

# The principle of Moderation in the Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, Verse 143

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## ARTICLE INFO

### *Keywords:*

Wasathiyah;  
Exegesis;  
Moderation;  
Nusantara

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### *Article history:*

Received 2026-05-11  
Revised 2026-06-10  
Accepted 2026-07-16

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## ABSTRACT

Socio-religious polarization, intolerance, and the rejection of religious moderation resulting from the weak theological grounding of the faithful at the grassroots level have triggered serious national tensions. This study aims to extract the principle of moderation in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 143, through a comparison of classical and contemporary interpretations from the Indonesian archipelago. The research method employs a qualitative literature review using a thematic (maudhu'i) exegetical approach to the interpretations of Al-Tabari, Hamka, and Quraish Shihab. The findings reveal a hermeneutical evolution from Al-Tabari's classical theological-eschatological framework toward the practical, community-oriented approach of Hamka and Quraish Shihab in the Nusantara region. Specifically, Al-Tabari focuses on justice as a witness to the afterlife; Hamka emphasizes the resilience of the nationalist-religious struggle; while Quraish Shihab highlights the dialogical aspect of social inclusiveness. From this dialectic, a blueprint for the three operational pillars of wasathiyah is formulated: the epistemological pillar (the harmonization of reason and revelation), the practical-ethical pillar (the balance of social rights and obligations), and the socio-cultural pillar (active tolerance based on local wisdom). As a concrete recommendation, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, interfaith leaders, and educators must organically integrate this three-pillar operational blueprint into the national curriculum and community outreach modules.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The socio-religious landscape, both globally and nationally, has recently been marked by increasing polarization, exclusivism, and claims to a monopoly on truth, which often trigger social tensions (Rahmat et al., 2025). In Indonesia, a country with a highly complex diversity of ethnic groups, cultures, and religions, this phenomenon manifests itself in the form of intolerance, opposition to places of worship, and even acts of extremism that threaten the nation's unity. The Indonesian government has responded intensively to this situation by designating "Religious Moderation" as a national priority

program in the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) to foster a balanced, fair, and tolerant understanding of religion (Intan, 2023). However, these top-down campaigns are often viewed with suspicion by some conservative groups as covert secularization projects or political tools used by the state to control Muslims' religious expression. As a result, clashes of interpretation at the grassroots level continue, indicating that the concept of moderation has not yet been firmly internalized as a genuine theological conviction among the faithful.

The discrepancy between the bureaucracy's massive moderation campaign and theological resistance at the grassroots level reveals a critical gap that must be addressed immediately (Qoumas et al., 2024). The sociological-political approach that has long been dominant among government officials tends to emphasize moderation as a tool for social harmony in the interest of development stability, and thus often loses its persuasive power in the face of rigid religious doctrines. For the Muslim majority in Indonesia, adherence to social values will only be effective if it has an authoritative theological and scriptural foundation derived directly from the Holy Qur'an (Subchi et al., 2022). Without a strong theological foundation, religious moderation will continue to be viewed as a Western construct or a secular agenda that is alien to authentic Islamic values. Therefore, there is a clear gap between society's need for authentic theological justification and the current narrative of moderation which remains dominated by sociological-pragmatic rhetoric that demands proof that the concept of moderation (*wasathiyah*) is a divine command inherent in the very identity of every Muslim since the time of the Prophet (Andrisopiyani et al., 2026).

These circumstances call for an in-depth examination of the foundations of Islamic scripture, particularly Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 143, which introduces the concept of "*ummatan wasathan*" (the middle way) as the ideal model for an Islamic society (Mufidah, 2025). Although this verse has been extensively studied, a review of the existing literature reveals a significant research gap in previous academic studies. Most previous studies tend to be trapped in two separate analytical camps: on the one hand, purely classical hermeneutical studies that are highly textual and lack contextual depth in addressing the challenges of modern pluralism; and on the other hand, contemporary sociological studies on moderation that often overlook the depth of interpretive analysis and the dynamics of semantic shifts in the verse's meaning. No study has yet specifically, comprehensively, and operationally integrated the interpretations of classical exegetes such as Al-Tabari with those of local Indonesian exegetes such as Hamka in Tafsir Al-Azhar and Quraish Shihab in Tafsir Al-Misbah to formulate practical principles of moderation (Supriyanto, 2024). The absence of this epistemological integration has resulted in studies of Al-Baqarah verse 143 amounting to nothing more than an abstract legitimization of the text, without offering an operational methodological framework for resolving contemporary socio-religious conflicts.

To fill this academic gap, this study offers a novel contribution in the form of a systematic extraction of the principles of moderation in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 143, through an integrative thematic (*maudhu'i*) exegetical approach. The novelty of this study lies in its effort to juxtapose the methodological authority of classical exegesis with the contextual sensibilities of contemporary Nusantara-specific exegesis to formulate an operational framework for *wasathiyah*. This research does not merely reiterate normative definitions of moderation but rather analyzes the semantic structure of verse 143 including the phrase "*ummatan wasathan*" and its function as "*shuhada 'ala al-nas*" (witnesses over humanity), and then translates it into three operational pillars: epistemological moderation (balance between reason and revelation), practical-ethical moderation (balance between rights and obligations), and socio-cultural moderation (active tolerance in diversity). By dialectically mapping the thought of Hamka and Quraish Shihab, this study has successfully produced a blueprint for moderation that is not only deeply rooted in the classical Islamic scholarly tradition but is also adaptive and applicable to the cultural ecosystem and the dynamics of diversity in contemporary Indonesian society.

The urgency of this research encompasses both theoretical and practical dimensions that are critically important for the continued harmony of the nation. Theoretically, this study contributes to enriching the body of knowledge in Qur'anic studies and exegesis, particularly in developing an

epistemology of contextual-multicultural exegesis capable of addressing the challenges of social disruption. Practically, the principles of moderation formulated in this research can serve as an authoritative reference for educators, religious leaders, and public policymakers such as the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs to develop curricula and da'wah modules on moderation that are more grounded in sacred texts and culturally sensitive. Through the understanding that moderation is a divine mandate enshrined in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 143, public rejection and suspicion toward the concept of religious moderation can be mitigated and replaced with sincere, organic acceptance. Ultimately, the internalization of these principles of moderation is crucial for preserving the existence of the Republic of Indonesia as a pluralistic nation, while also reaffirming the historical role of Indonesian Muslims as the axis of medieval civilization that spread peace, justice, and compassion throughout the universe.

## 2. METHODS

This study is designed as a qualitative library-based research project using a thematic exegesis approach to comprehensively analyze the principle of moderation. As a study based on religious texts, the primary data source in this research is the Holy Qur'an, specifically Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 143. To gain theological and contextual depth, this verse was analyzed through three authoritative exegetical works selected for specific purposes: Tafsir al-Tabari by Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari to represent the classical explanatory tradition (riwayah/ma'tsur), as well as Tafsir Al-Azhar by Buya Hamka and Tafsir Al-Mishbah by M. Quraish Shihab to capture the contextual articulation characteristic of the Indonesian archipelago. Secondary data sources were obtained selectively through a search of articles in reputable scientific journals, monographs, theses, dissertations, and official religious policy documents that discuss the concepts of wasathiyah, religious moderation, and the theory of social harmony to strengthen the theoretical credibility of the analysis.

The data collection technique in this study employed the documentation method systematically through text search, literature archiving, and thematic categorization relevant to the keywords ummatan wasathan and shuhada 'ala al-nas. The collected data were then analyzed using qualitative content analysis with a descriptive-comparative-analytical framework. The interpretation process was conducted through three epistemological stages: first, data reduction by isolating the specific interpretations of the three exegetes regarding verse 143; second, conducting a dialectical comparison to map conceptual points of convergence and divergence between classical and contemporary exegetes; and third, reconstructing contextual meaning using contextual hermeneutics. Through these stages, the textual data is transformed into operational pillars of moderation that are adaptive and applicable to the reality of social pluralism in Indonesia.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### **Semantic Deconstruction and the Dialectics of Interpretation of "Ummatan Wasathan" in the Commentaries of al-Tabari, Al-Azhar, and Al-Mishbah**

A philological examination and semantic deconstruction of the word wasath in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 143, reveals that the root w-s-th (وَسْطَ) etymologically refers to the geometric midpoint between two extremes, which carries philosophical implications of justice, goodness, and balance (tawazun) (Munawar, 2025). This central position is not merely a static geographical location, but rather an ideal dynamic space because it is equidistant from two opposing poles, so that individuals occupying it possess the clarity of vision and emotional stability to view reality objectively without leaning excessively toward either pole. This meaning aligns with Ibn Manzur's explanation in Lisan al-Arab, which asserts that the best aspect of any matter is its middle ground a semantic perspective reinforced by contemporary findings regarding the importance of ethical proportionality in Islam (Pahrudin et al., 2025).

This study identifies that the phrase li takunu shuhada 'ala al-nas (so that you may be witnesses over mankind) in that verse positions Muslims as bearers of a mandate for moral witness and upholders

of justice in human history (Andeska, 2026). The role of a witness (shuhada) necessitates personal integrity, objective honesty, and absolute fairness in conduct, for testimony will have no legal or social validity if the witness himself engages in extreme misconduct. This concept is supported by Al-Qurtubi's theoretical analysis in his exegesis, which asserts that Muslims cannot fulfill the role of witnesses to universal civilization unless they consistently practice justice (al-'adalah) which, in a modern context, translates to serving as active ethical role models amid the dynamics of global society (Andeska, 2026).

Through an analysis of Tafsir al-Tabari, it was found that the classical exegete Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari explicitly equates the term wasathan with al-khiyar (the best choice) and al-'adl (justice), with an interpretive focus that is overwhelmingly centered on the theological-normative dimension as well as the eschatological role of Muslims as witnesses to the truth of the prophets' messages in the hereafter. For al-Tabari, the community's moderation is a divine decree rooted in doctrinal obedience, wherein the middle path is a blessing that safeguards the community from the extremes of the Jews (who alter the law to make things difficult for themselves) and the negligence of the Christians (who are too lenient regarding religious boundaries). This style of theological-narrative exegesis (tafsir bi al-ma'tsur) is reinforced by classical sociological-historical analysis, which notes that Al-Tabari's approach was extremely rigorous in upholding the validity of the Companions' narrations to preserve the purity of doctrine from the infiltration of foreign ideas. (Supriyanto, 2024).

A study of Buya Hamka's Tafsir Al-Azhar reveals that the concept of ummatan wasathan is drawn from the abstract-theological realm into the sociological-practical realm of struggle, where Hamka portrays moderation as a distinctive trait of Indonesian Muslims who struggle tenaciously yet maintain a balance between the material needs of development and spiritual resilience. Hamka interprets this middle ground as a cultural shield for Indonesian Muslims to resist the dominance of the extreme left in the form of materialism and communism that deny God while simultaneously countering the extreme right, represented by radical asceticism that neglects social contributions in the real world in favor of individual piety alone. Hamka's perspective, rich in socio-cultural nuances (adabi ijtimai), is supported by a historical analysis of the nation's struggle, which positions Indonesian Muslims as the unifying axis of dynamic cultural diversity without losing their Islamic identity (Daud & Rababa'h, 2020).

An analysis of M. Quraish Shihab's interpretation in Tafsir Al-Mishbah reveals that ummatan wasathan is defined as a community positioned in the center so that it can be seen by all parties from every direction, which methodologically gives rise to the principles of openness, dialogical hospitality, and a firm rejection of the truth monopoly. Being in the middle means that Indonesian Muslims are called upon to serve as a beacon of peace a role that can only be realized if they possess an inclusive and tolerant understanding of religion and actively build bridges of communication with different groups without compromising the fundamental principles of their faith. Quraish Shihab's moderate and inclusive framework aligns with contemporary contextual hermeneutics, which emphasizes that religious understanding must always be engaged in dialogue with the diversity of social realities in order to avoid radicalism (Munandar & Amin, 2023).

Through a dialectical comparison of the three exegetes, this study finds an evolution in interpretation characterized by a shift in theoretical orientation from a theological-eschatological approach centered on the hereafter during Al-Tabari's time to a pragmatic-societal approach that actively responds to the challenges of national pluralism in the era of Hamka and Quraish Shihab. This shift in orientation is not a form of interpretive deviation but rather a hermeneutical necessity in which the universal meaning of verse 143 is re-actualized by Indonesian exegetes to address the challenges of their respective eras, particularly in preserving the unity of Indonesia's multicultural nation. This evolution of interpretation validates the theory of contextual exegesis, which asserts that the Qur'anic text possesses the capacity for semantic flexibility to provide ethical solutions relevant to the social dynamics of its readers (Destia Purwaningsih et al., 2025).

Although these three exegetes lived across vastly different historical periods, geographical regions, and intellectual traditions, this study identifies a solid point of convergence: the consensus that the deepest essence of moderation (*wasathiyah*) is the upholding of justice (*al-'adl*) in all dimensions of life. This convergence demonstrates that moderation should not be understood as a weak, compromising stance or a syncretic blending of beliefs, but rather as a stance that is theologically just (neither extreme nor extremist), ethically just, and just in treating fellow human beings amidst differences. This principle of the unity of the meaning of justice aligns with the theory of universal justice in Islamic law (*maqashid al-sharia*), which affirms that balance (*tawazun*) is an absolute foundation for the sustainability of the cosmic and social order of humanity.

Conversely, the points of divergence that have been successfully identified lie in methodological emphasis and interpretive style (*laun al-tafsir*), where Al-Tabari emphasizes the authenticity of normative narrations, Hamka focuses on the formation of a nationalist-religious character, while Quraish Shihab focuses on modern, inclusive linguistic analysis that is adaptable to global civil society. These differing emphases have positive implications because they provide a rich spectrum of understanding of moderation for Indonesian Muslims, shifting from mere rigid dogmatic compliance toward a grounded and flexible socio-cultural awareness. This methodological plurality reinforces the theoretical claim that Qur'anic interpretation is inherently dynamic and contextually dynamic (*shalihun likulli zaman wa makan*), providing valuable methodological tools for developing culturally sensitive moderation policies.

**Table 1. Semantic Deconstruction and the Dialectics of Interpretation of Surah Al-Baqarah: 143**

| Verse Fragment & Philological Findings   | Tafsir al-Tabari (Classical)                                                                                                                                                                                          | Tafsir Al-Azhar (Hamka - Nusantara)                                                                                                                                                                 | Tafsir Al-Mishbah (Quraish Shihab - Nusantara)                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| أُمَّةٌ وَسَطًا                          | Interprets <i>wasath</i> as <i>al-khiyar</i> (the chosen) and <i>al-'adl</i> (just). Focuses on a theological aspect to distinguish the Muslim community from the excesses of Judaism and the laxity of Christianity. | Translates it practically and sociologically as the character of the Nusantara Muslim, who strives resiliently, balancing the material dimension (development) and the spiritual dimension (piety). | Defines the middle position spatially so that it is easily visible to all parties. It demands inclusivity, active tolerance, openness to dialogue, and anti-extremism.              |
| لَتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ     | Interprets this witness as eschatological in nature in the afterlife. The Muslim community acts as a witness to the validity of the <i>dawah</i> (call) of previous messengers before Allah.                          | Interprets it as a socio-historical responsibility in this world to defend the truth and to be a pioneer of justice amidst the diversity of nations.                                                | Interprets it as an exemplary moral standard (morality role model) where the behavior of the Muslim community must serve as a reflection of goodness for global human civilization. |
| وَيَكُونُ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا | Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) acts as a witness for the Muslim community regarding the truth of their faith and their worthiness as witnesses for previous communities on the Day of Judgment.                              | Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) serves as the absolute patron in the struggle of <i>dawah</i> , where the actions and movements of the community must be aligned with his noble struggle.                   | Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is positioned as the primary benchmark (standardizer) for the compatibility of the community's actions with the sublime values of Islamic teachings.        |

Source: Data processed by the researcher, 2026

## Reconstructing the Three Operational Pillars of Wasathiyah as a Blueprint for Religious Moderation in Indonesia

A reconstructive study of the conceptual meaning of Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 143, reveals the first pillar of the blueprint for moderation namely, the epistemological pillar, which emphasizes the importance of an absolute balance between reason and revelation (sacred text) in formulating an objective understanding of religion (Nurhasanah et al., 2025). These findings imply that Muslims in Indonesia are called upon to adopt a moderate religious perspective, in which religious texts are neither understood in a rigidly literal manner that rejects the dynamic development of reason and science, nor interpreted in a radically liberal way that negates the absolute truth of revelation in order to follow the discordant tide of secular modernization. This pattern of epistemic harmonization aligns with the theory of scientific integration, which asserts that a dynamic synergy between revelation as an absolute moral guide and reason as a contextual operational instrument is essential for fostering a form of religious understanding that offers solutions to the social problems of modern society without compromising the authenticity of Islamic teachings themselves.

An empirical and literature-based study of the dialectics of thought among Nusantara exegetes demonstrates that the epistemological harmonization of reason and revelation gives rise to a methodology of religious thought that is dialogical, inclusive, and adaptive to national pluralism. This dialogical character of thought equips Indonesian Muslims with the intellectual flexibility to continually contextualize universal religious doctrines within the complex national social reality without having to sacrifice fundamental principles of faith (ushuliyah). This flexible and dialogical methodological approach is strongly supported by contextual hermeneutics, which asserts that the interpretation of sacred texts must be situated within a sociological dialectic so that religion does not become a historical dogma isolated from real-world challenges, but rather serves as a functional ethical guide for humanity across civilizations (Makrifat et al., 2026).

On a practical level, this study formulates a second pillar the practical-ethical pillar which emphasizes the necessity of upholding a proportional balance between the fulfillment of human rights and the fulfillment of human duties in national life. A comparative interpretation by exegetes shows that true moderation requires every citizen particularly Indonesian Muslims not to be selfish by merely demanding the right to religious freedom, but rather to proactively fulfill their social duties in maintaining public harmony, peace, and respect for the right to expression of other faith communities. This balanced ethical reconstruction is fully consistent with the universal fiqh principle of *jalb al-mashalih wa dar' al-mafasid* (seeking public benefit and avoiding harm), whereby the public interest must always take precedence over personal interests or individual rights claims that provoke social friction (Fauziah et al., 2025).

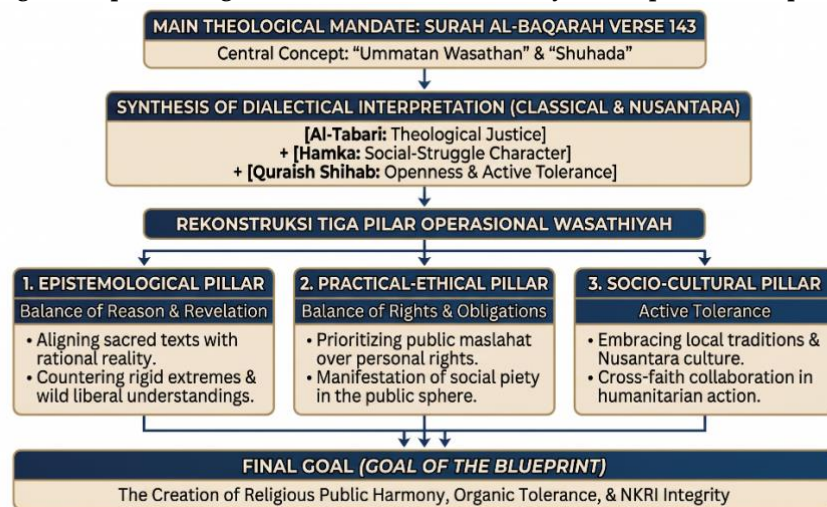
Furthermore, this practical-ethical pillar manifests the role of Muslims as *shuhada' ala al-nas* (witnesses over humanity) through active engagement in upholding social justice and defending universal human dignity without sectarian barriers. Based on these operational findings, a Muslim's piety is no longer sufficient if measured solely by individual rituals within the private sphere of worship; rather, it must be demonstrated through concrete social contributions in mitigating economic inequality, eroding intergroup prejudice, and defending the oppressed (*mustadh'afin*). This inclusive humanistic ethical orientation aligns with contemporary Islamic social ethics theory, which positions social piety as the most authentic manifestation of sound theological faith one that calls upon the faithful to act as guardians of global human life (Awadin et al., 2024).

At the community operational level, this study identifies a third pillar the sociocultural pillar which emphasizes strategies for utilizing local wisdom and the culture of the Nusantara as an accommodative medium for instilling the values of *wasathiyah*. This strategy implies that the local customs and traditions of the Nusantara should not be dichotomously positioned as enemies of religion, but rather embraced as a welcoming cultural framework, so that Islamic teachings can be organically absorbed without theological resistance at the grassroots level. This tolerant approach to cultural accommodation is supported by the fundamental character of the Islam Nusantara movement, which is culturally inclusive; the integration of spiritual values and cultural expression has proven

effective in fostering stable social harmony and strengthening interfaith national bonds (Nurjannah, 2023).

This process of sociocultural reconstruction ultimately gave rise to the concept of “active tolerance,” which does not merely allow other groups to coexist passively, but rather encourages productive interfaith collaboration in humanitarian and economic spheres to preserve the unity of the Republic of Indonesia. Active tolerance motivates citizens to actively work together to address shared social challenges, so that dogmatic prejudices and theological tensions can be naturally eroded through constructive social interaction. The urgency of this interfaith solidarity is strongly legitimized by the theory of socio-religious integration, which states that the national resilience of a pluralistic country will only be robust if it is supported by solid humanitarian relationships, bonds of mutual cooperation, and a collective consciousness as a unified nation.

**Figure 1. Epistemological Flowchart of the Wasathiyah Blueprint (Al-Baqarah: 143)**



#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the concept of religious moderation as set forth in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 143, has original and comprehensive theological-scriptural roots, refuting the misguided view that this idea is an import of foreign, secular thought. Through semantic deconstruction and comparative analysis, a constructive hermeneutical shift has been revealed from the classical theological-eschatological interpretive style of Al-Tabari toward a contemporary socio-cultural articulation in the Nusantara by Hamka and Quraish Shihab, in which the essence of moderation (wasathiyah) is consistently emphasized through the consistent upholding of the value of justice. From this dialectical synthesis, a holistic blueprint for moderation is formulated, consisting of three operational pillars: the epistemological pillar (the harmonization of reason and revelation), the practical-ethical pillar (the balance of social rights and obligations), and the socio-cultural pillar (active tolerance rooted in local wisdom). These three pillars transform abstract religious texts into a functional operational framework for strengthening tolerance and resolving socio-religious conflicts in Indonesia.

Based on these findings, this study recommends that religious policymakers such as the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs educators, and religious leaders adopt this three-pillar operational blueprint as the primary reference in designing educational curricula, da'wah modules, and culturally sensitive moderation programs so that they can be organically accepted at the grassroots level. For future researchers, it is recommended to expand the scope of this study through field research to test the relevance, level of effectiveness, and empirical implementation models of this three-pillar blueprint for moderation in various religious educational institutions and diverse indigenous communities across Indonesia. Strengthening this follow-up study is crucial for transforming the concept of wasathiyah from merely a theological discourse on paper into a grounded collective



consciousness that actively fosters social integration and reinforces the existence of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.

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