



Australian Journal of Islamic Studies

<https://ajis.com.au>

ISSN (online): 2207-4414

Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation

Charles Sturt University CRICOS 00005F

Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia

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To cite this article:

Mohamed, Nabil. "The Role of the Qur'ānic Principle of Wasatiyyah in Guiding Islamic Movements." *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2018): 21-38.



Published online: 19 November 2018



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THE ROLE OF THE QUR'ĀNIC PRINCIPLE OF WASAṬIYYAH IN GUIDING ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS

Nabil Mohamed*

Abstract: This article discusses the Qur'ānic principle of *wasatiyyah* (moderation/middle-way) towards guiding the Islamic movement and building an applied Islamic ethics. It demonstrates the application of the principle of *wasatiyyah* in the spheres of politics, civic engagement, spirituality, jurisprudence and theology. *Wasatiyyah* is an expression of the universal Qur'ānic principle of justice (*adl*). The primary Qur'ānic verse on *wasatiyyah* describes the Muslim community as a witness of moderation to other nations. Observing the principle of *wasatiyyah* may draw individuals, the community and Islamic movements towards a middle-way. The article focuses on modernist and Islamist movements in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To reverse extremist tendencies among fringe groups within these movements, a practical methodology on the foundations of a centrist-based approach is needed. Through embracing Islam's teachings on moderation, truth and justice the consequences of extremism may be remedied. The Islamic movement as a collective endeavour to guide humanity to Islam and restore the message of *tawhīd* in the hearts, minds and lives of Muslims will be studied through the prism of *wasatiyyah*. The article attempts to develop an applied Islamic ethics on the theoretical framework of *wasatiyyah* and *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* (objectives of Islamic law) towards guiding the Islamic movement to promote justice and moderation. Thus, through harmonising *wasatiyyah* and *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* we may develop a balanced legal model, synthesising the ethical and legal faces of Islamic tradition.

Keywords: *wasatiyyah*, *maqāsid al-sharī'ah*, *Islamic movement*, *Islamism*, *modernism*

INTRODUCTION

In a post- 9/11 world, a common discourse in the media is the rise of extremism in Arab regions. In our current geopolitical world order and Trump discourse of a “clash of civilisations,” Islam is constantly perceived as radical, violent and extreme by the actions of a few. Extremists typically perpetuate such a discourse, fanatically advocating their binary world view, ignoring the nuances that underpin a pluralist society. Navigating the landscape of the Arab world; colonialism, the influence of secular modernity, and the decline of religion has led to a loss of ethical consciousness, impeding the Islamic movement. To counter extremist

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tendencies among fringe groups, an infusion of ethical principles in our social, political and educational fraternities is needed. The Islamic movement is a collective and individual endeavour to guide humanity to Islam; create harmony in society; convey the message of *tawhīd*; and nurture and restore our hearts, minds and lives upon Islamic principles. The foremost Qur'ānic verse on *wasatīyyah* says “Thus did we make you a middle community, that you may be witnesses for mankind and that the Messenger may be witness for you.” The Muslim nation is described as a witness of moderation to others. Observing the principle of *wasatīyyah* may draw individuals, the community and Islamic movements towards an approach of moderation, balance and fairness. It is by virtue of the Qur'ānic principle of *wasatīyyah* that the Islamic movement may move towards the centre and not the burning periphery.

In this article, the Qur'ānic principle of *wasatīyyah* will be discussed and its relevance to the Muslim personality. In addition, the relevance of *wasatīyyah* as a criterion of being “witness” to humanity will be elaborated upon. Thereafter, two strands of the Islamic movement in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Islamic modernism and Islamism will be defined and navigated. Afterwards, the issues of spiritual, political and theological extremism will be explored in contradistinction to the golden mean. Finally, the paper attempts to develop applied Islamic ethics on the foundation of *wasatīyyah* and *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* (objectives of Islamic law) towards guiding the Islamic movement.

THE QUR'ĀNIC PRINCIPLE OF WASATĪYYAH

The Qur'ānic principle of *wasatīyyah* has multiple meanings and implications in ethics, jurisprudence, religion, politics and sociology. Lexically, “*wasatīyyah*” can be derived from the term “*wasat*,” which means the middle-way, fairness, moderation and balance. The opposite of *wasatīyyah* is *taṭarruf*, which means extremism, radicalism and excess. *Wasatīyyah* is thus the middle or best choice between two extremes. *Wasat* is closely related to the principle of justice (*‘adl*) as mentioned in numerous hadith of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).¹ It can be understood as a universal Qur'ānic principle to guide Muslims and Islamic movements. The foremost Qur'ānic verse on *wasatīyyah* is: “Thus did we make you a middle community, that you may be witnesses for mankind and that the Messenger may be witness for you.”² Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) interprets the word *wasat* to mean the “best and most honoured” nation, which is understood as the most just (*adl*) nation.³ Al-Tustari (d. 896) understands it as “just,”⁴ and Tafsir Al-Jalalayn (d. 1459 and d. 1505) as “excellent and upright.”⁵ Al-Qurtubi (d. 1273)

¹ See hadith no. 3339, 4487 and 7349 in *Sahih al-Bukhari*; hadith no. 2961 in *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*; hadith no. 11068 of *Musnad Ahmad*; hadith no. 10939 of *Sunan al-Nasa'i*.

² Qur'ān 2:143. Translation from *The Majestic Qur'ān*.

³ Ismail Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, trans. Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, 2nd ed. (Riyadh: Darusalam Publications, 2003), v. 2:143.

⁴ Sahl b. 'Abd Allāh al-Tustarī, *Tafsir Al-Tustari*, trans. Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), 23.

⁵ Jalal al-Din Al-Suyuti and Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli, *Tafsir Al-Jalalayn*, trans. Feras Hamza (Amman: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007), 25.

interprets it as “just and balanced,” a praiseworthy disposition that avoids excess and falling short; thus we are entrusted with the task of bearing witness against all creation.⁶

Yusuf Ali (d. 1953) translates *ummatan wasaṭan* as “*ummat* justly balanced,” referring to the Muslim community as temperate in character.⁷ Muhammad Asad (d. 1992) translates it as the “middlemost community.” Such a community keeps an equitable balance between extremes, neither towards licentiousness or exaggerated asceticism.⁸ He further states the Qur’ān exhorts us not to place too much emphasis on the material world, even though the “life of the flesh” is God-willed and legitimate.⁹ Asad stresses the dualistic nature of the Muslim community and denies an inherent antagonism between the spirit and flesh. Mohammad Shafi (d. 1976) states the law of ethical and spiritual equilibrium, and physical equilibrium is signified in the above verse.¹⁰ In the opinion of Hashim Kamali (b. 1944), the Muslim community is just, truthful and forgiving by the commitment to the virtue of *wasatiyyah*. It is this attribute that gives him the ability to mediate between people and be an example of God’s mercy and justice.¹¹ The unparalleled distinction of a moderate disposition of the Muslim community thus sanctions its spiritual and ethical leadership.

A *shāhid* in this context means “someone who is witnessed.” In the same sense, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is a witness for Muslims; the Muslim community is a witness to mankind. The Muslim nation is described as a witness of moderation to other communities. The Muslim bridges the esoteric and exoteric dimensions of faith. He employs a balance, unlike the hyper-legalism of the Jews or the hyper-spiritualism of the Christians.¹² He neither goes to the extreme to believe Jesus is the son of God, like the Christians do; or to reject the miraculous birth of Jesus, like the Jews do.¹³ According to Abul A’la Maududi (d. 1979), it was not merely a change in the direction of the *qibla* from the Temple to the Ka’ba, but a change in spiritual and ethical leadership from the Israelites to the Muslims.¹⁴ It is the embodiment of *wasatiyyah* in the Muslim personality that credits him as a direction (*qibla*) for mankind. The verb to “witness” can be interpreted as a calling to “civilisational awareness” of the role of Islam in the historical cycle of societies and civilisations.¹⁵ A civilisational awareness requires us to be aware of the ebb and flow of our ethical moorings. It is not just self-awareness, but awareness

⁶ Ahmad Al-Ansari Al-Qurtubi, *Tafsir Al-Qurtubi- A Classical Commentary of the Holy Qur’an*, trans. Aisha Bewley, vol. 1 (London: Dar Al Taqwa Ltd., 2003), 384–85.

⁷ Ashraf Adeel, “Moderation in Greek and Islamic Traditions, and a Virtue Ethics of the Quran,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 32, no. 3 (2015): 21.

⁸ Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an* (Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1980), 30.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Muhammad Shafi, *Ma’riful Quran- A Comprehensive Commentary of the Holy Quran*, trans. Muhammad Shamim, vol. 1 (Karachi: Maktaba Darul Uloom, 2005), 369.

¹¹ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Moderation and Balance in Islam: The Quranic Principle of Wasatiyyah* (Kuala Lumpur: IIAIS, 2010), 5.

¹² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Study Quran* (New York: Harper One, 2015), 64.

¹³ Asham bin Ahmad, “Moderation in Islam: A Conceptual Analysis of Wasatiyyah,” *IKIM Journal of Islam and the Contemporary World* 4 (2011): 41.

¹⁴ S. Abul A’la Maududi, *The Meaning of the Quran*, 6th ed., vol. 1 (Lahore: Islamic Publications Ltd, 1982), 120.

¹⁵ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, “The Middle Grounds of Islamic Civilisation: The Qur’ānic Principle of Wasatiyyah,” *IAIS Journal of Civilization Studies* 1 (2008): 11.

in relation to other civilisation's attributes.¹⁶ To be a witness to others, we must be self-aware to gauge if we qualify as representatives of moderation.¹⁷

The spirit of *wasatiyyah* balances the commitment between this world and the hereafter, or between the social and spiritual. In the hadith narrated by Anas bin Malik, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said: "The best among you are not those who neglect this life for the life to come, nor those who neglect the life to come for the sake of this life."¹⁸ Muslims are thus involved with civic responsibilities, political engagement and economic development, yet deeply spiritual. It is thus obvious why the Romans described the Muslims as knights during the day and monks at night.

Al-Zamakhshari (d. 1180) says, "The middle (*wasaf*) is the best choice as it is protected by its peripheries against corruption and collapse."¹⁹ The golden mean thus protects one's character and religion from corruption, to remain true to being a witness. Al-Raghib al-Isfahani (d. 1060) discusses virtue as the middle of two extremes; the virtue of generosity between being niggardly and lavish, courage between being foolhardy and cowardly, and wisdom between being dim-witted and cunning.²⁰ When the virtues of temperance, wisdom and courage are moderated and do not diverge to extremes, justice will manifest. Islamic philosophers such as Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030), Al-Raghib al-Isfahani (d. 1060) and Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (d. 1111) have been receptive to the Greek conceptualisation of moderation as it is consistent to the Qur'an.²¹ In the *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Revival of the Religious Sciences), al-Ghazzali compares man to an ant in the centre of a burning ring of fire, fleeing from the heat of the ring and striving to settle in the centre.²² Man's desires surround him like the ring, and man must adopt the mean of all character traits that have opposites.²³ Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) expresses this when he said, "The best of affairs is the middle course."²⁴ In current times, a prescription to the Islamic movement is to move from the burning periphery to the centre.

The concept of *wasatiyyah* is not novel, but normative to the Muslim personality; however, it is lacking in the modern Muslim world. The crisis of the Islamic movement is a moral crisis. The contemporary challenge is to infuse *wasatiyyah* in Islamic movements through ethical education and temperate institutions. It is in light of the above discussion that comprehensive understanding and implementation of *wasatiyyah* may solve the problems and challenges of Islamic movements in the disciplines of politics, economics, law, theology and civil society. *Wasatiyyah* may serve to guide Islamic movements to promote truth, justice and moderation, as opposed to extremism and intolerance.

¹⁶ Ibid, 12.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Quoted by al-Suyuti in al-Hawi li al-Fatawi 2/89:110.

¹⁹ Kamali, *Moderation and Balance in Islam*, 7.

²⁰ Yasien Mohamed, *The Path to Virtue: The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Raghib Al-Isfahani* (Malaysia: ISTAC, 2007).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Abu Hamid Muhammad Ghazzali, *On Disciplining the Soul and on Breaking the Two Desires*, trans. Timothy Winter (Cambridge: Islamic Text Society, 1995).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Cited in Ghazzali, *On Disciplining the Soul*; unidentified in the *sahih* corpus.

NAVIGATING THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT

Rashid al-Ghannoushi (b. 1941) articulates the Islamic movement is a collective and individual effort to spread the Islamic message all over the world.²⁵ He says it aims to guide humanity to Allah, create harmony in society, enlighten hearts and nurture effectiveness in everyday aspects of our lives.²⁶ This effort is achieved through struggle (*jihad*) to renew and reform all areas of our lives: society, education, politics, the arts, etc.²⁷ Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (b. 1926) defines the Islamic movement as an “organised, collective work, undertaken by the people, to restore Islam to the leadership of society and all walks of life.”²⁸ The Islamic movement aims at social change and religious revivalism. The Islamic movement does not relegate Islam to mere rituals and ascetic practices, but is socially transformative and intellectually dynamic.

The idea of Islamic revival (*tajdid*) is not a modern concept, but indigenous to the Islamic tradition. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said in a hadith narrated by Abu Hurayra: “Allah shall send down a man who will revive the religion of this Nation at the start of every hundred years.”²⁹ Scholars have interpreted this as the work of a single scholar or leader at the turn of every century. Others understood it as a revival to take place as a collective endeavour. Qaradawi posits the “who” may be a group, such as a school or movement of thought or action to attempt to revive Islam.³⁰ Inspired by the Qur’ānic verse, “Work: Soon will Allah observe your work, and His Messenger, and the Believers,”³¹ Qaradawi identifies the Islamic movement as a multitude work, of the persistent and industrious type towards achieving social change and Islamic revivalism. He discusses the Islamic movement as work within the educational, political, economic, scientific and intellectual realms.³² The Islamic movement is not homogenous, but takes various ideological bents within these fields, which may shape the dynamics of the movement. It is thus an imperative that these structures or areas of work are founded on the ethical plinth of *wasāṭiyyah*. The Islamic movement of the twentieth century is shaped by its reaction to Western imperialism and the influences of secular modernity.

The seduction of secular modernity influenced Muslim nations. Various attempts were made to respond or cope with the challenges of Western imperialism and secularism. The Islamic modernist movement attempted to validate Islam’s modernity by the benchmark of Western values. The likes of Jamal al-Afghani (d. 1897) and Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) of Egypt, and Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) of India were early modernist. The Islamist movement, on the

²⁵ Rashid Al-Ghannoushi, “On the Dilemma of the Islamic Movement: A Political Party or a Reformist Organization?,” in *Rethinking Islam and Modernity*, ed. Abdelwahab el-Affendi (London: The Islamic Foundation, 2001), 109.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Yusuf Al-Qardhawi, *Priorities of the Islamic Movement in the Coming Phase*, trans. S.M Hasan Al-Banna (UK, USA: Awakening Publications, 1992).

²⁹ Hadith no. 4291 in *Abu Dawood*.

³⁰ Al-Qardhawi, *Priorities of the Islamic Movement*, 8.

³¹ Qur’ān 9:105. Translation from Yusuf Ali.

³² Al-Qardhawi, *Priorities of the Islamic Movement*, 9–10.

other hand, took a less apologetic and defensive stance.³³ It rejects attempts at modernising Islam and instead looks at Islamising the modern world. They hold that Islam is a complete and universal system that should integrate all spheres of life. The early examples were Hassan al-Banna (d. 1949) of Egypt and Abul Al'a Maududi (d. 1979) of India. These Islamic movements, modernist and Islamist, were not mutually exclusive, but overlapped in many ways. The reaction to modernity was either a modernisation of Islam or superficial Islamisation of Western structures. These two strands are the Islamic movement's reaction to colonialism and modernity. The focus of this article is these two strands; however, other educational, spiritual and cultural movements exist within the broad spectrum of traditionalist, modernist and post-modernist camps. A brief survey of the dominant modernist and Islamist trends are applicable to understanding their strengths and shortcomings. Thereby, we may prescribe the role of *wasatiyyah* in guiding the trajectory of Islamic movements.

The Islamic Modernist Movement

One of the reactions to modernity and Western occupation came in the form of Islamic modernism. It responded more to intellectual modernity than to political hegemony in the course of declining Islamic civilisation. It became an intellectual tool by which to respond to the religious and cultural challenges as a result of dynamic technological and scientific developments. It attempted to reconcile Islam and scientific rationalism, arguing that science and reason are indigenous to the Islamic approach to dealing with modernity.

Muhammad Abduh's approach to dealing with modernity and his contribution to Islamic intellectual thought was influenced by his encounter with colonial powers in Egypt and other socio-political factors. A watershed in Abduh's thinking was his study with Jamal al-Din al-Afghani in 1872, who introduced him to European literature, ideas of Islamic renewal and the need for Islamic unity.³⁴ Abduh offered constructive criticism and suggestions towards pragmatically dealing with modernity. He particularly focused on Islamic revival, approaches to dealing with European influences and pan-Islamic unity.³⁵ In his early years, his focus was on the politics of Egypt and the unity of the Egyptian people. In his later years, upon his return to Cairo, his efforts were focused on educational reforms and renewal of Islamic theology. With al-Afghani, they published *al-urwah al-wuthqa*, discussing Islamic reform, removal of ignorance and corruption in the Muslim world, and the promotion of pan-Islamism. His writings were thus geared towards independence from colonial powers and Islamic unity.³⁶ During the later phase of his life, he denounced nationalist, pan-Islamist sentiment or any division on the basis of race, geography or politics. He found this quest to be impractical due

³³ Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, trans. Carol Volk (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), 35–47.

³⁴ Haji Salleh Kamarudin, "Muhammad Abdu's Religio Political Ideas of Reformation," *Jurnal Usuluddin* 17 (2003).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Yasien Mohamed, "The Educational Life and Thought of Muhammad Abdu," *Muslim Education Quarterly* 13 (1996): 19.

to the state of the Egyptian people and focused his efforts on social and educational reforms to harness political emancipation.³⁷

As critical as Abduh was of European colonial advances, he was acquainted, appreciative and influenced by the birth of enlightenment rationality and scientific development in Europe. He was particularly inspired by the positivism of French thinker Auguste Comte (d. 1857), who interpreted society along rational and scientific lines. Abduh argues in his *Theology of Unity* that reason, logic and science are inherent in the Qur'ān.³⁸ Thus, he attempted to reconcile European rationality and science with Islam. Abduh and Islamic modernists to follow were impressed by the intellectual advances of modernity and made serious attempts to synthesise Western thought and Islam. Abduh thus wrote on the need for Muslims to be liberated from the restraints of imitation (*taqlīd*) and embrace independent reasoning of legal sources (*ijtihād*).

Abduh's apologetic approach led him to uncritically adopt modern science and embrace the erroneous ideas that formed part of it. He was influenced by liberalist ideas of humanism, thus reformulating scholastic theology to realise man's capacity as a free agent of action and thought. Reason, science and human free will are already cherished in Islam. Abduh attempted to resuscitate it from the petrification of thought and remove the shackles of *taqlīd* in Egyptian society and scholarship.

Another significant contributor to Islamic modernism was Muhammad Iqbal from India, a contemporary of Abduh, who was educated in England and Germany. In the *Reconstruction of Religious Thought*, Iqbal leans towards the Mu'tazilite view of free will and denies God has the foreknowledge to protect human free will, limiting Himself, for man to be free. Iqbal's theological discourse on man's free will was a reaction to the fatalism of the Indian Muslims of his time.³⁹ His theological stance was perhaps an influence of enlightenment humanistic thought that emphasised personal autonomy, placing man at the centre of the universe. Iqbal reached the height of political awareness and envisaged a consolidated north-west Indian Muslim state. The articulation of this vision was to promote Muslim unity and emancipation from inter-religious conflict. Muhammad Iqbal implemented a multi-dimensional approach, integrating Qur'ānic mysticism, civic and political engagement, and rationality. To Iqbal, a theological expression stressing man's free will, would cast Indian Muslims out of their fatalism and political lethargy.

These reformers were instrumental in twentieth century Islamic thought and were the shoulders by which Islamists drew their inspiration. Their contribution reinvigorated Islamic teachings, rationalism and consciousness towards the liberation from colonial forces.⁴⁰ However, the impressionability of modernists led to an uncritical acceptance of Western thought, foreign practices and invasive technology. In the intellectual realm, a middle-way

³⁷ Kamarudin, "Muhammad Abdu's Religio-Political Ideas of Reformation."

³⁸ Muhammad Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*, trans. Kenneth Cragg and Ishaq Musa'ad (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2003).

³⁹ Yasien Mohamed, "The Concept of Predestination and Free Will in Iqbal," *Afkar-Journal of Aqidah and Islamic Thought* 7 (2006).

⁴⁰ Tariq Ramadan, *Islam and the Arab Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 70.

(*wasatiyyah*) to embrace Western thought yet be true to the Islamic tradition is imperative to the way forward for Islamic movements.

The Islamist Movement

Islamist thought traces itself to the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*) of Egypt founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1924 and *Jamaat-e Islami* of British India founded by Abul Ala' Maududi in 1941. The Islamist movement is not monolithic and consists of radical and moderate strands. It typically takes a Salafist theological bend.⁴¹ Most tend to thus reject the Islamic schools of law (*madhahib*), and to interpret the Qur'ān in a literal fashion. It is also generally averse to philosophical and Sufi thought. Islamist advocates for the Islamisation of society through political and social action.⁴² Islamism adopts the notion that Islam is a complete and universal force that infuses in all areas of life: social, political and economic.⁴³

Moderate Islamists like Hassan al-Banna promoted social and political reform from the bottom-up, through socio-cultural movements and preaching.⁴⁴ His movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, had strong anti-colonial objectives. It made attempts to Islamise Egypt, educate the masses, and achieve social and economic reform.⁴⁵ From the onset, the Muslim Brotherhood was non-violent and legalist, always working within the framework of the law. However, from the 1960s onwards it took a different slant.

After the failures of the legalist approach, young members of the Muslim Brotherhood were attracted to the thought of Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966). His approach was more radical than that of al-Banna and took a significant departure from normative *Ikhwān* thought. He rejected any notions to do with the West. Qutb emphasised in *Milestones* that any other system, such as nationalism, class struggle, etc., are corrupt theories. For Qutb, the fault line in Egyptian society was between Islam and *jāhilīyah*.⁴⁶ Syed Qutb called for an armed struggle (*jihad*) for Muslims to deliver themselves from the *jāhilīyah* of oppressive regimes.⁴⁷ This was central to his vision of political Islam and played a primary role in political transformation.⁴⁸ He called for a return to Islam and challenged the illegitimate established order. Qutb promoted revolution as a way to seize power from the oppressor and depict Islam as an ideology of social justice. His notions of *jāhilīyah* incited others to undertake armed struggle (*jihad*) against oppressive Muslim governments and to replace it by Islamic states. It led him to excommunicate segments of Egyptian society and leadership from Islam (*takfīr*). This legitimated violent takeover of corrupt governments, but if interpreted in an extreme form, and not studying all of Qutb's work, it could also lead to violent struggle against fellow-Muslims who are not in conformity with

⁴¹ Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, 36.

⁴² Ibid, 36.

⁴³ Ibid, 37.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 41.

⁴⁵ Ramadan, *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, 70.

⁴⁶ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, revised ed. (New York: I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2009), 39.

⁴⁷ Yasien Mohamed, "Muslim Fundamentalism: The Case of Sayyid Qutb," *Scriptura* 99 (2008): 384.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 380.

sharī'ah.⁴⁹ More moderate Islamists rejected excommunication (*takfīr*) and preferred stability than violent revolution and civil strife (*fitnah*).⁵⁰ Thus, the moderate Islamist camp employed reform rather than revolution.

In the India Subcontinent, Maududi of Pakistan did not promote social revolution and clandestine action like the case of Sayyid Qutb. Instead, he advocated for Muslims to partake in political institutions, thus Maududi's party, *Jamaat-e-Islami*, existed in complete legality. Maududi understood politics to be an integral, inseparable part of the Islamic faith, and thus promoted an Islamic state. His political ideology propounded the five pillars of Islam are phases of preparation for *jihad* against those who unrightfully took power. Maududi thus called for *jihad* against the oppressors and construction of an Islamic ideology of political struggle.

The Way Forward

The brief overview of Islamic intellectual and political thought is instructive towards understanding the currents of the Islamic movement in the 21st century. The dominant focus of early Islamism was social and educational reform; however, its failure led to adoption of a radical approach. It focused on multi-party politics, revolution, militant *jihad* and a 'clash of civilisations' narrative. The Islamic movement is bound to fail if reduced solely to politics; and not social, educational and spiritual reform. A balanced and holistic approach to understanding the work of the Islamic movement is imperative. In Ali Allawi's reflections of the 2012 Arab Spring, he posits that hard policy prescriptions and Islamist trends have failed the Arab world.⁵¹ Their narrow, blinkered and binary interpretation of Islam dominates their ideological bend. He says that often unjust rulings become sacrosanct through conflating their political worldview with Islam.⁵² A myopic and ultra-politicised view of Islam rejects the kernel for the husk, losing the ethical sensibilities of its people. Allawi states the greatest loss of the Muslim world is the golden mean – *wasatīyyah*. He explains *wasatīyyah* is:

The necessary compass that draws one back to the centre, back to the sense of balance and equilibrium that rejects outlandish experiments and placing unacceptable divisions between communities. The Middle East is out of balance: between the wealth of the very few and the misery of the mass; between the state and civil society; between favoured regions and impoverished hinterlands; even between men and women. *Wasatīyyah* demands a fundamental shift in understanding the nature and experience of power in the Arab world. Power can no longer be the preserve of the few or of shadowy organisations that are a law unto themselves. It must be devolved as a matter of utmost priority: to regions, provinces, cities, civil and religious institutions, and new forms of economic organisation. Without *wasatīyyah*, human beings are driven by their basest qualities: envy, resentments, aggressiveness, greed, vengeance and on and on... There is no higher calling than to regain the virtues inherent in *wasatīyyah*.⁵³

⁴⁹ Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, 42.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ali G Allawi, "Reflections on the Revolutions in the Arab World," 2013, 29.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

The Islamic movement is not confined to the political sphere, but involves itself on a grassroots level in the civil and educational domain too. The Islamic movement guided by the imperative of *wasāṭiyyah* may balance the division of labour to not merely focus on revolutions, clandestine action and political gain, but social and educational reforms as well. Rashid al-Ghannoushi echoes the gist of Al-Banna's thought, emphasising an Islamic movement is larger than any political party.⁵⁴ It is a social reformist movement that encourages man to do good work and embody Qur'ānic values, drawing him in closeness to his creator.⁵⁵ Thus, an Islamic movement is reformist and penetrates all spheres of society operating through the ethical prism of *wasāṭiyyah*; to guide people to the Qur'ān and message of *tawhīd*.

Said Ramadan al-Bouti (d. 2013) provides stark criticism of Islamic political groups for being distracted from reformist Islam. Consequentially, the focus of power in party politics distracts from the task of reforming hearts and minds, and calling to God.⁵⁶ The spiritual and intellectual apparatus of the Islamic movement cannot operate effectively without the Qur'ānic principle of *wasāṭiyyah* as its guiding force. The imperative of balance will thus not compromise societal and educational reform for the sole enterprise of the political sphere. Thus, civic society and the intellectual elite may guide the political arena to act with justice and social interest. Al-Ghannoushi says social institutions should have the weight to hold political leaders accountable; and not allow the political project to influence the social reform project. Totalitarian political agendas should thus be curtailed, and political influence should stay clear from social activity such as cultural affairs, mosques and educational institutes, and solely be the realm of civic society.⁵⁷

The idea of “civilisational awareness” is important to understand the stages of the *ummah*, morally and intellectually. In Western sociology, civilisation progresses in a linear fashion, through technical and economic growth. For instance, Adam Smith understood society to progress through four stages: hunting and gathering, pastoralism and nomadism, agriculture, and finally commerce.⁵⁸ Muslim scholars, the likes of Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) and Malik Bennabi (d. 1973), understood the law of progress in a cyclical fashion. Malik Bennabi, a Neo-Khaldunian, developed a three-stage schematisation: the spiritual stage, the rational stage and finally the instinctive stage.⁵⁹ The first stage begins with a spiritual idea, religious principle or moral impulse. In the second stage, reason becomes the dominant force, rather than religion, thus society loses its moral impulse, and intellectual and material growth occurs. In the final stage, weakness and corruption settles in due to the loss of faith and moral sentiment. Uncritical acceptance of Western thought and practice, and the rise of modernity and technology, led to the loss of vitality in the Muslim world. In light of the failed Arab “spring,” the rise of ISIS, and the civil strife and despotic rule in the Middle East, the Muslim world is in the final stage

⁵⁴ Al-Ghannoushi, “On the Dilemma of the Islamic Movement,” 116.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 117.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 119.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 122.

⁵⁸ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Annotated ed. (New York, N.Y: Bantam Classics, 2003), 519–35.

⁵⁹ Elmira Akhmetova, “Defining Civilisation and Religion,” *IAIS – Journal of Civilisation Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 51.

of Bennabi's schematisation. Bennabi's approach is instructive to gauge the moral ebb and flow of the Islamic movement. He places great emphasis on the endurance of vital ideas (moral or religious ideas) in revitalising broken societies.⁶⁰ His cyclic understanding of civilisation shows the importance of the ethical edifice in the reformist movement. The ethical imperative of *wasatiyyah* is central in measuring the Islamic movements standing in being a "witness" to other civilisations.

Taha Jabir al-Alwani (d. 2016) emphasises that our responsibility in witnessing is much greater than what we anticipated or put into practice thus far. He says the task of responsible witnessing was passed to the *ummah* after Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) fulfilled his mission.⁶¹ The responsibility of witness is both conceptual and concrete, and should be transmuted in our temporal world through the spirit of Qur'anic guidance and the temperate disposition of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).⁶² To re-establish the much-needed balance in the Muslim world, the Islamic movement should infuse the ethical principle of *wasatiyyah* in political, social and intellectual movements in the Muslim community.

ISSUES OF EXTREMISM

The opposite of moderation is extremism – the former is centripetal, drawing to the centre; and the latter is centrifugal, drawing to the periphery of chaos and disorder. There are limits to be observed and extremist typically have no limits in their mind, speech or actions.⁶³ The Qur'an in many verses conveys the importance of observing God's limits.⁶⁴ In a post-9/11 world, a common debate in the media is the issue of extremism in Arab regions. In our current geopolitical world order, and Trump discourse of a "clash of civilisations," Islam is constantly perceived as radical, violent and extreme by the actions of a few. Extremists typically perpetuate such discourse, fanatically advocating their binary world view, ignoring the nuances that underpin a pluralist society. To counter extremist tendencies among fringe groups, a practical methodology on the foundations of a centrist-based approach is needed. Through embracing Islam's teachings on moderation, truth and justice, the consequences of extremism may be remedied. Kamali says, "just as extremism is the immediate opposite of *wasatiyyah*, justice is its closest conceptual synonym, so much so that *wasatiyyah* finds its true expression

⁶⁰ Ali A Allawi, *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 71.

⁶¹ Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, "Missing Dimensions in Contemporary Islamic Movements," in *Issues in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London and Washington: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2005), 236–37.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ahmad, "Moderation in Islam," 45.

⁶⁴ "These are the limits set by God; so transgress not against them. And whosoever transgresses against the limits set by God, it is they who are the wrongdoers". Qur'an 2: 229. Translation from *The Study Qur'an*. "The penitent, and the worshipers, and the celebrants of praise, and the wayfarers, and those who bow, and those who prostrate, and those who enjoin in right, and those who forbid wrong, and those who maintain the limits set by God; and give glad tidings unto the believers". Qur'an 9:112. Translation from *The Study Qur'an*.

in justice.”⁶⁵ A false sense of justice is typically applied by over-zealous tends towards extremism. Justice should thus be informed by *wasatiyyah* to manifest a rational, moderate and balanced community not at the fringe of extremism. Abd al-Laṭīf al-Furfūr, author of *Wasatiyyah fi'l-Islām*, says “there is no easy refuge from the evil consequences of extremism except through embracing Islam’s teachings on moderation, truth and justice.” Yusuf al-Qaradawi recommends to remedy the problem of extremism a balanced, just and open-minded approach should be employed.⁶⁶ He further discusses the importance of nurturing sound thought and a cogent understanding to deal with the sources of extremism.

Extremism in Spirituality and Civic Engagement

The prophetic model unites the esoteric and exoteric, the otherworldly and worldly, or the spiritual and political. Prophet Muhammad said, “Live for this world as if you will live forever, and live for the hereafter as if you will die tomorrow.”⁶⁷ It is thus expected a Muslim should not neglect the affairs of this world or that of the hereafter. A lack of involvement in politics can create environments for Muslims that may impede their practice and potentially cause harm to their lifestyle. On the other hand, over-engagement in civic matters and politics can limit spiritual progress or moral refinement. It is an ailment in the Muslim world that spirituality is the domain of Sufis and faith-based civic engagement and politics are the realm of Islamist. These two ideas are not dichotomous, but should be synthesised through the principle of *wasatiyyah*. Such synthesis considers the ethical dimensions in social and political matters to guide the action of Islamic movements. At the same time, it motivates action in civic matters, rather than a simplistic fatalism. A centrist approach thus encourages the balance between religious duties and civic responsibility or political engagement.

Political Extremism

Navigating the geopolitical landscape in the Arab world, the rise of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, ISIS, etc., are products of political extremism and a reaction to Western imperialism. The application of the Islamic penal code (*hudud*), militant *jihad*, and tax for non-Muslims (*jizya*) are misapplied and exploited for political ends. Rather than radicalism, through the imperative of *wasatiyyah*, we may moderate these fringe groups towards a sober political expression. The Qur’ānic principle of governance advocates mutual consultation (*shura*).⁶⁸ A middle course of *shura* neither advocates for dictatorships and totalitarian regimes or for liberal governance that promotes anarchy.⁶⁹ As stated by Abdi Shuriye, many Muslim classical scholars (Al-Mawardi (d. 1058), Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) and Al-Ghazzālī)

⁶⁵ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam: The Quranic Principle of Wasatiyyah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 85.

⁶⁶ Yusuf Al-Qardawi, *Islamic Awakening: Between Rejection and Extremism* (London: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2006).

⁶⁷ Classified by Suyuti as a weak hadith.

⁶⁸ Qur’ān 42:38.

⁶⁹ Adeel, “Moderation in Greek and Islamic Traditions,” 24.

recommended electing a ruler as opposed to dictatorships.⁷⁰ However, *shura* should not be equated with Western style democracy (multi-party politics), which emanates from liberal individualism, and manifest conflict and opposition, whereas *shura* promotes communal unity and social cohesion.⁷¹

Theological Extremism

Many problems in the political and social sphere arise from dogmatic and extreme theological positions. Extremist groups often misinterpret the hadith “My *ummah* will divide into seventy-three sects, all of them in hellfire except one”⁷² to justify their sectarianism and demonisation of other groups. It is not a command or prescription to excommunicate others from the faith (*takfir*). This particular hadith has numerous interpretations and understandings. Above all, the hadith points more towards unity and not to take one’s own group or understanding above the *ummah*. Perhaps, the idea of the saved sect might be understood as everyone that is ready to embrace everyone with differences.⁷³ Theological fanaticism further stimulates the sectarian divide leading to civil strife in the Muslim lands and fragmentation of the Islamic movement. Sectarianism is a symptom of an extremist mind-set and is the antithesis to the principle of *wasatiyyah*. To remedy the problem of theological fanaticism, we should develop tolerance of differences of opinion; a disposition inherent in those of a moderate temperament. By tolerance, we do not mean uniformity of thought, but respect for diversity. In addition, *wasatiyyah* may guide theological interpretations of the text – neither adopting extreme literalism nor extreme rationalism or esotericism. Extreme partisanship in theological opinion may hinder the Islamic movement in its collective effort, thus stifling the reformist agenda.

The above survey of extremism is merely a cursory view applicable to the impediments that limit the activity of the Islamic movement. Other extremities exist in the realms of economics, culture, education and jurisprudence. The problems of extreme legal edicts I intend to discuss in contrast to an objective-based approach. In the section to follow, an applied Islamic ethics will be discussed with intention to harmonise *maqasid al-shari’ah* and *wasatiyyah*.

TOWARDS AN APPLIED ETHICS IN GUIDING THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT

Scholars such as al-Ghazzālī and St Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) embraced the virtue ethics of Aristotle in the crucible of Islam and Christianity, respectively.⁷⁴ Al-Ghazzālī, inspired by al-Isfahani, recognised the indigenous value of virtue ethics in Islam, and emphasised the

⁷⁰ Ibid, 25.

⁷¹ Al-Alwani, “Missing Dimensions in Contemporary Islamic Movements,” 239.

⁷² Hadith no. 4597 in *Sunan Abu Dawud* and hadith no. 3991 in *Sunan Ibn Majah*.

⁷³ Hatem Bazian, “On Sectarian Violence in the Muslim World,” Hatem Bazian, 2015, <http://www.hatembazian.com/content/on-sectarian-violence-in-the-muslim-world/>.

⁷⁴ Mohamed, *The Path to Virtue*.

temperate disposition of man.⁷⁵ Moral character, moral wisdom or discernment is the compass of how we should be and live and not merely the implementation of rules and regulations.⁷⁶ A rethinking of the Islamic movement will thus consider a sound moral education. We do not dismiss the deontological and consequentialist approach to morality altogether. However, we have to acknowledge their limitations. They should be employed alongside virtue ethics, thus the principles or universals employed are coupled with the binding material of moral excellence.⁷⁷ It is at the nexus of internal and external approaches to ethics that a comprehensive ethical framework can be incorporated into the Islamic movement.

In the Muslim legal fraternity, extremist approaches exist. There are those who adopt a literalist bend, ignoring the higher objectives of *sharī'ah*, and, on the other end, those who use the *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* to justify secular liberal sentiment.⁷⁸ A harmonisation of *wasāṭiyyah* and *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* mediates the application of *maqāsid*, remaining faithful to the Islamic tradition, yet dealing with contemporary issues. The incorporation or consideration of *wasāṭiyyah* in the conceptualisation of *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* includes the ethical dimension. The synchronism between law and morality provides a more comprehensive framework, integrating the exoteric and esoteric dimensions. The classical grouping of *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* focused on the rulings for punishing transgressors (*al-hudud*) – such as murder, adultery, consumption of alcohol, etc. – and established the *maqāsid* by way of inference. In light of contemporary challenges and the limitation of my methodological tools, Ahmad ar-Raysuni (b. 1953) argues to expand and reconsider the classical conception of *maqāsid*; at the same time incorporate the spiritual and ethical dimensions.⁷⁹ Thus, through harmonising *wasāṭiyyah* and *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* we may develop a balanced legal model, synchronising the ethical and legal face of the Islamic tradition. Islamic law should not solely be the vanguard of the jurist, and spiritual and ethical refinement the pursuit of the Sufi. A balanced community combines the esoteric (*batin*) and exoteric (*thahir*) dimensions of Islam.

Hashim Kamali encourages collective *ijtihad* and *shura* in the identification of *maqāsid*, thus avoiding partisan bias and the arbitrary nature of *maqāsid*.⁸⁰ A moderated legal methodology that accounts for the higher purpose of *sharī'ah* is relevant to policy making. Avoidance of extremities in policy making takes into account necessities (*darrurat*), needs (*hajiyyat*) and enhancements (*tahsiniyat*) in the *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* schematic. These prioritisations are not ossified, but contingent on time and place. Thus, a moderate disposition

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall (2013), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/ethics-virtue/>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Imam al-Juwayni (d. 1058) classified *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* as the protection of "faith, soul, mind, progeny and money." Traditional scholars have divided *maqāsid* into three levels of prioritisation; the necessities (*darūrāt*), needs (*hājiyāt*) and enhancements (*tahsīniyyāt*). The necessities are regarded as essential to human living, order in society and prevention of chaos. The needs ensure the prevention of harm or difficulty; however, not essential for life. The enhancements aim towards beautification and perfection, but are not regarded as a priority.

⁷⁹ Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 135.

⁸⁰ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Maqāsid Al-Sharī'ah Made Simple* (Washington: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2008), 6.

is crucial to legislation. *Wasatiyyah* is both abstract and actual; however, at the nexus of *wasatiyyah* and *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* one may more effectively actualise it in guiding Islamic movements.

An applied Islamic ethics considers the outward (*zahir*) and inward (*batin*), and the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of Islam. The *wasatiyyah–maqāsid* model aims towards the pursuit of human excellence and fulfilment of the Qur'ānic imperative of being “witness” to mankind, in an individual and communal sense. It considers the purpose of *sharī'ah* and the ethical sensibilities of a Muslim personality. According to Ahmad ar-Raysuni, moderation is the ideal that *sharī'ah* aims to achieve in its legal rulings, thus cutting a middle-ground between extremes. In this regard, the words of Imam al-Shatibi are appropriate:

In its imposition of obligations in accordance with its precepts, Islamic law proceeds along the path of moderation and consummate fairness... The obligations entailed by the Law of Islam are founded upon an equilibrium which requires that every one of us progresses toward perfect moderation. Hence, if a given precept comes into being in order to correct human beings' tendency to diverge from the right path, or because there is good reason to believe that we might diverge from the middle-way toward this or that extreme, it thereby serves to restore us to the path of moderation and full integrity.⁸¹

The Qur'ān states, “Lo! God changes not the condition of a folk until they change that which is in their hearts.”⁸² It is by the token of changing our internal state, through ethical cultivation, that the Islamic movement restores harmony in society and guides humanity to Allah.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I espoused the Qur'ānic principle of *wasatiyyah*; defined and navigated two strands of the Islamic movement, Islamic modernism and Islamism; discussed the issues of spiritual, political and theological extremism; and finally developed an applied Islamic ethic on the foundation of *wasatiyyah* and *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* towards guiding the Islamic movement. The crisis of the Islamic movement is a moral crisis. The ethical imperative of *wasatiyyah* is fundamental in measuring the Islamic movement's standing in being a “witness” to other civilisations. The path of balance, moderation and temperance is the binding moral material that may guide the Islamic movement. The virtue of *wasatiyyah* is a calling towards fairness, justice and truth. A balanced and holistic approach to understanding the work of the Islamic movement is imperative. A myopic and ultra-politicised view of Islam rejects the kernel for the husk alone, losing the ethical sensibilities of its people. Thus, the Islamic movement is reformist and penetrates all spheres of society operating through the ethical prism of *wasatiyyah*; to guide people to the Qur'ān and message of *tawhīd*.

A reconstruction of an applied Islamic ethics was deemed applicable to guiding the Islamic movement. In a post-colonial world, deontological and utilitarian ethics have influenced the

⁸¹ Gamal Eldin Attia, *Towards Realization of the Higher Intents of Islamic Law- Maqasid Al-Shari'ah- A Functional Approach*, trans. Nancy Roberts (London and Washington: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2007), 45.

⁸² Qur'ān 13:11. Translation from Marmaduke Pickthall.

Muslim world at the expense of virtue ethics. It is at the nexus of internal and external approaches to ethics that a comprehensive ethical framework can be incorporated into the Islamic movement. The consideration of *wasāṭiyyah* in the conceptualisation of *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* includes the ethical dimension. The synchronism between law and morality provides a comprehensive framework, integrating the exoteric and esoteric dimensions. To expand and reconsider the classical conception of *maqāsid*, and incorporate spiritual and ethical dimensions, is imperative to the Islamic movement. Thus, through the harmonising of *wasāṭiyyah* and *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* we may develop a balanced legal model, synchronising the ethical and legal face of the Islamic tradition, and consider the ethical sensibilities of a Muslim personality and the purpose of *sharī'ah*.

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