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THE QURANIC ORIGINS OF THE *WASAṬIYYA* CONCEPT: A CRITICAL VIEW

Interpretation of the Qur'an as a sacred text has constituted a challenging task both for medieval and contemporary Muslim theologians. Although it is generally accepted in scholarly circles that the Qur'an is a rather early source, which goes back to the first half of the 7th century¹, the composition of the specific works of exegetical genre (*tafsir*) cannot be dated earlier than the 8th century. Even more to that the first treatises that go beyond the elucidation of general meanings of the words (philological *tafsirs*), were composed only in the beginnings of the 10th century (the most prominent of those is "Jami' al-bayān" al-Tabari).

Thus, there appears to be a gap in the tradition of interpretation of the Qur'an: by the time when Islamic theology matured into a separate discipline, there were no authoritative figures left to shed more light on the earliest meanings of the separate ayahs or surahs and the causes of their appearance. For this reason, Islamic exegetical tradition in its large part is often viewed by contemporary scholars as a product of literary activities of the generations of *mufasssirs* who tried to find answers to new questions about the sacred scripture². To put it differently, even though *tafsir* treatises may contain a kernel of truth, there is no way to distinguish the authentic reports from those fabricated with the purpose of filling gaps in interpretation.

In this light, the unraveling of the "original meaning" of many difficult passages of the Qur'an may appear to be a lost cause. Yet, a scholarly attempt still can be made to establish the variety of meanings in order to select the most plausible of them historically and semantically. Needless to say that such a scientific exercise can be extremely helpful for understanding of how the Qur'an has been interpreted by Muslim scholars of various time periods and, consequently, deconstructing the background of different Islamic movements that derive their ideology and legitimacy from the major sacred text of Islam.

A case in point here is the ayah 143 of the surah al-Baqara, which has been traditionally considered as the first one revealed after the Prophet's emigration from Mecca to Yathrib in 622 CE. This ayah appears in the passage (ayahs 142–145) devoted to the changes in the direction of prayers (*qibla*) for the Muslim community in the context of polemics with the people of the Book:

"Wa kazalika ja'alnakum ummatan wasatan litakunu shuhada' 'ala al-nās wa yaku-nu rasulu alaykum shahidan. Wa mā ja'alna al-qibla allati kunta alayha illa lina'lama man yattabi'u al-rasula minman yanqalibu 'alā 'aqibayhi wa 'in kanat lakabīratan illa 'ala allazina hadā allahu wa ma kana allahu liyudi'a imanakum inna allaha bi-l-nassi lara'ufun rahimun" (al-Baqara: 143).

We have made you [believers] into a just community, so that you may bear witness [to the truth] before others and so that the Messenger may bear witness [to it] before you. We only made the direction the one you used to face [Prophet] in order to distinguish those who follow the Messenger from those who turn on their heels: that test was hard, except for those God has guided. God would never let your faith go to waste [believers], for God is most compassionate and most merciful towards people (translation of M.A.S. Abdel Haleem).

The major confusion here is caused by the first part of this ayah where the expression *ummataṅ wasaṭan* is used. Although the word *wasataṅ* has a rather lucid etymology and meaning³, its appearance in this context and in the grammatical form of *nasb* (accusative case) is not entirely clear. For one thing, it is evident that *wasataṅ* in this ayah is meant to signify a specific feature of the Muslim community, or some quality which makes it particularly suitable to be witnesses *for/against* other communities. Such an approach dominates the analysis of the ayah in major exegetical treatises on the Qur'an.

The question of *wasataṅ* received a close examination already in the tafsir "Jami' al-bayān" of al-Tabari (d. 310/923). First, he comes up with what he regards as the general usage of Arabs for *wasat*, namely "ḥiyar" (الخيار) – "best", "selected" person or group of people [Al-Tabari, 6]. Al-Tabari asserts that this privileged title was ascribed to the Muslim community due to the highest qualities of its religious teaching which avoids extremes of Christian and Jewish doctrines [Al-Tabari, 6]. Yet, he goes on to uncover *ta'wīl* (a symbolic meaning) of the word *ḥiyar* which, as he argues, here is what *wasat* stands for [Al-Tabari, 7]. In this respect al-Tabari says that *wasat* in al-Baqara: 143 means 'adl because it is the best embodiment of ḥiyar [Al-Tabari, 7].

It must be noted that almost all mufassirs are unanimous in advancing *wasat* as a synonym of the word 'adl, or justice, and typically support this version by numerous reports from previous authorities. However, the focus of Muslim scholars' attention may substantially vary. For example, Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373) in the end of his paragraph on al-Baqara: 143 does cite a number of hadiths in which the parallels between *wasat* and 'adl are drawn. His major focus, though, revolves around the explanation of *wasat* as "ḥiyar" (خيار). He argues that Islamic community is made by Allah *wasataṅ* in the sense "the best of all communities" (خيار الأمم) [Ibn Kathir, 191] with the perfect laws, the most straight paths and clearest ways [Ibn Kathir, 191]. Here Ibn Kathir bases his argument on the meaning of *wasat* not as "middle", but more precisely as "center" which, according to him, is usually the best part of anything. In this respect he comes up with the example of an oasis the central part of which is always the best [Ibn Kathir, 191–192]. Following this logic, Ibn Kathir asserts that the Prophet was *wasat* (center) of Islamic community, that is the best and the most noble of it [Ibn Kathir, 192].

It must be noted that Ibn Kathir is not the only representative of Islamic exegetical tradition who tried to introduce some evidence for understanding *wasataṅ* as *center* in spatial terms. For example, a hanbalite jurist and theologian al-Jawzi (d. 597/1200–1201), although supporting interpretation of *wasataṅ* as 'adlan (justice) himself, also quotes the opinion of some Abu Sulayman al-Dimashki who claims that this ayah implies that the *qibla* of Muslims lies between (*wasataṅ*) that of the Jews who pray to the west and that of Christians who pray to the east [Ibn al-Jawzi, 92]. This obviously constitutes an attempt to interpret *wasataṅ* in terms of the symbolic space – an idea that eliminates the necessity of establishing a metaphorical meaning of this word.

Thus, there appears to be a certain division between the two meanings ascribed to *wasataṅ* in exegetical literature: while the usage of "ḥiyar" supports understanding of it as "best, chosen community", another seems to advance the notion of 'adl which renders the *umma* as a "just community". The logical chain of argument seems to be as following: *wasat* means "best" and "best" is first and foremost "just", thus *wasat* means "just". These speculations constitute an attempt of the mufassirs to find meaningful connections between *wasat* and 'adl in the realm of metaphors. In this they tend to establish specific understanding of justice as the way of middle decisions or a state of things between two extremes.

In addition to rational reasoning, there are also textual arguments from the Qur'an that Muslim scholars adduce in this case. For example, it is usually presumed that the ayah al-Qalam: 28 in which the form *awsatu* is applied to a person, uses the root *w-s-t* in the meaning similar to that of al-Baqara: 143:

"Qala 'awasatuhum 'alam 'aql lakum lawla tusbihūn" (al-Qalam: 28).

The wisest of them said, “Did I not say to you, ‘Will you not glorify God?’” (translation of M.A.S. Abdel Haleem).

Also Ibn Kathir points out to another example of possible usage of *wasat* in the Qur’an, namely al-Baqara: 238 where *al-salat al-wusta* (الصلاة الوسطى) is mentioned [Ibn Kathir, 191]. Yet, in what concerns al-Qalam, 28, there is also no certainty about the feature which is implied here to underline specific (“most middle”) status of that person. It is evident that Abdel Haleem translation is just of the many possible versions. In the same vein, heated discussions surround the true meaning of *al-salat al-wusta* in al-Baqara: 238 that preclude its usage as evidence in this context.

As for the contemporary exegetes, it is clear that in their approaches to al-Baqara: 143 they completely follow the path of the medieval tradition. Yet, in many non-standard tafsir works this ayah gains even more pronounced function of the confirmation of the special (even messianic) status of the Muslim community. For example, based on its quality of moderateness (or achieving the golden mean in everything) Sayyid Qutb considers the Islamic *ummah* as a provider of real values for the whole humanity: its mission is to establish justice in the world and differentiate between what is right and what is wrong [Qutb, I, 130]. Moreover, in this status, the Islamic community must not borrow anything of this from other nations – this is why Allah has given Muslims their own *qibla* [Qutb, I, 131].

Another example of establishing the exclusive status of the Muslim community through an interpretation of *wasatan* may be found in the tafsir of Muhammad Shafi:

Through such a characterization of the Islamic Ummah, the Holy Qur’an has thus indicated that this Ummah possesses the essential quality of manhood to a degree of perfection that no other Ummah does, and that it is superior to all others in serving the purpose for which the whole cosmic order has been created, and for which all the prophets and divine books have been sent [Shafi, I, 369–370].

Both S. Qutb and M. Shafi tend to stress the polyvalency of *wasatan* as long as all the meanings that can be derived from it (best, just, moderate, chosen) bear evidently positive connotations for the description of Islamic community. At the same time, they obviously prefer to elaborate on the quality of moderation as the basis for all others providing numerous aspects of holding to the “middle ground” in all doctrinal and ritual as well as in socio-economic and political issues of the Islamic religious teaching. In addition to that, the idea of moderation in their works is presented in a way that makes it a synonym for balance and harmony (“equilibrium”) which, in their turn, are associated with the standard of perfection.

In the light of these exegetical efforts, which were intended to infuse *wasatan* with as many positive connotations as possible, it comes as no surprise that the ayah al-Baqara: 143 has received a special attention in the works of the prominent figures of contemporary Islamic revivalist thought. Moreover, it has provided the ideological background for the so called *wasatīyya*⁴ movement, or a school of thought, which is represented by a number of separate theologians and religious thinkers who promote the image of Islam as first and foremost a religion of *moderation*⁵. This position is clearly founded on the reading of *ummatan wasatan* as “a community of the middle path”, or the one that avoids extremes⁶. This situation may come as a good example of how one particular interpretation is pushed forward to serve as an ideological basis for a religious movement. In this case, the plurality of possible meanings (some of which clearly have little to do with moderation *per se*) is sacrificed to advancing the one that to a particular group of theologians seems to be most adequate and felicitous to represent Islam and its message as a religious teaching in general.

The central figure of the *wasatīyya* movement at the present time is shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi who is also often considered to be the founder of this school of thought. However, as it follows from the previous analysis, al-Qaradawi did not actually invent this

message – he seems to have picked it up from the earlier scholars and employed it as a motto for his global activities. In his numerous works on the subject, al-Qaradawi has developed a universal notion of *wasatiyya* as permeating all aspects of Islamic religious and social teaching [al-Qaradawi 2011]. In addition, he offers a *wasatiyya*-style solution for many of the current world's problems.

It is important to note though that al-Qaradawi's approach contains a certain controversy. On the one hand, he declares his utmost willingness to set out the notion of *wasatiyya* as clearly and precisely as possible to avoid misinterpretations on the part of those who are going to implement it in practice [al-Qaradawi 2011, 39]. In other words, "the global mufti" is aware of the vagueness of this term and intends to prevent speculations or a misuse of it. On the other hand, his attempts to define *wasatiyya* with a number of rather general statements can barely serve such a purpose, especially considering the fact that those points in many cases constitute a replica of already widespread ideas of the Islamic revivalist thought.

In his latest pamphlet "al-Wasatiyya in Islam and its stages" ("Kalimat fi al-wasatiyya al-islamiyya wa ma'alimuha"), al-Qaradawi comes up with thirty major points about the essence of Islamic centrism [al-Qaradawi 2011]. As it may be easily predicted, in the first place they confirm the status of Islam as all-encompassing universalistic teaching, the supremacy of the Qur'an and Sunna, the necessity of the call to Islam (*da'wa*), the obligation of *jihad* for protecting or liberating Islamic territories and the centrality of religious responsibilities and morals in human life [al-Qaradawi 2011, 41–44]. Yet, at the same time al-Qaradawi calls for building up a hierarchy of religious obligations to avoid focusing on the minor ones at the expense of those that are more important. Traditionally, he mentions the necessity of *ijtihad* and renovating of Islam from inside, i.e. without resorting to ideas of other ideological systems [al-Qaradawi 2011, 46]. Nonetheless, al-Qaradawi also tried to pay the tribute to the western values, stressing democracy and the rights of religious minorities, human rights, freedom and justice as indispensable parts of his *wasatiyya* program.

In addition to mentioned above, two points of al-Qaradawi's approach deserve a special attention: first, his emphasis on *gradualism* (introducing Islamic social order through gradual transformations and reforms) and, secondly, his inclination to inclusivity (the idea of widening boundaries of Islamic orthodoxy to include as many Islamic groups and movements as possible in the process of formation of the global Islamic *umma*)⁷. In general, al-Qaradawi's program comes not as a system or synthesis, but rather as a conglomerate of ideas reflecting the "wishful thinking" of their author. In this respect, *wasatiyya* seems to continue the tradition of Islamic utopianism of the second half of the XXth century in the form of setting yet another vague ideal of the "Golden Mean".

Besides al-Qaradawi, there are other religious thinkers, journalists and secular intellectuals of various affiliations, who make attempts to employ *wasatiyya* as an important element of their agendas. Among others, historian Tariq al-Bishri, theologian Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazzali, scholar Muhammad Ammara, journalist Fahmi Huwaydi, and others. However, it is rather curious that the very idea of Islam's moderation is also gaining popularity even in the circles of theologians, which belong to the radical *sala-fiyya* trends [Rubin 2010, 30]. Moreover, at the peak of its popularity *wasatiyya* was even institutionalized in such countries as Kuwait and Malaysia in the form of specific centers and organizations.

For instance, in Malaysia this ideology has been actively supported by government as a means against the spreading of radical groups. In 2012 this led to the establishment of the Institute of Wasatiyyah [Mazlan 2013, 6]⁸. It is curious that Malaysian scholars tried to somehow develop the Quranic notion of *wasat* further by providing their own understanding, which would be more specific than all the other traditional views on al-Baqara: 143. M. Kamali argues that the most appropriate translation for *ummatan wasatan* would

be “a community justly balanced” [Kamali 2015, 16–25]. This view, to him, is much more inclusive than “moderate” or simply “just” or “balanced”.

In addition to that, in the case of Ukraine the idea of *wasatiyya* was picked up and actively promoted by the Muslim organization “Al-Raid”, which in 2011 established official links with the Center of “Wasatiyya” in Kuwait [Shestopalets 2014]. In the texts of Seyran Arifov, who has acted as the major “voice” of “Al-Raid”, *wasatiyya* is viewed as an ideological platform for the overall development of Islam in Ukraine which can help in “incorporating both modernity and the principle of a constant renewal without breaking up with the roots and preserving the light of our spiritual world and values” [Arifov 2012, 1]. He also writes: “[Wasatiyya] offers a balance which would allow Muslims of Ukraine finding their place in the multiethnic Ukrainian society. What is even more important, it also could provide the perspective and direction of further development” [Arifov 2012, 1].

Thus, despite its seeming insignificance, the issue of the word *wasat* in al-Baqara: 143 may have a certain impact on the ways in which Islam is seen, interpreted and represented. Another example of this may be found in what concerns the attempts of western translators to produce an accurate rendition of the Qur’an into European languages. Already the analysis of the most famous and authoritative translations shows the variety of approaches to this question. In this context, though, only a few of the translators have ventured to come up with their own interpretation of the word *wasatan* which would differ from the literal meaning or official exegetical views of the subject.

For example, A. Arberry translates the beginning phrase of al-Baqara: 143 as “Thus We have appointed you a midmost nation” [Arberry 1996, 18]. In his turn, Abdel Haleem prefers to use “a just community”, at the same time, adding the comment about the literary meaning of *ummatan wasatan* (‘a middle nation’) [Abdel Haleem 2004, 16]. The author of an insider translation (authorized by the Al-Azhar University) M. Pickthall gives just the literary meaning – “a middle nation” [Pickthall 2001, 43]. As for M. al-Hilali and M. Khan rendition (which was published by “King Fahd Complex for the printing of the Holy Qur’an”), it combines two metaphorical meanings of *wasatan* mentioned in the tafsir literature – “a just (and the best nation)” [al-Hilali and Khan, 29]. Among others, the version of Nicolas Starkovsky – “a well balanced community” – should be mentioned [Starkovsky 2005, 299].

A similar situation can be observed in the translations of the Qur’an to other European languages. For example, both R. Paret and H. Bobzin rendered *ummatan wasatan* as “*einer in der Mitte stehenden Gemeinschaft*”/“*eine Gemeinde, in der Mitte steht*”, or “a community standing in the middle” [Paret 1982, 25; Bobzin 2010, 25].

Russian translators, in their turn, have followed much more diverse patterns for al-Baqara: 143. On the one hand, E. Kuliev and Abu Adel use the versions of the exegetical tradition – “a community, holding to the middle” (“общинной, придерживающейся середины”) [Кулиев 1995, 25] and “a middle community [most just and best]” (“общинной средней [самой справедливой и самой лучшей]”) respectively [Абу Адель 2008, 25]. On the other hand, Osmanov takes completely different path, translating *wasatan* as “amongst” in reference to some group of people from Muslims themselves – “we have made amongst you such a community” [Османов 1995, 24].

In this context, the Russian translation of I. Krachkovskiy constitutes even more significant diversion from the whole tradition of interpretation of al-Baqara: 143 when he renders *ummatan wasatan* as *mediating community (obshinoy posredstvuyushey)*⁹ [Крачковский, 41]. This version was explicated even more clearly in the Ukrainian translation of Valeriy Rybalkin as “community-mediator” (*obshyna-poserednytsya*) [Рибалкін 2002, 131]. It might be pointed out that this version is almost absent from tafsir literature, except for some marginal reports, like the one that appears in tafsir al-Tabari on the authority of Ibn Zayd: “They (Muslim community) are the connection (*wasat*) between the

Prophet and other nations” [al-Tabari, 8]. In addition to the mentioned above, it is important as well to note that there is no commonly accepted translation of “*awsatu*” in the ayah al-Qalam, 28 (to which most of mufassirs refer to in determining the meaning of the al-Baqara: 143) either: wisest (Abdel Haleem), best (Pickthall, Hilali and Khan, Kuliev), middle (Osmanov, Krachkovskiy) etc.

This difference in translations of *wasatan-awsatu* is by no means a specific case and in general reflects the complexity which is inherent in all sacred texts, especially those dated back to the periods of ancient civilizations. For this reason many scholars simply take this situation for granted as something that does not deserve attention.

Yet, my point here is that the nature of plurality of meanings may be caused by different reasons. On the one hand, it may come as a result of the stylistic and poetic features or philosophical content of the text which reflects author’s attempts to explicate his insights about the nature of the sacred and mysteries of the world. On the other hand, the inability of later readers to comprehend some part of a sacred text may be due to the time distance and loss of the context in which a particular revelation/text appeared. In other words, something that contemporary audience might have taken for granted or considered nothing special may pose an unsolvable question for later generations.

While the first dimension of this polysemanticism calls for constant reflection and deeper appreciation of sacred texts, the latter case has important implications for historical and sociological analysis. In relation to the topic of this article the questions that persist here are twofold: 1) the possibility of uncovering the “original meaning” the ayah and 2) the implication of different interpretations for the development of a religious tradition, including appearance of different schools of thought and patterns of social behavior, or even formation of generalized images of Islam on the basis of this or that ayah. Needless to say that the first question is unlikely to receive a conclusive answer until more solid evidence and sources on the origins of the Qur’an are discovered. In its turn, answering the second one can be important to shed more light on the evolution of Muslim discourses on the Qur’an and the origins of contemporary movements and teachings within Islam.

Summarizing this brief overview of approaches to interpretation of al-Baqara: 143 in Islamic theological tradition and scholarly translations, it might be noted that seemingly clear expression and words in the Qur’an may cause no less confusion than some unknown or rare vocabulary. This is apparent from the way the word *wasatan* has been treated in exegetical literature: “a middle community” (a community standing in the middle), “the best community” (the chosen community), “a just community”, “a mediating community” (community-mediator). Although none of them changes the meaning of the verse in a fundamental way (as long as all the interpretations are somehow connected to the basic meaning of *wasat*), it nonetheless clearly demonstrates that even minor variations may be important when the Qur’an is seen as a source of direct laws or prescriptions and guidance for organizing social reality. This also presents the basic mechanisms of how favoring a particular interpretation of Qur’anic ayahs provides ideological positions and stances that are deployed by different schools of thought in their struggle for religious authority.

¹ See, for instance, F. Donner’s “The Narrative of Islamic Origins” [Donner 1998].

² See, for instance, the article of U. Rubin [Rubin 1993, 14] and J. Burton [Burton 1993, 6].

³ In Arabic “middle”, “center” or “something placed between two extremes” [Lane, 2941–2942].

⁴ The name of the movement is derived from the word *wasat* mentioned in the ayah.

⁵ See on the *wasatiyya* movement: Dekmejian R. H. Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World. Syracuse, N.Y., 1995. P. 213–220; Mandaville P. G. Global Political Islam.

London, 2007. P. 114–117; Hoigilt J. Rhetoric and Ideology in Egypt's Wasatiyya Movement // Arabica. Vol. 57. 2010; The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies (ed. Freedman M.). Oxford, United Kingdom, 2013. P. 637–640; Gräf B. The Concept of Wasatiyya in the Work of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi // Global Mufti: The Phenomenon of Yusuf al-Qaradawi (ed. Gräf B. and Skovgaard-Petersen J.). New York, 2009; Rubin B. M. The Muslim Brotherhood: the Organization and Policies of a Global Islamist Movement. New York, 2010. P. 30–33; Mazlan I. et al. Wasatiyyah Discourse according to Muslim Scholars in Malaysia // Advances in Natural and Applied Sciences. Vol. 7, No. 1. 2013. P. 6–14; Kamali M. H. The Middle Grounds of Islamic Civilization: The Quranic Principle of Wasatiyyah // Journal of Civilisation Studies, Vol. 1, No. 1 (October 2008). P. 7–41; Baker R. W. Worldly Islam: the Islamic Wasatiyyah and the Quest for Democracy // Oriente Moderno, Nuova serie, Anno 87, Nr. 2, Islams and Democracies. 2007. P. 327–354.

⁶ Yet, it could be noted that while in the classical tradition (starting from al-Tabari) this idea appears to designate the extremes of the religious teachings of Christians and Jews, contemporary scholars usually refer to such issues as resorting to violence for achieving religious means (terrorism), etc.

⁷ The second idea, in combination with al-Qaradawi's call for simplification of Islamic religious teaching in secondary matters, explicitly contradicts the attempts of such groups as *al-ah-bash* to limit the Islamic orthodoxy on the basis of *ash'arism*.

⁸ See about the intellectual discourse on wasatiyya in Malaysia: Mazlan I. et al. Wasatiyyah Discourse according to Muslim Scholars in Malaysia // Advances in Natural and Applied Sciences. Vol. 7, No. 1. 2013. P. 6–14; Kamali M. H. The Middle Grounds of Islamic Civilization: The Quranic Principle of Wasatiyyah // Journal of Civilisation Studies, Vol. 1, No. 1 (October 2008). P. 7–41; Hanapi M. Sh. The Wasatiyyah (Moderation) Concept in Islamic Epistemology: A Case Study of its Implementation in Malaysia // International Journal of Humanities and Social Science. Vol. 4, No. 9 (1). 2004. P. 51–62.

⁹ This view was possibly adopted by Krachkovskiy from the translation of G. Sablukov [Саблюков 1907, 147].

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