

Middle East and African Student (MEAS) perceptions of Islam and Islamic moderation: a case study

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Abstract

Islamic Moderation is such a fundamental concept that without it understanding faith is inadequate at best. Muslims are required by definition of the term 'Muslim' to remain on the middle path in everything pertaining to the life ways. They must not overstep the bounds (*tafrit*) and become trapped in the extremist quagmire (*ifrat*). As an Islamic doctrine *par excellence*, moderation inherently finds solutions for injustice and the violation of human rights. Nonetheless, some schools of Islamic thought (*madhhabs*) attend extremist ideology, particularly those of Middle East and African savour. These have spread a frightful spirit of intolerance

throughout the world that has indelibly blackened Islam's image by choosing to deny Islam's characteristic spirit of moderation. In so doing, they marginalize any proper implementation of authentic Islam and block all corrective political discourse. Militant radicals clearly neglect moderation as a doctrinal position that is traditionally essential to the creed. This paper presents a broad exposure to Islam's middle path with a focus on 192 respondents in a survey taken by Middle Eastern and African students (MEAS) studying in Malaysia. Qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to achieve four significant findings indicating these students do not understand the nature of being a good Muslim.

Moderasi Islam adalah konsep fundamental yang tanpa pemahaman keimanan tidak akan memadai. Muslim diharuskan menurut definisi istilah 'Muslim' untuk tetap berada di jalan tengah dalam segala hal yang berkaitan dengan cara hidup. Mereka tidak boleh melewati batas (*tafrit*) dan terjebak dalam ranah ekstrimis (*ifrat*). Sebagai doktrin Islam par excellence, moderasi secara inheren menemukan solusi untuk ketidakadilan dan pelanggaran hak asasi manusia. Meskipun demikian, beberapa mazhab fikih (*madhhab*) mengikuti ideologi ekstremis, terutama yang bercita rasa Timur Tengah dan Afrika. Ini telah menyebarkan semangat intoleransi yang mengerikan ke seluruh dunia yang telah menghancurkan citra Islam dengan memilih untuk menyangkal semangat moderasi khas Islam. Dengan melakukan itu, mereka memarjinalkan penerapan Islam otentik yang tepat dan memblokir semua wacana politik korektif. Kaum radikal militan jelas mengabaikan sikap moderat sebagai posisi doktrinal yang secara tradisional penting bagi keyakinan. Makalah ini menyajikan paparan yang luas tentang jalan tengah Islam dengan fokus pada 192 responden dalam survei yang diambil oleh siswa Timur Tengah dan Afrika (MEAS) yang belajar di Malaysia. Pendekatan kualitatif dan kuantitatif digunakan untuk mencapai empat temuan penting yang menunjukkan bahwa para siswa ini tidak memahami hakikat menjadi seorang Muslim yang baik.

Keywords: *Wasatīyyah; Muslim ummah; Middle Eastern and African Students (MEAS), Extremism; Malaysia*

Introduction

Muslim civilization once contributed much knowledge, science and technology to the world. History refers to Islamic sources for social structures and scientific innovations that involved extensive dialogues with a generous acceptance of contributions from non-Muslims. Muslims once built bridges and broke barriers between nations and religions to create common ground. Moderation was once their pioneering trait. Andalusia's centuries of '*La Convivencia*' proved that Muslims, Jews and Christians once lived peacefully under Islamic rule. This exceptionally strong inter-civilizational bonding advanced science, art and every conceivable humanitarian pursuit. Significant initiatives based on the principle of Islamic moderation encouraged inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogues that obtained high ranks and positions for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, including ministers and counsellor to the Caliph.

The principle of Islamic moderation¹ affirms it as core to Islam's substantiating nature. The ideal Muslim state must do the following: provide justice to its citizens in every aspect of politics, economy and law; protect and uplift a civil public life with regard to religion, intellectual property, family and dignity; and allow for individual and cultural diversity under governmental regulations.

Nydell² discussed specific features that have increased cultural awareness between Arabs and non-Arabs, especially Westerners. This generous spirit has been lost and of present import is our focus on Muslim youth, which cannot

¹Muhammad Adil Iqbal and Shaikh Abdul Mabud, "Challenge of Globalisation to the Muslim Ummah: Religious Extremism and the Need for Middle Path (Wasat)", *Strategic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2019), 73-88; Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "*Wasatiyyah* as Explained by Prof. Muhammad Kamal Hassan: Justice, Excellence and Balance", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2014), 24-30; Taufiq Radja Nurul Bahri, "Recent Campaigns of Islamic Moderation", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2013), 8-10.

²Margaret K. Nydell, *Understanding Arabs: A Contemporary Guide to Arab Society*, Boston: Intercultural Press, 2012.

be over emphasized. The challenge is to impart Islamic principles and ethics to each generation and indicate how these values serve a nation's growth and development. Otherwise, a morbidly dreadful force of intolerance is energized and loosed upon the world. Several so-called "Arab Springs" show how youth can be mischanneled when unemployment and their non-involvement in decision making is the status-quo. Moreover, technology profoundly influences youthful aspirations. Awareness of international politics is also necessary because technological influence has huge implications in the face of ignorance. The authors believe a strong religious foundation is essential for youth, but one that must balance the goals of worldly life with those of the hereafter. Hence, to minimize any gap between non-religious and religious studies, both streams of knowledge should be aligned to better facilitate human development and avoid aggressive conflicts.

A growing number of Muslim students from the Middle East and Africa have chosen Malaysia for advanced learning³ because Islamic ideologies and practice are much influenced by local students and Malaysian society at large. This study focuses on their perceptions of Islam, specifically, to what extent do they understand: 1) Islam in general; 2) Islamic moderation; and 3) characteristics that define a good Muslim? Having foundational legacies from Arab and African cultures and traditions, this MEAS cohort could be uniquely approached with respect to their comprehension of Islam and moderation. We note that Islam is predominantly implemented as a means to legitimize power by the majority of governments in MEA nations; thus, their several peoples understand Islam in a dissimilar manner to that of the Malaysian model. A major issue is the concept of moderation, which appears to be misinterpreted by MEAS. Accordingly, this study hopes

³Mansoureh Ebrahimi and Kamaruzaman Yusoff, "The Regulatory Education Environment in Malaysia and Willingness to Accept Unlimited Numbers of International Students", *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Educational Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2020), 63-72.

to inspire in depth study by historians on Islamic moderation among Muslims; specifically, social and political aspects that affect the global Muslim ummah.

Qualitative and quantitative analyses were used for statistical and conceptual investigations. Sources included available secondary literary resources and a survey of MEAS who are studying in selected Malaysian government universities. Negative MEAS responses were analyzed. Respondents were from the top six government funded research universities. A stratified random sampling comprised 192 international students (post-graduates and undergraduates) studying Social Science and Humanities, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Sampling was also classified per MEA region.

Survey results were compared and contrasted with relevant material to help explain respondent perceptions. These efforts identified factors that affected student sensitivities and outcomes. There are five research universities involved in this research together with International Islamic University. The latter was chosen due to its biggest population of foreign students studying at all levels of the university. Survey questions addressed demographics, personality, family, social life (13 questions), understanding of Islam (11 items), understanding of Muslim characteristics (18 items), and understanding/the perception of Islam's position of moderation – of *wasatiyyah* (32 items). A pilot study was undertaken at UTM Johor Bahru, Malaysia with twenty international students to measure student understanding of the questionnaire after which it was suitably revised and distributed. Reliability analysis was done using the Cronbach's alpha, of which the results show strong reliability values ranging from 0.73–0.82.

We fully expected MEAS to understand Islam and Islamic Moderation as a result of proper Islamic teaching. However, we found diverse perspectives that strayed far from authentic Islam. We anticipated correlations between

understanding Islamic Moderation and its impacts on society that were positive. However, we discovered odd thoughts directed at non-Muslims and non-Arab speaking societies. The MEAS majority believed that what is Arab equates with what is Muslim. This construct was deeply embedded as narrow-minded conventional dogma from largely homogeneous societies. In other words, the bigotry reflects the cultural norm. This clearly indicated insufficient knowledge and educational neglect because Islamic Moderation is a doctrinal position traditionally considered essential to the creed.

Regarding the significance of the Islamic doctrine of moderation (*wasatīyyah*), this study determined to achieve the following objectives: to establish to what degree MEAS understood authentic Islamic teaching and its characteristics; and to determine how MEAS perceived the concept and implementation of Islamic moderation.

What is Islamic moderation (*Wasatīyyah*)?

The term *wasatīyyah* derives from the Arabic word, *wasat* (centre), which means middle or moderate. Functional use of *wasatīyyah* includes *tawassut* (central position), *wasīṭ* (intermediary), *wāsiṭah*, (agent/Medium), *mutawassit* (mediator). Yaakub and Othman (2016)⁴ wrote that *wasatīyyah* meant a *neutral state of socio-cultural attitudinal behaviour*. This indicates that it means to be moderate or in the middle or to be the best with respect to *compromise; i.e., to take the middle path or position oneself in the centre of the circle*. Thus, the ‘middle of the road’ in this context is also framed by extremes such as: “*hot and cold, rich and poor, tall and short, big and small, empty and full, generosity and stinginess, courage and cowardice. It is the balanced median.*” Translation to English denotes moderation, mid-ground, and centricism. *Wasatīyyah*, as a characteristic, therefore compares Muslim

⁴Muhamadul Bakir Yaakub and Khatijah Othman, “A Textual Analysis for the Term ‘*Wasatīyyah*’ (Islamic Moderation) in Selected Quranic Verses and Prophetic Tradition”, *Journal of Education and Social Sciences*, Vol. 5 (October 2016), 61-68.

society to non-Muslim societies in terms of individual and collective conducts, and generally ranks Muslim societies superior in this regard because it is the natural state of the Islamic Religious system⁵.

Despite obvious implications, *wasatiyyah* is, however, not a monolithic construct because it requires recurrent justification in socio-political realms of praxis with respect to national and international contexts. The best approach ever refers to Islam's primary sources: al-Quran and al-Sunnah. Its principles are also comprehensively integrated in nature and of much benefit when solving issues and needs of the *ummah*. *Wasatiyyah* characteristically manifests in *Aqidah* (belief) and *akhlaq* (ethics) in daily Muslim life. Islam introduced *manhaj* or methodological approaches to all aspects of human endeavour in order to achieve the balance that secures goodness and harmony without extremist elements. *Wasatiyyah* is therefore a fundamental Islamic concept that requires Muslims to remain on middle paths so as to avoid overreaching *tafrit* (boundaries) where the quagmire of *ifrat* (extremes) lay waiting like quicksand.

Scripture affirms *wasatiyyah* as the *straight path*:

And in that way (O Community of Muhammad), whereas others turn in different directions and, straying from the Straight Path, falter between extremes in thought and belief, We have made you a middle-way community, that you may be witnesses for the people (as the ways they follow), and that the (most noble) Messenger may be a witness for you⁶.

(O Community of Muhammad!) You are the best community ever brought forth for (the good of) humankind, enjoining and promoting what is right and good and forbidding and trying to prevent evil, and (this you do because) you believe in God.⁷

⁵Muhamadul Bakir Yaakub and Khatijah Othman, "A Textual Analysis...", 61-68.

⁶The Quran: *Annotated Interpretation in Modern English* by Unal Ali, New Jersey: The Light Inc, 2008, Al-Baqarah 2:143.

⁷The Quran. Ali 'Imran 3:110.

Factors and issues

From the knowledge management perspective, Islamic moderation is a challenge that faces contemporary Muslim society. Most Muslims do not have a truly informed understanding of *wasatiyyah* and consequently fail in its praxis. Education is critical. Muslims are often unsure of how to objectively internalize *wasatiyyah*, especially in the face of extremism and terrorism⁸. Some of them even failed to differentiate between jihad and terrorism^{9,10}. Hence, the ummah must be re-equipped with more than one kind of knowledge. The prophetic tradition says to seek knowledge to the ends of the earth. Accordingly, a conceptual framework for the *Role of Knowledge Purification in Islamic Moderation Practices* was developed with four key questions: Who does it? How does it work? Why does it work? Does it have an impact?¹¹

The Hadith: “*One who goes out to search for knowledge is in the cause of Allah till he returns ... Verily, the men of knowledge are inheritors of the prophets.*” This demonstrates Islam’s emphasis on knowledge. The significance of knowledge is presently manifested by an urgent emphasis placed on its organization. Islamic knowledge management stresses objectivity and function. With this in mind, *wasatiyyah* is both inherited and inherent to Islamic values as a way of life commonly shared by its adherents¹².

⁸Muhamadul Bakir Yaakub and Khatijah Othman, “A Conceptual Analysis of *Wasatiyyah* (Islamic Moderation-IM) from Islamic Knowledge Management (IKM) Perspective”, *Revelation and Science*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017), 21-31.

⁹Philipp Holtmann, “Terrorism and Jihad: Differences and Similarities”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2014), 140-143.

¹⁰Jeffre M. Bale, “Denying the Link between Islamist Ideology and Jihadist Terrorism: “Political Correctness and the Undermining of Counterterrorism”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol 7, No. 5 (2013), 5-46.

¹¹Muhamadul Bakir Yaakub and Khatijah Othman, “A Conceptual Analysis of *Wasatiyyah*” ..., 21-31.

¹²Muhamadul Bakir Yaakub and Khatijah Othman, “A Textual Analysis for the Term ‘*Wasatiyyah*’ ..., 61-68.

The contextualization of moderation by Islamic Scholars began with orthodox theology's exclusion exaggeration and negligence. As an example, Christians venerate and even worship prophets while Jews undervalued and anecdotally killed some of them, whereas Muslims venerate all but do not worship any. To the contrary, some schools of Islamic thought (*madhhabs*), particularly those with extremist ideologies of Middle Eastern savour, spread frightful intolerance globally and have blackened Islam's image. These sects entirely avoid Islamic Moderation, which then marginalizes authentic Islam's proper implementation by blocking corrective political discourse. Extremism is also not new as it changes colour schemes and patterns. Al Qaeda in Arabia and Iraq (AQI) and in Syria as ISIS or ISIL under Abu Bakr al Baghdadi¹³, who birthed *Daesh*, is the most-feared terrorist organization of militant radicals thus far known. These groups have been motivating youth psychologically in order to attract them¹⁴. They purposely neglect Islamic Moderation as a doctrinal position traditionally considered essential to the creed.

The main issue is that of misunderstanding Islam. Epistemological consideration effectively and successfully involves all Islamic principles. Here, tolerance of the individual freedom to choose is emphasized. Secondly, misinterpreting certain concepts concerns conventional dogma on Islamic principles. Religious pluralism as a matter of traditional *wasat iyyah* perspective is tolerated by moderates but not by extremists. The interpretations of diverse concepts, including literal meanings, refer to a middle place—that of moderate actions based on the original implications of *wasat iyyah*. What should be done, therefore, is to return Islam education

¹³Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "The Danger of Takfir (Excommunication): Exposing IS' Takfiri Ideology", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2017), 3-12.

¹⁴Jessica Stern, "Radicalization to Extremism and Mobilization to Violence: What Have We Learned and What Can We Do about It?", *The Middle East and Regional Transition, Terrorism, and Countering Violent Extremism: What the Next President Will Face*, Vol. 668 (2016), 102-117.

to universal teachings that promote unity, equilibrium and just balance with respect to holistic human values and needs¹⁵.

The Quran's definition of *wasatiyyah* embodies a "just balance" that manifests characteristic Muslim temperance so that people spend neither extravagantly nor meanly but moderately. The interpretation of concepts like, *jihad* and sacrifice, etc., also requires *wasatiyyah* and re-education so that Muslims understand *Jihad* is perseverance and continuity through hardship in all realms of human endeavour, individual and communal. The issue of democracy evades extremists who rigidly and blindly follow a literal form of *Khalifah* that variously represents radicalism. Flexibility is therefore needed to find common values between Western and Eastern perspectives. A final matter concerns the total rejection of western values and systems. This presents the greatest obstacle, especially post-9/11. The solution is *wasatiyyah*. It is essential to peaceful co-existence in a global society. Fortunately, moderation is gathering momentum as a rising trend called Liberal or Modern Islam.

The growth of Islamic revivalist movements since the Iranian Revolution (1979) has been attributed to the failure of secular governments to meet human needs. Consequently, electoral victories by conservative religious parties challenged US policy makers, especially in the Middle East (ME). Fear of Islam in the West has replaced fear of communism after the Soviet collapse, just as Communism replaced Nazism post-WWII. Western scholars like Bernard Lewis and Samuel P. Huntington warned against the rise of "Islamic bioFundamentalism" and a potential "Clash of Civilizations." "A West at the peak of its power confronts a non-West that increasingly has the desire, will and resources to shape the world in non-Western ways¹⁶."

¹⁵Taufiq Radja Nurul Bahri, "Recent Campaigns of Islamic Moderation"..., 8-10.

¹⁶Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations? Foreign Affairs", Volume 72, No. 3 (1993), 22-49.

Citing root causes of Islamic revivalism as “*a reaction against indigenous corruption; the politics of tyranny and repression; ... [and] ailing secular ideologies,*” Momayezi¹⁷ also wrote that Islam is not a monolithic homogeneous religion as perceived in the West whose people ignore “*diversity within Islam and groups within Islamic movements*”. In terms of political Islam, two groups emerge, namely, moderates and radicals. The objective of both is “*to return to the basic or fundamental truths of the religion as a means of resolving contemporary political, social, economic and other problems.*” Moderates, also coined as Islamic Renewal by Maghraoui,¹⁸ employ non-violent approaches such as the democratic electoral process, while radical “hard-liners” use violence to seek a quick transfer of power.

Extremism

According to Yusuf al-Qaradawi,¹⁹ extremism literally means to be as far as possible from the central point. Figuratively, it indicates religious alienation and isolation of thought, including human attitude. However, its major consequence is exposure to mortal harm, which is why Islam encourages moderation and balance in all things, including faith, worship, behaviour and legislation. “*This is the straightforward path that Allah (SWT) calls al-Ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm, one distinct from all the others which are followed by those who earn Allah’s anger and those who go astray*”²⁰. Moderation and balance are fundamental Islamic landmarks. Muslims are fair and just people who carefully distance themselves from every possible deviation from the

¹⁷Nasser Momayezi, “Islamic Revivalism and the Quest for Political Power”, *Journal of Conflict Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1997).

¹⁸Abdeslam M. Maghraoui, “American Foreign Policy and Islamic Renewal”, *Connections*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (2006), 26-40.

¹⁹Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Islamic Awakening between Rejection and Extremism*, International Institute of Islamic Thought, Herndon Virginia: American Trust Publications, 1987.

²⁰*The Prophet* (2002). Islam and Extremism. Online. Retrieved on 24 Jul 2019 from <https://www.islamweb.net/prophet/index.php?page=showarticle&id=11900>.

“*straightforward path*”, both here and hereafter. Islamic texts enjoin Muslims to practice moderation and reject and oppose all types of extremism such as *ghuluw* (outrage), *tanattu* (over careful or cautious religiosity) and *tashdid* (religious rigor and severity). Careful examination of certain passages demonstrates that Islam strictly prohibits *ghuluw*.

Prohibition of extremism and exaggeration is necessary because both have serious shortcomings. Although small numbers of people survive exaggerations for short periods, the human majority does not. The law of God thus addresses all of mankind and not just a particular group with a unique ability to withstand the test. A second weakness is brevity. Given human capacities to withstand trials, tenacity is naturally limited and people easily become bored and will not tolerate long term outrage. Although they might survive for a while, physical and spiritual fatigue will inevitably defeat them. Hence, people ultimately give way to different paths and may replace extremism by rebounding with an overall attitude of negligent laxity. A third weakness is that extremism endangers the duties and rights of others.

Initial evidence of extremism is the bigoted intolerance by which one vehemently holds to opinion and prejudice. Such rigidity prevents any clear perception of the interests of others as well as the purpose of Shariah and present extenuating circumstances. Bigots do not allow dialogue and its chauvinist posture is clear evidence of extremism. People obsessed with ideology almost never agree with others. Agreement and compromise is only possible only with moderation but the ideologically obsessed do not recognize it. As indicated by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, “... *He stands in relation to people as the East stands in relation to the West – the nearer you get to one, the further you move away from the other*”²¹. The issue becomes critical when one begins to force or coerce others, not necessarily physically but by accusing them of *bid'ah*, of negligence, or of *kufr* and corruption. Psychological

²¹Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Islamic Awakening between Rejection and Extremism...*

terrorism is just as formidable as physical terrorism.

Another feature of extremism is its intense commitment to intemperance, which manifests by the forcing of one's will on others despite available avenues that facilitate compromise. Allah (SWT) forbids such force. A person motivated by piety and caution may, if he/she so wishes, choose a position of intolerance only under certain circumstances.

A third feature of extremism is the religious exaggeration of inappropriate times and places that are burdensome. Examples are forcing Islamic principles on non-Islamic societies or on people who have just converted to Islam. Such affirmative emphasis should not be placed on insignificant controversial issues but only on fundamental matters of import. Of primary concern is the endeavour to correct misunderstandings by clarifying what is Islamic. To soundly construct faith and belief, one explains the five pillars and then gradually focuses on emphasizing all aspects of the religion. This more appropriately eases both faith and practice so that a convert's entire life way embodies what Allah permits.

A fourth aspect of extremism is violence towards the general public. Hardness of heart and a harsh approach to calling people to Islam are contrary to the Quran and Sunnah. Allah commands us to preach and teach with wisdom and gentleness, not by force. The Quran does not permit a strict uncompromising attitude except in two places: 1) in the midst of battle, when dealing with the enemy in time of war. In this matter Allah Swt said: *"O you who have believe! Fight against those unbelievers who are in your vicinity (who pose an immediate threat to you and the preaching of Islam), and let them find in you sternness. Know that God is with the God-revering, pious who keep their duty to Him"*²²; 2) When you want to execute the laws of God on those who deserve it, that is when there is meant to be soft lenience in enforcing the laws of God on earth. This is in accordance to His command: *"The*

²²The Quran, al-Tawbah 9:123.

*fornicatoress and the fornicator – flog each of them with a hundred stripes; and do not let pity for them hold you back from carrying out God’s law, if you truly believe in God and Last Day; and let a group of believers witness their punishment”.*²³

Suspicion and distrust also manifest extremism. Fanatics often indiscriminately accuse people and quickly respond in ways contrary to the generally accepted norm of “innocent until proven guilty.” Guilt is assumed the moment suspicions arise. They often draw conclusions without clarification. Small errors in judgement can destroy everything; wrongdoing becomes sin and sin is characteristic of *kufr*. This type of reactionary foolishness violates and pollutes the spirit and teachings of Islam, which encourage people to think positively about others while trying to find every reason for good behavior and assistance.

This aligns with Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who pointed out that history showing extremism is a major consequence of exposure to harm and unsafe conditions. The blood of martyrs at the hands of extremists paints history. The period after the death of Rasulullah saw three of four *Khulafa’ al-Rashidin* die at the hands of extremists. If we reflect on mankind’s history, extremists always use violence to achieve their goals. Among the most famous of these criminals were Sicarii and Assassins; the former during the time of Prophet Jesus and the latter from the 11th to 13th centuries. Weapons used were primitive swords and daggers but both groups were inspired by religious zealotry and both were very destructive and internationally active.

Zealots-Sicarii, a Jewish group lasting only twenty-five years, profoundly affected the entire Jewish community and history²⁴. They assassinated with dagger and sword then moved to open warfare. Their objective was

²³The Quran, al-Nur 24: 2.

²⁴Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc, 2003.

a large-scale revolt against the Graeco-Roman government in Judea. The revolution was unexpected and devastating, and eventually caused the destruction of the temple, mass suicide, and the genocidal elimination of Jews in Egypt and Cyprus, resulting in marked population declines.

The *Assassin* (Ismailis-Nizari) operated for two centuries (1090–1275).¹⁸ Like Islamic extremists today, their goal was to spread a “holier” and “purer” Islam. They often stabbed their enemies at close range in broad daylight when escape was impossible. Like contemporary suicide bombers, they regarded their soul a sacrificial offering. They were, however, far more target-selective and only murdered important political or religious leaders who refused to accept their new school of thought. Their techniques, although conservative, seriously threatened governments in several countries, including the Seljuk Turkish Empire in Persia and Syria. In the 21st century, the holy terror of Zealots-Sicarii and Assassins has resurfaced.

Destruction caused by religious extremism also applies to Christianity. Mainstream Christianity often executed capital punishment against those with different views of the Cross. During the 11th century, Jews, Muslims and Eastern Orthodox Christians were victims of actions taken in the name of Prophet Jesus. These extremists were also driven by faith and believed that what they did aligned with commandments in sacred texts.

Extensive literature exists as to the role of Islam in politics, society, legislature, judiciary, constitutional forms and education, etc. However, a gap exists regarding MEAS perceptions, particularly those studying in Malaysia. This project seeks to remedy this breach by revealing their perspectives on Islamic moderation.

Analysis of perceptions on Islamic moderation

The phenomena discussed at a greater length combined with analysis of negative items (Table 1) indicate a pattern of responses for the

‘understanding of Islam’ (items *b22*, *b23*, *b25* and *b24*) that were contrary to authentic Islamic doctrine[es. They saw Islam as an Arabian dominion but with no great effort made to follow Shariah. Some believed in secularism; others in Salafism; others saw in the murder or killing of non-Muslims as legal; and many thought that all Muslims must follow the Arabian lead. According to Ghoshal,²⁵ this thought started to spread to Asian population. These perceptions differ from the global Muslim majority.

As for *wasatiyyah*, respondents had little understanding. Respondent demographics show that lack of formal Islamic teachings gave direct impact to the students understanding on Islam and its characteristics as well as very limited understanding of the concept of moderation. Their perceptions were contrary to the concept of Islamic moderation. They also thought sustainable development was not part of Islam; that promoting aggression towards non-Muslims was acceptable; that Islam permits prejudice towards other Muslims; that aggression was important when combating extremism; and that Muslims should murder non-Muslims in the west. All these items represent extremist thinking and a robust intolerance for non-Muslims. This notion has been coined by Schmid as he discussed on certain characteristics of some Muslims who believed that attracted to the idea of Sunni salafi jihadist.²⁶ Their perceptions of Islamic moderation’s impacts on the ummah were similar. These items included ‘suspicions among Muslim’; ‘misinterpretation of jihad’; ‘will divided society’; ‘will cause a misunderstanding of Islam’; ‘no freedom of speech’. This set of perceptions reflected a poor degree of understanding of Islam and strong

²⁵Baladas Ghoshal, “Arabization: The Changing Face of Islam in Asia”, *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (2010), 69-89.

²⁶Alex P. Schmid, *Moderate Muslims and Islamist Terrorism: Between Denial and Resistance. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, 2017. Retrieved on 8 June 2020 from <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ICCT-Schmid-Moderate-Muslims-and-Islamist-Terrorism-Aug-2017-1.pdf>

negative views of Islamic moderation. Islamic foundation provides not only “rich relationship of moral obligation and solidarity with non-Muslims”, but also “contributing to their well-being.”²⁷ However, “radical jihadists wrongly believe that they adhere to a moral logic grounded in religion.”²⁸ Hence, we should categorise ‘Islamic fundamentalist’ and what reality of Islam intends to Muslims²⁹. Stern (2016) explains the danger more than ISIS to the West is “Westerners who self-mobilize for attacks at home or who return, trained to fight, from the jihad abroad.”

Table 1. Perceptions of Arab Respondents Towards Islam, and Islamic Moderation

No	Item	Agree	Not sure	Disagree
B22	Islam is Arab	50.5% (97)	17.2% (33)	32.3% (62)
B23	Islam does not emphasize great effort	49.5% (95)	17.7% (34)	32.8% (63)
B25	Muslims allowed to refuse Shariah law	49.0% (94)	23.4% (45)	27.6% (53)
B24	Allow takfiri thought	43.8% (84)	15.6% (30)	40.6% (78)

This section includes a total of 12 items. Respondents were given a choice of five answers according to Likert scale, *i.e.*, strongly agree, agree, not sure/neutral, disagree and strongly disagree which are regrouped

²⁷Andrew F. March, “Sources of Moral Obligation to non-Muslims in the Jurisprudence of Muslim Minorities (*Fiqh al-Aqalliyāt*) Discourse”, *Islamic Law and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2019), 34-94.

²⁸Reid Hutchins, “Islam and Suicide Terrorism: Separating Fact from Fiction”, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 9, No. 11 (2017), 7-11.

²⁹Roxanne L. Euben, “Killing (For) Politics: *Jihad*, Martyrdom and Political Action”, *Political Theory*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (February 2020), 4-35.

into three answers such as agree, not sure and disagree. To support the objectives of this paper, we have chosen the aforementioned four main top answers given by 192 respondents related to their negative replies regarding a series of questions posed to them. We have found out that they either confused or ignored the true meaning of Islam. For example, in regard to item B22, 'Islam is same as Arab', 97 respondents (50.5%) agreed on the statement, whereas the Quran mentioned clearly that Islam is not religion for the Arab only, but bringing *rahmat* (mercy, grace) to the whole world. 62 (32.3%) of them tend to disagree on this questions and 33 (17.2%) of them are confused about the true meaning of Islam.

A basic statement that shows their further confusion and low level of understanding about the religion is item B25, 'Muslims are allowed to refuse the implementation of Shariah Law.' Interestingly, about half of them (94 persons, 49%) agreed that Muslims are allowed not to implement Shariah at any level, especially at the state level. The number of those who agree 'Muslims must implement Shariah Law' is not very significant whereby only 53 persons (27.6%). The percentage of those who are not sure about this matter might be due to their limited exposure to the real teaching of Islam.

Furthermore, item B24 asked the respondents on the Takfiri issues. This issue has been delved into by some scholars^{30,31}, but a big number of them still believed that takfiri thought should be allowed in the society. Out of 192 respondents, 84 (43.8%) of them show their agreement to this contentious way of thinking. According to Hassan,³² this takfiri thought

³⁰Azura Muhammed Kifli, Kamaruzaman Yusoff, Mansoureh Ebrahimi and Siti Zubaidah Hj Abu Bakar, "Islamic Radicalism: Twenty-First Century Challenges in Malaysia", *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Civic and Political Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2020), 37-51.

³¹Siti Zubaidah Abu Bakar and Mohd Mizan Aslam, "Ongoing IS Radical Ideology in Malaysia: Factors and Counter Strategies", *International Journal of Islamic and Civilizational Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2019), 115-125.

³²Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "The Danger of Takfir (Excommunication)"..., 3-12.

is very much related to deviant teachings of Islamic State (IS). Sultan³³ and Ismail³⁴ also attested that this takfiri belief has been spread to South East Asian region. Perceptions of radicalism vs. moderation (*wasatiyyah*) by Ebrahimi and Yusoff explored the role of Islam in Malaysian society from different aspects, but “communal perceptions in other Muslim countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) completely differ from the Malaysian model”.³⁵

Regarding section D of the questionnaires, Table 2 shows the following questions asked the respondents on their understanding on moderation. Since principles of moderation are very much closer to those of Islamic teachings, this paper will try to understand respondents’ perceptions on moderation and their characteristics. For this purpose, a total of 34 questions were posed to them. The table below shows five top answers given by 192 respondents on the subject. These answers were considered negatives perception as opposed to the very basic teachings of Islam. Among these questions, the highest score given by respondents is referred to item D49 about the permissibility to kill non-Muslims. 117 (60.9%) of them perceived that murdering non-Muslim is part of Islamic teachings and a characteristics of moderation (*wasatiyyah*). Haji Halimi and Sudiman³⁶ argue that this belief is not only contradicted to the Islamic teaching, but has been affected by extreme ideology.

Additionally, respondents tend to forget the main principle of moderation (D75), when they agreed to let their Muslim brothers to kill

³³Zulkifli Mohamed Sultan, “Takfir in Indonesia: Analysing the Ideology of Saiful Anam”, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2014), 18-23.

³⁴Noor Huda Ismail, “The Unique Legacy of the ‘Islamic State’ in Indonesia”, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2020), 17-20.

³⁵Mansoureh Ebrahimi and Kamaruzaman Yusoff, “Socio-Political Islam & Revivalism in Malaysia”, *Journal for the Study of Religious and Ideologies*, Vol. 19, No. 57 (2020), 239-254.

³⁶Mahfuh Haji Halimi and Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah Sudiman, “Debunking Jihadist Ideological Misinterpretations and Distortions”, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 12, No.1 (2020), 87-91.

non-Muslim in the west, assuming that the western people did the same to them. For instance, one of reasons for this application considered and “attempted Islamic legalization of anti-American mass casualty terrorist attacks.”³⁷ A total of 111 (57.8%) of them shared the same faith whereas only 55 (28.6%) of them showed their disagreement to this statement.

Another item (D50) is about leadership when the question was asked about who should lead the Muslim community. Though the prophet clearly hinted that a Muslim should listen and obey, even if an Abyssinian slave, whose head is like a raisin, was appointed a ruler over you. Contradiction to this saying, 110 (57.3%) of Middle East and African Muslim students opined that all Muslims must follow Arab leadership. Other intriguing answers from respondents (D60) are about promoting aggression amongst their fellow Muslims. As part of the most important characteristics of moderation according to Hassan (2014) are justice, excellence and balance.

One more unexpected finding in the list of negative scores is about activities of terrorist groups in Muslim society (D73). 104 (54.2%) respondents opined that Muslim terrorists follow true Islam. When we referred to writings on ISIS, we found that Muslim scholars consented that this movement and the like are against Islamic teachings.³⁸

³⁷Paul Kamolnick, “Has Adam Gadahn Forsaken the Lawful Jihad for Anti-Americanism? A Case Study of Ideological Contradictions”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (2014), 36-62.

³⁸Muhammad Haniff Hassan, “The Danger of Takfir (Excommunication)”..., 3-12; Donald Holbrook, “Using the Quran to Justify Terrorist Violence: Analyzing Selective Application of the Quran in English-Language Militant Islamist Discourse”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2010), 15-28; Muhammad Haniff Hassan, “Refuting Islamic State (IS) Jihad Propaganda with the Story of Uwais Al-Qarni”, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 10, No. 10 (2018), 12-16.

Table 2. Perceptions of Arab Respondents towards Islam, and Islamic Moderation

No	Item	Agree	Not sure	Disagree
D49	The murder of non-Muslims is permissible	60.9% (117)	9.4% (18)	29.7% (57)
D75	Muslim should murder non-Muslims in the west	57.8% (111)	13.5% (26)	28.6% (55)
D50	All Muslim must follow the Arab's lead	57.3% (110)	11.5% (22)	31.3% (60)
D60	Islam promote aggression toward Muslims	54.2% (104)	14.1% (27)	31.8% (61)
D73	Muslim terrorists follow true Islam	54.2% (104)	12.5% (24)	33.3% (64)

Regarding this tendency towards negative scores, we assumed that prior schooling was a factor that shaped perceptions towards Islam and moderation. However, an independent t-test revealed no differences between religious and non-religiously schooled respondents (Table 3).

Table 3. Results of T-test Analysis on the Effect Prior Schooling

	Prior High School	N	Mean	SD	t value
Understanding Islam	Religious	71	17.5493	3.76749	0.69
	Non-religious	121	17.1736	3.58626	
Understanding Wasatiyyah	Religious	71	34.9859	6.95802	1.34
	Non-religious	121	33.6364	6.64831	

Further analysis determined associations between scores on each subscale. A higher score indicated agreement with a statement, a lower score

indicated disagreement. A Likert scale was converted to nominal scales (low versus high scores). Scores greater than the mean were coded as 'high' and less than the mean were coded as 'low'. Chi-square results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Chi-square Results

	Low score (Negative perception)		High score (Positive perception)	
	Observed N	Expected N	Observed N	Expected N
Understanding Islam	109	64	83	128
Perception on <i>Wasatiyyah</i>	105	64	87	128

Expected and observed variable values showed a clear difference for each sub-scale. Chi-square evaluation demonstrated a significant association between low and high scores for all subscales. Significant high versus low scores indicated a tendency toward negative perceptions. Correlation analysis of relationships between all variables confirmed that two subscales were highly correlated (*Understanding Islam* and *Perception of Islamic Moderation*, $r = 0.23, 0.67, 37$), respectively. These results indicated that respondent knowledge of Islam and sentiments on certain issues were negative. Therefore, their perception of Islamic moderation and its impacts on the Muslim world were also negative.

Conclusion

The authors analysed perceptions of foreign students studying in Malaysia (MEAS) regarding Islam, Muslim characteristics and Islamic moderation. Results demonstrated low levels of understanding of Islamic moderation on certain issues as highlighted. These perceptions are generally contrary

to authentic Islam doctrine. They saw Islam as an Arab domain that did not place much emphasis on diligent efforts and which endorsed Salafism concepts along with the legality of the murder of non-Muslims. They also thought the global Muslim world should follow Arabian leadership. All of these beliefs reveal a systematic indoctrination that contradicts majority Muslim positions. Men seem to have reached the pinnacle of material progress but forgot the meaning of life and his responsibilities towards society. Hence, characteristics of believers in Islam are systematically should mitigate sociological contradictions in a world that has forgotten its purpose.

As for Islamic moderation, Arab students had no comprehension of its meaning. Their views were also contrary to authentic doctrine. They believed that 'sustainable development is not a part of Islam'; that 'the promotion of aggression towards non-Muslim is acceptable'; that 'Islam permits prejudice towards Non-Muslims; that 'aggression is important when combating extremism'; and that 'Muslims should murder non-Muslims in the west.' They scored higher on negative items, which indicated extremist thinking with very negative opinions of non-Muslims in addition to intolerance when dealing with issues affecting non-Muslim societies.

Their perceptions of impacts from Islamic moderation were the same. For them, Islamic moderation created 'suspicion among Muslims'; 'misinterpreted the meaning of jihad; 'divided society'; 'generated misunderstanding of Islam'; and 'denied Muslims freedom of speech'. These perceptions reflect an inferior understanding of Islam with a pronounced negative attitude towards Islamic Moderation.

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