



## Islamic Thought and Civilization (JITC)

Volume 11 Issue 2, Fall 2021

ISSN<sub>P</sub>: 2075-0943, ISSN<sub>E</sub>: 2520-0313

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc>

Issue DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.112>

Homepage: <https://journals.umt.edu.pk/index.php/JITC>

Journal QR Code:



### Article:

### Being al-Wasatiyah Agents: The Role of Azharite Organization in the Moderation of Indonesian Religious Constellation

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### Published:

Fall 2021

### Article DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.112.07>

### QR Code:



### Citation:

As'ad., D. I. Ansusa Putra and Arfan. "National social security fund of Kenya: An assessment from Islamic Jurisprudence." *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 11, no. 2 (2021): 124–145.

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### Publisher Information:



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### Indexing



## Being al-Wasatiyah Agents: The Role of Azharite Organization in the Moderation of Indonesian Religious Constellation

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### Abstract

Under the leadership of Mustofa Al Maragh of Egypt, Al-Azhar University established the paradigm of *al-Wasatiyah* or centrism as its religious view. Its alumni (Azharites) have interpreted, conveyed, and participated in presenting this paradigm in the public discourse in the various parts of the world including Indonesia. This study uses a qualitative and descriptive method based on the observation of the activities and interviews of the members of the Al-Azhar Alumni International Organization (OIAA) in Jambi. The aim is to examine the concept of *al-Wasatiyah* agents through the social agency theory of Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1998). Furthermore, it reviews how OIAA displays its *Wasatiyah* identity in the Indonesian religious constellation. The results show that OIAA's role includes three main elements namely selectively reactivating the *al-Wasatiyah* mindset based on conventions and past experiences, projecting its future trajectory, and contextualizing the spread of its paradigm in the digital society. It confirms the contribution of Azharites in the Muslim society during the millennial period.

**Keywords:** *al-Wasatiyah* agents, Azharite, digital society, OIAA, religious constellation

### Introduction

The Al-Azhar International Alumni Organization (OIAA) was officially established in April 2006 to reach thousands of alumni, voice al-Wasathiyah Al-Azhar worldwide, and counter movements that give Islam a bad image.<sup>1</sup> In 2010, the Indonesian branch of OIAA was formed and have carried out *Multaqo* or Alumni meetings, seminars, and conferences.

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<sup>1</sup>"The World Association for Al-Azhar Graduates: Establishment," *The World Association for Al-Azhar Graduates* (blog), accessed September 1, 2020, <https://azhargraduates.org/>

Its performance in Indonesia is evident through several national figures, including Muhammad Quraish Shihab, the first Chairman of the Indonesian branch. Other figures are Tuan Guru Bajang (TGB) Zainul Majdi and Ustadz Abdul Somad (UAS). Furthermore, Kyai Mustofa Bisri, Muchlish Hanafi, Habiburrahman El Shirazi, and Hanan Attaki are Azharite cultural practitioners, bureaucrats, writers-artists, and preachers with Wasathiyah orientation.

The Al-Azhar student and alumni association for Indonesia started in the early 20th century before OIAA was formed. The Indonesian youth that were active in Cairo spread the discourse of Islamic Modernism and Nationalism to society before independence.<sup>2</sup> They used the media called *Seruan Azhar*, which began in October 1925. In the mid-19th century, science prosecutors from Indonesia and Peninsular Malaysia consolidated the *riwak* (hostel) Jawi and began studying at Al-Azhar University.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the 18th century, Indonesian students in Haramayn made contact with the professor and rector of Al-Azhar,<sup>4</sup> and returned to their homeland at the beginning of the Republic. According to Kinoshita, Azharite in the 1950s contributed to the Ministry of Religion and established the Directorate of Islamic Higher Education (PTAI) in the 1950s. PTAI was later instrumental in organizing student delivery routes from Indonesia to Egypt.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the progress of the students and alumni was recorded by Abaza through three rounds. In the colonial era, they maintained the connection with Egypt but became religious officials in the Republic of Indonesia during independence. The spread of this religious fundamentalism was strengthened in the 1990s when the oil price boomed, benefitting Middle Eastern countries.<sup>6</sup>

The historical stages of pre-independence and post-proclamation of Indonesian independence have passed. Abaza's study, which is a continuation of Roff's research of Indonesian students in Egypt in the 1920s, was criticized by Azra on at least two things. First, Abaza placed Indonesia as a fringe or periphery influenced by the center (Egypt). It was reflected in the analysis of the cultural exchange of Indonesian students in Egypt, which ignored the socio-cultural and educational backgrounds. This ignorance is evident before the students studied at Al-Azhar and when they returned to religious life in Indonesia. The second criticism regards the factors that influenced Indonesian students to choose Egypt before Islamic modernism in the 20th century. According to Azra, Abaza was right to base the rise of Islamic modernism in Egypt as the reason for the shift in

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<sup>2</sup>William R. Roff, "Indonesia and Malay Students in Cairo in 1920s," *Indonesia* 9 (1970): 73.

<sup>3</sup>Azyumardi Azra, "Tracing the Influence and Orientation Shifts of Cairo Graduates," *Studi Islamika* 2, no. 3 (1995): 206.

<sup>4</sup>Azyumardi Azra, *The Connection of the Middle East and Archipelago Ulama in the XVII and XVIII Centuries* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2003),

<sup>5</sup>Hiroko Kinoshita, "Islamic Higher Education in Contemporary Indonesia," *Kyoto Working Papers on Area Studies* (Kyoto: Center for Southeast Asian Studies Kyoto University, 2009): 2.

<sup>6</sup>Mona Abaza, *Changing Images of Three Generations of Azharites in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1993).

learning places. This was also mentioned by Roff's previous study, but before the 20th century, the orientation of Indonesian students to Egypt was purely studying Islam from professors at Al-Azhar. The pattern at Al-Azhar is almost similar to the traditional Islamic religious education in Haramayn, starting from *Hadīth* and neo-Sufism.<sup>7</sup>

Azra's notes on Abaza's study and the previous research by Roff and Kinoshita support the current progress of the Azharite. This is especially when the Azharite actively promote al-Wasathiyah through OIAA amid the vibrant transnational Islamic movement. They use new media and spread literature to influence the millennial youth.<sup>8</sup> This paper examines specifically OIAA's efforts to promote Wasathiyah al-Islam. Data were collected through observations of OIAA activities, a review of four Azharites profiles, and interviews of two OIAA members. The OIAA and efforts to broaden the al-Wasathiyah paradigm in the era of New Media differentiate this discussion from the previous ones. First, this paper discusses al-Wasathiyah, the distinctive paradigm of Al-Azhar alumni. Second, it discusses the organizational activities of the OIAA yang menjadi agent in promoting al-Wasathiyatul Al-Azhar. Third, it photographs Azharite human resources with religious organizations amid the dynamics and discourses of Indonesian Islamic forums and the organization's official opinion.

## 2. Al-Wasathiyah al-Azhar: A Social Agency Perspective

The *Al-Wasathiyah* agent terminology is defined in this article from a social agency perspective to avoid misunderstanding. This is because agency terminology is widely used in various disciplines that results in misunderstandings. Most of the agency theories are dominated by business, educational, and government agencies, as well as bureaucracies. Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1998) contributed to the understanding the social agency concept useful in a socio-religious context.

Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, in their article 'What is Agency?', stated that social agency is a process of involvement that is temporally embedded and informed by the past in the iteration (habitual) dimension. Also, it is oriented to the future as a projective attempt to describe alternative possibilities. The social agency is also oriented to the practical-evaluative present to contextualize past habits and future projects in current contingencies.<sup>9</sup>

This definition shows that social actors or agents assume orientations at different times simultaneously, consistently engaging in multiple temporalities at once. Therefore, the

<sup>7</sup>Azra, "Tracking the Influence and Orientation Shift of Cairo Graduates," 208.

<sup>8</sup>Abdul Aziz, Imam Tholkhah, and Soetarman, *Contemporary Islamic Movement in Indonesia* (Jakarta: Pustaka Firdaus, 1989); Noorhaidi Hasan, ed., *Millennial Generation of Islamic Literature: Transmission, Appropriation, and Contestation* (Yogyakarta: Pascasarjana UIN Sunan Kalijaga Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup>Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, 'What Is Agency?,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 103.4 (1998), <https://doi.org/10.1086/231294>.

social agency could be oriented towards the past, future, and present simultaneously. However, most would be oriented towards something that appears in a situation and the dynamics they face. In this regard, social agency comprises actors that face social contexts dynamically by reorienting their goals temporally, built in, and through certain contexts. Reorientation changes actions and behavior maneuvering, invention, and reflection by these social actors. Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische stated that social agency consists of three important elements called The Chordal Triad of Agency. The first is called the iteration element, referring to selectively reactivating thought patterns based on the past actions by actors. As routinely incorporated into practical activities, it stabilizes and provides social order by maintaining identities, interactions, and institutions over time.

The second dimension is the Projective Element, which includes the imaginative generation of possible future actions by actors. The accepted structures of thought and action are creatively reconfigured concerning future hopes, fears, and desires. The third dimension is the practical-evaluative element which demands actors to make practical and normative judgments among possible alternative actions. Social actors must always respond to demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities arising from the current developing situation.

The concept of social agency could practically be used to see the religious activities of Azharite through the *Wasatiyah* al-Azhar paradigm. Therefore, the al-*Wasatiyah* agent involves the al-*Wasatiyah* al-Azhar actor, converted as an al-Azhar paradigm based on the past experience. The involvement projects a Moderate society in the future, contextualized with the demands of today's digital society. This definition makes it possible to understand the scope of agency activities in supporting the spread of al-*Wasatiyah*. Furthermore, it helps to see the phenomenon of the OIAA religious movement as an agency. The agency conception of al-*Wasatiyah* also set the limits and scope of the study to understand social phenomena.

The social agents are individuals tasked with influencing the targets of change, acting and behaving in the direction the organization wants. Additionally, they must be reliable in connecting the targets and sources of change, including innovation and organizational policies. In this context, Azharite is a social agent that connects the normative paradigm of al-Azhar; al-*Wasatiyah* with the Indonesian Muslim Community, the target of change. For this reason, it has several roles in supporting the al-*Wasatiyah* paradigm. The role of the *Wasatiyah* al-Azhar agent based on the social agency theory of Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische is seen from three elements. These include responding to the past religious experiences, designing the direction of al-*Wasatiyah*'s trajectory, and spreading al-*Wasatiyah*'s paradigm according to the demands of the digital society using new media. Furthermore, Azharite must practice al-*Wasatiyah*'s normative decisions and exemplify moderation actions. This should allow it to be responded to in the social context and community demands and present the situation to the digital society. The use of technology

in massively disseminating socio-religious content occurs in Indonesia and plays a role in supporting the presence of religion in millennial periods.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. *Al-Wasatiyah* Al-Azhar Agents Responses to Extremism over Time

The first element in agency theory is the iteration or response of social actors to past experiences. In the context of the *al-Wasatiyah* al-Azhar agent, several figures have responded to the past experiences considered extremism in the civilization of the Muslim society. Subsequently, they have made decisions based on the bitter experience of past extremism in Islamic civilization.

*al-Wasatiyah* is a theological paradigm that has been ready historically and normatively. Historically, it existed with the establishment of Al-Azhar more than a thousand years ago, during the era of the Siah Fatimiyah dynasty.<sup>11</sup> Since, 1928 under the leadership of Mustofa Al-Maroghi Al-Azhar, Al-Azhar voiced *al-Wasatiyah* as the official paradigm of the university. An interviewee of this research<sup>12</sup> stated that Al-Azhar was appropriate in promoting the paradigm for two historical-empirical reasons. First, since its establishment, it has been a place of cross-sectional learning and a home for all fiqh schools, though most are Syafi'iyah. Second, the Egyptian political constellation attracts universities or university managers to be on one side. This confirms that the university and its members are followers of the *al-Wasatiyah* paradigm or impartial and independent middlemen.

The establishment of *al-Wasatiyah* could also easily be checked because it is a norm adopted by most of the Muslims. However, the details of the concept vary between the Middle Eastern, the African, and the Asian Muslims themselves.<sup>13</sup> *Al-Wasatiyah* is a terminology from the holy Qur'an,<sup>14</sup> from the basic word *washat*, developed from the phrase *ummatan washatan* (intermediate people), as stated by Allah (SWT) in al-Baqarah (2: 143). Therefore, the Al-Qur'an interpreters agree that *al-Wasatiyah* contains the best meaning, ideals, balance, and proportionality. For the Muslims, it is given by God, making them intermediate people (*ummatan wasatan*), the best-chosen people (*khiyaran*), and the justest

<sup>10</sup>D. I. Ansusa Putra, and Mohammad Hidayaturrehman, 'The Roles of Technology in Al-Qur'an Exegesis in Indonesia,' *Technology in Society* 63 (2020): 101418 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2020.101418>>.

<sup>11</sup>Bayard Dodge, *Al-Azhar: A Millennium of Muslim Learning* (Washington: The Middle East Institute, 1961).

<sup>12</sup>"Interview Hermanto Harun," Jambi OIAA Manager, Indonesia, Recorded, September 18, 2020.

<sup>13</sup>Mansoureh Ebrahimi, Kamaruzaman Yusoff, and Rozmi Ismail, "Middle East and African Student (MEAS) Perceptions of Islam and Islamic Moderation: A Case Study," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 11.1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.18326/IJIMS.V11I1.55-80>.

<sup>14</sup>Khatijah Othman, Muhamadul Bakir, "Wasatiyyah (Islamic Moderation): A Conceptual Analysis from Islamic Knowledge Management Perspective," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, 7.1 (2017): 13-30.

(*'adulan*).<sup>15</sup> There are several explanations about *washatan* in that verse, as stated by Fakhruddin ar-Razi. *Wasath* means fair, choice, the best, or religious people are angry (to create new ones in religion), and *tafrith* (reducing religious lessons).<sup>16</sup>

The understanding of *al-Wasathiyah ar-Razi* is also used by Al-Azhar University as the epicenter of Islamic higher education. Therefore, Islam *al-Wasathiyah* must be mainstreamed by the Azharites from various generations, social backgrounds, and countries, including Indonesia.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Al-Azhar views this paradigm as important in answering the Muslims' fragmentation and dichotomy.<sup>18</sup> The Muslims have always been divided into Radical-Liberal and West-East, making their main identity vague. This awareness led al-Azhar to establish a Comparative School Study Program and Comparative Religious Studies. The cross-sectional and inter-religious studies were initiated by establishing the *muqoronaḥ mazahib* (comparative *mazhab*) department and comparative religion. This was carried out by Sheikh Azhar, Sheikh Mustafa al-Maraghi, Egyptian mufti Sheikh Abdul Majid Salim, and the chief executive of Sheikh Fathullah Sulaiman.<sup>19</sup>

A research interviewee<sup>20</sup> stated that establishing the comparative school department proved that al-Azhar was the first Islamic University to initiate inclusiveness of *mazhab* thoughts. In contrast, other universities at that time only emphasized linear school studies. This initiative is to create alumni that are non-fanatical in certain religions and *mazhab* thoughts. From the comparison of these *mazhab* thoughts or Fiqh Muqarran, which involves al-Azhar education, the Fiqh curriculum appears with interesting methods. Therefore, this research focuses on the four *mazhab* thoughts (Hanafiyah, Malikiyah, Syafi'iyah, and Hambaliyah). Also, it includes other schools outside the Sunni sect, such as Dhahiriyah, Zaidiyah, Ja'fariyah / Syi'ah 12, and Ibadliyah. This idea was adopted by the Islamic University in Indonesia. Murtadlo stated<sup>21</sup> that the University was initially oriented towards the structure and curriculum of Egyptian Al-Azhar University.

Hermanto stated that Egyptian experts also came from various backgrounds. Hassan Hanafi, a lecturer at Cairo University, whose work was warmly welcome in Indonesia

<sup>15</sup>Muhammad Muhammad Al-Madani, *Wasathiyah Al-Islam* (Kairo: Dar al-Nasyr li as-Tsaqofah, 2016).

<sup>16</sup>Fakhr al-Din Al-Razi, *Tafsīr Al-Kabir Wa Mafatih al-Ghaib*, II (Beirtu: Dar al Kutub al-Ilmiah, none): 389-90.

<sup>17</sup>Abaza, *Changing Images of Three Generations of Azharites in Indonesia*.

<sup>18</sup>Ali A Mazrui, "Liberal Islam Versus Moderate Islam: Elusive Moderates and the Siege Mentality," in *Debating Moderate Islam the Geopolitics of Islam and the West* (Utah: University of Utah Press, 2007).

<sup>19</sup>Hasan Zayd Zayd and Muhammad Ali, *Tarīkh Al-Fiqhi al-Islami* (Medina: Dar al-Zaman, n.d.), 155

<sup>20</sup>"Interview Abdullah Firdaus on Islamic Education in Al-Azhar," September 17, 2020.

<sup>21</sup>Muhammad Murtadlo, "Hubungan Mesir-Indonesia Dalam Modernisasi Pendidikan Islam (Egypt-Indonesia Relationship for Modernization of Islamic Education)," *Jurnal Al-Qalam* 24, no. 2 (December 2018): 297-306.

during the reform era, focused on social science and anti-imperialism. In 1981, Hassan Hanafi published the journal *Al-Yassar Al-Islami*, influenced by the 1979 Iranian Revolution.<sup>22</sup> Hanafi wrote in that journal, together with those of Ali Auda and Ali Shariati, the potential for major changes in Islam. However, the *al-Wasatiyah* thoughts are embraced by most Egyptian Islamic scientists and Al-Azhar. They are a reference for the thoughts and opinions of the Islamic universities of various schools. Moreover, several prominent al-Azhar figures individually became al-Wasatiyah's agents. They include Abdul Halim Mahmud, Syeikh Ali Jum'ah, al-Tantawi, Ahmad Tayyib. Another figure is the most famous Egyptian Muslim scholar Al-Azhar alumni that migrated to Doha Qatar, Yusuf al-Qaradhawi.<sup>23</sup> Al-Qaradhawi admitted that *al-Wasatiyah* is the basic principle underlying Islamic lessons, whether *aqidah*, *sharī'ah*, or morality. According to Al-Qaradhawi, the neat and orderly system of the universe is evidence of the order designed by Allah based on *al-Wasatiyah*, balance, and harmony. In Surah al-Baqarah 143, Al-Qur'ān mentions the concept of *ummatan wasatha*, the ideal *ummat*, full of balance and upholding justice.<sup>24</sup> Another verse explains in Surah Al-i- Imrān 110 that *ummatan wasatha* means *khairo ummah* (the best *ummat*). Therefore, an expert such as Al Qaradhwi seems to be an agent of *al-Wasathiyah*.

Al-Azhar University is increasingly disseminating this idea to countries with the Muslim populations in the information technology revolution. The university asks Azharite worldwide to spread *al-Wasatiyah* using new media. It emphasizes on al-Wasathiyah al-Azhar as a national and humanitarian-based world peace concept. In the Indonesian context, the emphasis on globality and universality differs from *Nahdatul Ulama Islam Nusantara* (NU).<sup>25</sup> Similarly, it is different from the Indonesian Islam *Wasatiyah Ulama* Council (MUI) and the concept of Muhammadiyah's *al-Wasatiyah* Movement.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. Azharite Design for Future al-Wasatiyah Trajectories

The second role of Azharite in grounding *al-Wasatiyah* al-Azhar in Indonesia is projecting its future according to the organization's previously set expectations, desires, and goals.

<sup>22</sup>Hassan Hanafi, *Al-Yasr al-Islami: Kitabah an-Nahdah al-Islamiyah* (Cairo, 1981).

<sup>23</sup>"Interview Hermanto Harun," OIAA Jambi Manager, Indonesia.

<sup>24</sup>Badri Khaeruman, "Al-Qaradawi and Islamic Legal Thought Orientation to Respond to Demands for Social Change," *Wawasan: Jurnal Ilmiah Agama Dan Sosial Budaya* 1, no. 2 (2016): 227-38.

<sup>25</sup>Isom Yusqi, *Introduction to the Concept of Islam Nusantara* (Jakarta: Pustaka STAINU, 2015).

<sup>26</sup>"Din: Muhammadiyah Character Is the Wasathiyah Movement," <http://m.muhammadiyah.or.id/>, December 09:12 2019, <http://m.muhammadiyah.or.id/id/news-18152-detail-din-watak-muhammadiyah-adalah-gerakan-wasathiyah.html>.



*Istiqamah* is hoped to act as *al-Wasatiyah* agents to many places including, Indonesia, to promote it through alumni.<sup>27</sup> The Indonesian branch of OIAA stated on its official website that it was a place of friendship for all al-Azhar alumni. Furthermore, it emphasized itself as an agent of Al-Azhar As-Syarief with moderate Islamic manhaj, Islam without liberalism and radicalism. This implies that Al-Wasathiyah is a concept for the world peace based on nationality and humanity. It is strengthened by associative Islamic moderation through seminars and conferences of OIAA and its figures.<sup>28</sup>

*al-Wasatiyah*'s reliability in the context of the Indonesian Islam is seen from the agreement of most of the Muslim groups to make it a religious paradigm. Each group has a certain emphasis on *al-Wasatiyah* in a socio-religious context. However, its promotion addresses various problems of religious relations and social phenomena of the archipelago. Masdar Hilmi quoted John L. Esposito, stating that there was a struggle for *al-Wasatiyah* caused by the flexibility of its Islamic definition.<sup>29</sup> This term is championed by religious groups or *Ulama* and defined differently, depending on the person and context in which it is understood. *Al-Wasatiyah* is claimed by the Islamic organizations, such as *Nahdhatul Ulama* (NU), Muhammadiyah and MUI. These are large mass organizations and are considered to represent the Indonesian Islam. Additionally, there is a term of struggle when the concept of *al-Wasatiyah* is proposed to solve socio-religious problems in Indonesia.

The field observations show no difficulties in contextualizing *al-Wasatiyah*. Although there are various understandings, this diversity needs to be seen through *ikhtilaf li tanawwu* (differences to enrich), not *ikhtilaf li tadhadh* (differences to oppose). This paper finds that the different emphasis on each Islamic group in Indonesia is caused by the enthusiasm to make *al-Wasatiyah* a *kalimatun sawa* (meeting point) between Islamic groups. The spirit is driven by the fact and reality of the heterogeneous religious life of the people. There needs to be a collective agreement that unites a concept consistent with Islamic theory without blocks or taking sides. The concept of *al-Wasatiyah* unites various Islamic groups and eliminate what is called by Munjid<sup>30</sup> as twins of Modern Islam, specifically Liberal and Militant Islam. Therefore, its promotion must also contribute to preserving a peaceful nationality and harmonious diversity.

<sup>27</sup>Muchlis Hanafi, "The Role of Middle East Alumni in Carrying Wasathiyat Al-Islam," (Indonesia Al-Azhar Alumni Conference, Jakarta, 2010).

<sup>28</sup>"Profil," n.d., <https://oiaa.or.id/profil/>. As the branch of the World Organization for Al-Azhar Graduates in Indonesia (OIAA) had representative office in 22 provinces. 17 branches established before OIAA Indonesia launched in 2018, they are: Aceh, East Sumatera, Riau, West Sumatera, South Sumatera, Lampung, Bangka Belitung, Jambi, Banten, West Java, Central Java, East Java, South Kalimantan, Central Kalimantan, East Kalimantan, Sulawesi and West Nusa Tenggara.

<sup>29</sup>Masdar Hilmy, "Whither Indonesia's Islamic Moderatism?: A Reexamination on the Moderate Vision of Muhammadiyah and NU," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 7, no. 1 (2013): 24-48.

<sup>30</sup>Achmad Munjid, "Militant and Liberal Islam: The Unwanted Twin Children of Modernization – an Indonesian Experience," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 3, no. 1 (2009): 35-68.

Grand Sheikh al-Azhar Muhammad al-Thayyib, in the High Level Conference of World Muslim *Ulama* and Scholars in Bogor, West Java, stated that *al-Wasatiyah* Islam should aim at all aspects, including politics. According to Muhammad al-Thayyib, the most basic character of *al-Wasatiyah* Islam is never to judge *ahlul qiblah* (a person speaking two sentences of the creed) as an infidel unless they admit that they left Islam (*murtad*). As long as they believe in Allah as their Lord and Muhammad as a prophet, it is not permissible to judge them as *kāfir* because they interpret Islam differently.<sup>31</sup> Muhammad al-Thayyib stated that al-Wasathiyah, which became the understanding of Ahlussunah wal Jamaah, followed Imam Abul Hasan al-Asy'ari, where understanding tauhid and aqidah was a middle way. It means not being excessive in religion and not reducing what is taught by Islam.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, this opinion was stated by Al-Ghazali that doing aqidah correctly combines two different sides of the aqidah in the middle.<sup>33</sup> Western scientists, such as Esposito, called al-Wasathiyah an Islam agreed upon historically, theologically, culturally, and normatively.<sup>34</sup>

### 5. Contextualizing al-Wasatiyah in Digital Society

The third role of the Azharite in spreading al-Wasatiyah al-Azhar is to contextualize its contribution according to the demands of the community. In the millennial context, Azharite must practice al-Wasatiyah's normative decisions and exemplify moderation actions. This should allow it to be responded to in a social context and community demands of a digital society using new media.

Mustofa Bisri and Quraish Shihab appear on television as speaker resources for the religious dialogues or monologues on *Tafsīr*. The general public gains religious knowledge from Quraish during religious events or the fasting month before breaking the fast on television. Mustofa Bisri is a kyai, a poet, and a humanist that leads the family boarding school in Rembang. However, the common people do not know much or care that Quraish and Mustofa Bisri are alumni of Al-Azhar University by displaying *al-Wasatiyah*'s qualities. After the Quraish and Mustofa eras, al-Azhar alumni in fields of science returned to Indonesia with new approaches and religious authority.<sup>35</sup> They were new because their presence has been preceded by already established religious approaches that have become

<sup>31</sup>Muhyiddin, "Grand Syekh Al Azhar: Wasatiyah Konsep Dasar Islam," *Republika.Co.Id*, May 1, 2018, sec. Khazanah, <https://khazanah.republika.co.id/berita/dunia-islam/islam%20nusantara/18/05/01/p81nmp348-grand-syekh-al-azhar-wasatiyah-konsep-dasar-islam>.

<sup>32</sup>Ahmad Thayyib takes the base from Ibn Taimiyyah in "*al-'Aqidah al-Wasathiyah*." Although this book is concise, it covered most of the belief problems (*i'tiqad*) and faith basics (*ushul al-iman*). Ibn Taimiyyah, *Al-'Aqidah al-Wasathiyah*, II (Ismailiyah: Maktabah Imam Bukhari, 1999), 13.

<sup>33</sup>Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Al-Iqtisād Fi al-'Itiqād* (Kairo: Maktabah Mahmudiah, n.d.), 134-136.

<sup>34</sup>John L. Esposito, "Moderate Muslims: A Mainstream of Modernists, Islamists, Conservatives, and Traditionalists," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 22, no. 3 (n. d.): 11-20.

<sup>35</sup>Imawati Rofiqoh, "The New Religious and Islamic Authority of Indonesia: The Role of Al-Azhar Alumni in Public" (Thesis, Yogyakarta, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2019), 10.

prevalent, such as Muhammadiyah, Nahdatul Ulama, and Persis. Moreover, their method is new because the latest generation of Azharite is Digital Native that uses new media through the internet daily.<sup>36</sup> This generation expands information and self-actualization of figures, preachers, and digital religious activities.<sup>37</sup>

About a decade before the era of the Internet of Things,<sup>38</sup> Habiburrahman El Shirazi provided important momentum for Al-Azhar alumni. This was a sequel to science prosecutors in Cairo through *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (AAC), published in 2004 and filmed in 2008.<sup>39</sup> The film is watched by politicians and state officials and, together with AAC novels, they were warmly welcomed by the public. They tell new stories and present a fashionable, pluralist, and tolerant Islam.<sup>40</sup> The Indonesian people and other Southeast Asian countries enjoy popular culture with religious nuances by El Shirazi. Therefore, these novels and films have raised the social values of Al-Azhar alumni and show examples of El Shirazi's preaching performance using popular culture to other preachers.

Before the publication of the novels and *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* film, Azharites were accepted in many places. However, they sometimes merged with other preachers from educational backgrounds, including alumni of local Islamic boarding schools and colleges. El Shirazi's film broadens the public's picture of Al-Azhar students' spirit with the learned religious knowledge. Also, it increases the confidence of alumni and improves the performance of da'wah through popular media.

The new religious performance of Azharite through popular culture and new media is regarded by Ariel Heryanto as the enjoyment of the end of the cold war.<sup>41</sup> This enjoyment has increased public consumption of new media platforms, such as Youtube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, where al-Azhar alumni track self-actualization. They distribute

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<sup>36</sup>Internet (short term of *interconnected-networking*) is a global system from all computers web-connected using *Standard Internet Protocol Suite* (TCP/IP) to serve a billion users worldwide. Method to connect the connection with this principle named *internetworking*. Some experts named this sophisticated era the digital era. See Maria Bakardjieva, *Internet Society: The Internet in Everyday Life* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 12-15

<sup>37</sup>Heidi Campbell, ed., "Introduction: The Rise of Study of Digital Religion," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>38</sup>"Internet of Things Global Standards Initiative," *ITU International: Committed to Connecting the World* (blog), accessed September 2, 2020, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-T/gsi/iot/Pages/default.aspx>.

<sup>39</sup>Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani, "Islam, Romance and Popular Taste in Indonesia: A Textual Analysis of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* by Habiburrahman El-Shirazy and *Syahadat Cinta* by Taufiqurrahman Al-Azizy," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 40, no. 116 (March 2012): 59-73.

<sup>40</sup>Lukman Hakim, "Conservative Islam Turn on or Popular Islam? An Analysis of the Film *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*," *Al-Jami'ah* 48, No. 1, 2010 M/ 1431 H 48, no. 1 (2010): 101-28.

<sup>41</sup>Ariel Heryanto, "Indonesian Pop Culture: Warmth After the Cold War," *Prisma* 28, no. 2 (Oktober 2009): 15-30.

religious information anywhere and anytime, and the public chooses by searching for the content of preachers they like.<sup>42</sup> Several Azharites who appeared on Youtube received widespread public attention in 2015. Two young preachers of new media are Ustadz Abdul Somad (UAS) and Hannan Attaki. Abdul Somad preaches about daily Islamic fiqh interspersed with natural humor broadcast via Youtube. In contrast, Hanan Attaki is a Wasathiyah agent and a pioneer of the millennial Muslim urban youth movement in Bandung. This movement has spread to major cities, resulting in hijrah festivals in several places in Indonesia as its intense promotion through new media.<sup>43</sup>

Abdul Somad and Hanan Attaki are relatively moderate among various Islamic groups. However, they are accused of being part of a certain group in their endeavor to be moderate.<sup>44</sup> Identity politics ahead of the presidential election stimulated the suspicion of candidate supporters to preachers. On the contrary, the preachers were drawn to support certain candidates. Abdul Somad (also Adi Hidayat) was then provoked to support one of the presidential candidates. However, Hanan Attaki did not involve their hijrah community towards certain political candidates. Regardless, Abdul Somad and Hanan Attaki have conveyed the message of *al-Wasathiyah* through worship or *muamalah* in practice or behavior, *ushul* and *furu*.<sup>45</sup>

The message of al-Wasathiyah was echoed more strongly after the OIAA appeared in 2006. Muhammad Quraish Shihab became the first chairman and was succeeded by Zainul Majdi or Tuan Guru Bajang. The two successors and other alumni promoted the al-Wasathiyah Al-Azhar paradigm. OIAA's message was welcomed because it was consistent with the spirit of large mass organizations. These include NU and Muhammadiyah, which especially agreed to promote al-Wasathiyah in digital information content.

After the *da'wah* of El Shirazi novel and the film, Azharite Indonesia actively preached al-Wasathiyah through new media platforms, such as Youtube, Facebook, Instagram, blog, and applications. Awareness of voicing al-Wasathiyah through digital media is one of the concerns. However, Islam *al-Wasathiyah* in cyberspace is still conveyed with wisdom and respect, *mau'idzah hasanah*. Moreover, the Azharite's activities promote al-Wasathiyah in new media, including the Facebook account 'Suara al-Azhar. Although this account is not an official website managed by Indonesian students at al-Azhar, the promotion of al-Wasathiyah is evident. Sheikh Ali Jum'ah's words about living in harmony indicate that the universe, which has certain systems and structures, should not leave the system. This is

<sup>42</sup>Mohammad Hidayaturrahman and D.I. Ansusa Putra, "The Role of Technology and Social Media in Spreading the Qur'an and Hadiths by Muballigh," *Jurnal Dinika* 4, no. 1 (2019).

<sup>43</sup>Hadri Hasan, "Contemporary Religious Movement in Indonesia: A Study of Hijrah Festival in Jakarta in 2018," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 13, no. 1 (2019): 230-65.

<sup>44</sup>Asma Barlas, "The Excesses of Moderation," 12, (2002): 143.

<sup>45</sup>Ilham Habibullah, "Wasathiyah Dakwah Ustadz Abdul Somad," *Qur'anic and Tafsi'r Studies UNIDA Gontor* (blog), November 26, 2019, <http://iqt.unida.gontor.ac.id/wasathiyah-dakwah-ustadz-abdul-somad/>.

because it would break the balance, cause destruction and damage the universal system. Similar to nature, humans have bonds between them that need balance for life to be in harmony without damage. Furthermore, the Al-Azhar Voice account also posts the opinions of other al-Azhar scholars, such as Sheikh Muhammad Ramadhan al-Buthi, Sheikh al-Sya'rawi, and Sheikh Usamah Sayyid al-Azhari. Similarly, the al-Azhar alumni Facebook account run by the Al-Azhar alumni community mentions al-Wasathiyah. The community account, developed on February 25, 2009, enforces zero tolerance for slander and cyberbullying and already has 2,261 members. Additionally, Instagram was also chosen to promote al-Wasathiyah. For instance, the *alazhar\_kairo\_jkt* account was created by the Azharite Indonesia community and supported by the Egyptian Embassy in Indonesia. This account is on Instagram and Facebook, with a name البعثة الأزهرية بأندونيسيا. Another Azharite account is officially owned by OIAA Indonesia through @alumniiazhar. It informs the organization's agenda, such as seminars, discussions, workshops, lectures, and quotes from al-Azhar figures. These figures include Sheikh Ali Jum'ah, Sheikh Tantawi, and Sheikh Abdul Halim Mahmud. They promote the values of *al-Wasathiyah* and the unity of the *Ummah*. Moreover, OIAA Indonesia has an official website, [waag-azhar.or.id](http://waag-azhar.or.id), which states several goals. First, OIAA aims to realize a peaceful and harmonious religious life by enhancing the role of the Azharite and developing moderate and tolerant Islamic teachings. Second, it intends to enhance cooperation between Indonesia and al-Azhar in education, religion, and culture. Third, it aims to strengthen communication and friendship relations among al-Azhar alumni in Indonesia. Fourth, OIAA is determined to develop a religious dialogue between Islamic sects and schools of thought in Indonesia. Fifth, it aims to uphold noble Islamic values and defend them from misunderstanding and distortion. The Azharite individual and OIAA activities based on Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube platforms promote the virtues of Al-Azhar. Also, it becomes an agent for spreading the al-Wasathiyah paradigm as an important agenda, including in Indonesia.

The political situation attracted the Wasathiyah agents from Al-Azhar to be involved in practical politics. However, some senior figures, such as Quraish Shihab and Mustofa Bisri, have undecided attitudes. Also, some of the young political figures do not co-exist in one political party but are scattered in various parties, mass organizations, and professions. For instance, Tuan Guru Bajang from the Democratic Party has a Nahdatul Wathan background. Similarly, Zuhairi Misyrawi at PDIP is affiliated with Nahdatul Ulama, and several other alumni are PKS exponents. Based on profession, some are involved in the state bureaucracy, such as Muchlis M. Hanafi, while others are loyal to become preachers with or without new media. They are also busy as academics, local religious teachers, and da'wah activists. However, it is an important asset for the human resources of Al-Azhar alumni continuing to work nationally through new media. These include Mustofa Bisri, Quraish Shihab, Zainul Majdi, Habiburrahman El Shirazi, Abdul Shomad, Muchlis M. Hanafi and Hanan Attaki. Therefore, this paper presents a brief profile of four people promoting al-Wasathiyah.

## 6. Al-Wasatiyah Agents and Religious Constellation

The religious constellation in Indonesia is very dynamic, with various figures appearing in debates and discussions affecting the paradigm of the Muslims. Some of these figures are al-Azhar alumni widely known to fill Islamic discourse in the public sphere. This description mentions some of the agents of al-Wasatiyah al-Azhar, their actions, and their roles in Indonesia's religious constellation.

### 6.1. First, Kiyai Mustofa Bisri or Gus Mus

Mustofa Bisri or Gus Mus is the caretaker of the Raudlatut Thalibin Islamic Boarding School, Rembang, Central Java. However, Mustofa Bisri is more famous as a poet, humanist and moderate kyai in the Nahdatul Ulama environment. Mustofa Bisri attended courses in Islamic Studies and Arabic from Al-Azhar University from 1964 to 1970. Mustofa Bisri or Gus Mus developed paintings, poetry, articles, and short stories, and their written works promote moderate Islam and are well received by the public. Moreover, Gus Mus attended invitations from various countries as an Islamic boarding school based on culture, such as a poetry event in Baghdad, Iraq, 1989. Gus Mus was invited by the Faculty of Literature, University of Hamburg, for a seminar and poetry reading in 2000. Furthermore, the University of Malaya invited Gus Mus to a seminar on Arts and Islam. As a short story writer, Gus Mus received the Asian Literature Award from the Literature Council (Mastera, Malaysia, 2005). In 2017, Gus Mus also received the Yap Thiam Hien Award.<sup>46</sup>

Gus Mus also wrote *Tafsīr* Al-Ibriz, the holy Qur'an's interpretation, using the pegon alphabet with rational interpretive sources. This is because Gus Mus often uses much *ijtihad* in explaining the meaning of the holy Qur'ān verses. However, Gus Mus interpreted the verse using *bi al-ma'tsur* or history in several places, though the interpretation is simpler (*ijmaliy*).

Gus Mus appears to be a consistent religious figure in writing and spreading al-Wasathiyah and Akhlaqulkarimah. This is evident through the active spread of moderate thoughts using the everyday internet, especially through the official website <http://gusmus.net>. An example was when Gus Mus interpreted the word 'fair' in the holy Qur'an. Quoting Surah An-Nisa 'verse 158 and Al-Maidah verse 8, Gus Mus stated that when it is unfair, it is not because of Allah. Gus Mus explained that humans find it difficult to act fairly because they maintain emotions of hatred or love for something or someone. Therefore, according to Gus Mus, the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) taught people to act in moderation and reconciliation. It means that fairness cannot happen when you love too much or hate too much. This statement also relates to religious behavior in Indonesia. Some

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<sup>46</sup>Awarding ceremony given by Yap Thiam Hien Foundation chaired by Todung Mulya Lubis in National Library Auditorium, Jakarta, on Wednesday, January 24, 2018. Gus Mus is a figure who helps and fights for Human Rights through his ways. "His preachment is already calm and soothing."

Muslims involved with transnational religious movements and intersecting with politics ignore this middle attitude. Expressions of anger and hatred were frequently conveyed on social media. Gus Mus stated on their internet page, “Do not even once your hatred for a group of people drags you down, encourages you to be unfair.” Moreover, according to some people in surah Al Maidah and Gus Mus, unfairness is also for infidels. It would be very unfair when it was prohibited for infidels, it would be even worse to commit hatred among the Muslims.

## 6.2. Second, Muhammad Quraish Shihab

Muhammad Quraish Shihab is the Indonesian Expert *Tafsīr*, whose work *Tafsīr Al-Mishbah* was published in 2003. From the late 1950s to the late 1960s, Quraish was in Egypt for pre-university preparatory classes until completing the second degree at Al-Azhar. Coming from a rich Arab-Bugis middle class from Rapang, South Sulawesi, Quraish's father Abdurrahman Shihab was once the Chancellor of the Muslim University of Indonesia, Makassar and IAIN Alauddin Ujung Pandang. Having an established intellect, Quraish and Alwi Shihab were sent by their father to continue their studies in Cairo. After returning to their homeland, Quraish became a lecturer at IAIN Makassar and moved to IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. Quraish was entrusted with being the Chancellor, Minister of Religion, Indonesian Ambassador to Egypt and Djibouti, and an expert in Al-Qur'an Science. In the new media era, Quraish Shihab's thoughts and ideas were spread on many blogs and YouTube channels. Officially, the thoughts are spread via the site <http://quraishshihab.com/> and Quraish's Twitter account <https://twitter.com/quraishshihab>.

Quraish Shihab also pays attention to Al Maidah verse 8. According to Quraish, textually or contextually, the verse forbids to do something unfair to unbelievers, which is traced to Al-Jalalayn's interpretation. It becomes unfair because hostilities are incompatible with Islamic values. Moreover, since justice is closer to piety, Islam has called on humankind to be consistent in justice to stakeholders or enemies. According to the Quraish Shihab, it is not right that hatred causes unfair behavior, which applies to relationships between individuals, institutions, or countries.<sup>47</sup>

Justice against the enemy is explicitly described in the holy Qur'ān as an act of approaching piety. Therefore, there would be no war when justice is applied in international law. The Quraish Shihab underlined that every religion has special characteristics, and those of Islam is monotheism and justice.<sup>48</sup>

Quraish Shihab conveyed the concept of *al-Wasatiyah* on many occasions. According to Quraish, human life must be balanced between the spiritual and the physical, as stated

<sup>47</sup>Jalaluddin al-Suyuti, and Jalaluddin al-Mahalli, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'an al-'Adzīm* (Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyah, n.d.); Muhammad Quraish Shihab, *Tafsīr Al-Mishbah: Pesan, Kesan Dan Keserasian Al-Qur'ān* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2009), 70.

<sup>48</sup>Muhammad Quraish Shihab, *Tafsīr Al-Mishbah: Pesan, Kesan Dan Keserasian Al-Qur'ān*.

in the holy Qur'ān. Furthermore, another simple practice of *al-Wasatiyah* is eating. Quraish stressed against overeating and eating too little, recommending one-third each for food, drinks, and breathing. Similarly, in religious life, the Muslims are expected to remind and take care of each other and avoid extremes. Also, they should be in a true middle position as instructed by the Al-Qur'an to become a *wasathan ummatan*.

### 6.3. Third, Tuan Guru Bajang

Tuan Guru Bajang (TGB) Zainul is known in politics and the grandson of Tuan Guru Zainuddin Abdul Majid is the founder of the Nahdatul Wathan organization. This organization developed the *Ahlussunah wal Jamaah al-Wasathiyah* concept under the Imam Syafi'i school of thought. It became an organization culturally followed by the Muslim community of West Nusa Tenggara (NTB). Tuan Guru Bajang became NTB governor for two terms and disseminated the *manhaj al-Wasatiyah* on their academic base and network during their reign. Zainul completed their bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees at Al-Azhar University. Together with Muhammad Quraish Shihab, they raised OIAA. Tuan Guru Bajang's ideas, thoughts, and activities are seen at: <https://www.instagram.com/tuangurubajang/>.

TGB attracted national attention when thoughts about nationality, statehood, and Islam spread through Al-Azhar alumni networks and social media. According to TGB, religion must strengthen Indonesia, and Al-Azhar Alumni could calm the hot atmosphere in the community. Furthermore, TGB stated that *al-Wasatiyah*, adopted by Al-Azhar alumni in the context of a state, would provide a peaceful atmosphere.<sup>49</sup>

TGB also attended the world *ulama* meeting at the Bogor Palace at the end of April 2018. The meeting ended with scholars committing to revitalize the Islamic paradigm of *al-Wasatiyah*. The paradigm was formulated in the consensus of '7 Bogor Messages' as the meaning of *al-Wasatiyah*. These included *tawassuth* or middle way, *i'tidāl* or acting proportionally, fairly, and responsibly, and *tasamuh* or tolerant, acknowledging and respecting differences in life. Other messages were *syuro* or consultation and discussion to reach a consensus for saving humankind and reciting or engaging in constructive and reformative action for the common good. Also, there were *qudwah* or creating good initiatives for human welfare, and *muwathonah*, recognizing the state and nation and respecting citizenship.

TGB initiated the Al-Azhar alumni meeting in Lombok in July 2018, which resulted in the '9 Lombok Messages,' reinforcing the expansion of *Al-Wasatiyah* Al-Islam. The message was read by the Secretary-General of the Indonesian Branch of OIAA, *Mukhlis*

<sup>49</sup>See TGB article in his official sites <https://tgb.id/pilpres-2019-dan-narasi-keummatan-tgb/> accessed on May 4, 2019, at 2.55 p.m



M. Hanafi.<sup>50</sup> First, the alumni and scholars agree to the definition of *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah*. Second, *al-firqah al-nâjiyah*, or the term of the group that survived and entered heaven, is *khilafiyah*. Third, sectarianism, racism, and discrimination in any form are against *wasatiyah*. Fourth, Al-Azhar al-Syarif is the vanguard of Islamic *wasatiyah*, respecting the views and attitudes of others without accusing them of being kafir (*takfir*), *fasiq* (*tafsîq*) and doing *bid'ah* (*tabdî*). Fifth, Al-Azhar al-Syarif, its scholars and branch offices of the Al-Azhar International Alumni Organization (OIAA) spread across several countries are ready to build thought concepts. Furthermore, they are willing to guide and educate those straying from the *wasatiyah* path. These include adherents of extreme thought that returned from conflict areas to become good citizens. Sixth, designing educational programs built based on Islamic *wasatiyyat* and non-violence, targeting children that become the hope of the future. Seventh, *Wasatiyah* Islam is a method of worship, bermuamalah, economic, social, and all other aspects of life. Eighth, it is necessary to hold seminars and conferences and use social media in carrying out *wasatiyyah* propaganda and counter extreme thinking. Moreover, it is necessary to guide the Muslim youth regarding internet sites that spread extreme thoughts and violence. Ninth, *Wasatiyah* Islam glorifies humans, regardless of differences in religion and belief. Also, it instills deliberation and social justice for all citizens of a country, loyalty to the state, and affirms the homeland's unity. Indonesia has taken good initiatives by making these values the basis of the state reflected in Pancasila and needs to be maintained and cared for. In front of all participants and Al-Azhar Ulama, TGB hopes that all alumni work together with various parties, must be open and not exclusive. Additionally, TGB calls all Al-Azhar alumni to be serious businessmen, teachers, artists, bureaucrats, and politicians. However, they should not forget to work as preachers of *al-Wasatiyah* Islam as taught by Al-Azhar.

After the Bogor and Lombok meetings, TGB actively toured various regions in Indonesia, giving lectures, meeting community leaders, officials, and scholars. On this safari, TGB promoted *Wasatiyah* in the country's pluralistic society in religious, political, economic, social, and cultural fields. Also, TGB claimed to be spreading goodness. TGB discusses *al-Wasatiyah* with Muhammadiyah figures, kyai at Pondok Modern Gontor, Chairman of the PBNU, Sheikh Al Azhar, and manages the *al-Wasatiyah* consortium in Indonesia. This consortium provides additional scholarships to Indonesian youth to study at Al-Azhar. However, the promotion of *manhaj al-Wasatiyah* by TGB encountered obstacles, especially when expressing its support to a presidential candidate.

#### 6.4. Fourth, Ustadz Abdul Somad

Abdul Somad completed undergraduate studies at Al-Azhar in 2002 and a bachelor's degree at Dar el Hadîth el Hassania Institute Morocco in 2006 with a scholarship, after getting registered and studying at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Abdul Somad comes

<sup>50</sup>Dedik Priyanto, "Pesan Lengkap Lombok Message, Hasil Pertemuan Ulama Internasional Di NTB," *Islami.Co*, n.d., <https://islami.co/pesan-lengkap-lombok-message-hasil-pertemuan-ulama-internasional-di-ntb/>.

from a middle-class village family and has a simple, natural, and easy-to-understand communication style. After returning from Morocco, Abdul Somad taught at UIN Sultan Syarif Qasim Riau, becoming a preacher around the Riau area.

In 2017, Abdul Somad's lecture, recorded since replacing Mustafa Umar, a preacher in Riau, went viral and liked by the public, besides causing controversy. Two Youtube channels, Tafaqquh Online and Fodamara, actively broadcast their lectures in long duration and in short pieces of explanation regarding a topic and problem. In 2017, millions of people watched Abdul Somad's various video lectures.<sup>51</sup> As a result, Abdul Somad became an idol of Indonesian society to Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam and a scholar of millions of viewers. Subsequently, members of various affiliations, with a few exceptions, receive the lecture content. Also, the NU, Muhammadiyah, and those affiliated with Hizb ut Tahrir heard Abdul Somad's lecture.<sup>52</sup>

Somad uses new media, such as public platforms, open houses, across ideologies, religions, and social classes, gaining popularity, though there are obstacles. For instance, some of the lecture content slipped, counterproductive to the preaching. Also, Abdul Somad was rejected in Hong Kong and disowned domestically by Gajah Mada University. However, Abdul Somad was later invited to many other places and campuses in Yogyakarta. Furthermore, the claims about Starbuck and the Cross have met with opposition, which prompted Somad to clarify the content. Abdul Somad seems to have gained valuable experience in opposing their preaching. The content of Abdul Somad's lectures answers the daily activities of the Muslim community. This includes their response to LGBT and other religious symbols, which should be conveyed in an internal forum and directly to the point of the matter. However, the Indonesian Muslim community remains enthusiastic about Abdul Somad's preaching. Its existence crosses classes and various Islamic religious understandings, and Somad has tried to become a middle man among religious groups. Additionally, the Wasathiyah attitude conveyed by Somad was warmly welcomed by the Indonesian Muslim community. Since Somad was a preacher before becoming a judge (*du'at qabla qudhat*), his persuasive preaching encourages the Muslims and the religious figures to preach politely without judgment. According to the Gontor Islamic Boarding School leader, Hasan Abdullah Sahal, most Muslims' preference for Somad indicates that Somad is a Wasathiyah preacher.<sup>53</sup> A seminar with the theme "Are Muslim preachers pushing Indonesian politics to the right?" was held at Monash University in February 2019. It presented Islamic Studies Expert Julian Millie and Islamic Law

<sup>51</sup>Muhammad Sufyan Abdurrahman, "Mengenal Dakwah Digital Ustadz Abdul Somad Pekanbaru," *Detik.Com*, July 18, 2017, <https://news.detik.com/opini/d-3563958/mengenal-dakwah-digital-ustadz-abdul-somad-pekanbaru>.

<sup>52</sup>Yosi Zamzuardi and Ermanto, "The Rhetoric of Persuasion of Ustadz Abdul Somad: Discourse Analysis in the Media Youtube," in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Languages and Arts (ICLA 2018, Atlantis Press, 2018)*, 552-58, <https://www.atlantispress.com/proceedings/icla-18/55914551>.

<sup>53</sup>Habibullah, "Wasathiyah Dakwah Ustadz Abdul Somad."

Lecturer Nadirsyah Hosen and discussed Abdul Somad's existence. Abdul Somad is considered a representative of a successful preacher using new media. Also, Somad represents individual preachers across various groups easily accepted by all classes.<sup>54</sup>

Abdul's colleagues, the Azharite as the sources of this research, also considered that the da'wah material conveyed was the true Islamic values of Ahlussunah wal Jammah. Moreover, the alumni stated that Somad spread the spirit of al-Wasathiyah Islam, strengthening nationality, unity, and brotherhood. Somad's unpretentious Facebook and Instagram accounts spread a message that unites the nation and prevents the division of the people. For instance, when Somad met Kyai Solahuddin Wahid at Tebu Ireng, Somad wrote, "Look at the similarities, do not widen the differences." Therefore, Abdul Somad's commitment to other Azharites regarding nationality and statehood cannot be ignored.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper draws conclusions based on the described individual activities of several Azharite and OIAA figures. First, the concept of *al-Wasatiyah* echoed by Azharite is a basic Islamic value embraced by individuals or other religious organizations in Indonesia. *Al-Wasatiyah* is the *kalimatun sawa* or the meeting point of all Islamic schools. However, the normative paradigm of *Al-Wasatiyah* Al-Azhar conceptually has a strong foundation. Historically, it has been the official attitude of Al-Azhar higher education institutions to be independent and impartial. Therefore, it is linked to the interference of Egyptian domestic politics and the domination of the school of thought. Al-Azhar spread *al-Wasatiyah* to various countries around the world through Azharite and OIAA as its agents. Second, in the Indonesian centrism constellation, Azharite and OIAA contextualizing *al-Wasatiyah* al-Azhar. The public figures participating in religious and social activities, such as Mustofa Bisri, Muhammad Quraish Shihab, and Tuan Guru Bajang Zainul Majdi, promote *al-Wasatiyah*'s thoughts and actions to the public. In July 2018, Azharite and OIAA formulated steps that need the implementation to realize *al-Wasatiyah* through the Nine Lombok Messages. Third, Azharite and OIAA have conducted the *da'wah* of *al-Wasatiyah* using relevant methods. These include social, traditional, popular, and new media, such as what was performed by Habiburrahman El Shirazi, Abdul Somad, and Hanan Attaki. The Azharite preachers through popular and new media are increasingly expanding *al-Wasatiyah* and the influence of Al-Azhar on nationalism, commonness, and universal humanity.

This research strengthens the arguments of William Roff, Mona Abaza, and Azyumardi Azra about the contribution of Al-Azhar alumni in Indonesia. As shown by Heidi Campbell, the transformation to digital religion management has been carried out by Azharite and OIAA. Furthermore, the digital and new media era has become a leverage for

<sup>54</sup>“Universitas Monash Australia Discuss the Phenomenon of Ustadz Abdul Somad,” *Republika.Co.Id*, February 19, 2019,

<https://nasional.republika.co.id/berita/pn5oq5409/internasional/abc-australia-network/19/02/19/pn5es3-universitas-monash-australia-bahas-fenomena-ustadz-abdul-somad>.

Al-Azhar's contribution to spreading peace and moderation from Islam. It fends off the ideas that disassociate the Muslims from the true values of Islam and movements that negatively label Islam and its people.

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