

Islam Wasathiyah and Acehese Dayah Ulama: Negotiating Local Tradition and State Religious Discourse

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Abstract

This study examines the understanding of Islam Wasathiyah from the perspective of Acehese dayah ulama and explores its negotiation with the state-promoted discourse of religious moderation. Although religious moderation is widely promoted to encourage inclusive and peaceful Islam, the terminology has encountered resistance among dayah ulama in Aceh. This study aims to analyze how Islam Wasathiyah is interpreted within dayah scholarly traditions and to investigate the negotiation between local Islamic traditions and national religious discourse. Employing a qualitative fieldwork-based approach, the study draws on in-depth interviews, limited observation, and document analysis. The findings reveal that dayah ulama reject the term “religious moderation” due to its perceived ideological and political connotations. Nevertheless, they substantively embrace and practice these core values through the concept of Islam Wasathiyah, which is rooted in the tradition of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama‘ah. In this context, Islam Wasathiyah functions as a dialectical bridge that mediates between local Islamic authority and national religious discourse. This study highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity, linguistic framing, and local religious authority in articulating moderate Islam within the Indonesian context.

Keywords: *Islam Wasathiyah; Acehese Dayah Ulama; Religious Moderation*

Abstrak

Studi ini mengkaji pemahaman Islam Wasathiyah dari perspektif ulama dayah di Aceh serta mengeksplorasi negosiasinya dengan wacana moderasi beragama yang dipromosikan negara. Meskipun moderasi beragama secara luas dipromosikan untuk mendorong Islam yang inklusif dan damai, terminologi tersebut menghadapi resistensi di kalangan ulama dayah di Aceh. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana Islam Wasathiyah dimaknai dalam tradisi keilmuan dayah serta menelaah proses negosiasi antara tradisi Islam lokal dan diskursus keagamaan nasional. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis kerja lapangan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi terbatas, dan analisis dokumen. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ulama dayah menolak istilah “moderasi beragama” karena dianggap memiliki konotasi ideologis dan politis. Namun demikian, mereka secara substantif menerima dan mempraktikkan nilai-nilai utamanya melalui konsep Islam Wasathiyah yang berakar pada tradisi Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama‘ah. Dalam konteks ini, Islam Wasathiyah berfungsi sebagai jembatan dialektis yang memediasi hubungan antara otoritas Islam lokal dan diskursus keagamaan nasional. Studi ini menegaskan

pentingnya sensitivitas budaya, konstruksi linguistik, dan otoritas keagamaan lokal dalam artikulasi Islam moderat di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: Islam Wasathiyah; Ulama Dayah Aceh; Moderasi Beragama

INTRODUCTION

From its inception, Islam has been understood as a religion that upholds balance, justice, and the middle path in all aspects of life. The principle of *wasathiyah*, as articulated in the Qur'an, serves as a normative foundation that positions Muslims as *ummatah wasathan*—a community characterized by justice, moderation, and the capacity to act as a mediator within socio-religious dynamics.¹ In the Indonesian context, this principle has been further elaborated by the state through the discourse of religious moderation, promoted as a strategic framework for maintaining harmony within a society marked by religious, cultural, and ideological pluralism. Ideally, this discourse is expected to function as a point of convergence between the inclusive teachings of Islam and the socio-national imperative for stability and tolerance.

However, this ideal framework does not always align with realities at the local level. Aceh, with its long-standing history and deeply rooted Islamic identity, has exhibited ambivalent attitudes to the state-sponsored discourse of religious moderation, particularly among *ulama dayah*.² Although substantively the values of moderation—such as balance, the rejection of extremism, and social harmony—are congruent with the Islamic teachings traditionally transmitted in dayah institutions, the term “religious moderation” is often perceived as a product of state discourse imbued with ideological and historical interests. The legacy of strained center–periphery relations, experiences of policy marginalization, and the strong autonomy of local religious authority have collectively shaped a critical stance, and in some cases resistance, toward this terminology.

In practice, *ulama dayah* do not reject the values of moderation per se; rather, they contest the manner and language through which the state frames religious discourse. Instead, they demonstrate greater acceptance of and actively promote the concept of *Islam Wasathiyah*, which they regard as an authentic Islamic teaching rooted in the tradition of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* and long embedded in the religious and social life of Acehnese society.³ This divergence between terminological rejection and substantive acceptance constitutes the central issue addressed in this study. The phenomenon reveals an ongoing discursive tension between national narratives and local wisdom that has yet to be sufficiently examined in existing academic scholarship.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to analyze how the concept of *Islam Wasathiyah* is understood and constructed by Acehnese *ulama dayah*, as well as how they negotiate the relationship between local scholarly traditions and national religious discourse. Specifically, the study examines the theological, jurisprudential, and socio-practical foundations of *Islam Wasathiyah* within dayah scholarly thought, while also exploring the historical and ideological factors underlying

¹ Yusria Amalia et al., “Moderasi Beragama Dalam Al-Qur'an: Analisis Semantik Terhadap Term Ummatah Wasathan,” *Jurnal Al Iklil: Jurnal Dirasab Al Qur'an Dan Tafsir* 3, no. 1 (2025): 9, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.28926/al%20iklil.v3i1.1913>.

² Iskandar Zulkarnaen et al., “Dayah Ulama's Interpretation of Religious Moderation Narratives: Negotiable,” *Society* 11, no. 2 (2023): 474–489, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.33019/society.v11i2.452>.

³ Juwaini et al., “The Role of Islamic Universities in the Harmony of the Madhhab (Resolution of the Aswaja and Wahabism Conflicts in Aceh),” *Millati: Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities* 6, no. 2 (2021): 2, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.18326/mlt.v6i2.6148>.

resistance to the term “religious moderation.” Furthermore, the study highlights the role of *ulama dayah*—including those who also serve as lecturers at State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN)—as mediators bridging these two discursive spheres.

This study contributes to the enrichment of local Islamic studies in Indonesia, particularly regarding the dynamics of religious authority and the negotiation of moderate Islamic discourse. Theoretically, this research offers a nuanced understanding that moderation in Islam does not necessarily emerge within state-defined terminological frameworks but may instead develop organically through local traditions such as *Islam Wasathiyah* in Aceh. Practically, the study’s insights may inform the formulation of religious policies that are more attuned to historical contexts and local wisdom, thereby fostering a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable dialogue between the state and religious communities.

The discourse on religious moderation in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), including those in Aceh, is not a new field of inquiry. A substantial body of scholarship has examined this theme through various approaches. Muhaini analyzes the internalization of religious moderation within traditional *dayah* education in Langsa, emphasizing the role of educational processes in shaping students’ moderate attitudes.⁴ Similarly, Ummi Habibatul Islamiyah explores the implementation of *Islam Wasathiyah* within a specific institutional context, namely Dayah Darul Hikmah Islamiyah in West Aceh, demonstrating how the concept is operationalized at the local level.⁵ In a different context, Lutfiana Dwi Mayasari investigates the strengthening of moderate Islamic theology in pesantren as part of character formation to foster tolerance among students.⁶ While these studies share thematic similarities with the present research—particularly in their engagement with religious moderation and Islamic educational institutions—they tend to focus on pedagogical processes, institutional implementation, or context-specific theological reinforcement. Consequently, the perspective of *dayah* scholars as intellectual agents, especially in articulating and negotiating the concept of *Islam Wasathiyah*, remains relatively underexplored.

Building on the existing literature, this study seeks to contribute by foregrounding the interpretive frameworks of *dayah* scholars in Aceh and examining how *Islam Wasathiyah* is understood, constructed, and negotiated at the intersection of local Islamic traditions and national religious discourse. This study positions itself as an effort to extend and deepen current discussions by focusing on the interaction between scholarly authority, conceptual frameworks, and broader socio-religious dynamics.

The phenomenon of *Islam Wasathiyah* from the perspective of *dayah* scholars can be theoretically grounded in the thought of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who conceptualizes *wasathiyah* as a principle of balance (*tawazun*) and justice (*i’tidal*) in understanding and practicing Islam. For al-Qaradawi, *wasathiyah* does not imply compromise toward religious truth; rather, it represents a

⁴ Muhaini Muhaini, “Internalisasi Pendidikan Moderasi Beragama dalam Sistem Pendidikan Dayah Tradisional di Kota Langsa (Studi Kasus di Dayah Tradisional Raudhatun Najah Kota Langsa),” *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 10, no. 10 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.30868/ei.v10i02.1636>.

⁵ Ummi Habibatul Islamiyah, “The Implementation of Islam Wasathiyah Thought in Dayah Darul Hikmah Islamiyah, West Aceh,” *Konfrontasi: Jurnal Kultural, Ekonomi Dan Perubahan Sosial* 9, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.33258/konfrontasi2.v9i2.227>.

⁶ Lutfiana Dwi Mayasari, “Penguatan Nalar Teologi Islam Moderat di Pondok Pesantren Al Iman Ponorogo,” *Proceedings of Annual Conference for Muslim Scholars* 6, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.36835/ancoms.v6i1.362>.

theological position that rejects two opposing extremes: excess (*ghulum*) and negligence (*tafrith*).⁷ This framework emphasizes balance between text and context, firmness in principles and flexibility in methods, as well as between individual piety and social responsibility. In relation to this study, al-Qaradawi's formulation provides a normative-theological lens to analyze how dayah scholars in Aceh interpret *Islam Wasathiyah* not as a state-driven construct, but as an authentic expression of Islamic teachings rooted in the tradition of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*.

Complementing this perspective, Fazlur Rahman and Syahrin Harahap offer important analytical tools for understanding *Islam Wasathiyah* within the dynamic relationship between text, tradition, and social reality.⁸ Fazlur Rahman's double movement approach highlights the need to interpret Islamic teachings through a dialectical engagement between revelation and contemporary context, suggesting that universal values must be articulated in historically and socially grounded ways. Meanwhile, Syahrin Harahap emphasizes that moderate Islam in Indonesia should be understood as the outcome of an ongoing dialogue between normative Islamic teachings and local wisdom, rather than as a homogenizing ideological project imposed by the state.

In the context of this research, these theoretical perspectives are particularly useful for explaining the stance of dayah scholars in Aceh, who tend to reject the term "religious moderation" while substantively embracing its core values through *Islam Wasathiyah*. This apparent tension can be interpreted, through Rahman's and Harahap's frameworks, as a form of socio-cultural *ijtihad*—a negotiated response that reflects both fidelity to Islamic tradition and sensitivity to local context. Therefore, this study utilizes these theoretical foundations not only to frame *Islam Wasathiyah* as a theological concept, but also to analyze it as a lived discourse that mediates between national religious narratives and locally grounded Islamic authority.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a fieldwork-based approach conducted in several dayah institutions in Aceh. The participants consisted of dayah ulama who were actively engaged in religious teaching, including several scholars who also served as lecturers at State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN). Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, limited participant observation, and document analysis, including the ulama's written works and public statements.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their religious authority, institutional roles, and relevance to the research topic. Data analysis was conducted through three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The study employed thematic analysis to identify major patterns related to the understanding of *Islam Wasathiyah* and responses toward the discourse of religious moderation.

To ensure the validity of the findings, the research applied source triangulation by comparing interview data with documentary sources and observational findings. In addition, theoretical triangulation was employed through the use of relevant scholarly perspectives and conceptual frameworks.

⁷ Zaprul Khan Zaprul Khan and Iskandi Iskandi, "Moderate Islam in Yusuf Qardhawi's Perspective," *Kalam* 16, no. 2 (2022): 105–130, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.24042/klm.v16i2.7158>.

⁸ Muhammad Yusuf et al., *Fazlur Rahman's Double Movement and Its Contribution to the Development of Religious Moderation*, 4, no. 1 (2021): 51–71, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.26555/ijish.v4i1.2667>.

DISCUSSION

From Dayah Ulama to the Discourse of Religious Moderation

Religious moderation has become an important contemporary discourse in contemporary Indonesian religious policy, particularly in promoting social harmony within a pluralistic society.⁹ Through this framework, the state emphasizes values such as tolerance, balance, anti-extremism, and peaceful coexistence. Substantively, these values are not foreign to Islamic traditions in Aceh. However, findings from this study indicate that the introduction of religious moderation through formal state institutions has generated varied responses among dayah ulama. Some informants accepted its substantive values, while others expressed skepticism toward the terminology and political framing attached to it. These responses suggest that the discourse is interpreted not only in theological terms, but also through historical and sociological experiences within Acehnese society.

The study findings further show that the responses of dayah ulama are closely connected to Aceh's historical relationship with the central government. Historically, ulama have occupied a significant position within Acehnese social and political life, functioning as religious leaders as well as guardians of communal identity.¹⁰ Several informants associated contemporary state religious programs with earlier experiences of political intervention and unfulfilled promises regarding Islamic autonomy in Aceh. This historical memory contributes to the emergence of caution toward religious narratives promoted by the state. As a result, programs related to religious moderation are often interpreted beyond their normative objectives and viewed within broader political and historical contexts.

The tension between state discourse and local religious authority also reflects differing perspectives regarding the legitimacy of religious interpretation. On the one hand, the state promotes religious moderation as a national framework for preventing radicalism and strengthening social integration. On the other hand, many ulama dayah consider religious interpretation to remain within the authority of traditional Islamic scholarship rooted in dayah institutions. Interview data indicate that several ulama support values such as tolerance and social harmony, yet they remain critical of concepts perceived as externally imposed through bureaucratic language. This finding demonstrates that the debate surrounding religious moderation in Aceh is shaped not only by theological considerations, but also by questions of authority, legitimacy, and cultural representation.

Ulama Dayah as Local Religious Authorities

In Acehnese society, ulama dayah function as influential local religious authorities whose legitimacy is strongly rooted in community trust and Islamic scholarly traditions.¹¹ Findings from this study

⁹ Sutrisna Sutrisna, "Local Wisdom as the Basis for Religious Moderation in Pluralistic Indonesian Society to Realize Islamic Values Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin," *Millati: Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities* 6, no. 2 (2021): 243–256, <https://doi.org/10.18326/mlt.v6i2.6581>.

¹⁰ Syafieh Syafieh et al., "Authority and Ulama In Aceh: The Role of Dayah Ulama In Contemporary Aceh Religious Practices," *Jurnal Theologia* 33, no. 2 (2022): 151–178, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.21580/teo.2022.33.2.13455>.

¹¹ Syafieh et al., "Authority and Ulama In Aceh: The Role of Dayah Ulama In Contemporary Aceh Religious Practices," 152.

show that the authority of ulama dayah does not primarily originate from formal state recognition, but from their moral standing, religious knowledge, and long-standing relationship with society.¹² Informants consistently described ulama as central figures in guiding religious life, resolving social problems, and preserving Islamic values within the community. This position enables ulama dayah to become important references in responding to contemporary religious issues, including the discourse of religious moderation. The strong social influence of ulama demonstrates that religious authority in Aceh remains closely connected to local cultural and communal structures.

The authority of ulama dayah is closely related to the institutional role of dayah itself as a traditional Islamic educational institution. Based on interview data, dayah is not only perceived as a place for learning classical Islamic texts, but also as a center for shaping moral discipline and religious identity. Through daily interaction between teachers and students, dayah produces a pattern of authority built upon knowledge transmission, ethical example, and spiritual guidance. Several informants emphasized that society tends to trust ulama who emerge from established dayah networks because they are considered to possess both intellectual and moral credibility. This institutional legitimacy strengthens the influence of ulama dayah within broader social life, particularly in rural Acehnese communities where religious values remain highly influential.

The relationship between ulama dayah and Acehnese society is also characterized by close social and emotional attachment. Empirical findings indicate that ulama are actively involved in communal activities such as religious gatherings, social ceremonies, conflict mediation, and public consultation on religious matters. This continuous interaction reinforces public trust and strengthens the perception of ulama as moral guardians of society. In many cases, community acceptance of religious ideas depends significantly on the position taken by respected ulama dayah. This explains why religious narratives introduced through state institutions often require validation from local ulama before being widely accepted by society. Thus, the authority of ulama dayah operates through social legitimacy rather than administrative power.

This sociological position places ulama dayah in a strategic role within the negotiation of religious discourse in Aceh. The study findings suggest that public responses toward concepts such as religious moderation are strongly influenced by how ulama interpret and communicate these ideas at the local level. Although many ulama support values such as tolerance and social harmony, they often reinterpret these concepts using religious terminology more familiar to Acehnese society, such as Islam Wasathiyah.¹³ This pattern indicates that ulama dayah function not only as religious authorities but also as cultural mediators who connect national religious discourse with local Islamic traditions.

This phenomenon can be further understood through the perspective of Syahrin Harahap, who argues that moderate Islam in Indonesia develops through an ongoing interaction between normative Islamic teachings and local socio-cultural realities. Harahap emphasizes that Islamic moderation in the Indonesian context cannot be separated from the role of local religious actors who reinterpret universal Islamic values according to the historical experiences and cultural

¹² Abidin Nuridin et al., "The Role of Ulama in the Application of Islamic Syariah in Aceh: A Study of Aceh Ulama Council's Fatwa on Apostasies and Heresies," *Mazahib* 17, no. 1 (128 AD): 46–68, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.21093/mj.v17i1.1022>.

¹³ Syarifuddin Syarifuddin, "Ulama Dayah and the Construction of Tolerance and Pluralism in Acehnese Society," *SINTHOP: Media Kajian Agama, Sosial Dan Budaya* 4, no. 1 (2025): 77–82, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.69548/sinthop.v4.i1.23.75-83>.

characteristics of their respective communities. In relation to this study, the authority of ulama dayah reflects this dynamic process, where religious teachings are not transmitted merely as abstract doctrines but are embedded within local traditions, communal ethics, and Acehnese Islamic identity. The findings demonstrate that ulama dayah maintain their influence precisely because they are able to articulate Islamic values in forms that remain culturally resonant and socially legitimate within Acehnese society.

Historical Memory and Acehnese Suspicion toward State Religious Narratives

The relationship between Aceh and the Indonesian central government has historically been marked by tension, negotiation, and political distrust. One of the most influential moments shaping this collective memory was the rebellion led by Daud Beureueh in the early years of Indonesian independence.¹⁴ As a respected Acehnese ulama and political figure, Daud Beureueh initially supported the Indonesian nationalist movement and mobilized Acehnese society in defense of the newly established republic. However, disappointment emerged when promises regarding Aceh's religious autonomy and the implementation of Islamic law were perceived as unfulfilled by the central government. This sense of betrayal gradually transformed political dissatisfaction into ideological resistance, leaving a long-lasting impact on Acehnese perceptions toward state authority.

The emergence of the DI/TII movement in Aceh cannot merely be understood as a separatist rebellion or military conflict. Rather, it reflected a deeper struggle over religious identity, regional dignity, and political recognition within the Indonesian nation-state.¹⁵ For many Acehnese Muslims, the conflict symbolized the failure of Jakarta to adequately appreciate Aceh's historical contribution and Islamic character. The central government's policies were often viewed as overly centralized and insufficiently sensitive toward local religious aspirations. Consequently, the memory of DI/TII became embedded within Acehnese collective consciousness as a reminder of the fragile relationship between religious authority in Aceh and political authority from the center. This historical experience continues to influence contemporary responses toward national religious programs introduced by the state.

The implementation of Islamic law in Aceh after the Reformasi era partially restored Acehnese confidence in the state, yet it did not entirely eliminate the historical trauma inherited from previous decades.¹⁶ Syariat Islam in Aceh is not simply understood as a legal framework, but also as a symbol of cultural dignity, historical continuity, and religious sovereignty. Therefore, any external discourse perceived as potentially redefining or regulating religious understanding tends to generate sensitivity among local religious communities. In this context, state-sponsored narratives concerning religion are often interpreted not only as administrative policies but also as ideological interventions into a sacred and historically protected domain. The memory of political marginalization has made Acehnese society particularly cautious toward external religious formulations promoted by the government.

¹⁴ Bambang Satriya et al., "Ulama Pejuang Dari Serambi Mekkah: Teungku Muhammad Daud Beureueh Dan Peranannya Dalam Revolusi Indonesia Di Aceh, 1945-1950," *Insancita: Journal of Islamic Studies in Indonesia and Southeast Asia* 4, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2121/inscita-jisisea.v4i1.1198>.

¹⁵ Azis Muhajir, "Politik Daud Beureueh Dalam Gerakan Di/Tii Aceh," *Kalam: Jurnal Agama Dan Sosial Humaniora* 4, no. 1 (2016): 1–18.

¹⁶ Ruhdiara Ruhdiara, "Rekonstruksi Syariat Islam Di Aceh Dalam Lintas Sejarah," *Jurnal Pattingalloang* 9, no. 3 (2022): 270–285, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.26858/jp.v9i3.41014>.

This historical sensitivity becomes especially visible in the responses of ulama dayah toward the discourse of religious moderation promoted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Although the values embedded in religious moderation—such as tolerance, balance, and anti-extremism—are not fundamentally rejected, the terminology itself often triggers suspicion among traditional Islamic circles. For some ulama, the discourse appears closely associated with state attempts to regulate religious interpretation and redefine the boundaries of Islamic orthodoxy. The concern is not merely theological, but also political and historical. Religious moderation is sometimes perceived as part of a broader national project that may gradually weaken the autonomy of local Islamic institutions and diminish the authority historically held by dayah ulama within Acehese society.

The persistence of such suspicion indicates that religious discourse in Aceh remains deeply intertwined with historical memory and center–periphery relations within the Indonesian state. Acehese reactions toward state religious narratives are deeply shaped by experiences of conflict, broken political promises, and struggles for religious recognition. This explains why concepts introduced by the government frequently encounter resistance, even when their substantive values overlap with local Islamic teachings. The novelty of this phenomenon lies in the fact that the resistance of ulama dayah is directed less toward the principles of moderation themselves than toward the symbolic and political meanings attached to state-sponsored religious terminology. In other words, historical trauma continues to shape the boundaries through which religious authority, identity, and legitimacy are negotiated in contemporary Aceh.

Theological Foundations of Islam Wasathiyah in Dayah Thought

The theological foundations of Islam Wasathiyah in the thought of Acehese dayah ulama are deeply rooted in the tradition of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah (Aswaja), which has historically become the dominant religious orientation within Aceh's Islamic educational institutions.¹⁷ In the dayah tradition, Aswaja is not merely understood as a theological identity, but as a comprehensive framework for maintaining religious balance, intellectual continuity, and social harmony. The transmission of classical Islamic scholarship through kitab kuning, sanad-based learning, and the authority of senior ulama has shaped a moderate pattern of religious understanding that rejects both theological extremism and excessive liberalism.¹⁸ Consequently, the concept of Islam Wasathiyah among dayah ulama emerges not as a newly imported discourse, but as an organic continuation of the Aswaja tradition that has long developed within Acehese Islamic society.

Within this theological framework, the principle of tawassuth occupies a central position in shaping the religious worldview of dayah ulama. Tawassuth, or the middle path, is understood as the rejection of radical and excessive approaches in religious interpretation and social behavior.¹⁹ Acehese ulama generally emphasize that Islam must be practiced with wisdom, gradualism, and proportionality while remaining firmly rooted in orthodox theological teachings. This principle

¹⁷ Ervan Nurtawab and Dedi Wahyudi, "Restructuring Traditional Islamic Education in Indonesia: Challenges for Pesantren Institution," *Studia Islamika* 29, no. 1 (2022): 55–81, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v29i1.17414>.

¹⁸ Zakiul Fuady Muhammad Daud, "Fiqh Across Madhhabs: An Alternative to Pesantren Students' School of Thought Exclusivism in the Post-Truth Era," *Maʿabib* 20, no. 1 (2021): 143–168, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.21093/mj.v20i1.3081>.

¹⁹ Syafieh et al., "Authority and Ulama In Aceh: The Role of Dayah Ulama In Contemporary Aceh Religious Practices," 168–172.

becomes visible in the way dayah institutions preserve classical Islamic scholarship while simultaneously responding to contemporary social realities. Rather than advocating rigid literalism or unrestricted reinterpretation, tawassuth encourages a balanced method of understanding religion that harmonizes scriptural fidelity with social wisdom.

The principle of tawazun further strengthens the theological structure of Islam Wasathiyah in dayah thought.²⁰ Tawazun refers to balance between various dimensions of human life, including the relationship between religion and society, tradition and modernity, as well as individual piety and collective responsibility. Acehese ulama frequently frame Islam as a religion that integrates spiritual devotion with social ethics, rejecting dichotomies between worldly engagement and religious commitment. This balanced orientation can be observed in the educational culture of dayah, where students are not only trained in ritual sciences but also in moral discipline, communal responsibility, and respect for social order. Through tawazun, the dayah tradition constructs a form of religiosity that remains spiritually rooted while socially adaptive within changing historical circumstances.

Another essential theological principle is tasamuh, or tolerance, which occupies an important place within the ethical orientation of Acehese Islam. In the perspective of dayah ulama, tasamuh does not imply theological relativism or the erosion of Islamic identity. Rather, it refers to the ethical capacity to coexist peacefully with differences while maintaining doctrinal commitment. The principle is particularly important within Aceh's plural social environment, where religious and social interactions require prudence and communal sensitivity. Dayah ulama generally emphasize that disagreement in matters of fiqh and social interpretation should not lead to hostility or takfir.²¹ This approach reflects a classical Aswaja attitude that recognizes diversity within Islamic intellectual traditions while preserving communal harmony.

The theological foundations of Islam Wasathiyah in Acehese dayah thought are also closely connected with the maqashid al-shari'ah approach, especially in understanding the broader objectives of Islamic law. Although many dayah ulama may not explicitly employ modern maqashid terminology in academic language, their religious reasoning often reflects concern for public welfare, social stability, justice, and the protection of communal morality.²² Islamic teachings are not merely understood through rigid textual formalism, but also through consideration of maslahat and the practical consequences of legal implementation. This orientation enables dayah ulama to maintain fidelity to classical Islamic scholarship while remaining responsive to local social realities.

The influence of Yusuf al-Qaradawi's thought can also be identified within contemporary Acehese discourse on Islam Wasathiyah. Al-Qaradawi's emphasis on moderation, balance, anti-extremism, and maqashid-oriented reasoning resonates strongly with the worldview of many Acehese ulama, particularly those engaged in academic and organizational circles. Concepts such as fiqh al-wasathiyah, the rejection of takfiri tendencies, and the integration of text and context are

²⁰ M. Anzaikhan et al., "Contrasting Thoughts: Internalization of Islam Wasathiyah of Dayah Ulama in Grounding Moderate Islam In Pesantren," *Al-Qalam* 30, no. 1 (2024): 113–123, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.31969/alq.v30i1.1424>.

²¹ Anzaikhan et al., "Contrasting Thoughts: Internalization of Islam Wasathiyah of Dayah Ulama in Grounding Moderate Islam in Pesantren," 117–119.

²² Raina Wildan et al., "Integrating Sufi Values in Aceh's Dayah Salafiyah: Strategies and Challenges in Harmonizing Tradition with Modernity," *Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 4, no. 2 (2024): 179–191, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jpi.v4i2.25918>.

frequently echoed in contemporary religious discussions among dayah intellectuals.²³ Nevertheless, Acehese ulama do not simply imitate Middle Eastern formulations of Wasathiyah. Instead, these global Islamic concepts are selectively interpreted through local theological traditions and sociocultural experiences rooted in Aceh's historical context. This demonstrates the dynamic interaction between transnational Islamic thought and local religious authority.

Despite these intellectual connections with broader Islamic scholarship, Islam Wasathiyah in Aceh maintains a distinctly local character shaped by historical memory, dayah culture, and the implementation of Islamic law. The Acehese understanding of moderation is inseparable from the region's experience as a society deeply attached to Islamic identity and local religious autonomy. For this reason, moderation is often articulated through culturally familiar concepts such as adab, ukhuwah, and communal harmony rather than through formal state terminology. The authority of dayah ulama also ensures that theological moderation remains grounded in local legitimacy rather than merely functioning as an external ideological agenda. As a result, Islam Wasathiyah in Aceh develops as a localized theological discourse that integrates classical Sunni orthodoxy with Acehese cultural identity.

Islam Wasathiyah as an Expression of Acehese Islamic Identity

Islam Wasathiyah in the Acehese context is understood not merely as a theological doctrine concerning moderation, but as an integral expression of Acehese Islamic identity itself. The concept has become deeply embedded within the social fabric of Acehese Muslim society through the long-standing traditions of dayah institutions, communal religious practices, and the moral authority of ulama. For many Acehese Muslims, Wasathiyah represents a lived religious culture that emphasizes balance, respect, ethical conduct, and communal harmony without abandoning commitment to Islamic orthodoxy. As a result, Islam Wasathiyah is perceived less as an abstract intellectual formulation and more as a cultural manifestation of how Islam has historically been practiced and preserved in Aceh. This explains why the discourse resonates strongly among grassroots communities and traditional religious circles.

Sociologically, the acceptance of Islam Wasathiyah among Acehese society is closely connected to the role of ulama dayah as custodians of local religious identity.²⁴ Dayah institutions function not only as centers of Islamic education but also as spaces for the reproduction of social values, collective memory, and communal ethics. Through religious teaching, rituals, and public guidance, ulama dayah continuously reinforce an understanding of Islam that prioritizes social cohesion and moral balance. In this setting, Wasathiyah becomes a social ethos shaping interpersonal relations, patterns of authority, and community behavior. The concept therefore operates as a form of symbolic identity through which Acehese Muslims distinguish their religious tradition from both radical religious tendencies and secular cultural influences perceived as external to local values.

²³ Mohd Hafiz Nordin et al., "The Concept Of Moderation In Creed According To Perspective Of Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jama'ah (Konsep Al-Wasatiyyah Dalam Akidah Menurut Perspektif Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jama'ah)," *Malaysian Journal Of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2019): 1–11.

²⁴ Syafieh Syafieh and Arief Muammar, "The Strategy of Dayah Scholars in Formulating Wasathiyah Islam in Aceh," *Analisis: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 25, no. 1 (2025): 155–184, <https://doi.org/10.24042/k1p6kb08>.

Anthropologically, Islam Wasathiyah in Aceh reflects the fusion between Islamic teachings and Acehnese cultural consciousness developed over centuries. Acehnese religious identity has historically been constructed through the interaction between Islamic scholarship, local customs (adat), and collective historical experiences.²⁵ This interaction produced a unique religious culture where Islamic values are inseparable from communal traditions and social norms. Within this cultural landscape, Wasathiyah is not understood as passive tolerance or theological compromise, but as the preservation of equilibrium between religious commitment and social stability. Consequently, many Acehnese ulama interpret moderation through locally meaningful concepts such as harmony, dignity, communal solidarity, and respect for religious authority. These elements strengthen the cultural legitimacy of Islam Wasathiyah within Acehnese society.

At the political and symbolic level, Islam Wasathiyah also functions as a marker of local Islamic autonomy in relation to national religious discourse.²⁶ In contemporary Aceh, the promotion of Wasathiyah by ulama dayah can be interpreted as an effort to articulate a distinctly Acehnese form of Islamic moderation rooted in local history and tradition rather than state bureaucracy. By emphasizing Islam Wasathiyah instead of adopting the official terminology of “religious moderation,” Acehnese ulama reaffirm their authority to define religious authenticity according to local cultural and theological frameworks. This demonstrates that Wasathiyah in Aceh is not only a religious concept but also a cultural-political identity through which Acehnese Muslims negotiate their relationship with the Indonesian state, national Islamic discourse, and broader currents of contemporary Islam.

Rejecting “Religious Moderation,” Accepting “Islam Wasathiyah”: A Terminological and Ideological Negotiation

The responses of Acehnese dayah ulama toward the discourse of religious moderation reveal a complex process of terminological and ideological negotiation rather than a simple rejection of moderate Islamic values. At the substantive level, many values promoted through the state discourse of religious moderation—such as tolerance, balance, anti-extremism, and social harmony—are already deeply embedded within the religious teachings of dayah traditions.²⁷ However, resistance emerges when these values are framed through terminology perceived as originating from state institutions and national political agendas. For many ulama dayah, the issue lies not in the ethical substance of moderation itself, but in the authority to define, formulate, and disseminate legitimate religious discourse within Muslim society. This distinction is crucial because it shifts the debate from theological disagreement to questions of symbolic authority and discursive legitimacy.

Within the perspective of Acehnese ulama, the term “religious moderation” is often viewed as carrying ideological and political implications that differ from the organically developed concept

²⁵ Cut Muthia et al., “Nilai-Nilai Agama Islam dalam Budaya dan Adat Masyarakat Aceh,” *Jurnal Riset Komunikasi Penyiaran Islam* 1, no. 1 (2021): 52–60, <https://doi.org/10.29313/jrkpi.v1i1.170>.

²⁶ Syafieh and Muammar, “The Strategy of Dayah Scholars in Formulating Wasathiyah Islam in Aceh.”

²⁷ Lismijar Lismijar and Imam Azhari, “Moderasi Beragama dalam Sistem Pembelajaran Dayah Salafiyah di Aceh,” *Konstruktivisme: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran* 16, no. 2 (2024): 380–393, <https://doi.org/10.35457/konstruk.v16i2.3696>.

of Islam Wasathiyah.²⁸ The terminology of moderation is frequently associated with bureaucratic language, state programs, and global political narratives concerning counter-radicalism and religious governance. As a result, some ulama perceive the discourse as potentially reducing Islam to a political instrument managed through state-defined categories of acceptable religiosity. In contrast, Islam Wasathiyah is understood as emerging from the internal tradition of Islamic scholarship rooted in the authority of classical ulama and the continuity of Aswaja teachings.

This phenomenon also demonstrates how language functions as a site of ideological contestation within contemporary Islamic discourse. Terminology is not neutral; rather, it carries historical experiences, institutional power, and political meanings. In the Acehese context, the rejection of the term “religious moderation” reflects broader anxieties regarding external intervention into local religious life. The adoption of state-sponsored terminology is sometimes interpreted as an implicit acceptance of centralized authority over religious interpretation. Therefore, by preferring the language of Islam Wasathiyah, ulama dayah symbolically reaffirm their role as legitimate custodians of Islamic knowledge within Acehese society. The contestation is thus not merely semantic, but deeply connected to struggles over who possesses the authority to define the “correct” form of moderate Islam in contemporary Indonesia.

The negotiation between these two discourses can also be understood within a broader postcolonial framework concerning center–periphery relations and the politics of knowledge production. Acehese ulama historically occupy a unique position shaped by memories of political marginalization, resistance, and regional Islamic autonomy. In this historical context, externally introduced religious narratives often encounter suspicion because they are perceived as extensions of centralized ideological control. The preference for Islam Wasathiyah therefore becomes a form of intellectual and cultural resistance against the dominance of nationally standardized religious categories. Rather than rejecting moderation itself, ulama dayah seek to preserve the authority of local religious traditions in defining Islamic concepts according to Acehese historical and sociocultural realities.

The coexistence of resistance and acceptance within this discourse illustrates the dynamic nature of Islamic thought in Aceh. Dayah ulama do not position themselves entirely outside national discourse, nor do they fully embrace state formulations without critical negotiation. Instead, they selectively reinterpret and localize broader Islamic concepts through culturally resonant terminology and locally recognized religious authority. Islam Wasathiyah thus functions as a dialectical space where universal Islamic values intersect with local identity, historical memory, and sociopolitical autonomy. This finding constitutes an important theoretical contribution because it demonstrates that debates surrounding moderation in Indonesia are not solely about doctrinal substance, but also about discourse, authority, and the politics of naming within Muslim societies.

Ulama Dayah as Mediators between State and Society

The position of ulama who simultaneously operate within the worlds of dayah and Islamic higher education institutions (PTKIN) reflects a unique phenomenon in the contemporary religious landscape of Aceh. These figures occupy a dual intellectual and social identity: on one side, they are rooted in the traditional authority of dayah as guardians of classical Islamic scholarship, while

²⁸ Husamuddin Mz et al., “Konsep Moderasi Beragama Perspektif Tokoh Dayah Di Aceh,” *Maqasidi: Jurnal Syariah Dan Hukum* 4, no. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.47498/maqasidi.v4i1.4202>.

on the other, they actively participate in modern academic institutions closely connected with state religious programs and national discourse. This dual positioning enables them to move flexibly between local religious communities and formal state structures. Consequently, PTKIN-dayah ulama often emerge as important intermediaries capable of translating state religious narratives into locally acceptable language while simultaneously articulating local concerns within broader national discussions.

The dual identity carried by these ulama creates a complex but strategic role in negotiating religious discourse in Aceh. Within academic spaces, many of them openly engage with concepts such as religious moderation, interfaith harmony, and inclusive Islam, often participating in seminars, policy discussions, and government-sponsored programs. However, when interacting with traditional dayah communities and grassroots religious audiences, they tend to employ terminologies more deeply embedded within local Islamic culture, such as Islam Wasathiyah, tawassuth, or Aswaja values.²⁹ This shift in language does not necessarily indicate ideological inconsistency, but rather reflects sociological awareness regarding the symbolic sensitivity of religious terminology within Acehnese society. They recognize that certain state-sponsored concepts may encounter resistance if presented without cultural adaptation.

In this context, PTKIN-dayah ulama function as cultural brokers who mediate between two different systems of legitimacy: the authority of the state and the authority of local religious tradition. Their role extends beyond intellectual interpretation into the realm of social negotiation and symbolic communication. By reformulating national religious discourse into culturally resonant expressions, they help reduce tensions between governmental agendas and local Islamic identity. At the same time, they also communicate the aspirations, concerns, and sensitivities of Acehnese Muslim communities to state institutions. This brokerage role becomes particularly significant in Aceh, where religious authority is historically decentralized and deeply tied to the moral legitimacy of dayah institutions rather than solely to formal bureaucratic structures.

The mediating role of PTKIN-dayah ulama also reflects their position as negotiation actors within a broader contestation of religious authority in Indonesia. They do not fully reject state programs concerning religious moderation, nor do they uncritically absorb official narratives without reinterpretation. Instead, they selectively negotiate concepts, terminologies, and approaches in ways that preserve local religious autonomy while maintaining constructive engagement with national institutions. Through this negotiation process, these ulama contribute to the formation of a localized discourse of Islamic moderation that remains compatible with Acehnese religious traditions. Their presence demonstrates that moderation in Aceh is not simply imposed from above, but continuously reconstructed through dialogue between state discourse and local Islamic scholarship.

Moreover, the role of PTKIN-dayah ulama as mediators highlights the dynamic transformation of religious authority in contemporary Aceh. Unlike traditional binaries that separate “state Islam” from “local Islam,” these figures embody an intersection where both spheres interact, compete, and collaborate simultaneously. Their intellectual flexibility allows them to navigate political sensitivities, theological commitments, and social expectations without entirely

²⁹ Syibrans Mulasi et al., “Religious Moderation in Aceh: A Strategy for Implementing Islam Washathiyah Values in Acehnese Society,” *Al-Adyan: Journal of Religious Studies* 4, no. 1 (2023): 1–11, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15548/al-adyan.v4i1.6067>.

abandoning either side. In many ways, they serve as bridge-builders who prevent polarization between national religious agendas and local Islamic traditions. Therefore, understanding the role of PTKIN-dayah ulama is crucial for explaining how Islamic moderation, Islam Wasathiyah, and religious authority are continuously negotiated within the sociopolitical context of Aceh.

This mediating role of PTKIN-dayah ulama can also be analyzed from the perspective of Fazlur Rahman, particularly his concept of the “double movement” between normative Islamic teachings and contemporary social realities. Rahman argues that Islamic thought should not remain confined to literal textualism, but must continuously engage with changing historical and societal contexts in order to preserve the ethical spirit of Islam. In relation to this study, the ability of PTKIN-dayah ulama to reinterpret concepts such as religious moderation into culturally resonant expressions like Islam Wasathiyah reflects this dialectical process between text and context. Rather than rejecting national religious discourse entirely, these ulama selectively adapt universal Islamic values into forms that remain compatible with Acehnese religious traditions and local sensitivities. Their role as mediators illustrates a form of socio-cultural *ijtihad*, in which Islamic principles are contextualized through negotiation with social realities while maintaining continuity with the authoritative traditions of dayah scholarship.

Negotiating Local and National Discourses: Islam Wasathiyah as a Dialectical Bridge

The encounter between the discourse of religious moderation promoted by the Indonesian state and the concept of Islam Wasathiyah articulated by Acehnese dayah ulama demonstrates a complex process of negotiation between local and national religious narratives. Throughout this study, it becomes evident that the relationship between these two discourses is not characterized by absolute opposition, but rather by a continuous dialectical interaction shaped by history, theology, culture, and political experience. Dayah ulama do not reject the ethical substance associated with moderation, such as balance, tolerance, and social harmony.³⁰ Instead, their responses reflect an effort to reinterpret those values through locally legitimate concepts rooted in Acehnese Islamic tradition. In this context, Islam Wasathiyah emerges as a mediating framework capable of connecting national Islamic discourse with local religious identity without erasing the authority of traditional ulama.

As a form of cultural mediation, Islam Wasathiyah enables Acehnese society to engage contemporary religious discourse while maintaining continuity with inherited traditions and local social values. The concept functions as a culturally resonant language that translates universal Islamic principles into forms recognizable within Acehnese communal life. Through dayah institutions, religious teachings concerning balance, tolerance, and social ethics are embedded within local customs, collective memory, and the authority structure of traditional scholarship. Consequently, Wasathiyah is accepted not as a foreign ideological project, but as an extension of long-standing Acehnese Islamic practices. This cultural dimension explains why the discourse possesses greater legitimacy among grassroots communities compared to state-centered terminology perceived as distant from local historical experiences.

³⁰ Syafieh et al., “Authority and Ulama in Aceh: The Role of Dayah Ulama in Contemporary Aceh Religious Practices.”

At the theological level, Islam Wasathiyah also operates as a process of adaptation that bridges classical Islamic scholarship with contemporary social realities.³¹ Acehnese ulama reinterpret broader Islamic concepts—including those influenced by global Wasathiyah discourse—through the epistemological framework of Aswaja and the intellectual traditions of dayah education.³² In doing so, they preserve the continuity of authoritative religious knowledge while selectively engaging modern religious discourse introduced through national institutions and academic networks. This adaptive process reflects neither rigid conservatism nor unconditional acceptance of external ideas, but rather a negotiated form of Islamic thought grounded in local theological legitimacy.

The discourse of Islam Wasathiyah represents an important form of political negotiation concerning authority, identity, and the production of religious knowledge in contemporary Indonesia. By adopting the language of Wasathiyah instead of “religious moderation,” ulama dayah symbolically assert their right to define moderation according to Acehnese historical and cultural realities. This negotiation reveals that debates surrounding moderation are not purely theological, but also involve struggles over symbolic power and discursive control. In this regard, Islam Wasathiyah functions simultaneously as cultural mediation, theological adaptation, political negotiation, and an epistemological bridge between local tradition and national discourse. The concept ultimately demonstrates how Acehnese Islam maintains its local authenticity while actively participating in broader discussions on moderation and Islamic identity within the Indonesian public sphere.

CONCLUSION

This study argues that the resistance of Acehnese dayah ulama toward the discourse of religious moderation should not be understood as a rejection of moderate Islamic values, but rather as a response to the symbolic and ideological dimensions attached to state-sponsored religious terminology. Values such as balance, justice, tolerance, and anti-extremism have long been embedded within the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama‘ah tradition practiced in Acehnese dayah institutions. Consequently, dayah ulama are more receptive to the concept of Islam Wasathiyah, which they perceive as theologically authentic and historically rooted in Acehnese Islamic identity. The findings demonstrate that debates surrounding religious moderation in Aceh are shaped primarily by questions of religious authority, historical memory, and discursive legitimacy rather than by theological disagreement.

This study further reveals that the relationship between local Islamic traditions and national religious discourse is characterized by negotiation and cultural adaptation rather than direct opposition. PTKIN-dayah ulama play a significant mediating role by translating national religious narratives into locally meaningful concepts and culturally resonant expressions. In this context, Islam Wasathiyah functions as a bridge connecting Islamic teachings, local identity, and national discourse. The study contributes to broader discussions on Islamic moderation in Indonesia by

³¹ Yazida Ichsan et al., “Realizing Islamic Education Based on Religious Moderation with the Wasathiyah Islamic Paradigm from the Perspective of the Qur’an,” *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 2, no. 1 (2024): 248–261, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14421/jpai.v2i1i.9944>.

³² Zuhri Arif et al., “Ulama and Knowledge in Modern Aceh: Abu Teupin Raya on Religious Sciences,” *Nabrsiyah: Journal of Aceh and Malay Archipelago Heritage* 1, no. 1 (2023): 69–83, <https://doi.org/10.47766/nabrsiyah.v1i1.2502>.

demonstrating that moderation is not solely a state-driven project, but also a locally negotiated discourse shaped by historical experience, cultural identity, and local religious authority.

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