Applications of Wasatiyyah in the Contemporary Muslim World

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Chapter 1

The Concept of Al-Wasaṭiyah and the Place of Islamic Moderation

M. Kamal Hassan

Introduction

The term wasatiyyah is used in the context of the Qur’anic1 expression “ummatan wasatan,” which refers to the universal Islamic community or nation having the attributes of justice, excellence and balance in order to serve as Allah’s trustworthy “witnesses over mankind” (“shuhadā’ ‘ala al-nās”) in this world and in the Hereafter (Al-Baqarah: 143). It can also be translated as the “justly balanced quality” or “justly balanced nature” of Islam and the Islamic community. The more popular translation of the term is ‘moderation.’

The term wasatiyyah as well as ‘moderation’ have become increasingly popular in Muslim public discourse, nowadays, as several Muslim national leaders grapple with the religio-political challenges posed by the emergent currents of religious extremism, radicalism and violence in their societies. But the primary focus on the dimension of religious ‘moderation,’ tolerance and inter-religious harmony by national leaders and Muslim NGOs, in this troubled world of ours, in the name of wasatiyyah can lead to the unintended consequence of Muslims and non-Muslims mistaking the part for the whole. Without

1 The Qur’anic translations in this chapter are mostly based on Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s version, while the meanings of Qur’anic verses (ayat) are cited from Muhammad Asad, The Message of the Qur’an. Online Qur’an and its translations sources are also used from the http://quran.com.