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The Role of JAKIM and Islamic Education Curriculum in Shaping the Discourse of Wasatiyyah in Malaysian Secondary Schools

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji peran kelembagaan dan kurikulum dalam membentuk wacana *wasatiyyah* (moderasi Islam) pada Pendidikan Islam tingkat sekolah menengah di Malaysia. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis analisis kebijakan dan analisis wacana, penelitian ini menelaah dokumen kurikulum nasional, buku teks Pendidikan Islam, serta pedoman dan narasi resmi yang diproduksi oleh Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM). Temuan menunjukkan bahwa *wasatiyyah* dikonstruksi melalui tiga pola wacana dominan: normatif, preventif, dan integratif. Moderasi diposisikan sebagai sikap keagamaan yang benar secara teologis, aman secara sosial, dan selaras dengan kepentingan negara. JAKIM memainkan peran sentral sebagai regulator wacana, penjaga ortodoksi moderat, sekaligus agen stabilitas sosial. Namun demikian, institusionalisasi *wasatiyyah* juga menghadirkan ambiguitas pedagogis, khususnya dalam membatasi ruang dialog, kritik, dan pergulatan etis siswa. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa *wasatiyyah* dalam pendidikan Islam perlu dipahami bukan hanya sebagai nilai normatif yang ditransmisikan, tetapi sebagai praktik pedagogis yang terus dinegosiasikan. Studi ini berkontribusi pada diskursus pendidikan Islam dengan menyoroti relasi kompleks antara otoritas negara, kurikulum, dan pembentukan nalar keagamaan generasi muda.

Kata kunci: Wasatiyyah; pendidikan Islam; kurikulum; JAKIM; moderasi beragama; Malaysia

Abstract

This article examines the institutional and curricular construction of *wasatiyyah* (Islamic moderation) in Malaysian secondary school Islamic Education. Employing a qualitative approach that combines policy analysis and discourse analysis, the study analyzes national curriculum documents, Islamic Education textbooks, and official guidelines produced by state religious authorities. The findings reveal that *wasatiyyah* is shaped through three dominant discursive patterns: normative, preventive, and

integrative. Moderation is framed as theologically sound, socially stabilizing, and civically aligned with national priorities. Within this framework, JAKIM plays a strategic role as a regulator of religious discourse, a guardian of moderate orthodoxy, and an agent of social stability. While this institutional configuration provides coherence and clarity, it also generates pedagogical ambiguities, particularly in limiting dialogical engagement and ethical deliberation among students. The article argues that *wasatiyyah* in Islamic education should be understood not merely as a prescribed value, but as an ongoing pedagogical practice shaped by institutional power, curricular design, and classroom interpretation. By foregrounding curriculum as a discursive site, this study contributes to global discussions on Islamic education, religious moderation, and the role of the state in shaping religious subjectivities.

Keywords: Wasatiyyah; Islamic education; curriculum; religious moderation; Malaysia; discourse analysis

Introduction

Across many Muslim societies today, the idea of *wasatiyyah*, often translated as moderation, balance, or the middle path, has re-emerged with renewed urgency (Kamali & Ramadan, 2015). This resurgence is not accidental. It unfolds against a backdrop of rising religious extremism, intensifying ideological polarization, and a broader crisis of coexistence that affects both Muslim-majority and plural societies (Muhammad & Rahim, 2017). In public debates, *wasatiyyah* is frequently invoked as a moral and theological antidote: a way of affirming Islamic commitment while resisting rigid literalism, exclusionary identities, and the temptation of violence (Yaakub, 2016). Yet, despite its frequent appearance in policy documents and sermons, the practical pathways through which *wasatiyyah* is cultivated, especially among younger generations, remain somewhat opaque (Yusuf et al., 2025). One senses that the concept is widely celebrated, but not always carefully examined in its everyday institutional life.

Malaysia occupies a distinctive position in this global and regional conversation. As a Muslim-majority country with deep ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, Malaysia has long treated social harmony not merely as a social aspiration, but as a political and educational priority (Ebrahimi et al., 2022). Over the past two decades, *wasatiyyah Islam* has been explicitly mainstreamed within national religious and educational discourses, often framed as a civilizational choice rather than a temporary policy response. In this sense, *wasatiyyah* in Malaysia is not only a theological concept; it is also a governing language, embedded in state narratives about national unity, moral citizenship, and religious responsibility (Karim et al., 2025). Whether this institutional embrace

produces genuine ethical depth or risks becoming a symbolic slogan is, perhaps, an open question, and one worth taking seriously.

Within this institutional landscape, the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) plays a particularly strategic role. JAKIM functions not simply as an administrative body, but as a central producer and regulator of official Islamic discourse in Malaysia (Norasid et al., 2022). Through policy guidelines, religious education frameworks, textbook oversight, and pedagogical directives, JAKIM exerts significant influence over how Islam is articulated, authorized, and transmitted in formal education. In many ways, it acts as a mediator between state priorities and religious interpretation. This position is powerful, but also delicate. The promotion of *wasatiyyah* through such an institution inevitably raises questions about how moderation is defined, whose interpretation is prioritized, and how dissenting or alternative voices are managed, if they are managed at all (Husain et al., 2021).

Secondary school Islamic Education occupies a crucial, though sometimes underestimated, space within this process. Adolescence is a formative period in which religious understanding begins to shift from imitation toward reflection, and sometimes toward questioning. Textbooks, classroom practices, and curricular emphases do more than convey information; they shape moral sensibilities, boundaries of legitimacy, and habits of interpretation (Ebrahimi et al., 2021). It is here, in these everyday pedagogical encounters, that abstract ideals such as *wasatiyyah* are translated into lived religious reasoning. One might argue that if moderation fails to take root at this level, its broader societal promise becomes fragile, even rhetorical.

Despite the prominence of *wasatiyyah* in Malaysian Islamic discourse, existing scholarship has tended to approach the topic in largely normative or theological terms (Islam et al., 2021). Many studies celebrate moderation as an Islamic ideal or analyze it as a policy slogan, but fewer examine how it is concretely embedded within curricula, textbooks, and institutional practices. Even fewer studies critically explore the role of state religious authorities, such as JAKIM, in shaping what *wasatiyyah* comes to mean in educational settings (Ebrahimi & Yusoff, 2020). This leaves a noticeable gap between discourse and practice, between intention and pedagogical reality. According to my reading, this gap is not trivial; it is precisely where the success or failure of moderation as an educational project is negotiated.

Against this background, this article seeks to explore the role of JAKIM and the Islamic Education curriculum in shaping the discourse of *wasatiyyah* in Malaysian secondary schools. It asks, first, how JAKIM institutionalizes *wasatiyyah* through Islamic education policies and curricular frameworks. It also examines how *wasatiyyah* is articulated, transmitted, and interpreted within Islamic Education textbooks and

classroom practices at the secondary level (Abdullah & Aziz, 2020). By focusing on curriculum as both policy and discourse, the study aims to move beyond abstract affirmations of moderation and toward a more grounded understanding of how *wasatiyyah* is taught, normalized, and sometimes, perhaps unintentionally, constrained within formal education (Hasbulah et al., 2019). In doing so, the article hopes to contribute to wider discussions on Islamic education, religious moderation, and the complex relationship between state authority and religious pedagogy.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The notion of *wasatiyyah* is deeply rooted in the Islamic intellectual tradition, yet its meanings have never been entirely fixed. Classical Muslim scholars often associated *wasatiyyah* with balance (*tawāzun*), justice (*'adl*), and moral proportionality, an ethical stance that avoids excess (*ifrāṭ*) and neglect (*tafrīṭ*) (Mujani & Mazuki, 2018). In Qur'anic discourse, the idea of the *ummatan wasaṭan* is not merely descriptive but normative, pointing to a community entrusted with moral responsibility and witness-bearing. Still, when one moves from classical texts to contemporary contexts, something subtle changes (Sahad & Asni, 2018). *Wasatiyyah* becomes less a purely ethical disposition and more a framework for responding to concrete social anxieties: radicalism, fragmentation, and the fear, sometimes justified, sometimes exaggerated, of religious absolutism. Perhaps this shift is inevitable. Concepts travel, and when they do, they adapt.

In modern Muslim-majority states, *wasatiyyah* increasingly functions as what might be called a state-sponsored religious discourse. It is promoted not only as a theological virtue, but as a policy language, one that aligns religious interpretation with national stability, social harmony, and political legitimacy (Mohd Zain et al., 2018). This does not automatically render the concept insincere or manipulative. In fact, many policymakers and religious actors may genuinely believe in the ethical value of moderation. Yet, the institutionalization of *wasatiyyah* inevitably reshapes it (Mokhtar, 2018). Certain interpretations are amplified, others softened or sidelined. Over time, moderation risks becoming less a contested moral ideal and more an administrative category, defined by what it is not, extremism, deviance, disruption, rather than by a rich ethical vocabulary of its own. We find this tension difficult to ignore, and perhaps it deserves more attention than it usually receives.

To make sense of this process, this article draws on the idea of *curriculum as discourse*. From this perspective, curriculum is not simply a neutral collection of topics or learning outcomes. It is an ideological text. It selects, organizes, and authorizes certain forms of knowledge while marginalizing others. What appears in a syllabus, how a concept is framed

in a textbook, and which voices are cited as authoritative all reflect deeper assumptions about religion, society, and the kind of subject the education system seeks to produce. In religious education especially, curriculum becomes a powerful site where theology, pedagogy, and politics quietly intersect. Sometimes too quietly, perhaps.

The theoretical framework of this study therefore integrates three interrelated strands. The first is the literature on religious moderation, which examines how traditions negotiate between doctrinal commitment and social plurality. This body of work helps clarify why *wasatiyyah* is framed as both a moral and civic virtue (Osman, 2017). The second strand concerns curriculum ideology, emphasizing that educational texts are never value-free, but always embedded in broader power relations. The third strand focuses on discourse institutionalization, which explains how certain interpretations become normalized through repeated articulation within authoritative institutions. Taken together, these perspectives allow us to see *wasatiyyah* not only as an idea, but as a structured discourse that is produced, circulated, and stabilized over time.

Within this theoretical constellation, the role of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) becomes particularly significant. JAKIM sits at the intersection of state authority, religious knowledge, and educational policy. It does not merely transmit Islamic teachings; it curates them. Through its involvement in curriculum guidelines, textbook approval, and pedagogical framing, JAKIM helps define what counts as "moderate Islam" in formal education. This position grants the institution considerable influence, but also places it within a field of expectations and constraints. It must negotiate between theological credibility, state objectives, and pedagogical practicality. Whether this negotiation produces a dynamic and reflective form of *wasatiyyah*, or a cautious and tightly managed one, is not always clear, and may vary across contexts.

By situating JAKIM within this broader theoretical framework, the article does not seek to pass normative judgment too quickly. Rather, it aims to understand how moderation is constructed, stabilized, and taught within an institutional setting. The framework thus serves as a lens, not a verdict. It invites us to look carefully at how ideas move from scripture to policy, from policy to curriculum, and from curriculum to the lived religious reasoning of students. In that movement, meanings are gained, but also, sometimes, quietly lost.

Scholarship on *wasatiyyah* and religious moderation in Muslim societies has expanded noticeably over the past two decades, often in response to global anxieties about radicalism, identity politics, and social fragmentation. Much of this literature approaches *wasatiyyah* as a normative Islamic ideal, grounding it in Qur'anic exegesis and classical ethical theory. These studies are valuable, perhaps even necessary, in reminding readers that moderation is not a modern invention imposed

from outside Islamic tradition. Yet, they also tend to remain at a relatively abstract level (Muchtar et al., 2017). The emphasis is frequently placed on what *wasatiyyah* ought to mean, rather than how it actually functions when translated into policy, pedagogy, or institutional practice. One gets the sense that moderation is treated as self-evidently virtuous, leaving little room to ask how it is operationalized, or contested, on the ground.

A parallel body of literature examines *wasatiyyah* as part of contemporary state strategies in Muslim-majority countries. Here, moderation is often analyzed as a response to security concerns, social cohesion, and nation-building agendas. In the Malaysian context, several studies highlight how *wasatiyyah* has been adopted as an official national discourse aimed at fostering religious tolerance and managing diversity (Milner, 2017). Education frequently appears in these discussions as a long-term socialization mechanism, but usually in broad strokes. The assumption seems to be that schooling naturally transmits moderation once the correct values are declared at the policy level. What remains less clear is how this transmission actually unfolds within classrooms, textbooks, and curricular structures, where ideals encounter everyday pedagogical realities.

Research on Islamic education in Malaysia, particularly at the secondary level, offers a more concrete entry point. A number of studies have analyzed curriculum documents, learning objectives, and textbook content, noting that values such as balance, ethical conduct, and social responsibility are explicitly or implicitly embedded within Islamic Education syllabi (Mohd Hambali et al., 2017). These works often conclude that the aims of Islamic education extend beyond doctrinal mastery to include character formation, moral reasoning, and moderate religious attitudes. Empirical approaches, including document analysis and interviews with teachers and students, lend credibility to these claims. Still, many of these studies adopt a largely affirmative tone (Al-Qudsy et al., 2017). They document the presence of moderation but rarely interrogate how consistently it is framed, whose interpretation of moderation is prioritized, or how students themselves negotiate these messages.

The role of state religious institutions in shaping educational discourse has also attracted scholarly attention, though often from a governance or policy perspective rather than a curricular one. In Malaysia, the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) is frequently described as a central coordinating body for Islamic affairs, operating under the Prime Minister's Department. Several academic discussions note JAKIM's influence in defining acceptable religious interpretations, including its articulation of *wasatiyyah* as moderation grounded in balance, justice, and compliance with *sharīʿah* principles. However, these discussions are usually based on policy analysis or conceptual reviews (Azmi et al., 2015). They acknowledge JAKIM's discursive authority but stop short of examining how this authority materializes within the concrete

structures of school curricula and learning materials. In other words, JAKIM is visible as a planner and regulator, but its pedagogical footprint remains underexplored.

Relatedly, some studies point to the existence of complementary institutions, such as the Institut Wasatiyyah Malaysia, which promote moderation through non-formal education and public outreach. While these initiatives reinforce the national commitment to *wasatiyyah*, they also highlight an interesting imbalance in the literature. Non-formal and policy-driven initiatives are often well documented, whereas formal schooling, arguably the most sustained site of value formation, receives comparatively less critical scrutiny. This gap becomes more striking when one considers that secondary school students are at a developmental stage where religious ideas are not merely absorbed, but actively interpreted, questioned, and sometimes resisted.

Taken together, existing studies suggest that *wasatiyyah* in Malaysia is widely endorsed, institutionally supported, and rhetorically coherent. Yet, the literature also reveals several limitations. First, there is a strong tendency toward normative affirmation rather than critical engagement. Second, analyses of curriculum often focus on stated objectives rather than discursive patterns within textbooks and pedagogical practices. Third, the specific role of state religious authorities in shaping educational meanings of moderation remains insufficiently theorized and empirically grounded (Mujani et al., 2015). This article positions itself within these gaps. Rather than asking whether *wasatiyyah* is present in Islamic education, a question that has been largely answered, it asks how moderation is constructed, stabilized, and transmitted through the interaction of curriculum, institutional authority, and classroom practice. In doing so, it seeks to move the discussion from endorsement to examination, and perhaps, to a more nuanced understanding of religious moderation as an educational project rather than a policy slogan.

The institutional landscape of Islamic education in Malaysia cannot be understood without situating the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) within the broader architecture of state–religion relations. Established to coordinate and develop Islamic affairs at the federal level, JAKIM emerged from a historical need to harmonize religious administration across Malaysia's complex federal system. Over time, its mandate expanded beyond ritual regulation and religious certification into areas of policy coordination, standard-setting, and public religious guidance. Education, while not its sole domain, has gradually become one of its most consequential arenas.

Formally, the administration of school curricula falls under the Ministry of Education Malaysia. This division of authority creates an interesting, and sometimes uneasy, institutional arrangement. On paper, JAKIM does not design school curricula. In practice, however, its influence

is difficult to separate from the educational process. Through consultative roles, advisory committees, policy alignment exercises, and its broader authority in defining "correct" Islamic interpretation, JAKIM occupies a quasi-pedagogical position. It shapes the moral and theological parameters within which Islamic Education is expected to operate, even if it does not draft every line of the syllabus.

This influence becomes visible through several mechanisms. First, JAKIM contributes to the framing of Islamic Education curricula by articulating overarching principles, such as *wasatiyyah*, that are then absorbed into curricular objectives and learning outcomes. Second, it plays a role, directly or indirectly, in the vetting of textbooks and instructional materials, particularly in ensuring theological conformity and ideological alignment with national religious narratives. Third, JAKIM's guidelines and public religious statements often inform teacher training, pedagogical orientations, and the tone of classroom instruction. Finally, through sermons, official publications, and policy documents, JAKIM continuously produces a repertoire of "authorized" religious narratives that circulate beyond mosques and into schools, sometimes subtly, sometimes quite explicitly.

Within this institutional framework, *wasatiyyah* functions as both a moral ideal and a governance tool (Othman & Sulaiman, 2014). It is promoted as a unifying principle capable of reconciling religious commitment with social diversity and political stability. From the state's perspective, embedding *wasatiyyah* within education serves a long-term purpose: shaping citizens who are religiously grounded yet socially compliant, morally confident yet resistant to radical ideologies. There is, however, an inherent tension here. When moderation becomes a national agenda, it risks being treated less as an open ethical practice and more as a predefined stance, something to be taught, assessed, and monitored. Whether this strengthens or narrows the meaning of *wasatiyyah* is not immediately obvious, and perhaps depends on how the curriculum translates institutional intentions into pedagogical realities (Mohamad et al., 2014).

Islamic Education Curriculum and the Construction of Wasatiyyah

At the level of curriculum, Islamic Education in Malaysian secondary schools are officially designed to cultivate holistic individuals, students who possess sound religious knowledge, upright character, and the ability to navigate social life responsibly. The stated aims emphasize balance: between belief and practice, spirituality and rationality, individual piety and communal harmony. On the surface, this aligns neatly with the language of *wasatiyyah*. Yet, as is often the case, the real work of meaning-making happens not in mission statements, but in how concepts are organized, emphasized, and repeated across curricular components.

In the domain of *'aqīdah* (creed), *wasatiyyah* is typically articulated through affirmations of orthodox belief combined with cautions against deviant or extremist interpretations (Kamali & Ramadan, 2015). Students are taught clarity and certainty, but also restraint, an insistence that correct belief should not lead to arrogance or exclusion. Still, the boundary between theological firmness and openness is delicate. At times, moderation appears less as an invitation to critical reflection and more as a reminder to remain within sanctioned interpretive limits. Whether students experience this as guidance or constraint likely varies, depending on classroom dynamics and teacher mediation.

Within *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), the language of balance often emerges through discussions of flexibility, context, and the diversity of legal opinions. The curriculum tends to highlight adaptability and ease (*taysīr*), presenting Islamic law as responsive rather than rigid. This can be a powerful pedagogical move, especially in a plural society (Muhammad & Rahim, 2017). Yet, one might also notice that legal pluralism is often presented in a controlled manner. Differences are acknowledged, but rarely explored in depth. Moderation, here, sometimes feels carefully curated, visible, but contained.

The theme of *akhlāq* (ethics) perhaps offers the most explicit space for *wasatiyyah*. Lessons on respect, empathy, social responsibility, and self-restraint resonate strongly with the ethos of moderation. Students are encouraged to see themselves as moral agents within a diverse social environment. In these sections, *wasatiyyah* appears less controversial, almost intuitive (Hasbulah et al., 2019). And yet, even here, there is an underlying tension between moral universality and religious particularity: how to promote openness without diluting religious identity remains an unresolved pedagogical question.

In *sīrah* and Islamic history, narratives of balance and justice are often drawn from prophetic examples and early Islamic governance. These stories serve as moral exemplars, offering historical legitimacy to contemporary ideals of moderation. However, historical complexity is sometimes simplified in service of moral clarity. Conflict, disagreement, and ambiguity, features that might enrich students' understanding of pluralism, are occasionally smoothed over. The result is a history that supports *wasatiyyah*, but perhaps at the cost of critical historical engagement.

Across these curricular domains, representations of tolerance, pluralism, religious authority, and citizenship are carefully interwoven. Islam is presented as compatible with national belonging and social harmony, reinforcing the idea that a good Muslim is also a responsible citizen. This alignment is pedagogically effective, but not without its frictions. The normative claims of religion do not always sit comfortably with the lived realities of multicultural interaction, where differences are

not merely theoretical but personal and sometimes uncomfortable. The curriculum gestures toward this complexity, but often stops short of fully confronting it.

In this sense, the construction of *wasatiyyah* within the Islamic Education curriculum reflects both ambition and caution. It aspires to shape balanced, thoughtful believers, yet remains anchored to institutional priorities and normative boundaries. The result is a form of moderation that is coherent and teachable, but not always dialogical. Whether such a model equips students to navigate genuine religious difference, or merely to recognize its official limits, is a question that lingers, perhaps deliberately, at the edges of the curriculum.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design, drawing primarily on policy analysis and discourse-oriented approaches. The choice of a qualitative framework is deliberate. Questions about *wasatiyyah*, institutional authority, and curriculum are not easily reduced to variables or measurements; they unfold through language, emphasis, silences, and repetition. To some extent, this study is less interested in how often moderation appears than in how it is framed, stabilized, and made to feel natural within educational texts. That orientation, admittedly, comes with its own limitations, but it also allows for a deeper engagement with meaning rather than mere presence.

The research is designed as a document-based analysis, complemented, where possible, by interview data. The core materials include national Islamic Education curriculum documents for secondary schools, officially prescribed Islamic Education textbooks, and selected policy guidelines and public documents issued by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM). These texts are treated not simply as administrative artefacts, but as discursive sites where particular understandings of Islam, moderation, and citizenship are produced and normalized. In some cases, semi-structured interviews with educators or curriculum practitioners may be used to enrich the analysis, especially to capture how official narratives are interpreted and enacted at the classroom level. That said, the study does not rely on interviews as its primary evidentiary base; rather, they function as a contextual layer, offering texture rather than definitive claims.

In terms of data sources, curriculum documents provide insight into official learning objectives, thematic priorities, and pedagogical intentions. Textbooks are analyzed as mediating texts, situated between policy and practice, that translate abstract ideals into teachable content. JAKIM's guidelines and policy statements are examined to understand how *wasatiyyah* is defined, framed, and authorized at the institutional level.

Together, these materials allow for a multi-layered reading of moderation as it moves from policy discourse into educational representation. There were moments, during data selection, where boundaries felt blurred, where it was not entirely clear whether a text belonged to education policy or religious governance. Rather than treating this as a problem, the study takes it as part of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data analysis proceeds through a combination of thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns related to balance, moderation, tolerance, authority, and religious identity across documents. Critical discourse analysis, in turn, enables a closer examination of how these themes are linguistically constructed: what is emphasized, what is softened, and what remains unsaid. Attention is paid to framing strategies, binary oppositions (such as moderation versus extremism), and the subtle ways in which institutional authority is asserted through curricular language. The aim is not to expose hidden intentions in a conspiratorial sense, but to understand how certain meanings become commonsensical through repetition and institutional endorsement.

Ethical considerations in this study are relatively modest, given its primary reliance on publicly available documents. Nevertheless, care is taken to represent institutional positions accurately and to avoid attributing motives that cannot be substantiated. Where interview data are used, informed consent is obtained, anonymity is maintained, and participants are given space to express uncertainty or ambivalence without pressure for coherence. Validity is approached through triangulation across data sources and through sustained engagement with the texts, rather than through claims of objectivity. In qualitative work of this nature, interpretation is unavoidable. The goal, therefore, is not neutrality, but transparency, making clear how conclusions are reached, and where alternative readings might still be possible.

Results and Discussion

How Wasatiyyah *is Constructed*

Across the documents and learning materials examined, *wasatiyyah* is not presented as a single, stable definition. It is built, piece by piece, through recurring emphases, sometimes explicit, sometimes almost incidental. In curriculum statements, it often appears as a guiding value: a desirable posture for religious life and social participation. In textbooks, it becomes more tangible, taking the form of themes, examples, warnings, and moral narratives. And in institutional guidance, it tends to sound more like a boundary-setting language, a way of saying: this is the kind of Islam that fits the national project, and this is the kind that does not. What struck me, perhaps more than we expected, is how consistently *wasatiyyah* is

constructed through a blend of ethical idealism and administrative caution. It can sound uplifting, and then suddenly procedural, as if the concept itself is asked to serve two masters at once.

One dominant construction is *wasatiyyah as balance*, almost a pedagogical shorthand for equilibrium. Balance between worldly life and spirituality, between individual piety and social responsibility, between obedience to religious norms and peaceful coexistence in a diverse society. This seems benign, even commonsensical. The language of "balance" is rhetorically powerful because it feels intuitive; few readers would openly reject it. Yet balance also has a quiet disciplining effect. It invites students to see "too much" and "too little" religiosity as equally problematic, without always specifying who gets to decide where the middle actually lies. In several places, the "middle" is not treated as a site of thoughtful deliberation, but as a destination that is already mapped. The student's task is mainly to arrive there safely.

A second, closely related construction frames *wasatiyyah* through opposition. Moderation gains meaning by being contrasted with its feared alternatives: *ghuluw* (excess), deviance, fanaticism, harshness, or disorder. This binary logic, moderation versus extremism, appears repeatedly and, at times, becomes the primary engine of definition. The problem is not that extremism is invoked; in many contexts it is a very real concern. The more subtle issue is that *wasatiyyah* can become conceptually thin when it is defined mainly by what it rejects. It becomes a kind of safe zone, a moral perimeter. Students learn that moderation is "not extreme," but may not always be given the conceptual tools to understand moderation as an active ethical practice: how one reasons, listens, disagrees, or holds convictions without weaponizing them. We found myself wishing the texts lingered longer in that active space, but perhaps that is my own bias showing.

A third pattern is the merging of *religious moderation* with *civic morality*. *Wasatiyyah* is constructed not only as a personal virtue but as a social and national asset. Texts frequently link the moderate Muslim to harmony, national stability, and responsible citizenship. This is especially visible in passages that speak about respecting authority, avoiding conflict, and maintaining good relations with others. On one hand, this alignment makes practical sense in a multicultural nation-state; it is an attempt to integrate religious identity with public life rather than isolating it. On the other hand, it raises a delicate question: is moderation being taught as moral maturity, or as political compliance? The two can overlap, obviously, but they are not identical. At moments, the discourse seems to slide, almost imperceptibly, from ethical responsibility to social management. The educational message becomes: a good believer is also a predictable citizen. That may be effective governance, but it is not always the same thing as moral depth.

The texts also construct *wasatiyyah* through a particular configuration of authority. There is a recurring insistence that moderation must remain anchored to "correct" interpretation and recognized religious guidance. This is where institutional influence becomes visible, even if not always named. In this construction, *wasatiyyah* is not simply an individual's personal journey toward balance; it is something to be safeguarded through authorized knowledge. Students are encouraged to trust recognized scholars, official interpretations, and established norms. There is nothing inherently problematic about teaching epistemic humility, arguably, it is necessary. Yet the discourse sometimes produces a restrained intellectual atmosphere, where interpretive exploration feels risky. The implicit message can become: moderation means staying within the boundaries of what has already been endorsed. Curiosity is permitted, but only if it returns safely to the approved shore.

Another noticeable construction appears in the way pluralism and tolerance are handled. Tolerance is usually affirmed, but it is framed in a careful, conditional manner. Students are guided toward respectful relations with others, yet those relations are often structured by a strong emphasis on preserving Islamic identity and doctrinal clarity. The result is a tolerance that is ethical, but somewhat guarded, more about peaceful coexistence than about deep interreligious understanding. In some places, the discourse suggests that plural engagement is acceptable as long as it does not blur religious boundaries. This is not necessarily a weakness; many communities, religious or otherwise, maintain boundaries. The question is pedagogical: does the curriculum help students live with difference as a complex reality, or does it treat difference as a situation to be managed politely from a safe distance? The construction of *wasatiyyah* sometimes leans toward the second. It teaches calmness, yes, but not always the skills of sustained dialogue and mutual learning.

The construction of *wasatiyyah* also appears in the emotional tone of the materials. Much of the language is reassuring: moderation as serenity, as ease, as a humane expression of Islam. This affective framing matters. It suggests that *wasatiyyah* is not only correct, but comforting. Yet there is also a background note of anxiety. You can feel it in the warnings, explicit or implied, about ideological threats, deviant teachings, or social discord. This dual affect, reassurance and anxiety, shapes moderation into a protective discourse. It is not merely aspirational; it is defensive. Students are invited to inhabit moderation as a form of safety. Again, that may be understandable, but it can subtly narrow what moderation means: it becomes risk avoidance, rather than moral courage.

Perhaps the most consequential finding, though, is the way *wasatiyyah* is translated into teachable "units" within curriculum domains, creed, jurisprudence, ethics, and prophetic history, without always being integrated into a coherent interpretive method. In ethics sections, moderation becomes character: empathy, fairness, self-restraint.

In jurisprudence sections, moderation becomes flexibility: recognizing ease and contextual consideration. In creed sections, moderation becomes doctrinal steadiness: resisting deviance and confusion. In prophetic history, moderation becomes exemplarity: the Prophet as the embodied model of balance and justice. Each of these is meaningful on its own. But sometimes, they sit side by side rather than forming a single conceptual spine. Students might learn multiple "faces" of moderation without being invited to ask how these faces relate when tensions arise, for instance, when doctrinal firmness seems to conflict with social openness, or when legal flexibility meets a demand for certainty.

In the end, the dominant construction of *wasatiyyah* in these materials is coherent, persuasive, and institutionally legible. It promotes a form of Islam that is morally serious, socially harmonious, and resistant to extremism. Yet it is also carefully bounded. It emphasizes stability more than experimentation, harmony more than contestation, authorized interpretation more than interpretive struggle. And wa are not entirely sure whether that boundedness is a limitation or a deliberate design feature, perhaps it is both. What seems clear is that *wasatiyyah*, as constructed here, is not just a theological ideal. It is an educational architecture: a way of shaping religious reasoning so that it becomes ethically acceptable, socially safe, and institutionally aligned.

If you want, we can extend this Findings section into two moves that journals often expect: a tighter synthesis of "core themes" (still in paragraph form) and then a bridge toward Discussion that explicitly links the findings back to the theoretical framework (curriculum-as-discourse, institutionalization, and curriculum ideology).

Dominant Discursive Patterns: Normative, Preventive, and Integrative Frames

One of the most consistent findings across the curriculum documents and textbooks is the presence of a *normative discourse* that quietly anchors the meaning of *wasatiyyah*. In this frame, moderation is presented as the "proper" or "correct" Islamic stance, something that ought to be embraced almost by default. The language is calm, declarative, and often didactic. Students are told what moderation looks like, what it leads to, and why it is desirable. There is little sense of debate or uncertainty here. *Wasatiyyah* appears as a settled conclusion rather than an ongoing ethical inquiry. This normativity gives the discourse a certain strength: it provides clarity and direction, which are often valued in educational settings. At the same time, it leaves limited space for students to wrestle with ambiguity or to experience moderation as a difficult moral choice rather than an expected posture. Moderation, in this frame, is less something to be struggled toward and more something to be accepted as already resolved.

Alongside this normative tone runs a distinctly *preventive discourse*. This is where *wasatiyyah* is mobilized as a protective mechanism, a shield against perceived threats, extremism, deviant interpretations, ideological confusion, or social discord. The curriculum repeatedly signals dangers that students are expected to avoid, sometimes explicitly, sometimes through cautionary examples. Moderation becomes a form of risk management. It teaches students not only how to be good Muslims, but how not to become the "wrong kind" of Muslim. This preventive logic is understandable, especially in a global climate where religious radicalization is a genuine concern. Yet it also shapes the emotional texture of moderation. *Wasatiyyah* is infused with a subtle sense of vigilance. It is something one clings to in order to stay safe, religiously and socially. The cost of this framing, however, is that moderation may come to be associated more with fear of deviation than with confidence in ethical reasoning. Students learn to avoid extremes, but they may not always learn how to navigate moral complexity when clear boundaries are absent.

The third dominant pattern is an *integrative discourse*, perhaps the most aspirational of the three. Here, *wasatiyyah* is constructed as a bridge, between religion and nation, faith and citizenship, personal piety and social responsibility. Islamic moderation is portrayed as fully compatible with national harmony, multicultural coexistence, and civic loyalty. This integration is presented as natural, even seamless. A moderate Muslim is also a good citizen; the two identities reinforce rather than contradict each other. In pedagogical terms, this is an elegant solution to a perennial tension in religious education. It reassures students that religious commitment does not place them at odds with the broader social order. Still, the smoothness of this integration can feel slightly idealized. Real-life negotiations between religious conviction and plural social realities are often messier than the curriculum suggests. The integrative discourse tends to emphasize alignment over friction, coherence over contestation.

What is striking is how these three discursive patterns, normative, preventive, and integrative, do not operate separately. They overlap, reinforce one another, and occasionally blur. The normative discourse tells students what moderation is. The preventive discourse explains why it is necessary. The integrative discourse shows where it belongs: within the moral and civic architecture of the nation. Together, they form a powerful narrative ecology. *Wasatiyyah* becomes morally correct, socially safe, and nationally useful. From an institutional perspective, this is a remarkably efficient construction.

Yet, from an educational standpoint, the combination also raises questions. When moderation is simultaneously prescribed, defended, and harmonized with state objectives, it risks losing some of its ethical openness. There is little room left for moderation as a space of moral struggle, where difficult questions do not always yield tidy answers. The discourse rarely pauses to ask what happens when these frames pull in

different directions, when normative religious commitments generate tension rather than integration, or when preventive caution discourages honest questioning. These tensions are not foregrounded; they remain implicit, perhaps intentionally so.

In this sense, the dominant discursive patterns reveal both the ambition and the restraint of the curriculum. The ambition lies in its effort to produce balanced, thoughtful, socially grounded believers. The restraint lies in how carefully that balance is choreographed. *Wasatiyyah* is taught not as an open-ended moral horizon, but as a carefully managed equilibrium. Whether this equips students to navigate genuinely complex religious and social landscapes, or primarily prepares them to recognize and reproduce an officially sanctioned middle path, remains an open, and perhaps uncomfortable, question.

The Role of JAKIM: Regulator of Discourse, Guardian of Moderate Orthodoxy, and Agent of Social Stability

Across the materials analyzed, the presence of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) is rarely loud, but it is consistently felt. JAKIM does not always appear as an explicit authorial voice within school curricula or textbooks, yet its influence operates more subtly, as a structuring force that determines what can be said, how it can be said, and, perhaps most importantly, what remains outside the frame. In this sense, JAKIM functions first and foremost as a regulator of religious discourse. Regulation here should not be understood narrowly as censorship or control, but as the establishment of interpretive boundaries. Through policy statements, approved definitions, and alignment mechanisms with educational authorities, JAKIM helps set the parameters within which *wasatiyyah* is articulated as legitimate Islamic knowledge.

This regulatory role is most visible in the consistency of language and emphasis across different educational texts. Definitions of moderation tend to converge. Certain terms, balance, justice, harmony, obedience to *sharīʿah*, recur with remarkable regularity. At the same time, alternative or more contentious framings of moderation are largely absent. There is little engagement, for instance, with intra-Muslim debates that frame *wasatiyyah* as critical dissent, ethical resistance, or moral courage in the face of unjust authority. The discourse is not necessarily narrow, but it is carefully curated. JAKIM's regulatory presence thus produces coherence, but coherence achieved through selection. What students encounter is not the full spectrum of Islamic thought on moderation, but a version that has been filtered for pedagogical safety and institutional compatibility.

Closely related to this is JAKIM's role as a guardian of what might be called *moderate orthodoxy*. This is an interesting and somewhat paradoxical position. Orthodoxy is often associated with firmness, boundary maintenance, and doctrinal clarity, while moderation implies

openness and flexibility. In the Malaysian context, these two are not treated as opposites. Instead, moderation is framed as something that must be protected by orthodoxy. *Wasatiyyah* is legitimate precisely because it is anchored in recognized interpretations and authoritative scholarship. Students are repeatedly encouraged to avoid extremism not by independent critical reasoning alone, but by adhering to trusted religious authorities and officially endorsed interpretations.

This guardianship has pedagogical advantages. It provides students with a sense of stability and confidence in a religious landscape that can otherwise feel fragmented or overwhelming. It also reinforces epistemic humility, the idea that not every opinion carries equal weight. Yet there is an accompanying cost. When moderation is so tightly linked to orthodoxy, it risks becoming conservative in the literal sense: preserving what is already established rather than encouraging thoughtful engagement with new ethical challenges. Moderation becomes something to be inherited rather than cultivated. The space for interpretive struggle, disagreement, or creative moral reasoning is present, but limited. It exists at the margins rather than at the center of the educational project.

Beyond discourse regulation and doctrinal guardianship, JAKIM also emerges as an agent of social stability. This role is perhaps the most politically sensitive, and also the most consequential. In curricular representations, *wasatiyyah* is repeatedly associated with harmony, order, and peaceful coexistence. These are not merely moral virtues; they are social goods. JAKIM's vision of moderation aligns closely with national concerns about unity in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society. Through education, moderation becomes a technology of stability, an effort to pre-empt conflict by shaping religious subjectivities that are calm, compliant, and socially predictable.

This stabilizing function is not inherently problematic. In societies marked by deep diversity and historical tensions, stability is a legitimate aspiration. However, when social stability becomes a dominant horizon, moderation risks being instrumentalized. It can begin to function less as an ethical compass and more as a behavioral expectation. Students are encouraged to be moderate not only because it is morally right, but because it is socially safe. The discourse subtly teaches that good religion is religion that does not disturb the social order. Here, *wasatiyyah* takes on a disciplinary dimension. It reassures, but it also constrains.

What is striking is how seamlessly these roles, regulator, guardian, stabilizer, interlock. JAKIM regulates discourse to ensure coherence, guards orthodoxy to maintain legitimacy, and promotes moderation to secure stability. From an institutional standpoint, this triadic role is internally consistent and strategically effective. From an educational perspective, however, it produces an ambivalent outcome. Students are offered a clear, safe, and socially endorsed version of Islam, but they are

less frequently invited into the messy work of ethical discernment where moderation must be negotiated rather than prescribed.

In the end, JAKIM's role in shaping *wasatiyyah* within Islamic education is neither simply restrictive nor purely enabling. It is both. It provides the scaffolding within which moderation can be taught at scale, but it also narrows the range of moral imagination available to students. Whether this trade-off is unavoidable, or whether there are pedagogical ways to hold stability and openness together more productively, remains an open question, one that sits uncomfortably, but perhaps necessarily, at the heart of state-sponsored religious education.

Critical Discussion: Opportunities, Limitations, and Institutional Ambiguities

The institutionalization of *wasatiyyah* within Malaysia's Islamic education system opens up a number of genuine opportunities. At its best, the framework provides a shared moral vocabulary through which religious education can address pressing contemporary concerns, extremism, intolerance, and social fragmentation, without abandoning theological depth. The involvement of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) gives this project coherence and authority. There is something to be said for clarity in religious education, especially in a world saturated with competing interpretations and digital misinformation. For many teachers and students, the official articulation of *wasatiyyah* offers a sense of orientation: a reminder that Islamic commitment and social responsibility need not be opposing forces. In this sense, institutional backing can protect moderation from being dismissed as vague idealism.

At the same time, this strength is also where the first limitation begins to surface. When *wasatiyyah* is strongly anchored in institutional authority, it risks becoming pedagogically prescriptive rather than dialogical. The curriculum tends to present moderation as an answer more than as a question. Students are taught what moderation looks like, but are less often guided through the process of arriving at it themselves. Ethical reasoning, after all, is not only about knowing the "correct" position, but about learning how to navigate uncertainty, disagreement, and moral tension. The current construction of *wasatiyyah* leaves relatively little room for that kind of struggle. Moderation is safe, but it can also feel settled too quickly.

Another limitation lies in the selective nature of the discourse. By emphasizing balance, harmony, and stability, the curriculum foregrounds certain dimensions of Islamic ethics while backgrounding others. Traditions of critical engagement, moral protest, or principled dissent, also part of the Islamic intellectual heritage, receive less attention. This is understandable from a governance perspective, but educationally it creates an incomplete picture. Students may come to associate good religion

primarily with calmness and conformity, rather than with moral courage or ethical responsibility in difficult circumstances. The risk here is subtle: moderation may be internalized as avoiding trouble, rather than as engaging complexity with wisdom and restraint.

Institutional ambiguity further complicates the picture. JAKIM occupies a hybrid position, neither fully an educational authority nor merely a religious advisory body. Its influence on curriculum operates through coordination, guidance, and normative framing rather than direct control. This ambiguity allows flexibility, but it also blurs accountability. When moderation is framed as both a religious imperative and a national objective, it becomes difficult to disentangle pedagogical goals from political considerations. Is *wasatiyyah* being taught primarily to cultivate ethical maturity, or to secure social order? Often, it is both. The problem is not the overlap itself, but the lack of explicit reflection on that overlap within the curriculum.

There is also an unresolved tension between inclusivity and boundary maintenance. On one hand, the institutional discourse promotes tolerance and coexistence, particularly in a multireligious society. On the other hand, it carefully guards doctrinal boundaries and interpretive authority. This produces a form of moderation that is open, but conditionally so. Students learn to respect difference, yet they are also reminded, sometimes implicitly, that such respect has limits. Navigating this tension is not easy, and the curriculum does not always acknowledge its difficulty. The result can be a polite but shallow engagement with pluralism, one that values peace without fully engaging difference as a lived, and sometimes uncomfortable, reality.

Perhaps the most significant ambiguity lies in the dual identity of *wasatiyyah* as both ethical ideal and institutional instrument. As an ethical concept, *wasatiyyah* invites reflection, self-critique, and balance. As an institutional discourse, it demands coherence, predictability, and alignment. These two logics do not always move in the same direction. The curriculum attempts to reconcile them, but traces of tension remain. Students are encouraged to be reflective, yet within carefully drawn lines. They are urged to be moderate, but rarely invited to ask who defines moderation and why. This silence is not accidental; it reflects the broader institutional need for stability. Still, from an educational perspective, it leaves an important question unanswered.

Taken together, these opportunities, limitations, and ambiguities suggest that the institutional project of *wasatiyyah* in Islamic education is neither fully emancipatory nor merely restrictive. It is best understood as a negotiated space, one shaped by sincere ethical aspirations, political realities, and pedagogical compromises. Recognizing this complexity does not undermine the value of moderation. On the contrary, it highlights the need to approach *wasatiyyah* not as a finished product delivered through

curriculum, but as an ongoing educational practice, one that remains open to reflection, critique, and gradual transformation.

The findings of this study carry several pedagogical implications, particularly for teachers of Islamic Education who stand at the front line of translating institutional ideals into lived learning experiences. One immediate implication is the need to treat *wasatiyyah* not merely as content to be delivered, but as a mode of reasoning to be cultivated. Teachers are already positioned as mediators between curriculum texts and students' lived realities; this role could be expanded more consciously. Rather than presenting moderation as a fixed moral endpoint, educators might invite students into guided ethical inquiry, asking how balance is negotiated in real dilemmas, where religious commitments intersect with social complexity. This does not require abandoning curricular boundaries, but it does call for pedagogical courage: allowing questions to linger, acknowledging uncertainty, and modeling reflective restraint rather than simply transmitting correct answers.

Over the longer term, the way *wasatiyyah* is taught has significant consequences for the formation of students' religious reasoning. When moderation is framed primarily as stability and avoidance of extremes, students may develop a religious habitus that is calm and compliant, yet somewhat hesitant in the face of moral ambiguity. This may produce social harmony, but it may also limit ethical imagination. Alternatively, if moderation is experienced as a thoughtful engagement with difference, within faith and beyond it, students are more likely to internalize *wasatiyyah* as an active virtue. Such an approach encourages them to reason, to listen, and to disagree without hostility. The difference is subtle, but consequential. It shapes whether religious moderation becomes a personal moral compass or remains an external expectation tied to institutional approval.

Beyond the Malaysian context, these findings hold relevance for other Muslim-majority countries that have embraced moderation as a guiding principle of religious policy and education. Many states face similar challenges: balancing theological authenticity with social pluralism, preventing radicalization without suppressing intellectual vitality, and aligning religious education with national cohesion. The Malaysian experience suggests that institutional clarity can be a powerful asset, but also that over-institutionalization carries risks. For countries seeking to mainstream moderation, the key lesson may lie not in replicating specific structures, but in reflecting carefully on how moderation is pedagogically framed, whether as a living ethical practice or as a settled doctrinal stance.

At a broader level, this study contributes to global discussions on Islamic education by reframing moderation as an educational question rather than solely a theological or policy concern. It highlights curriculum as a critical site where ideals of balance, justice, and coexistence are either

deepened or flattened. In doing so, it invites scholars and practitioners to move beyond celebratory narratives of moderation and toward a more nuanced engagement with how religious values are taught, stabilized, and sometimes constrained within institutional systems. Perhaps the most important implication, then, is a conceptual one: *wasatiyyah* should be understood not as a finished answer delivered through education, but as a pedagogical horizon, one that requires continual reflection, careful guidance, and the humility to accept that moderation, like education itself, is always unfinished.

Conclusion

This article has examined how *wasatiyyah* is constructed, transmitted, and stabilized within Malaysian secondary school Islamic Education through the institutional involvement of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM). The findings suggest that *wasatiyyah* is not presented as a single, transparent concept, but as a layered discourse shaped by normative, preventive, and integrative frames. JAKIM plays a central role in this process, acting simultaneously as a regulator of religious discourse, a guardian of moderate orthodoxy, and an agent of social stability. Through curriculum guidelines, textbooks, and pedagogical narratives, moderation is framed as ethically desirable, socially safe, and institutionally legitimate. In response to the research questions, the study shows that *wasatiyyah* is institutionalized not only through explicit policy statements, but more powerfully through curricular organization and discursive repetition that render moderation both teachable and governable.

Theoretically, the study contributes to Islamic education scholarship by treating *wasatiyyah* as an educational discourse rather than a purely theological ideal. By applying the lens of curriculum-as-discourse and institutionalization, it demonstrates how moderation is shaped by power, authority, and pedagogical pragmatism. Practically, the findings highlight the need for more dialogical approaches to teaching moderation, approaches that preserve institutional coherence while allowing space for ethical inquiry and interpretive engagement. At the same time, this study is not without limitations. Its primary reliance on document analysis means that classroom interactions and student perspectives are only indirectly captured. Moreover, the Malaysian case, while instructive, cannot be uncritically generalized to all Muslim contexts.

Future research could build on these findings by incorporating ethnographic classroom studies, comparative analyses across different national systems, or longitudinal research on how students internalize moderation over time. Such work would help clarify whether institutionally framed *wasatiyyah* functions as a lived moral resource or remains largely

an official narrative. Ultimately, understanding moderation in Islamic education requires sustained attention to the everyday spaces where ideals are taught, negotiated, and sometimes quietly resisted.

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