

The Intellectual Resilience of Wasatiyyah: Adapting Islamic Moderation to Modern Nation

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Abstract

This article analyzes the dynamics of interpreting the concept of wasatiyyah (moderation) within the Islamic intellectual tradition across three crucial periods: classical, medieval, and modern. Utilizing a contextual-hermeneutical approach and social change theory, this study underscores the intellectual resilience of wasatiyyah, demonstrating that moderation is not a static or monolithic doctrine, but rather an adaptive interpretive framework capable of aligning with the modern nation-state. The findings reveal a significant paradigm shift in substantive focus: from the epistemological-theological dialectics of the Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī era, toward the reform of fiqh (jurisprudence) praxis during the time of Muḥammad al-Syaukānī, to ultimately becoming a sociological-national instrument in the Tafsir of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. This study concludes that wasatiyyah functions as a 'theological DNA' that enables Islam to remain highly resilient and adapt to modern socio-political realities and the demands of national integration

Keywords: Wasatiyyah; Intellectual Resilience; Contextual Hermeneutics; Religious Moderation; Modern Nation

1. Introduction

The concept of moderation in Islam, terminologically defined as *wasatiyyah*, is often caught in a reductive simplification that views it as a static and monolithic theological doctrine. In reality, when viewed through the lens of the history of Islamic thought, *wasatiyyah* is an interpretative paradigm that is highly dynamic, resilient, and adaptive to the *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the times) surrounding it.(1) As asserted by Mohammad Hashim Kamali, moderation is not a passive point between two poles, but rather a proactive stance to uphold justice and balance amidst a complex, changing socio-political reality. This evolution of meaning reflects how Muslim intellectuals continually negotiate between sacred revealed texts and profane historical contexts to respond to the various mutating forms of extremity.(2)

Epistemologically, the dynamics of wasatiyyah in exegetical (tafsir) literature demonstrate a significant shift in substantive focus alongside the changing challenges of each era. In the classical period, the discourse on moderation tended to revolve around metaphysical and theological-philosophical issues. This was triggered by intellectual turbulence involving the fierce struggle between extreme rationalism (Mu'tazilah) and rigid textualism (Ḥanābilah). In this context, moderation was positioned as an "epistemological bridge" to reconcile the authority of reason ('aql) with the revealed text (naql). Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, through his magnum opus *Mafātīḥ al-Ghaib*, represents the pinnacle of this synthetic effort. For him, moderation is a mechanism for the purification of thought, aimed at creating stability in the community's creed (aqidah) amidst a storm of intellectual contradictions.(3)

Al-Rāzī's emphasis on this dialectical aspect demonstrates that during the classical period, the primary enemy of moderation was the deviation in thinking methodology that threatened the doctrinal coherence of Islam. In this era, as mapped out by Abdul-Raof, the dichotomy between tafsīr bil-ma'thūr (tradition-based exegesis) and tafsīr bil-ra'y (reason-based exegesis) created the space for exegetes like Al-Rāzī to perform an epistemological restoration. For Al-Rāzī, the "middle path" was a mechanism to balance the authority of the text with the demands of reason.(4)

Entering the medieval era, the focus of moderation underwent a shift toward the realms of praxis and legal reform. During this period, the Muslim community faced a crisis of intellectual stagnation caused by the hegemony of taqlīd (blind imitation) and acute school-based fanaticism. The extremities that emerged were no longer merely metaphysical debates, but rather a legal rigidity that hindered the dynamics of ijtihad (independent legal reasoning). Muḥammad al-Syaukānī, in his work Fath al-Qadīr, reconstructed the meaning of wasatiyyah as the intellectual courage to return to the purity of the evidence (dalīl) of the Quran and Sunnah without being shackled by sectarian fanaticism.(5) For Al-Shawkānī, moderation means breaking free from the shackles of traditions that lack a solid foundation and reviving the flexibility of Sharia so that it remains relevant to the needs of the time. In this era, moderation functions as a motor for *tajdid* (renewal) aimed at liberating religious practices from rigid institutional stagnation.(6) Through his way of thinking, Al-Shawkānī reformed the practice of moderation by rejecting school-based fanaticism (madhhab) and reopening the gates of *ijtihad* to counter the deadlock of legal dogmatism. (7) In the modern and contemporary era, the challenges faced by Islam have shifted radically toward sociological, geopolitical, and existential issues within the framework of the nation-state. The emergence of transnational Islamic movements carrying exclusive ideologies and political radicalism has forced the definition of moderation to transform into an ethical-political framework.(8) In the Indonesian context, the Qur'anic Commentary (Tafsir) of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs represents a systematic state effort to contextualize *wasatiyyah* as Religious Moderation (Moderasi Beragama). Here, moderation no longer functions merely to reconcile legal schools or purify law; instead, it serves as an instrument to maintain social cohesion, tolerance, and national integration within a pluralistic society. As noted by contemporary Islamic studies experts, this modern interpretation seeks to balance religious piety with openness toward universal human values and nationalism. Moderation is no longer merely a discourse of scholars in their ivory towers; instead, it has transformed into a sociological instrument to maintain national cohesion. Modern interpretation, as represented by the Tafsir of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, positions *wasatiyyah* as a social integration strategy to manage the diversity of a pluralistic society under the umbrella of the nation-state. (9)

The evolution of Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*) over fourteen centuries demonstrates that the explanation of revelation has never been detached from the sociopolitical and theological currents of its time. Beyond the fact that the act of interpretation is adapted to the situation and needs of the community at that time,(10) *tafsir* often becomes a "battleground" for various Islamic schools of thought to express the interpreter's perspective. In this context, the concept of moderation (*wasatiyyah*) has undergone a significant paradigm shift, moving from an abstract realm toward a practical-national one.

Previous research by Ichsan, et al. utilizes the *wasatiyyah* paradigm through the Ma'na-cum-Maghza approach to counter extremism by integrating the values of justice and tolerance into Islamic education.(11) Like other studies, Romli, et al. reinforce Azra's view that *wasatiyyah* is a "middle path" of harmonization between religion and the state, where both support each other without necessitating either a secular state or a conservative theocracy.(12) Another study, conducted by Hassan, et al., positions this

research within the literature on religion and politics, counter-ideology, and the relationship between the state and the Muslim community (*ummah*). (13)

Research on *wasatiyyah* continues to evolve; for instance, according to Hassan's research, Jemaah Islamiyah officially disbanded in June 2024 and transitioned from violent jihadism to non-violent Islamism that recognizes the sovereignty of the NKRI (Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia) and the constitution. The success of this transformation toward moderation (*wasatiyyah*) now depends on their socio-political behavioral consistency as well as the effectiveness of internal reforms and education in the future. (14)

As for studies focused on exegesis, research by Mustaniruddin finds a significant paradigm shift from sectarian Madhab-based theology toward a more inclusive Humanist theology in the works of Bisri Mustafa, Quraish Shihab, and Hamka. Utilizing Thomas Kuhn's framework of paradigm shifts, the author analyzes how factors such as ideological background, power authority, and socio-cultural context influence an interpreter's perspective on religious moderation. The results indicate that while all three maintain an open stance, Bisri Mustafa and Quraish Shihab tend to be more tolerant in addressing differences compared to Hamka, whose interpretation remains heavily influenced by traditional patterns and a focus on the purification of faith. This shift proves that the context of diversity and contemporary issues in Indonesia—such as terrorism and interfaith harmony—have become a vital basis for bridging the dialogue between Qur'anic texts, human reality, and nationalism. (15)

Based on research mapping using Open Knowledge Maps with the keyword *wasatiyyah*, no studies were found that examine the shift in the concept and practice of *wasatiyyah* within works of exegesis (*tafsir*). Based on these research data, this article fills that gap and aims to map the transformation of the meaning of moderation through a comparative-synchronic analysis. Drawing upon John O. Voll's theoretical framework regarding the dialectic of continuity and change in Islamic history, this study argues that while the normative essence of *wasatiyyah* remains constant, its applied manifestations continually change in accordance with sociopolitical demands. (16)

Research regarding the paradigm shift of moderation (*wasatiyyah*) is rooted in the need to deconstruct the reductive simplifications that have long viewed the concept as a static and monolithic theological doctrine. In reality, through the lens of the history of Islamic thought, moderation is an interpretative paradigm that is highly dynamic, resilient, and adaptive to the *Zeitgeist* or the spirit of the times. In current academic discourse, scholars have provided various perspectives on *wasatiyyah*, yet they tend to focus on specific functional domains. For example, Ichsan et al. utilize this paradigm to counter extremism within Islamic education, while Romli et al. and Hassan et al. place greater emphasis on the harmonization between religion and the state and the role of moderation as a counter-ideological tool. Similarly, Mustaniruddin's research focuses more on the shift of religious moderation specifically within the Indonesian context.

While these studies are highly valuable, there remains a research gap or void: they have not yet examined how the shift in the concept and practice of *wasatiyyah* specifically transforms within works of exegesis (*tafsir*) across different historical periods. This research aims to fill that gap by contributing a comprehensive mapping of the transformation of the meaning of moderation through a comparative-synchronic analysis. The primary contribution of this study lies in its ability to demonstrate the dialectic of continuity and change, where moderation evolves from an epistemological restoration across three distinct eras.

This analysis becomes crucial amidst the strengthening narrative of global radicalism, as it provides historical evidence that Islam possesses rich intellectual modalities to face the crises of the times without

losing its original identity. Through an exploration of the thoughts of Al-Rāzī, Al-Shawkānī, and the Tafsir of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, we will see how moderation functions as the theological "DNA" of Islam, enabling this religion to remain resilient as a source of solutions, rather than a source of conflict, across various trajectories of civilization.

This continuity of intellectual tradition demonstrates that changes in religious interpretation are not a form of deviation (*bid'ah*), but rather a sociological necessity—a *sunnatullah* (divine law) within the realm of social change.⁽¹⁷⁾ Using a contextual-hermeneutical approach, this article will deconstruct how time and space influence exegetes in formulating the boundaries of moderation. This is essential to affirm that Religious Moderation in Indonesia, for instance, is not a sudden political product without roots; rather, it is a continuation of a long tradition of *wasatīyyah* interpretation that has withstood various tests of time. Ultimately, this study is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the development of the discourse on Islamic moderation at an international level, while serving as a policy reference for managing diversity in the modern Muslim world.

The conceptual transformation of *wasatīyyah* will be analyzed in depth through three crucial phases of intellectual development to demonstrate the dynamism of this paradigm in responding to the challenges of the times. The analysis begins by reviewing the classical era through the thought of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, where moderation was established as a methodological foundation to restore the epistemological balance between reason and sacred text amidst theological turbulence. Next, the discussion shifts to the late medieval era with Muḥammad al-Syaukānī, who reconstructed *wasatīyyah* as a motor for legal reform to dismantle the deadlock of school-based dogmatism and revive the spirit of *ijtihād*. This series of discussions concludes with an analysis of the Tafsir of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs in the contemporary era, which contextualizes moderation as a strategic-sociological instrument to weave national integration and social cohesion within the framework of a pluralistic nation-state. Through this diachronic mapping, this article will demonstrate how moderation has adapted from an abstract theological realm toward a practical-national reality.

Epistemological Restoration through Manifestations of Theological Balance in the Classical Era

In the classical era of Islam, specifically during the 6th century AH, the concept of moderation or *wasatīyyah* underwent significant intellectual crystallization through the thought of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606 AH/1210 CE). Distinct from modern manifestations of moderation which are often sociopolitical in nature, moderation in Al-Rāzī's discourse emerged as an urgent response to epistemological turbulence that threatened the coherence of the community's creed (*akidah*).⁽¹⁸⁾ During this period, the Islamic intellectual landscape was fractured by a sharp polarization between the factions of extreme rationalism—represented by the Mu'tazilah and the philosophers (*falāsifah*)—and rigid textualist groups such as the Ḥashwīyah and extremist elements of the Hanbali school. In the midst of this "methodological war," Al-Rāzī, through his phenomenal work *Mafātīḥ al-Ghaib*, performed an epistemological restoration by positioning *wasatīyyah* not merely as a moral choice, but as a methodological foundation for understanding revelation.

Al-Rāzī constructs his thesis of moderation upon the principle of balance between the authority of reason (*naẓar*) and the supremacy of the text (*naql*). For him, methodological extremities—whether deifying ratio to the point of ignoring the literality of the text, or worshiping the text while negating the role of logic—represent the primary threats to the integrity of faith. In Al-Rāzī's view, theological moderation is the ability to navigate between these two poles of extremity without falling into the disqualification of either

one.(19) This effort is clearly evident in his discourse regarding the Divine Attributes and the nature of human actions, where he consistently applies the "middle path" principle as a mechanism to achieve objective and stable truth.

Theologically, Al-Rāzī explicitly justifies his rejection of literal interpretation (anthropomorphism) that positions God within a physical space or upon the 'Arsy (Throne). He builds this discourse upon three logical foundations. First, the principle of God's eternity (pre-eternity), which precedes the existence of space; thus, it is impossible for the Creator to have a dependency on location. Second, he performs a deconstruction of the notion of a "sitting God" using the argument of divisibility; for him, such a concept reduces God's perfection to a spatially divided entity. Third, Al-Rāzī asserts that the attribute of "sitting" inherently involves the properties of motion (*ḥarakah*) and rest (*sukūn*), both of which are characteristics of originated or created things (*muḥdath*). As he concludes, if God were subject to changes in position, He would be temporal in nature—a premise he refutes with the statement: '*fain kāna al-awwal faqad šāra maḥall al-ḥarakah wa al-sukūn fayakūnu muḥdathan lā maḥālah*'."

In the construction of his thought, al-Rāzī applies a method of critical dialectics toward Mu'tazilah discourse, as seen in his references to figures such as al-Jubbā'i and al-Zamakhshari. Despite quoting extensively from the opinions found in *al-Kasysyāf*, al-Rāzī performs a deconstruction of those arguments using a synthesis of rational logic and textual authority (*naql*). This is manifested in his interpretation of QS. Al-Baqarah: 255 (Ayat al-Kursi), where he rejects the negation of Divine attributes proposed by the Mu'tazilah and replaces it with a more comprehensive Sunni theological framework.(20)

Furthermore, Al-Rāzī expanded upon the principle of *wasāṭiyyah* (moderation) regarding human actions. While Mu'tazilite doctrine emphasizes human autonomy over their actions to safeguard Divine Justice (*al-'adl*), Al-Rāzī argues that attributing evil acts to Allah would invalidate the logic of moral liability and render punishment an act of injustice. This intellectual framework is evident in their interpretation of the concept of *al-Hamd* (QS. 1:2), wherein Allah performs only good—whether it be obligatory (reward) or an act of grace (*ihsān*). For the Mu'tazilites, the phrase *jazā'an bimā kānū yaksibūn* (QS. 9:82, 85)—"a recompense for what they used to earn"—serves as textual evidence that humans are active subjects. Al-Rāzī clarifies this logic through his commentary on *ghairil-maghdhūbi 'alaihim* (QS. 1:7); asserting that Divine Wrath is a logical consequence of a servant's free choice, because punishing an individual for actions they did not consciously choose would be a form of cruelty impossible for God. (21)

Al-Rāzī's strategy in *Maḥāṭib al-Ghaib* demonstrates that classical moderation is both intellectually defensive and methodologically constructive. He does not merely reject extremities rhetorically; rather, he constructs robust dialectical arguments to dismantle the epistemological foundations of these extremist groups. (22) For Al-Rāzī, truth can only be achieved through the path of *tawassuṭ* (mediation)—a path that respects the text as the source of law, while utilizing reason as an instrument to unveil the depth of its meaning. The primary legacy of this epistemological restoration was the creation of intellectual stability that allowed classical Islamic civilization to withstand internal shocks, before those challenges eventually migrated into the realm of practical law in the subsequent era.

Praxis Reform in Efforts to Combat the Deadlock of Legal Dogmatism in the Al-Syaukānī Era

The transition from the classical era to the late medieval period brought a fundamental shift in the discourse of Islamic moderation. While in Al-Rāzī's time moderation functioned as a theological shield against metaphysical turbulence, in the era of Muḥammad al-Syaukānī (d. 1250 H/1834 AD), *wasāṭiyyah* was reconstructed into an instrument of resistance against intellectual stagnation and legal inertia. The

existential challenge facing the Islamic world during this period was no longer debates regarding the attributes of God, but rather a crisis of legal authority caused by the dominance of taqlid (blind adherence) and acute school-based fanaticism (mazhab fanaticism) (Hallaq, 2005). In the socio-political context of Yemen and the wider Islamic world at that time, school orthodoxy often transformed into a rigid dogmatism that closed off space for the dynamics of legal thought and social innovation.

In his magnum opus, *Fath al-Qadīr*, Al-Syaukānī performs a radical repositioning of the meaning of moderation. For him, moderation no longer signifies seeking a compromise among various school opinions (*madhhab*); rather, it is the intellectual courage to purify religious practice by returning to the absolute authority of the *dalīl* (the Qur'an and Sunnah). He observed that the extremity of his time lay precisely in the idolization of human opinion (the scholars of the schools), which had been elevated to the same level as divine revelation. Al-Syaukānī sharply employs the narrative of *wasatīyyah* to attack the practice of *taqlīd*, which he regards as a deviation from the middle path of Islam.(23)

This interpretive evolution marks the shift of moderation from the epistemological realm toward a praxis-reformist dimension. Al-Syaukānī introduced a rigorous methodology of *tarjīh*—a mechanism for selecting the strongest legal opinion based on the weight of textual and rational evidence, regardless of whether that opinion aligns with the majority of the *madhhab* (schools of law) or not. In Al-Syaukānī's perspective, moderation is a dynamic balance between absolute obedience to the *Shari'a* (*ittibā'*) and the rejection of both baseless innovations (*bid'ah*) and deviant local traditions.(24) This strategy aims to create an Islamic legal practice that is flexible yet remains rooted in an authentic foundation. By reopening the gates of *ijtihād*—which were considered closed by the pseudo-consensus of previous scholars—Al-Syaukānī positions moderation as an engine of renewal (*tajdīd*) that seeks to purify Islam from rigid institutional stagnation.

The uniqueness of Al-Syaukānī's moderation lies in its character of "intellectual independence." Having been raised within the Zaidiyah school of thought, he chose a moderate path by transcending sectarian boundaries to embrace a broader spectrum of Islamic legal traditions, including the Sunni tradition. This reflects how *wasatīyyah* in the late medieval era functioned as a tool to break the functional paralysis of Islamic law. For Al-Syaukānī, a moderate Muslim is one who possesses literacy regarding the *dalīl* (textual evidence) and does not fall into the trap of blind fanaticism that fractures the unity of the *ummah*.(16) Therefore, the restoration carried out by Al-Syaukānī was not merely a theological movement, but a politico-legal movement that demanded the return of scholarly integrity over group loyalty.

Ultimately, Al-Syaukānī's contribution to the evolution of the concept of moderation provided the foundation for modern Islamic reform movements across the globe. He proved that moderation does not signify a passive stance toward tradition, but rather a critical attitude in discerning what constitutes the essence of religion and what is merely the historical baggage that hinders progress. If Al-Rāzī stabilized reason, then Al-Syaukānī liberated the law. This intellectual legacy became crucial as the Islamic world entered the modern era, where moderation subsequently transformed from a mere issue of legal praxis into a broader sociological framework for addressing the challenges of the nation-state and global pluralism.

Sociological Integration and Moderation as an Instrument of National Cohesion

As it enters the threshold of the 21st century, the discourse of *wasatīyyah* has undergone a conceptual mutation within Islamic intellectual history. If, in the classical era, moderation functioned as a theological anchor, and in the medieval era as an engine of legal reform, then in the modern era, moderation has transformed into a sociological-national paradigm.(1) This shift is triggered by the changing landscape of

threats facing the Muslim *ummah*; it is no longer merely a matter of metaphysical debate or school-based stagnation, but rather the penetration of transnational ideologies, violent extremism, and the demand to maintain the integration of the nation-state amidst the massive tides of globalization. In this context, the Tafsir of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (Kemenag RI) emerges as an authoritative representation that reformulates moderation as an instrument of social cohesion within a pluralistic society.

In the narrative of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag RI) Tafsir, *wasatiyyah* is contextually defined as "Religious Moderation" (*Moderasi Beragama*)—a concept that distinguishes between religion, which is sacred, and the practice of religion, which is sociological and dynamic. This concept is strategically positioned as the antithesis to two extreme poles that threaten national stability: exclusive radicalism on one side, and liberal relativism on the other. Through an inclusive hermeneutical approach, the Kemenag Tafsir consistently integrates Qur'anic values with Indonesia's national consensus: Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, and the spirit of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). Moderation is no longer viewed merely as a theological "middle path," but as a politico-ethical tool of the state to manage ethnic and religious diversity, ensuring it remains within the corridors of peace.

One of the most significant manifestations of this sociological integration is seen in the reorientation of interpretations regarding verses that have historically been misappropriated by extremist groups, such as those concerning *jihad* and the *khilāfah*. In the Kemenag Tafsir, the concept of *jihad* is radically deconstructed; it is shifted from the meaning of offensive warfare (*jihad al-ṭalab*) toward the meaning of civilization-building and the strengthening of national resilience (*jihad al-binā'*). *Jihad* is interpreted as a collective effort in combating poverty, ignorance, and socio-political injustice.⁽⁸⁾ In thematic interpretation, *jihad* is categorized into specific types: *Jihād tarbawī*, which involves combating ignorance and backwardness; *Jihād iqtishādī*, aimed at eradicating poverty; and *Jihād ijtimā'ī*, which focuses on fostering solidarity and *ukhuwah* (brotherhood/sisterhood) among the Muslim community.⁽²⁵⁾

This interpretation demonstrates that moderation in the modern era is no longer oriented toward resolving internal conflicts among the scholarly elite; instead, it functions as a methodology for social management that positions religion as social capital to strengthen national brotherhood (*ukhuwwah waṭaniyyah*) and universal human brotherhood (*ukhuwwah basyariyyah*).

This evolution proves that *wasatiyyah*, in the hands of modern Indonesian exegetes, has transcended purely textual boundaries to address urgent sociological challenges. Religion is positioned as a source of solutions for socio-political conflicts, ensuring that an individual's spiritual devotion aligns with their responsibilities as citizens in a multicultural society. As explained within the framework of the sociology of religion, this form of moderation becomes a prerequisite for the sustainability of a democratic nation-state in the Muslim world.¹ By transforming moderation into a public policy supported by authoritative texts, Indonesia contributes to global civilization a model of how Islam can navigate between the demands of pure theology and the requirements of a pluralistic sociology.

Ultimately, this sociological transformation completes the cycle of the evolution of the concept of moderation in this study. From the purification of reason in the era of Al-Rāzī, to the purification of law in the era of Al-Syaukānī, and finally to the purification of social relations in the Kemenag RI era, *wasatiyyah* has proven to be a resilient theological "DNA." It consistently generates answers to every crisis of the age through a dialectic of continuity and change, ensuring that Islam remains a *raḥmatan lil 'ālamīn* (a mercy to the worlds) across every dimension of human history.

Conclusion

The dynamic evolution of the interpretation of moderation from the classical to the modern era demonstrates the intellectual resilience of Islam. While the fundamental principle of al-wasat remains consistent as a value of balance and justice, its operational focus has continually shifted. Al-Rāzī succeeded in stabilizing reason through epistemological moderation; Al-Syaukānī restored legal flexibility through praxis-oriented moderation; and the Kemenag RI integrated religion with the state through sociological moderation.

Consistent with John O. Voll's thesis, the Islamic tradition moves within a dialectic between the continuity of normative values and the shift in perspectives determined by historical context. This change is not a deviation, but rather a part of the natural law (sunnatullah) in responding to social dynamics. Moderation, therefore, is an eternal instrument for Islam to remain relevant across every trajectory of civilization.

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