In Search of an Islam of the Just Midst. The Struggle for the Representation of Authentic Islam

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Abstract

The attacks in Washington and New York on 9/11 marked a turning point both for the Muslim community and for the way of looking at Islam in the West. Two mirror phenomena have occurred. In the West, public opinion and politics have been divided between those who have simplistically begun to consider Islam as a religion inherently linked to violence, a vision that has degenerated into an Islamophobic attitude, and those who have tried to make distinctions in the Muslim community , a community that counts over a billion faithful, not all of which can be assimilated to the image of a violent Islam and an enemy of the West. In the Muslim community, in turn, many religious and intellectual personalities, institutions or governments, have moved in a defensive sense, to promote what they consider the authentic image of Islam, a religion inspired by the principles of tolerance and respect for others. The result was a sort of competition for the representation of a mainstream moderate Islam, in which political and strategic reasons often intersected between the different protagonists, in search of supremacy both within the Muslim community and outside. But the search for an Islam of the "just midst" is a much older phenomenon and was born as a pragmatic evolution within political Islam already in the second half of the 20th century.

Keywords: mainstream Islam, *wasaṭiyyah*, *i'tidal*, Islamic moderatism, al-Azhar, Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, Ahmed al-Tayyeb.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the pursuit of moderate Islam has become an obsession among Western politicians and intellectuals. On the other hand, many governments of Muslim-majority countries have since called themselves "moderate" to dissociate themselves from those responsible for the attacks. But even before 2001, Muslim intellectuals, both Sunni and Shi'ite, had begun to seek a way out of the polarization between radical Islam and secularism. The question was: is it possible to be faithful to Islamic principles while accepting the principles and values of modern democratic societies? Was it possible to trace the basis for creating a new synthesis between Islam and modernity in authentic Islamic sources? Could the rigor in the interpretation of religious norms leave room for an update to include principles such as those of freedom, democracy, citizenship? The strength of Islamic terrorism has led to the emergence of two tendencies in the East and in the West: on the one hand, the sliding towards the idea that Islam was inherently linked to violence; on the other, it has given rise to the need to dissociate Islam from these violent manifestations and to reaffirm how an authentic Islamic vision is far from extremism. The flattening of a trenchant judgment regarding Islam as a religion intrinsically linked to violence has gained more and more support after 9/11 in many public opinions and in international political establishments. The voice of over a billion Muslims who live their faith with respect and sincerity, adopting a quietist attitude, has struggled to be heard. Many Muslim religious, cultural and political institutions, since then, have tried to accredit internationally a vision of mainstream Islam that distanced itself from those who claimed to represent true

Islam by using violence. Thus, a conflict emerged that was primarily internal to the Muslim community itself: that of the representation of authentic Islam. In the attacks on New York and Washington, Kepel identified the will to strike the nearby enemy (Muslim governments considered ungodly, such as the Saudi one, for example), through the attack on the distant enemy, the US allies of ungodly Muslim regimes (Kepel 2004: 122-129).

In the following pages we will try to describe some expressions of the search for a "median" or "moderate" Islam. The logic and terminology with which some Muslim cultural institutions have built a narrative that wants to credit authentic Islam as a religion far from any excess and extremism will be considered. It will also appear that these attempts to be accredited as the voice of authentic Islam are sometimes linked to projects of cultural and political hegemony over the Muslim community and the search for affirmation and prestige at an international level.

Islam of the "just midst", *al-wasaṭiyyah*

It is very difficult to find a correct translation for the term *wasaṭiyyah*. It identifies that concept already known in ancient Rome with the term "mediocritas". In Latin, it had no pejorative value, as is now the case in some modern languages, including English (mediocrity) and Italian (mediocrità). The term conveyed the classic ideal of measure and moderation, distance from excess, so much so that the poet Horace described it as "auric" (Odi II, 10,5).

From an Islamic point of view, the concept of *wasaṭiyyah* has a Qur'anic origin in verse 2, 143: "Thus We appointed you a

midmost nation".[1] According to several exegetes, the cause of
the revelation of this verse was the changing of the *qibla* from
Jerusalem to Mecca, "because the Kaʿaba is the centre of the
world and its middle", said the renowned Persian theologian
Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209).[2] He explained the term as the
"just" and the "good", all of which is far from excess and ex-
aggeration. According to the medieval exegete Ibn Kaṯīr (d.
1373) the meaning is "just and best nation".[3]

The medieval *ḥanbalī* scholar Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), accord-
ing to Qur'an 2, 143, considers Islam as the religion of the *via
media*, or golden mean, compared to other religions or Islamic
sects (Hoover 2007: 173-176). The *wasaṭiyyah*, in its thinking,
is a well-balanced position of the true Muslim community, that
of the Sunnah, in all aspects of religion. It is the principle that
drives the silent majority of Muslims, according to Kamali.[4]
With prophets, they do not exaggerate as Christians do, nor
maltreat them as Jews do (Michot 2003: 22-23, 30). Regarding
religious precepts, ethics, and the question of God's attributes
and acts, they also assume a moderate position.

Thus, the People of the Sunnah became, by definition, the
"middle" community. This notion also plays an important role
in modern Islamic thinking.

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1. The Qur'an is quoted from the English translation by Arberry 1964.
2. Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, v. 4. p. 106, quoted in Talbī 1996: 13.
3. http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view
&id=294#3. Accessed 4-4-2022.
4. For a presentation of the concept of *wasaṭiyyah* from an Islamic point of
view, see Kamali 2015. For a study in the different interpretations of the
concept of Islamic moderation in Western and Muslim perspectives, see
Islam and Khatun 2005: 69-78. Available at: <https://journal.uinsgd.ac.id/
index.php/ijni/article/view/1414>. Accessed 13-4-2022. doi:https://doi.
org/10.15575/ijni.v3i2.1414.

As Shavit points out, one could refer to *wasaṭiyyah* in oppo-
sition to *salafiyyah* as a liberal and flexible approach to Islam-
ic law, while the latter is a rigid and strict one (Shavit 2012:
419). He suggests that the root of the *wasaṭī* approach could
be traced back to the reform movement (*iṣlāḥ*) that started at
the beginning of the XIX century in Egypt with Ǧamāl al-Dīn
al-Afġānī (d. 1897), Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) and Rašīd
Riḍā (d. 1935). In the *Tafsīr al-Manār,* the fathers of *iṣlāḥ* af-
firm that the Islamic *ummah* is an exemplary community that
stands in the middle (*wasaṭ*) of two truths; a community in
which "God united two truths, the truth of spirit and the truth
of body. It is a spiritual and a corporal community" (Talbī
1996: 16-17).

One might agree with this observation, considering that
those intellectuals are remembered as points of reference in
the thought of contemporary *wasaṭī* thinkers. Nevertheless,
according to the Pakistani theologian and activist Mawdūdī
(d. 1979) "the word *ummatan wasaṭan* is so comprehensive
in meaning that no English word can correctly convey its full
sense. It is a righteous and noble community which does not
go beyond proper limits but follows the middle course and
deals out justice evenly to the nations of the world as an im-
partial judge and bases all its relations with other nations on
truth and justice".[5] Already in 1988, Dekmejian has collocated
wasaṭiyyah trend in the Islamic movements spectrum and de-
fined it as "an amorphous collectivity encompassing the Mus-
lim Brotherhood, its affiliates outside Egypt, and several doz-
en 'independent' shaykhs and intellectuals who have chosen to

5. http://www.searchtruth.com/tafsir/tafsir.php?chapter=2. Accessed 4-4-
2022.

remain outside the main [Islamist] groups"(Dekmejian 1988: 213-214). He has also synthesized in six points its main political and ideological characteristics: eclecticism, a tendency to combine the tenets of fundamentalism with reformism; proselytism, priority to building of an Islamic community to create an Islamic State; gradualism in the pursuit of its goals; pragmatism, emphasis on practical actions instead of ideological controversies; legalism, acceptance of the regimes in office until their replacement by Islamic regimes; universalism, aspiration to enlarge the Islamic state to the level of a universal *ummah*.

In contemporary studies, the term *wasaṭī* has been translated differently, most of the times as "moderate", "centrist", sometimes "golden mean".[6] All these translations insist on the idea of balance, moderation, and distance from excesses. In the language currently used in the media and in politics, the concept of moderate, midstream, or centrist Islam (Islam *wasaṭī*) is emerging in opposition to terrorism that claims to be for Islam. In the West, newspapers, opinion makers and politicians are looking for an Islam that will dissociate itself from violent and sectarian attitudes. The term "moderate" started to be used

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6. See, for instance, referring to the Egyptian al-Wasat Party, Hatina 2005. Hatina has also defined *wasaṭiyyah* as "centrist Islamic discourse", see Hatina 2007, esp. pp. 138-157. See also Clarck 2006, here p. 542. Jacob Høigilt refers to the *wasaṭiyyah* as "centrism", and defines it as "an open-minded Islamist culture, willing to engage in open discussion with people who hold a different world-view" see Høigilt 2010: 251-254. Nathan J. Brown refers to *wasaṭiyyah* as "moderation or centralism [...] often linked to calls for persuasion and dialogue and against violence and what is perceived as extremism", see Brown 2012: 11-12. Polka refers to *wasaṭiyyah* as "centrist stream" or "centrism", Polka 2003: 40-41. Islamic mainstream is the expression used in his important study of new Islamist thought by Baker 2003: 39-40. See also Baker 2005: 111.

to define such an Islam, a procedure that implies, however, a definition *via negationis*: moderate Islam is all that is opposed to terrorism and fanaticism. In some Western languages, the corresponding term has a negative nuance of meaning which, if applied to religious faith, could imply a reduction of one's own religious convictions. However, as we have verified in this paragraph, a definition of the authentic Islamic *wasaṭiyyah* is anything but a moderate or less intense approach to faith, religious practice, and respect for its theological and scriptural sources. On the contrary, a Muslim *wasaṭī* is a believer who follows the correct path indicated by the Qur'an and the main Muslim theologians.

Therefore, in Western as in Islamic political discourse, the idea of a "moderate" Islam is gaining consensus as a reaction to the violent and ideological expression of contemporary militant groups claiming to represent the true Islamic interpretation.[7] Even in liberal or conservative Islamic circles, such as al-Azhar, an effort is being undertaken to show that the true face of Islam is a "*wasaṭī*" one, *i.e.*, a moderate one. During an international conference sponsored by al-Azhar in May 2010, the medieval theologian Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ašʿarī (d. 936) was taken as an example and a champion of the moderate and balanced vision of Islam embodied by al-Azhar (al-Ašʿarī 2014). Then, to be a "*wasaṭī*" Muslim is simply to follow Islam, *tout court*, in its true essence, according to a vision clearly opposed to that proposed by the terrorist groups of IS and others. In Baker's words, contemporary *wasaṭiyyah* is "the motivating force of the broad and varied Islamic Renewal. [...] The *wassatteyya*

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7. See Yusif 2015. The Author is the Director of the International Institute of Wasatiyah, International Islamic University Malaysia; Devji & Kazmi 2017.

[*sic*] functions as a vital yet flexible midstream, a centrist river out of Islam" (Baker 2015: 3).

Moreover, it must be remembered that *wasaṭiyyah* is not just a neutral word but identifies a group or an innovative path on which some of the most eminent representatives of contemporary Islamic thought recognize themselves.[8] As Nathan J. Brown pointed out, *wasaṭiyyah* indicates something beyond political moderation and has at least two connotations to be considered: the first implies a distance from extremism; the second is connected to interpretations of Islamic precepts more consistent and compatible within the contest of modern societies (Brown 2012: 12).

However, al-Azhar is not the only Islamic circle pretending to represent the Islamic *juste-milieu*. Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (b. 1926), a prominent Egyptian scholar of Azharite education, put the concept of *wasaṭiyyah* at the centre of his vision of contemporary Islam, long before the appearance of IS terrorism. His vision is opposed to that of militant Islamists, even if sometimes he is called a mentor of Islamic extremist movements (Graf 2007: 409). Qaraḍāwī, known for bearing positions close to the Muslim Brotherhood, is considered the founder of the school of new Islamists. He started to use this concept in the early Sixties as a "method based on middle positioning (*tawassuṭ*) and moderation (*i'tidāl*), and distances itself from those who exaggerate and those who abbreviate, as well as from the rigorous and the indifferent".[9] In his thought, a synonym of *wasaṭiyyah* is equilibrium (*tawāzun*) between two opposites,

8. Rachel M. Scott has spoken about *wasaṭiyyah* intellectuals as points of reference for reformist-minded members of the Muslim Brotherhood, see Scott 2012: 145-146.

9. Quoted in Bettina Graf 2009: 218.

such as the human and the divine, the spiritual and the material, and so on.[10] The realization of this kind of balance is beyond human possibilities, and it is a specific divine ability and there is no wonder that one can find this balance in God's creation. First, it can be found in Islam. He continues his argument by describing the characteristics of Islamic moderation in all sectors, following the approach of Ibn Taymiyyah. His perspective, however, seems innovative when, in the case of the attitude towards non-Muslims, he proposes a balance between classical rules and the conditions of the modern world.[11]

In 2004, this prominent *wasaṭī* scholar composed, in a post-9/11 context, a book that starts with a very important question: is it possible to change Islamic discourse? In that period, Islam started the new millennium facing one of the worst crises in its modern history when extremist and terroristic currents in the name of Islam challenged the credibility of Islamic religious and political discourse. The need for change was shared in various Muslim circles all over the world. Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī tried to respond to this challenge by highlighting the necessity of reform which considers Islamic judicial and religious sources. For religious or Islamic discourse, he refers to the image of Islam offered to Muslims and everybody alike. He continues by posing the question of whether Islamic discourse should be

10. A summary of Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī's idea of *al-wasaṭiyyah* is available online at his official website https://www.al-qaradawi.net/node/2401. Accessed 4-4-2022. See also the exhaustive presentation in al-Ġannūšī 2003: 305-354.

11. An interesting field of application of the *wasaṭiyyah* approach is represented by the *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt*, i.e. the attempt to enhance a more modern approach to the Islamic legal system for Muslims living in non-Muslim states. For al-Qaraḍāwī's contribution to this evolution, see Hassan 2013.

opened to change over time or whether it must remain fixed. This part of his reflection is very interesting because, opposing a worldwide opinion that attributes a static quality to Islam, he argues that "if religion with its fundamentals, all its creeds, devotions, morality, legal precepts, does not change, what changes is the ways in which we teach and call to it". Religious discourse changes based on time and place, but also based on interlocutors. Therefore, Islamic discourse will develop according to changes arising in a time of globalization. It is worth noting that here he introduces a sort of self-criticism, for he affirms that Muslim scholars in the recent past used to speak as if they were only addressing a Muslim public. In ecclesiastical terms, we could say that it was a discourse *ad intra*, for an internal audience. Now the time has come, he affirms, in which others look and read what Islam says, and who speaks in its name. Thus, he seems to appeal to the impending responsibility Muslim scholars and preachers have for their teaching.

One of the examples of applying this method in the renewal of Islamic discourse is devoted to Islamic-Christian relations (Pizzo 2017). The religious reform he is looking for implies that the preacher should consider the context in which he delivers his speech. It may be that he lives in a country in which, Muslims, Christians and Jews live together. In this case, Christians and Jews "share citizenship with Muslims". It is interesting the stress on the fact that Muslims, Christians, and Jews share the same quality of citizenship. This is something new in Islamic thought (Al-Qaraḍāwī 2004: 42). In this case, the preacher is invited not to use provocative tones in speeches; avoid referring to Jews as "usurpers and aggressors" or to Christians as "haters and evil crusaders" (Al-Qaraḍāwī 2004: 43). In

this regard, Qaraḍāwī recommends using a new terminology which could result in a renewed religious discourse, in which a new vision of the world and the "others" is more decisive. This attitude becomes part of the method in the religious reform that he intends to realize.

The new era of globalization pushes Islam to abandon old linguistic structures in its relationships with the "other". The change suggested is not only a superficial one; limited to an appellation. In fact, he argues that it is no longer appropriate to address non-Muslim believers as "*kuffār*", "unbelievers", or "*ahl al-dimmah*", "People of the Pact", even though their unbelief is recognized, especially in the case of *ahl al-kitāb*, "People of the Book", expression admitted in his discourse. In this way he questions the whole concept of "*kufr*" and "*dimmah*" with its legal ramifications. He justifies this choice based on the interpretation of some Qur'anic verses and major commentaries. But he goes further here than he did in his previous book dedicated to the same topic (Al-Qaraḍāwī 1983: 9-42). Differently from the Seventies, when he freely used the term "*ahl al-dimmah*", here he avoids it and proposes a new designation following the need for religious reform: "*muwāṭinūn*", "citizens". The term that substitutes "*ahl al-dimmah*" is relevant as it attributes the same rights of citizenship enjoyed by Muslims to non-Muslims. He justifies the dismissal of the old designation since Christians in the Middle East object to the term as they feel it is offensive. He argues that the term "citizen" is a modern expression of the concept on which all Muslim scholars agree, the fact that *ahl al-dimmah* are part of the *dār al-islām* and for this reason they bear the title of citizens like their fellow Muslims

(Al-Qaraḍāwī 2004: 46). This principle, in his thought, does not contradict any sharaʿitic obligation, and it is in line with the *sunnah* of the rightly guided caliphs.[12] Alongside with sheikh al-Qaraḍāwī, one can mention Muhammad al-Ya-qoubi, the former imam of al-Hassan Mosque in Damascus, Syrian scholar, son of a prominent Sufi preacher, belonging to the Shadili tradition. He was among the few Sunni clerics to condemn the Syrian government's response to the largely peaceful early demonstrations in March 2011. Then, he was forced into exile. His position is not a secular one, in fact he supports the establishment of an Islamic state. But his model of reference is the Syrian constitution of 1950s in which a system of cohabitation of Sunni, Shiite and non-Muslim communities is foreseen.[13] He proposes an Islamic vision but not an Islamist one, refusing what he considers a non-Muslim position, such as that of Isis.[14] Isis ideology represents, in his opinion, a challenge to Islam from inside. The threat to the Muslim community launched by the so-called Islamic State has been motivated by several factors, among which one can find "the marginalization of traditional, moderate Islam at the hands of secular government in most part of the Islamic world".[15] Writing in 2016 he was confident in the defeat of ISIS on the battlefield, but he warns that its ideology will

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12. Saudi scholar Ḥāmid ibn Aḥmad Rifāʿī, has proposed *wasaṭiyyah* approach as a path to enhance dialogue among civilizations, see Ḥāmid 2005.

13. For a brief survey on his life, see Malcolm H. Kerr, Carnegie Middle East Center, Profiles of Syrian Sunni Clerics in the Uprising, March 25, 2013, Syria Resources, https://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=51284. Accessed 4-5-2022.

14. His reference work on this point is Al-Yaqoubi 2016.

15. Muhamad al-Yaqoubi 2016, Preface to the first edition.

continue to spread even after the military defeat. Therefore, he concludes, "the ideology must be defeated; the position of moderate Islam must be strengthened, and its institutions must be enabled and supported".[16]

Many other initiatives, associations, schools of thought throughout the Muslim community from the United States to Indonesia have emphasized the spirit of *wasaṭiyyah* in Islam. It is not possible to review them all, but we would like to point out only a few taken from different cultural and geographical contexts. In Malaysia, Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, after taking over as Prime Minister in 2009, started a new politics of Islamization based on the principles of *wasaṭiyyah* which should have supported his vision of a more united multi-ethnic national community, Malay, Chinese, and Indian (Sani 2020: 46-47). In 2012, during an international conference of the Global Moderate Movement, Najib launched the creation of a department dependent on his office aimed at promoting moderation and balance in all aspects of life. On the same occasion, the prime minister announced the creation of a *wasaṭiyyah* chair to be created at the Malaysian university.[17] It is noteworthy that Saudi Arabia and Malaysia have cosponsored in 2013 an International Conference under the title "*Wasaṭiyyah* in the Qur'an and Sunnah and Its Contemporary Applications in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Malaysia".[18]

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16. *Ibidem*.
17. See https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/186817. Accessed 4-4-2022.
18. See Proceedings of the International Conference on Wasatiyyah in the Qur'an and Sunnah and Its Contemporary Applications in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Malaysia held on 26 September 2013 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Department of al-Quran and al-Hadith, Academy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya, 2013.

Shiite Islam is not estranged from this evolution, although more research is needed on the subject. In Iran, among Shiite Islam, one can observe a similar evolution. Scholars such as Ali Shariati, Mojtahed Shabestari, Abdoulkarim Soroush and Ali Montazeri, among others, belong to a group of reformist intellectuals that opened new styles of interpreting *shari'ah* and the role of religious leaders in the society (Ghobadzadeh 2022; Arjomand 2016: 442-454). This change has occurred in the aftermath of Iraq-Iran war, when Iranian society had to face with new tasks, such as the reconstruction after the war and the concrete problems met in the building of an Islamic state (Tezcür 2010). Amini and Rahmani postulate that "moderation" in the Iranian context profited both from liberalism and religious intellectualism, considered as a reconciliation between religion and modernity (Amini and Rahmani 2016). In the new discourse these scholars have tried to elaborate, concepts such as free acceptance of religion, democracy, and human rights are integrated in a vision of a faith that does not fear confronting itself with modernity and social changes. This trend, which started in the late 1980s, has gained its momentum after the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013, and now seems to be on its retreat.

Islam of moderation, "i'tidal"
Another useful term to understand how contemporary Islam is trying to distinguish extremist currents from mainstream one is *i'tidal*, which can be translated as "being fair". In this regard we can mention the main organization of Indonesian Muslims, Nahdlatul Ulema (NU), which has placed the concept of *i'tidal* at the basis of its shared values, together with those of: *ta-*

wassuṭ (moderatism), *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), *tawāzun* (balance), and the principle synthetized in the expression *amar ma'rūf nahi munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding wrong).[19] In NU's argumentation, "*At-Tawassuth* and *I'tidal* were middle and straight attitude that had core principles upheld a necessity of being fair and straight in the middle of a life together and avoided any kinds of approach that was *tatarruf* (extreme)".[20] NU has stressed its adherence to these principles to counter the growing of radicalism in Indonesia in recent years.[21] It is noteworthy that NU has employed the same terminology found in sheikh Qaraḍāwī argumentation, *tawassuṭ*, *i'tidal*, and *tasāmuḥ*, showing a kind of dependence on his thinking.

On the opposite side of the Asian continent, at the very heart of Islamic religion, one can find another initiative aiming at creating a point of reference for Islamic moderatism. On May 2017, King Salman of Saudi Arabia together with US President Donald Trump and Egyptian President 'Abdelfattah al-Sisi have inaugurated in Riyad a new Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology, which in a simplified Arabic transliteration sounds as *Etidal*. The inauguration came at the end of a two-day Conference under the title of "Together We Prevail", whose aim was to "renew mutual commitment to global security and further strengthen already deep business, cultural and political ties". *Etidal* Center mission is "to

19. See Mukhlis, Ulzikri and Widianto 2021: 1-34. DOI: 10.21154/altahrir.v21i1.2679. Accessed 4-4-2022.
20. See Nadatien, Handoyo, Pudjirahardjo and Probowati 2019.
21. For a comparative survey on the interpretations of moderation in the West and in the East, see Islam and Khatun 2015. Available at: <https://journal.uinsgd.ac.id/index.php/ijni/article/view/1414>. Accessed 4-4-2022. doi:https://doi.org/10.15575/ijni.v3i2.1414.

actively and pro-actively combat, expose, and refute extremist ideology, in cooperation with governments and organizations concerned" and its explicit vision is to become "the" global reference in combating extremist ideology and promoting moderation.[22] To foreign delegations visiting Saudi Arabia, a visit to this center is offered as a step to understand the new path that the country would have taken to contribute to the global fight against Islamic extremism. Young female researchers explain the aims and working methods of the center to visitors. Then, we move on to visit the operations room, where hundreds of computers scan the web in search of traces of hatred, violence, and attempts to entice chains of terrorism through the network, and other possible distorted uses of digital resources.

This initiative is different from those presented before and those which will follow due to its characteristic of being launched from on high, like that sponsored by the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak. It is a politically designed initiative that serves to strengthen Saudi Arabia's position as a country fighting extremism on the global political stage. During the Arab Islamic American Summit held in Riyad in May 2017, King Salman expressed the will of his government with these words: "We will cooperate in ending terrorism and extremism in all its shapes and forms. Islam was and will continue to be a religion of tolerance and peace".[23] Thus, it seems that a fight for the representation of "true" Islam is under way in the Muslim community.

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22. See https://etidal.org/. Accessed 4-4-2022.
23. See https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/517792. Accessed 4-4-2022.

Al-Azhar, a beacon against extremism

In the global competition for representing the true face of Islam, the Egyptian University of al-Azhar and its supreme guide, the Gran Imam Ahmed al-Tayyeb, seem to have gained in recent years a prominent position. Ahmed al-Tayyeb belongs to the *tariqah*, Sufi order, of the *Khalwatiyyah*, known in Turkey as Halveti. It is one of the best-known mystical fellowships (*tariqah*) in the Muslim world, founded by 'Umar al-Khalwati (d. 1397), in Herat, Khorasan, now Afghanistan, in the Middle Ages. Having moved to the region of Amasya (Anatolia), the *tariqah* abandoned its first Shiite colouring to lean on Ottoman Sunnism. Under the reign of Bayazit II (1482-1512), the *Khalwatiyyah* then moved to Istanbul. In the wake of the Ottoman victories, members of the sufi order spread throughout the Mediterranean, but also in other parts of the empire, giving rise to many derivative groups. According to some scholars, it is perhaps the sufi order that achieved a perfect balance between mystical asceticism and initiatory knowledge, while adhering to the practical aspects of social life. The Sufi Khalwati considered themselves heirs to the teachings of Junayd (? -910) and often supported the thought of Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), especially as regards the doctrine of *Wahda al-Wujud* (literally "Unity of Existence"). The *tariqah* proposes individual asceticism and retreat (*khalwah*) as tools to get closer to God. Alongside *dhikr*, a common practice in many mystical orders in Islam, the characteristic of the *Khalwatiyyah* is precisely the practice of retreat, which can vary from some days up to forty, which is required of its members. At the same time, the tradition of the *tariqah* indicates common participation in cult rites as the main tool to achieve greater aware-

ness. It is considered an enlightened order in its adherence to Sunna and Islamic doctrine. The Egyptian branch took off in the 15th century and reached its peak in the 19th. At the end of the nineteenth century, members of the *tariqah* played an active role in the anti-British 'Urabi revolt. Al-Tayyeb's father was the spiritual head of the Luxor branch of the *tariqah*, a function now exercised by his brother Muhammad. In the historical chain of sheikhs of al-Azhar it is not uncommon for there to be members of a sufi order, as in the case of Ahmed al-Tayyeb, present Grand Imam of al-Azhar.

One of the reasons for al-Azhar's growing influence both inside and outside the Islamic world relies on the internationally recognized prestige of Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb, its leader since 2002. He started his mandate just after the 9/11 terroristic attacks in New York and Washington and in the wave of islamophobia that has followed. Notwithstanding attempts to avoid a general identification of Islam with the terrorist group responsible for those terrific events, Islam has started to be targeted as a religion compromised with violence since its very fundamental beliefs and ethical values (Fallaci 2015). According to an FBI report, hate crimes against Muslims in the US rose from 12 in 2000 to 93 in 2001. This is a still growing phenomenon, if one considers that in the year 2016 the number of assaults against Muslims in the US has surpassed the peak reached in 2001.[24]

Al-Azhar is gaining international legitimacy as the almost unique institution that holds the keys to true Islam. The visits of the Grand Imam al-Tayyeb in Europe have contributed

24. See Katayoun Kishi, *Assaults against Muslims in U.S. surpass 2001 level*, posted on November 15, 2017, Pew Research Center, http://pewrsr.ch/2zMfEGA

to growing his position as a leading personality in the Muslim
community, on which it is possible to rely to prevent the influ-
ence of radicalism in Europe. Because of the consolidation of
al-Azhar reputation as a pillar of an Islam that does not inspire
fear, one can consider the proposal presented by the vice pres-
ident of the German Parliament, Johannes Singhammer, who
has asked that the German Muslim preachers should receive
their education at al-Azhar in Egypt, instead of in Turkey.[25]
During Ahmad al-Tayyeb's leadership, al-Azhar has started a
collaboration with the principal UN agencies with the aim of
combating extremism, violence and to promote a culture of
tolerance and coexistence, such as the UN Security Council,
UNESCO, and UNICEF. Al-Azhar is heard as a major ref-
erence in the field of contrasting terrorism inside the UN. In
July 2017 a delegation from the UN Counter-Terrorism Com-
mittee visited Egypt to discuss Egypt's progress in implement-
ing Security Council resolutions. The discussions focused in
particular on measures aimed at countering violent extremism,
with special attention to activities promoted by the al-Azhar
Observatory for Combating Extremism.[26] The Observatory
aims at building "a fortification which immune the Muslim
youths and young generations all over the world from the dan-
ger of being polarized by the deviant terrorist groups through
presenting a counter narrative and clarifying the brilliant facts
of Islam stemmed from the Glorious Qur'an, authentic Pro-
phetic traditions and the statements of the righteous ances-

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25. See https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/al-azhar-s-
role-abroad-signs-of-escalation-and-efforts-to-undermine-2/. Accessed
8-4-2022.
26. See https://www.azhar.eg/observer-en/. Accessed 4-4-2022.

tors".[27] This department has been created under the initiative of the Gran Imam al-Tayyeb in Jun 2015 to serve as a means for spreading a true interpretation of Islamic faith. The keywords of its mission are temperance, moderation, tolerance, and human fraternity (*wasaṭiyyah, i'tidāl, tasāmuḥ, iḥwah insāniyyah*). The initiative came one year after an international conference held in December 2014 at al-Azhar under the title "Al-Azhar Conference for Confronting Extremism and Terrorism". In his opening speech, Ahmed al-Tayyeb said: "Al-Azhar al-Sharif has devoted – and still devotes – a continuous effort, towards the formulation of a conscious and well-guided religious discourse, of which the structure must be well-founded on the Noble Quran and on the Holy Traditions of the Prophet's Sunnah, as well as on the well-received opinions of the scholars, over the centuries. From that vantage point, I appeal to all Muslims, asking them to have the greatest confidence in al-Azhar al-Sharif, both as mosque and as university, for it is your honest instructor in the affairs of religion, whether those that pertain to the creed (*'aqidah*) or to the right path (*shari'ah*), with purity and wholesomeness, as it was willed by God, and conveyed by His Messenger – Blessing and Peace be upon him, far removed from the perversions of extremists, the wiles of deceivers, and the misinterpretations of the ignorant".[28] Since that occasion, al-Azhar has committed itself to the fighting of extremism within the Muslim community and has started widespread activity in both internal and external

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27. https://www.azhar.eg/observer-en/details/ArtMID/1153/ArticleID /2027/The-Grand-Imam-launches-Al-Azhar-observer. Accessed 4-4-2022.
28. https://www.azhar.eg/observer-en/details/ArtMID/1153/ArticleID /2030/The-Grand-Imam-of-Al-Azhar-Terrorism-is-a-global-phenomenon. Accessed 4-4-2022.

arenas to show its stance against every form of exploitation of religion. Al-Azhar has promoted a series of initiatives aimed at promoting a vision of Islam consistent with its sacred references and at the same time away from all forms of extremism and violence, aiming to reach all sectors of society: children and young people, students and al-Azhar alumni, intellectuals, and ordinary people, faithful of other religions. In August 2016, sheikh al-Tayyeb with about 200 other Muslim Sunni scholars, joined an International Conference in Grozny, capital of the Chechen Republic, called to answer the question "Who is a Sunni?" in response to "the attempts by extremist Kharijite factions [i.e. Isis] to seize the title of Ahl al-Sunna and define it by their incorrect and distorted understanding and practice of faith".[29] The Final Statement has introduced a definition of the Ahl al-Sunna as those who follow "The Ash`ari or Maturidi schools in doctrine—including the Ahl al-Hadith who adopted the principle of *tafwid* (Consignment). The Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi or Hanbali schools in Islamic law and jurisprudence".[30] This definition is important because it has not mentioned the Wahhabi current, majority in Saudi Arabia, and consequently has caused a strong reaction among Saudi circles.[31]

In the last years, al-Azhar has reached an important recognition as a valid interlocutor through the establishment of a di-

29. Grozny Conference Final Statement, available online: https://chechnyaconference.org/material/chechnya-conference-statement-english.pdf. Accessed 5-6-2022.

30. *Ibidem*.

31. See Kristin Smith Diwan, *Who Is Sunni?: Chechnya Islamic Conference Opens Window on Intra-Faith Rivalry*, Security Blog Post, The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, September 16, 2016. https://agsiw.org/who-is-a-sunni-chechnya-islamic-conference-opens-window-on-intra-faith-rivalry/. Accessed 5-6-2022.

rect relationship between al-Azhar leader, Ahmed al-Tayyeb, and Pope Francis, that has led to the joint signature of the Document on Human Fraternity in Abu Dhabi on February 4, 2019. The meeting in Abu Dhabi between Pope Francis and Ahmed al-Tayyeb, with the joint signing of the document on Human Fraternity, represents, at the same time, a point of arrival and a starting point in relations between Catholics and Muslims. The event is part of a by now consolidated relationship of friendship and collaboration between the two personalities who represent, on the one hand, the Catholic Church, on the other, the ancient university of al-Azhar, the most representative and authoritative of the Sunni Muslim community, a confession that includes about 90% of Muslims in the world. The event of February 2019 was the culmination of a long process of relations between the two communities and which, for the Catholic Church, originates not only from the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, in paragraph 3, but also from the centuries-old history of coexistence between Christianity and Islam in the Middle East. In this line, there are many personalities who have anticipated and dreamt that a day would arrive at the joint signing of such a demanding document between the leaders of the two communities. These are well-known personalities who have fertilized the soil of Islamic-Christian friendship by promoting the need for dialogue, such as the French orientalist Louis Massignon, a pioneer in the knowledge of Muslim mysticism in the West and animator of friendship circles with Islam, or less known, such as the Italian Jesuit Giovanni Fausti, who died a martyr in Albania in 1946 and beatified by Pope Francis in 2016, who had supported the reasons for dialogue and encounter

with Muslims well before the Council. To remain among the Jesuits, we must also remember the tireless commitment of Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, kidnapped in Syria in 2013, who restored life and prayer to an ancient monastery dedicated to prophet Moses, near Damascus, which over the years has become a fruitful hub of Islamic-Christian friendships. On the Catholic side, we can mention other protagonists of the season of dialogue starting with John Paul II who, with the world prayer of religions for peace in Assisi 1986, launched what the Pope himself called the "spirit of Assisi", and who did take a leap forward to the Church in the encounter with non-Christian religions, to use an expression of Roger Etchegaray. John Paul II, ten years after the Assisi meeting, affirmed his hope that: "the spirit of Assisi would not be extinguished, but that it would continue to 'infect' men and women, arousing in their souls the desire to meet and recognize each other according to the example of universal brotherhood offered to all by St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi".[32] Starting from that meeting, despite internal and external resistance, a fruitful path of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue has developed which has kept open and enlarged a sphere of encounter and friendship between Christians and Muslims in the last thirty years. It is no coincidence that the Grand Imam of al-Azhar is a frequent and interested frequenter of the meetings in the spirit of Assisi, ever since he held the position of Grand Mufti of Egypt and then of Rector of the Azharite university. Precisely in one of these inter-religious dialogue meetings in the memory of Assisi, held in Bologna in October 2018 at the in-

32. Message from John Paul II to Cardinal Francis Arinze, October 15, 1996. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/letters/1996/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19961015_card-arinze.html. Accessed 4-4-2022.

vitation of the Community of Sant'Egidio, Ahmed al-Tayyeb underlined in his speech some reasons of great concern in the current international scenario, including the aspiration of men and women to peace, the suffering of the weakest, the pain of the poor, themes that found ample space in the Abu Dhabi document signed a few months later.[33] On the Catholic side, the Pope has stated on various occasions that Christians and Muslims are brothers, and this is not an obvious word for him. The geography of Pope Francis' travels always pays great attention to meetings with representatives of Islam. The Pope is convinced, as he said in Cairo in 2017, that "everyone's future also depends on the encounter between religions and cultures". Dialogue is a duty for Christians, says the Pope. A dialogue that, "even before being a discussion on the great themes of faith, is a" conversation on human life", a daily and concrete sharing of life and the future to be built together. The future of humanity and the construction of civilization depend on the ability to respectfully open up to dialogue with the other. Dialogue is a key word for Pope Francis, and it is a task that belongs to everyone: this is a clear point in the teaching of Francis. As he said in Cairo: "The only alternative to the civilization of encounter is the incivility of confrontation". For the Pope, dialogue is a barrier against violence and terrorism, and fraternity among believers is the oxygen that makes the world breathe. This can be read in all his speeches with Muslim representatives, where references to the magiste-

33. Speech of the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayyeb, International Conference "Bridges of Peace". https://preghieraperlapace.santegidio.org/pageID/30660/langID/it/text/3048/Discorso-del-Grande-imam-di-alAzhar-Ahmed-alTayyeb-alla-Conferenza-internazionale-Ponti-di-Pace.html. Accessed 8-4-2022.

rium of John Paul II are always present. From John Paul II to Benedict XVI and to Francis, one can find continuity in the line of the spirit of Assisi.

The Document on Human Fraternity is therefore the culmination of a long journey, while its immediate genesis is closely linked to the talks that have taken place in recent years between the two signatories. Furthermore, it can also be read as a starting point that has opened a process, as Francis himself often likes to say. The Abu Dhabi document is important because it confirms a relationship of esteem, indeed, of fraternity that has been established between Pope Francis and al-Tayyeb. But it is not a document dropped from above. On the contrary, it is rooted in years of concrete and daily weaving of threads of dialogue in the East and in the West that have seen intellectuals, men and women of religion, ordinary people as protagonists. It is rooted in the context of secular coexistence between Islam and Christianity in the Mediterranean, now severely tested by ideologies that advocate opposing identities. Precisely for this reason, the Abu Dhabi document is significant and prophetic because it offers a credible and practical alternative to the clash of civilizations. During the papal visit to Egypt in April 2017, the Pope and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar greeted and recognized each other with the appellation of "brother". It wasn't the first time they met. The previous year, it was the turn of Tayyeb to pay a visit to the Pope in the Vatican. It is no coincidence that the inter-religious conference in Abu Dhabi had "Human fraternity" as its theme. Of course, this does not mean that the problems posed to the two great religious communities are overlooked or evaded. But there is the awareness that global challeng-

es, such as poverty, war, violence, and terrorism, impose on believers a response that starts precisely from the common belonging to the human family, from the common recognition of being brothers in humanity, a principle accepted by both faiths. The Document on Human Fraternity represents the culmination of a centuries-old journey of encounters or, more often, clashes, between the two great world religions, Christianity and Islam. It was achieved thanks to the many intertwined threads in history that today form a fabric on which the objectives, the common commitment, the sense of shared responsibility towards the destiny of humanity, especially in its most fragile expressions, are clearly designed. The Document now represents a point of no return in relations between the Catholic Church and the Muslim community, which aims to remove any justification for any ideology that proposes the inevitability of the clash between believers.

Undoubtedly, the close relationship with Pope Francis and the joint signing of the Document on human fraternity represented a favourable opportunity for the Western world to get to know al-Azhar and its function as a spiritual and cultural centre for the Sunni Islamic world. During his first visit to Europe in 2015, it was hard for Western journalists to explain correctly what a Grand Imam of al-Azhar was. For many of them it was difficult to understand that his office was higher than that of the President of the University of al-Azhar. For the latter, in fact, the protocol of the event had reserved a lower position. Four years later, both the charge of Grand Imam of al-Azhar and the personality of the one who holds it are well known even outside the Muslim community. But above all, the current Grand Imam now embodies the

image of the Muslim with whom the West and the Christian world can and will dialogue. For decades, the problem of those within the Catholic Church who dedicated themselves to Islamic-Christian dialogue had been that of finding representative and reliable interlocutors. Now they seem to have found it. All these initiatives have contributed to crediting al-Azhar as a beacon of moderation and spokesperson for authentic Islam internationally.

To conclude, these pages have shown how it is necessary to distinguish between a *wasaṭi* current internal to the evolutionary path of contemporary Islam from a political strategy adopted by various Muslim regimes, Arab and non-Arab, to distance themselves from Islamic extremism and place themselves "on the right side of history" in the international context of the fight against Islamist terrorism that shocked the US and Europe from the end of the 20th century to the first decades of the 21st century. The first must be considered as an ideological current of thought, located within the galaxy of contemporary Islamism linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, of which the main representatives are sheikh Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī and his entourage, to which the experience of some Tunisian leaders of Ennahda Party can also be connected. The second group, on the other hand, includes all those positions assumed by various Muslim majority states which, following the attacks of 9/11 and later manifestations of Islamist terrorism, wanted to clearly mark their distance from what was defined as a deviation from the correct interpretation of Islam. External to this dialectic is the position of al-Azhar, which aspires to become the reference of a spiritual Islam, faithful to tradition and, at the same time, in step with the times.

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