

Wasatiyyah and Tasamuh in the ASWJ Methodology: An Analysis of its Role in the Harmony of Malaysian Muslim Society

Muhamad Amirul Zakir bin Zulkifli^{1*}, Mohd Hasrul Shuhari²

Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Kampus Gong Badak, 21300 Kuala Nerus, Terengganu, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.930000070>

Received: 10 December 2025; Accepted: 19 December 2025; Published: 27 December 2025

ABSTRACT

The disunity of the Muslim community, ironically, often thrives in a climate that upholds unity, a perplexing phenomenon that requires in-depth examination. Although Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ) is officially accepted as the main methodology in Malaysia, tensions between groups continue to spread, questioning the effectiveness of the ideals of wasatiyyah and tasamuh in practical application. Previous studies often stopped at textual descriptions of ASWJ principles, failing to uncover how they interact or fail to interact with contemporary social dynamics. Therefore, this paper conceptually examines, based on critical literature analysis, to reveal these gaps. Initial findings indicate that wasatiyyah is often misunderstood as a weak compromise, not a meaningful balance; second, tasamuh remains trapped in rhetoric, rarely manifesting in substantive action. Third, the ASWJ methodology faces challenges of differing interpretations intertwined with group interests, eroding the agenda of harmony. The implication is clear: the framework of wasatiyyah and tasamuh needs to be radically renewed to be relevant to the demands of today's pluralistic society, moving beyond mere empty slogans.

Keywords: Wasatiyyah, Tasamuh, Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah, Social Harmony, Religious Radicalization

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, which staunchly declares Islam as the religion of the Federation, ironically we are often presented with episodes of escalating religious misunderstanding. This is truly disappointing. Although Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ) is upheld as the official methodology an ideological umbrella supposedly promoting moderation and tolerance religious polemics remain a thorn in the side of society. Public debates that tear apart the fabric of communal brotherhood, sometimes ending in dangerous labeling, reflect an implicit failure to fully embrace the principles of wasatiyyah and tasamuh. It is as if there is a gaping chasm between the beautiful doctrines extolled from Friday pulpits and the harsh reality on the ground, where narrow views and petty extremism seem to find space. This not only causes great damage to social stability but also tarnishes the image of Islam itself in the public eye, and even in the eyes of a suspicious outside world. Most previous studies tend to view wasatiyyah and tasamuh as static concepts, merely formulating their definitions without delving deeply into how they struggle, adapt, or are even distorted within the unique Malaysian context, rich with ethnic and religious diversity. Why does this ASWJ mechanism, which should be the pillar of understanding, fail to curb the frequent outbreaks of disunity? This question, often overlooked in academic research, serves as the starting point for this paper, urging a more critical and pragmatic analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The long history of the narrative of wasatiyyah and tasamuh in Islam, especially that which relies on the framework of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ), is often depicted as a middle path that saves the community from left and right extremes. Scholars such as al-Qaradawi (2000) vociferously position wasatiyyah as the core of civilizational building, emphasizing the balance between worldly and otherworldly, individual and society, rationality and revelation—a seemingly complete and ideal view. Similarly, the view of tasamuh is proclaimed as sharia-based tolerance, allowing space for diversity without compromising faith, as discussed by Muhammad

Uthman El-Muhammady (1993) in the Malaysian context. However, the reality of applying these concepts, particularly in the social and political arena of Malaysia, is often far from theoretical perfection. There is a clear tension. Muhammad Faiz Azzam et al. (2020) may argue that ASWJ provides a strong bulwark against radicalism, yet field data often tells a different story namely, how ASWJ rhetoric is sometimes selectively used to discredit minority views or those of differing schools of thought. This becomes a bitter irony. Local scholarship, including works from Universiti Malaya and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, has extensively explored the doctrinal aspects of ASWJ, examining its history and outlining its theological arguments (e.g., Siddiq Fadzil, 2017). Unfortunately, most of these analyses tend to be descriptive, rarely daring to go further to uncover how wasatiyyah and tasamuh, despite being officially recognized, struggle amidst socio-political pressures and diverse religious interpretations. We often see elegant definitions, but less observation on 'how' and 'why' they fail to function effectively. Some other scholars (e.g., Hairudin Harun, 2019) touch upon the challenges of contextual interpretations of wasatiyyah, acknowledging that what is considered 'middle' in one place might be seen as 'extreme' elsewhere, or an unprincipled 'compromise'. This creates confusion, an ambiguity that opens space for subjective interpretations, ultimately undermining the validity of the concept itself. They tend to view this problem purely from a theological perspective, ignoring the more complex sociological and psychological dimensions. Furthermore, discussions on tasamuh are often limited to the context of inter-religious relations, whereas the issue of tolerance among Muslims themselves between schools of thought, intellectual currents, or da'wah groups is often marginalized. This issue, which is far more sensitive, requires deeper research, a matter severely lacking in the existing body of literature. Some argue (e.g., Zulkifli Mohamad al-Bakri, 2021) that tasamuh must have its limits, so that faith is not compromised a view that, while fundamentally true, is often misused to justify the rejection of diverse perspectives within Islam. So, the question is no longer 'what is wasatiyyah and tasamuh', but 'how are they practiced, interpreted, and sometimes exploited' in complex social realities. This gap, between doctrinal idealism and the reality of implementation, is the focal point of this paper, attempting to fill the void left by previous studies that focused too much on the normative, neglecting critical and applicative aspects.

METHODOLOGY

This study is fundamentally a conceptual analysis based entirely on the literature review method. There are no field surveys, no interviews, let alone experiments it is desk research, excavating and dissecting meaning from texts. Why choose this method? Because the challenges we face are not merely problems of raw data, but problems of interpretation, problems of deep understanding of how abstract concepts like wasatiyyah and tasamuh truly function in the minds and actions of society. This method provides space to delve into theological, sociological, and historical nuances often overlooked in empirical studies that focus too much on measurement. The data collection process involved searching and filtering academic documents, such as peer-reviewed journals, books, conference proceedings, and research reports from various disciplines especially the fields of Islamic studies, political science, and sociology of religion. We specifically focused on works discussing wasatiyyah, tasamuh, and the ASWJ methodology, with an emphasis on the Malaysian context or, if unavailable, relevant regional contexts. This was not merely searching for articles; it was a meticulous curation process, where each text was critically read to identify main arguments, hidden assumptions, and existing contradictions. We did not just collect; we evaluated, compared, and critiqued. Qualitative content analysis was used to examine, interpret, and synthesize information from selected sources. This involved several phases: first, the identification of main themes and recurring arguments regarding wasatiyyah and tasamuh within ASWJ. Second, the comparison and contrast of different perspectives, seeking commonalities and differences, and identifying gaps in existing understanding. Third, the synthesis of extracted concepts to construct a more robust analytical framework, capable of explaining the role and challenges of wasatiyyah and tasamuh in the harmony of Malaysian Muslim society.

We deliberately excluded overly dogmatic or apologetic views, instead prioritizing reflective and critical analyses that acknowledge the complexity and ambiguity in every interpretation. This is an effort to move beyond common rhetoric and achieve a more substantive, honest understanding of how these principles operate in the real world. The conceptual framework built from this synthesis will not only explain the problems but also offer a new lens for viewing solutions, or at least, understanding why existing solutions often fail. We are building an intellectual map, not merely listing what already exists. Therefore, the strength of this methodology lies in the depth of its analysis, allowing us to explore complex layers of meaning and forge connections between different

ideas, something impossible to achieve with superficial data alone. This is a method that demands patience, intellectual sharpness, and the willingness to keep questioning, even texts considered authoritative. It is a heavy intellectual undertaking, yet necessary to gain a truly holistic understanding.

FINDINGS

This research has uncovered several key themes illustrating the complexity of wasatiyyah and tasamuh within the ASWJ context in Malaysia. One prominent finding is the fragility of the interpretation of wasatiyyah. Many parties claim it is a middle path, yes, but the definition of 'middle' itself is often vague, even shifting according to political or specific group interests. This is no longer a universal principle; instead, it has become a malleable rhetorical tool, sometimes used to reject any view that does not align with the dominant narrative, thus losing its appeal as a unifying force. We observe how 'moderation' is sometimes equated with 'conformity to the status quo', neglecting the spirit of change and justice that should be at the core of wasatiyyah. The second very noticeable theme is the profound challenge in operationalizing tasamuh, or tolerance. Although often proclaimed, its practical application in Malaysian Muslim society is frequently limited to tolerance towards followers of other religions even then, with strict boundaries. However, when it involves differences of opinion among Muslims themselves, especially on issues of fiqh or da'wah methodology, tasamuh seems to vanish, swallowed by animosity. We see how labels like 'deviant' or 'liberal' are easily thrown around, hindering constructive dialogue and fragmenting the community. In reality, true tasamuh requires maturity to accept differences in interpretation within the permissible scope of sharia, something that is clearly still lacking. Third, the ASWJ methodology, despite being officially recognized, faces serious interpretative pressures. It ought to be a unifying umbrella, yet it is often transformed into an exclusive fortress, preventing the entry of new or less popular views. There is a tendency to limit ASWJ to a single interpretation, usually a conservative one, rejecting the rich and diverse intellectual tradition of Islam. Ironically, this methodology, intended to bring stability, sometimes becomes a cause of intellectual stagnation, narrowing the scope of ijtihad. A lack of deep understanding of the history and evolution of ASWJ itself, beyond the taught dogma, also contributes to this problem, producing a generation less critical of a single narrative. Fourth, there is a significant gap between official rhetoric and the reality of grassroots society. Religious institutions often promote wasatiyyah and tasamuh through lectures and sermons, yes, but this message often fails to resonate well with a society increasingly exposed to various schools of thought, including extremist ones, through social media. This is a war of narratives. Official messages, sometimes delivered in a dry and dogmatic manner, cannot compete with the appeal of more emotional and concise radical narratives. Consequently, trust in traditional institutions begins to erode, leaving a vacuum easily filled by more divisive ideologies. Finally, it was found that identity politics plays an undeniable role in shaping, and even damaging, the embodiment of wasatiyyah and tasamuh. When religious affiliations are overly politicized, these principles are easily sacrificed to gain group support. It becomes a tool, not an objective. Party or individual interests often override the priority of communal unity, causing the principles of wasatiyyah and tasamuh to remain mere empty labels, spoken but not embodied, a bitter reality for anyone who truly loves harmony. This is a systemic weakness that requires more than just religious advice.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, which uncover the shaky interpretations of wasatiyyah and tasamuh within the ASWJ framework in Malaysia, actually imply a larger dilemma in the contemporary religious landscape. So, what does this mean for the real world? This means we have collectively failed to provide a clear and consistent definition for concepts that we ourselves consider the cornerstone of unity. When wasatiyyah can be dragged in any direction by anyone with a platform it loses credibility. It is no longer a compass pointing towards balance, but rather a mirror reflecting the biases and interests of different groups, a rhetorical tool easily distorted. This is truly disheartening. This situation raises a profound question about the effectiveness of our religious institutions in shaping public understanding, because if even the basic message fails to be uniformly understood, how can we expect unity of action? Perhaps this failure also stems from a tendency to teach religion dogmatically, without emphasizing the ability to think critically and empathetically. Overly conservative views, often entrenched in official institutions, may have inadvertently narrowed the scope of wasatiyyah, causing it to be seen as a backward path, not a progressive one. We need to stop clinging to rigid old definitions. Furthermore, the inability of the Muslim community to practice tasamuh among themselves especially in differences of fiqh or theological opinion suggests that our rhetoric of tolerance is actually very fragile. Tolerance that only applies to inter-

religious relations but not intra-religious ones is flawed, defective, and dishonest tolerance. It is merely a mask. This raises suspicion that the problem is not the absence of the principle of *tasamuh*, but rather intellectual ego and the inability to accept that truth may have multiple facets, even within the same sharia boundaries. It seems to reflect that we are more comfortable with 'external enemies' than with 'internal differences' that test maturity more. This also has serious implications for the intellectual development of Islam in Malaysia, because if every difference of opinion is considered a threat that must be suppressed, then innovation and intellectual progress will cease. The ASWJ methodology, which should be a source of strength, is sometimes seen as a burden when interpreted too rigidly. It needs to be understood as a dynamic methodology, not merely a collection of static, unquestionable dogmas. There is an urgent need to re-examine how this methodology is taught and promoted, so that it can foster more open and inclusive thinking, in line with global realities. The failure of institutions to compete with alternative narratives, especially from social media, should also serve as a harsh reminder. It demands that we think strategically about how the message of *wasatiyyah* and *tasamuh* can be conveyed in a more engaging, relevant, and easily understood manner to a younger generation exposed to various ideologies. This requires more than just Friday sermons; it requires more proactive and innovative engagement in cyberspace, a new battlefield for minds. Finally, the involvement of identity politics in religious issues has poisoned the ability of *wasatiyyah* and *tasamuh* to function as agents of unity. When religious principles are instrumentalized for political gain, their value erodes, and they become bland. This indicates that the solution to the problem of harmony lies not only in theological correction but also requires a reform in how politics interacts with religion. This is a systemic challenge that requires political courage to separate the domain of religion from partisan manipulation. In conclusion, this study suggests that as long as we do not dare to confront the complexities of interpretation, inconsistent application, and political manipulation of *wasatiyyah* and *tasamuh* within the ASWJ framework, the dream of harmony for the Malaysian Muslim community will remain a beautiful fantasy that never materializes. This is not only a theological problem but a deep social, political, and leadership problem.

CONCLUSION

Our journey of uncovering *wasatiyyah* and *tasamuh* within the ASWJ methodology in Malaysia concludes with a finding that may be somewhat disappointing, but must be acknowledged. We found that these noble principles, though rhetorically highly praised, often fail to be translated into consistent and meaningful practice within society. *Wasatiyyah*, which should be a benchmark of balance, frequently falls victim to detrimental subjective interpretations, while *tasamuh* remains shackled by rhetoric, failing to transcend the boundaries of intra-religious tolerance. This is not merely a minor oversight; it is a systemic failure that erodes the foundations of the harmony we aspire to. The ASWJ methodology, which ought to be a unifying umbrella, is instead often used as a tool for exclusivity, narrowing intellectual space and rejecting diversity. This gap between idealism and reality is the root cause of persistent tensions in society. It affirms that official declarations alone are insufficient; we need more than that. The need for clearer definitions, more consistent application, and protection from political manipulation is extremely urgent. We can no longer be content with empty slogans that are merely beautiful on the lips. For future research, it would be beneficial for researchers to empirically examine how interpretations of *wasatiyyah* and *tasamuh* differ among various generations of Muslims, especially the youth who are heavily exposed to social media, and to study the impact of specific government policies on the perception and practice of these principles. We need to see how digital changes shape or alter their understanding. If we fail to address these fundamental issues honestly and courageously, with more radical efforts to translate these principles into tangible actions, then the dream of a harmonious Malaysia a society mature in its differences will remain a distant fantasy, merely an endless subject of debate, a tragedy of our own making.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Acknowledgement: We would like to express our highest appreciation to the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia for funding under the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) for project FRGS/1/2024/SSI03/UNISZA/02/2. We also wish to convey our sincere thanks to the Centre for Excellence Management & Research Incubator (CREIM) and the Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies (FKI), Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Terengganu, for their support and cooperation throughout the implementation of this project.

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