



Wasatiyyah Under Pressure: Bridging Ethics, Context, and Geopolitics in Contemporary Muslim Discourse

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By Mohamed Feisal Bin Mohamed Hassan

SYNOPSIS

Wasatiyyah, or moderation as a central theme in Islam, is often grounded in an ethical ideal rooted in Islamic tradition. However, in contemporary Muslim discourse, the concept's applicability needs to be extended across ethics, context, and geopolitics to avoid distorting its fundamentals and significance.

COMMENTARY

Wasatiyyah, a Qur'anic concept, commonly rendered as moderation or the middle way, is a central reference point in contemporary Muslim governance, religious education, and counter-extremism discourse. The concept's applicability is often stretched across competing meanings: an ethical ideal rooted in Islamic tradition, a policy framework for social cohesion, and a political language shaped by contemporary global tensions.

This tension has become more pronounced in recent years as Muslim societies navigate both internal ideological challenges and external geopolitical developments in the Middle East.

In this environment, wasatiyyah is increasingly shaped by three interacting forces: classical ethical foundations, contextual state and community interpretations, and global political perceptions of justice and power. Without these forces, wasatiyyah remains an ethical concept that can be distorted when reduced to either state policy or reactive geopolitical sentiment. A sustainable understanding of wasatiyyah today requires attention to all three dimensions.

Wasatiyyah as Ethical Balance in Classical Thought

In the Islamic intellectual tradition, wasatiyyah is not merely a sociopolitical posture but a moral condition grounded in the disciplined balance of the human self. Classical scholars, most notably al-Ghazali (d.1111) one of the most influential philosophers, theologians, jurists, and mystics of Sunni Islam, conceptualised moderation through a moral psychology centred on the ethical condition of the human soul.

He identifies three central faculties of the human self: reason (*'aql*), anger (*ghadab*), and desire (*shahwah*). Ethical virtue emerges when each faculty is regulated in a balanced manner. Wisdom arises when reason governs appropriately; courage emerges when anger is disciplined; and self-restraint is achieved when desire is moderated. In Ghazalian ethics, justice emerges when these faculties are harmoniously ordered under right reason and revelation.

In this framework, extremes in either direction constitute moral failure. Excess leads to corruption and injustice, while deficiency results in weakness and neglect of responsibility. Wasatiyyah, therefore, is not a compromise between opposing positions but the precise calibration of human faculties in accordance with moral order.

Importantly, this ethical framework implies responsibility. Human beings are expected to discipline their inner states rather than act on unchecked impulses, demands, or entitlements. Moderation, in this sense, is inseparable from moral responsibility, accountability, and self-restraint.

From Ethical Ideal to Contextual Practice

While classical formulations provide normative clarity, contemporary Muslim societies operate within complex institutional and political environments that shape how religious concepts are understood and applied.

In modern contexts, wasatiyyah is often institutionalised as part of religious governance, education policy, and community cohesion strategies. In these settings, it is interpreted not only as a theological principle but also as a framework for managing differences and diversity, maintaining social stability, and promoting civic responsibility.

This contextualisation reflects an important reality: moderation is no longer merely an individual ethical quality but also a socially mediated construct, shaped by state structures, educational systems, and community leadership.

However, this institutionalisation also carries risks. When wasatiyyah becomes overly associated with administrative categories or policy objectives, it may lose its ethical depth and be perceived as a tool of governance rather than as a lived moral value.

Contemporary Challenge: Entitlement and Moral Rebalancing

An additional challenge facing contemporary Muslim discourse is the emergence of entitlement-based attitudes in parts of religious and social life. While not universal, such attitudes may manifest as expectations of recognition or accommodation, without a corresponding emphasis on responsibility or ethical discipline.

This trend is significant because it subtly alters the moral grammar of wasatiyyah. Classical Islamic ethics emphasises restraint, self-discipline, and accountability. By contrast, entitlement-based thinking shifts the focus towards asserting claims rather than cultivating virtue.

If left unaddressed, this can weaken the ethical foundation of moderation by replacing internal discipline with external expectations. Wasatiyyah risks being interpreted not as moral balance, but as a mechanism for validating competing demands.

Addressing this requires reaffirming that moderation is inseparable from ethical self-regulation. Rights and recognition must be balanced with responsibility and moral restraint.

Geopolitical Context and the Strain on Moderation Narratives

Beyond internal dynamics, Muslim discourse on wasatiyyah is also shaped by external geopolitical developments, particularly in the Middle East. As of April 2026, US policy in the Middle East – marked by the war with Iran, continued security support for Israel and several Gulf Arab partners, and contested ceasefire and post-war governance proposals for Gaza – has generated mixed responses across Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority societies, resulting in intensified debate over whether moderation reflects ethical principle or political alignment.

At the state level, such developments often reinforce pragmatic engagement and stability-oriented diplomacy. At the societal level, however, they can foster perceptions of injustice or moral inconsistency, particularly in relation to conflicts involving massive civilian displacement, suffering and death.

This divergence between state-level pragmatism and public moral sentiment has direct implications for wasatiyyah discourse. Where perceptions of justice are contested, moderation narratives may face two pressures:

- First, scepticism that “moderation” reflects political alignment rather than ethical principle
- Second, the risk that moderation is reinterpreted either as disengagement from moral concerns or as an endorsement of existing power asymmetries

In both cases, the credibility of wasatiyyah depends not only on theological articulation but also on perceived moral coherence in global affairs.

The Contextual Reframing of Wasatiyyah

In response to these pressures, contemporary Muslim societies have increasingly contextualised wasatiyyah in different ways.

Within state institutions and religious bureaucracies, it is often framed primarily in terms of social cohesion and governance stability, emphasising harmony in plural societies and alignment with national frameworks.

Among religious scholars and intellectual circles, it is more commonly understood as ethical engagement with global issues, where moderation involves balancing moral conviction with contextual awareness.

In civil society and digital religious discourse, it may also be interpreted as a form of disciplined moral critique, in which restraint does not imply silence but rather the measured articulation of ethical positions.

These variations do not necessarily indicate conceptual fragmentation. Rather, they reflect the adaptability of Islamic ethical concepts when applied across diverse social and political environments.

However, they also emphasise the need for conceptual grounding to prevent moderation from becoming purely situational or instrumental.

Bridging Ethics, Context, and Global Perception

A sustainable understanding of wasatiyyah requires integrating three dimensions. First, the ethical foundation: drawn from classical thought, it emphasises inner discipline, proportionality, and moral responsibility.

Second, the contextual application: recognising that moderation is shaped by institutional, social, and political environments.

Third, the geopolitical dimension: acknowledging that global events and perceptions of justice influence how moderation is understood, legitimised, or contested within Muslim societies.

Without ethical grounding, contextualisation risks relativism, in which meaning becomes overly dependent on shifting social and political circumstances. Without contextual awareness, ethics risks abstraction. Without attention to geopolitical perception, moderation risks losing credibility in the public imagination.

Implications for Religious Discourse and Policy

First, religious education should reinforce the ethical depth of wasatiyyah, ensuring that moderation is understood as a disciplined virtue rather than mere behavioural compliance or policy alignment.

Second, religious leadership should be attentive to the moral expectations of communities, particularly regarding global injustices, while remaining committed to restraint and constructive engagement.

Third, policy frameworks that promote moderation should avoid reducing wasatiyyah to a governance instrument. Its legitimacy depends on its perceived ethical authenticity, not merely its administrative utility.

Finally, there is a need to address internal cultural shifts, including entitlement-based attitudes, that may weaken the ethical foundations of moderation by displacing responsibility with expectations.

Conclusion

Wasatiyyah remains a vital concept in Islamic thought and contemporary Muslim governance, yet its understanding is increasingly contested across ethical, contextual, and geopolitical dimensions. Classical scholarship offers a stable moral foundation grounded in balance and self-discipline. Contemporary contextual realities shape how moderation is interpreted and applied in diverse societies. Global political developments further influence how credible and meaningful moderation appears to different audiences.

The challenge today is not merely to affirm wasatiyyah, but to ensure it remains ethically grounded, contextually responsive, and publicly credible. Only through such integration can moderation serve, not as a slogan, but as a living ethical framework capable of guiding Muslim societies through the complexities of the modern world.

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