights that wasatiyyah functions as a counter-narrative to both radical exclusivism and excessive relativism. Kamali (2015) argues that moderation in Islam is intrinsically linked to justice, balance, and moral discipline. Auda (2008) further emphasizes its relevance within *maqasid al-shari'ah* as a framework for achieving human welfare, public benefit, and ethical order. From this perspective, wasatiyyah is not a weak compromise between opposing extremes, but a principled method of interpreting and practicing Islam in a way that remains faithful to revelation while responding responsibly to social realities.

In educational contexts, wasatiyyah has been identified as a key principle for developing inclusive, critical, and ethically grounded Islamic pedagogy. Siswanto (2020) shows that integrating moderation into Islamic education can foster tolerance, critical thinking, and social responsibility among students. This supports the argument that Islamic education should balance religious commitment with intellectual openness. Within this framework, wasatiyyah-based education does not dilute Islamic identity, but strengthens students' ability to understand religion with justice, wisdom, and responsibility.

In the socio-political sphere, wasatiyyah has been widely discussed as a framework for promoting peaceful coexistence in plural societies. Saeed (2006) and Esposito and Mogahed (2007) demonstrate that moderation in Islam supports interfaith dialogue, mutual respect, and constructive engagement without requiring Muslims to compromise their religious identity. This is consistent with the Qur'anic vision of Muslims as witnesses who uphold justice and ethical balance in social life.

Recent studies also highlight the role of wasatiyyah in countering extremism. Subchi et al. (2022) argue that promoting moderation through education and community engagement can help reduce radical tendencies. Similarly, Hasyim (2021) and Hefner (2021) show that Indonesian Islam, with its strong tradition of wasatiyyah, provides an important example of Islamic moderation in a plural democratic society. These findings indicate that wasatiyyah is not only a theological concept, but also a practical framework for strengthening civic ethics, tolerance, and peaceful social relations.

The theological perspectives of al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah remain relevant in contemporary discourse. Their emphasis on balance between reason and revelation, as well as adherence to authentic sources, resonates with modern efforts to reinterpret Islamic teachings in ways that are both faithful and contextually relevant (March, 2019; Brown, 2009). Al-Ghazali's ethical emphasis highlights the importance of inner discipline and moral balance, while Ibn Taymiyyah's concern for scriptural authenticity emphasizes the need to avoid both exaggeration

and negligence. These perspectives reinforce the idea that wasatiyyah operates at multiple levels, including epistemological, ethical, spiritual, and social dimensions.

Overall, the discussion confirms that wasatiyyah is a multidimensional concept that integrates textual legitimacy with intellectual continuity and contemporary relevance. It functions as a guiding principle for maintaining balance in belief, worship, ethics, education, and social interaction. In this sense, wasatiyyah offers a robust Islamic framework for addressing contemporary challenges faced by Muslim societies, particularly extremism, intolerance, ideological rigidity, and social fragmentation.

Conclusion

This study concludes that wasatiyyah is a central and comprehensive principle in Islam, rooted in the Qur'an, exemplified by the Sunnah, and elaborated through classical and contemporary scholarship. It represents a balanced approach that avoids both extremism (ghuluw) and negligence (tafrit), while emphasizing justice, moderation, wisdom, and ethical responsibility.

The findings demonstrate that wasatiyyah is not a compromise between opposing extremes, but a principled framework grounded in divine guidance. It encompasses theological balance, ethical moderation, spiritual discipline, and social harmony, making it a relevant paradigm for Islamic education and contemporary Muslim life. Through the interpretations of classical scholars and contemporary thinkers, wasatiyyah emerges as a dynamic concept that connects scriptural authority with practical responsibility in changing social contexts.

By integrating textual sources with scholarly interpretations, this study highlights the continuity and adaptability of wasatiyyah as an Islamic paradigm. It provides a foundation for promoting religious moderation, fostering peaceful coexistence, strengthening Islamic education, and addressing modern challenges while maintaining fidelity to Islamic teachings. Future studies may further develop this framework by examining how wasatiyyah is implemented in educational curricula, community programs, interreligious engagement, and public policy in diverse Muslim societies.

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Research Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of scientific and Islamic academic research, including academic honesty, objectivity, transparency, source accuracy, and research integrity. Since this study employed a qualitative library research approach based on Qur'anic verses, hadith texts, classical tafsir works, theological-ethical writings, contemporary Islamic scholarship, and academic literature, it did not involve direct human participants, interviews, surveys, classroom intervention, clinical intervention, biological specimens, or the collection of personal data. Therefore, informed consent and formal approval from a research ethics committee were not required. All scriptural, classical, and contemporary sources were used responsibly, interpreted carefully, and properly acknowledged.

Author Contributions

Dalerbek Pirmatov: conceptualization, development of the research focus, literature search, source selection, data extraction, textual analysis, thematic analysis, comparative analysis, interpretation of Qur'anic and Prophetic foundations of wasatiyyah, analysis of classical tafsir and theological-ethical thought, interpretation of contemporary Islamic moderation discourse, development of the argument, writing of the original draft, critical revision, and finalization of the manuscript.

The author has read, reviewed, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Artificial Intelligence Use Statement

The author declares that artificial intelligence was used only as a limited technical support tool for language editing, sentence refinement, grammar checking, translation assistance, and improving manuscript readability. All processes involving source selection, textual analysis, thematic synthesis, comparative interpretation, academic argumentation, and conclusion development remain the full responsibility of the author.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study consist of Qur'anic verses, hadith texts, classical tafsir works, theological and ethical writings, contemporary Islamic scholarship, academic literature, data extraction notes, thematic categories, comparative analysis notes, and interpretation records related to wasatiyyah, religious moderation, Islamic thought, Qur'anic interpretation, and Islamic education. Since this study was based on library research and documented sources, no new primary dataset involving human participants was generated. Additional information regarding the analyzed sources and data extraction process may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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