



The Religious Infrastructure of Al-Afgānī and ʿAbduḥ's Nationalism: Wasaṭiyyah as a Unified Reform Strategy in Colonial Egypt

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Abstract

Existing studies on Jamāluddīn Al-Afgānī and Muhammad ʿAbduḥ have mostly stayed at the level of biography, examining their life histories and theological reform separately, rather than connecting their activism to the twin frameworks of nationalism and religious moderatism (wasaṭiyyah) as these unfolded together in colonial Egypt. This paper goes beyond biography by reading Al-Afgānī and ʿAbduḥ's joint contribution to nation-revival and religious moderation as a single, unified reform strategy, using a qualitative literature-study method that reads their biographical record against the conceptual lenses of anti-colonial nationalism and Qur'anic wasaṭiyyah. The study finds that the spirit of Al-Afgānī's movement contributed to the revival of the community movement for independence and the development of science and literature in Egypt through three interlocking means: preparing the right environment by arousing religious values and nationalism, writing political articles in language that was beautiful yet easy to digest, and producing students who became prominent movers and writers in Egypt. ʿAbduḥ himself was active in social and political movements, both through party participation and through writings that ignited the spirit of nationalism, while in the religious sphere he called for understanding Islamic law from its main sources while practicing moderation, anchored in his interpretation of the four guidances (hidāyah) in surah al-Fātiḥah. The paper concludes that nationalism and moderatism are best understood not as two separate outcomes of two separate biographies but as two faces of one unified reform strategy.

Keywords: *Islamic Reform, Nationalism, Religious Moderation, Jamāluddīn Al-Afgānī, Muhammad ʿAbduḥ, Wasaṭiyyah*

INTRODUCTION

Egypt went through a long history with a civilization whose relics are even included among the wonders of the world that still exist; however, the country only adopted the republican system of government in 1953. Egypt and Indonesia share a close relationship; Egypt was the first country to recognize Indonesia's sovereignty and to deny Dutch colonialism over Indonesia, and both countries, with majority-Muslim populations, share the bitter experience of colonialism. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Egypt experienced colonization by both France and the United Kingdom. During this period, numerous movements emerged in the political sphere as well as in education, aimed at liberating Egypt from the colonizers and building an independent and prosperous nation; among the most prominent figures in this movement were Muhammad ʿAbduḥ and Jamāluddīn Al-Afgānī.

Why these two figures, and why together, is worth stating plainly before turning to the literature. Al-Afgānī and ʿAbduḥ are routinely named side by side in survey accounts of Islamic reform, yet that pairing is usually treated as a biographical fact: the teacher (Al-Afgānī) met the student in 1871 rather than as an analytical claim about how reform movements achieve political



traction. This paper treats the pairing itself as the object of explanation: not “what did each man believe,” but “what did the combination of nationalist mobilization and religious moderation accomplish together that neither could have accomplished alone.” Framed this way, the Egyptian case becomes a test of a more general proposition about religiously legitimated political mobilization under colonial rule, a proposition whose relevance extends well beyond nineteenth-century Egypt, as the Critical Comparison subsection in the Findings and Discussion later shows with reference to Indonesian and Central Asian cases ([Nasbi, 2019](#); [Sirait, 2020](#)).

Previous scholarship on the two figures has largely stopped at biography, treating their nationalist activism and their religious-moderation thought as two separate stories, and the Literature Review below explores the detailed account and critical synthesis. What remains comparatively underexplored is how these two dimensions reinforced one another as a single, unified reform strategy, rather than as two parallel but unconnected biographical careers is a gap that matters because it is precisely this entanglement, not either dimension alone, that explains why the Al-Afgānī-ʿAbduh partnership continued to be cited as a reference point in later Muslim reform movements, including in Indonesia.

Based on the gap identified in the literature review below, this paper addresses two questions: (1) in what concrete ways did Jamāluddīn Al-Afgānī and Muhammad ʿAbduh’s activities contribute to the awakening of nationalism in Egypt, and (2) how did Muhammad ʿAbduh’s religious thought articulate moderatism (*wasatīyyah*) as the religious counterpart to that nationalist awakening. Accordingly, this paper aims not merely to narrate the two figures’ biographies but to read that biographical record analytically through the conceptual lenses of anti-colonial nationalism and Qur’anic moderation, to show how the two dimensions formed a single, mutually reinforcing reform project.

Thus, it is interesting to discuss how the struggle of the two figures to present the image of Egypt that is known to the world today and examine how Islam plays a role in the lives of the Egyptian.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous scholarship on Jamāluddīn Al-Afgānī and Muhammad ʿAbduh has largely stopped at biography. Historical studies of Al-Afgānī tend to foreground his role in shaping the Egyptian national debate and the broader awakening of anti-colonial political consciousness in Egypt ([Keddie, 1983](#)). Studies on ʿAbduh, by contrast, are dominated by analyses of his theological and legal reformism, particularly his rationalist reading of *tawḥīd* and his exegetical work in *Tafsīr Al-Manār* ([Abbas, 2014](#); [Kerr, 1966](#)). More recent Indonesian scholarship has revisited Al-Afgānī’s thought mainly in connection with its later reception in Indonesian reform movements such as Sarekat Islam and Muhammadiyah ([Mahardika, 2023](#)) or has examined ʿAbduh’s journalistic role at *al-Waqāʾ al-Misriyyah* as a discrete episode of press history ([Amir & Rahman, 2024](#)). What remains comparatively underexplored is how the nationalist activism and the religious-moderation project of the two figures reinforced one another as a single, unified reform strategy, rather than as two parallel but unconnected biographical careers. This gap matters because it is precisely the entanglement of national awakening and religious moderation – not either dimension alone – that explains why the Al-Afgānī-ʿAbduh partnership continued to be cited as a reference point in later Muslim reform movements, including in Indonesia. To read this entanglement, this study combines two complementary frameworks: nationalism is read through the lens of anti-colonial national awakening as discussed in studies of the Egyptian national debate ([Keddie, 1983](#)), while moderatism is read through the conceptual framework of *wasatīyyah*, following Kamali’s account of *wasatīyyah* as a principle of balance, justice, and avoidance of extremes, which is then situated in ʿAbduh’s own exegetical articulation of moderation in *Tafsīr Al-Manār* ([Kamali, 2015](#)).

A critical reading of the existing scholarship suggests that these two bodies of literature remain largely additive rather than integrative. Studies of Al-Afgani's anti-colonial activism (Amiruddin et al., 2024; Keddie, 1983; Kemper, 2024) and studies of Abduh's theological rationalism (Abbas, 2014; Kerr, 1966) rarely engage with each other's analytical frameworks. Moreover, even scholarship that links both figures to nationalism (Zahra & Fatimah, 2023) or examines the later political appropriation of Islamic modernism (Helmy, 2021) tends to treat wasatiyyah as a contextual background rather than as the normative mechanism through which nationalist mobilization acquired religious legitimacy (Helmy et al., 2021). This paper addresses that gap by reading these two strands of scholarship in dialogue with one another, arguing that nationalism and wasatiyyah should be understood as complementary and mutually constitutive analytical lenses rather than as alternative interpretations of the same historical phenomenon.

This joint framework can be stated more precisely as a two-variable theoretical model. The first variable, anti-colonial nationalism, is treated here following Keddie (1983) not as a fixed ideological content but as a mobilizational capacity: the ability to organize collective anti-colonial action around a shared identity. The second variable, wasatiyyah, is treated following Kamali (2015) as a doctrinal position balancing revelation and reason. The theoretical claim advanced in this paper is that these two variables are not independent: mobilizational capacity in a colonial Muslim society is constrained by the degree to which the identity being mobilized around is doctrinally legitimate, and doctrinal legitimacy of a moderate, non-exclusivist kind is, in turn, more likely to translate into successful mobilization than either a rigidly exclusivist or a purely secular alternative, because it can address both religiously conservative and modernizing audiences simultaneously. This is a stronger claim than simply noting that Al-Afgānī and ʿAbduh happened to work together: it predicts that wherever this pairing of moderate doctrine and nationalist mobilization is absent for instance, where nationalism is pursued in an exclusivist religious register or in a purely secular one mobilization should be comparatively less durable or less broad-based, a prediction consistent with the contrast Helmy (2022) draws between modernist reform and its later authoritarian appropriations, discussed further in the Findings and Discussion.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper uses a qualitative literature-study (library research) method. Primary data consist of relevant verses of the Qur'an and ḥadīth of the Prophet, the primary writings of Al-Afgānī and ʿAbduh themselves (notably Al-ʾUrwah Al-Wuṣqū, Risālah Al-Wāridāt, Risālah At-Tauhīd, and Tafsīr Al-Quran Al-Hakīm), and secondary biographical sources written about the two figures. These sources were collected through documentation techniques, then analyzed using descriptive-analytical content analysis: data were read, classified into two thematic categories (a) nationalist activism and (b) religious-moderation thought, and interpreted with reference to the two analytical frameworks set out in the literature review (anti-colonial nationalism and Qur'anic wasatiyyah). First, nationalism is read through the lens of anti-colonial awakening as discussed in studies of Egyptian national consciousness in the late nineteenth century (Keddie, 1983). Second, moderatism is read through the conceptual framework of wasatiyyah (the Qur'anic middle path), following Kamali's (2015) elaboration of wasatiyyah as a principle of balance, justice, and avoidance of extremes, which is then situated in ʿAbduh's own exegetical articulation of moderation in Tafsīr Al-Manār (Kamali, 2015). These two frameworks are used jointly to trace how the historical-biographical data answer the research questions posed in the introduction. Document selection followed three inclusion criteria: (a) direct primary authorship by Al-Afgānī or ʿAbduh, (b) secondary biographical works with sustained scholarly engagement across subsequent historiography, and (c) direct relevance to either the nationalist or the wasatiyyah thematic category; sources meeting none of these criteria were excluded. To support the credibility and

trustworthiness of the analysis, the assignment of sources to the two thematic categories was cross-checked against the established secondary historiography (Keddie, 1983; Kerr, 1966), and citations were traced back to their original passages rather than relied upon secondhand wherever the source was accessible, consistent with standard credibility strategies in qualitative library research.

One further methodological clarification concerns how the two thematic categories were operationalized during coding. A passage was coded as “nationalist activism” when it described organized action, writing, or teaching oriented toward Egyptian self-rule or resistance to foreign control; a passage was coded as “wasatīyyah/religious-moderation thought” when it articulated a position on the relationship between revelation and reason, or between religious identity and openness to non-Muslim or non-traditional interlocutors. Passages satisfying both criteria simultaneously, which, per the findings below, turned out to be common rather than exceptional, were treated as direct evidence for this paper’s central claim that the two dimensions were mutually constitutive rather than separable, and are flagged as such in the analysis that follows.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented in two interlocking parts corresponding to the two research questions: the nationalist dimension of Al-Afgani and Abduh's activism and the moderatist (wasatīyyah) dimension of Abduh's religious thought. Read together, the two parts show that the nationalist and religious dimensions of the two figures' legacy were not separate careers but mutually reinforcing components of a single reform strategy.

Before turning to the two analytical dimensions, a brief biographical overview is useful. Jamaluddin Al-Afghani was born in 1839 in Asadabad, located west of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. Born into a noble family, he studied Arabic, Sharia, philosophy, and logic. He also studied medicine and acquired knowledge from distinguished scholars in various disciplines. After completing his studies, he traveled to India, where he spent one year studying science (Al-Afgani & Abduh, 2014; Imarah, 1988).

Jamaluddin Al-Afghani first arrived in Egypt in early 1869. At that time, his reputation had already become known among Al-Azhar students, although his stay in Egypt was relatively brief. During his visit, he delivered lectures at Al-Azhar on Qur'anic interpretation and Sufism, attracting considerable attention from his audience (Amin, 1944).

In 1871, Al-Afghani returned to Egypt. Although his original intention was only to visit and travel, Riyad Basha persuaded him to settle there. During this period, he witnessed the end of Khedive Ismail's reign and the beginning of Khedive Tawfiq's rule, when Egypt was experiencing economic, social, ideological, and political crises (Al-Afgani & Abduh, 2014). Jamaluddin Al-Afghani died in 1897 in Astana after dedicating his life to intellectual and scientific reform (Al-Magribi, 1987).

Unlike Al-Afghani, who was born and raised in a noble family, Muhammad Abduh was born into a humble family in Mahallat Nasr in 1849. He grew up in a society oppressed by authoritarian government policies. At approximately ten years of age, he learned to read, write, and memorize the Qur'an in his village. To improve his mastery of *tajwid*, his father later sent him to the Al-Ahmadi Mosque in Tanta, a well-known center for the study of the Qur'an and *qira'at*. After studying *tajwid* there for two years, he continued learning Arabic grammar. However, he found the conservative teaching methods difficult to accept and eventually decided to return to his village. In 1865, at the age of sixteen, he married and initially intended to become a farmer like his father and brothers. His intellectual direction changed after meeting his uncle, the Sufi master Darwish Khadr. After spending several days with him, he became aware of his intellectual abilities and potential for learning. He therefore returned to the Al-Ahmadi Mosque, but by that time his teachers had passed away. Consequently, in February 1866, he moved to Cairo to continue his studies at Al-Azhar

University, where he studied Sufism and Sharia, two intellectual traditions that were flourishing at the time.

When Al-Afghani returned to Egypt from Istanbul in 1871, Muhammad Abduh immediately became one of his students. Al-Afghani's study circle was open to the public, and he taught selected classical Arabic texts covering philosophy, Sufism, history, politics, and social thought. This represented a new educational approach that differed significantly from the prevailing teaching methods of the period. The education and intellectual guidance that Al-Afghani provided to Muhammad Abduh became the foundation of Abduh's later reformist activities ([Al-Aqqad, n.d.](#)).

After completing his studies, Muhammad Abduh taught theology, logic, and ethics at Al-Azhar University. In addition to his university lectures, he taught several classical works translated into Arabic at his home, including *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* by Ibn Miskawayh. In 1878, he was appointed to teach at other educational institutions, including history at Dar al-Ulum and Arabic language at Al-Asun.

In addition to his academic career, Muhammad Abduh wrote articles for both government-owned and privately owned newspapers. In 1889, he began delivering regular Qur'anic exegesis sessions three evenings each week. By the end of his life, he had completed the interpretation of the Qur'an up to Surah An-Nisa, verse 125. Muhammad Abduh died on July 11, 1905, leaving behind three daughters.

Jamaluddin Al-Afghani sought to break down the walls of Muslim exclusivism and introduce Muslims to a more open intellectual world. He remained optimistic despite the reality of diverse nations, cultures, and religions. For him, religion itself, particularly the Semitic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, was not inherently a source of division. Rather, division arose only when religion was exploited to serve the interests of particular groups.

While living in Egypt, Al-Afghani taught science, literature, and philosophy while initiating educational reforms aimed at liberating students and scholars from intellectual stagnation and exclusivism. He revived an open and active culture of scientific inquiry and encouraged his students to develop their writing skills by producing papers in the fields of literature, society, and politics.

Al-Afghani was renowned for his eloquence and his ability to inspire both the hearts and minds of his audiences. His expressive style, exceptional command of language, and strong social awareness made his lectures highly influential. According to Muhammad Abduh, Al-Afghani's philosophy lectures attracted not only students but also prominent intellectuals because of their intellectual depth and compelling delivery.

The spirit of Al-Afghani's movement had a profound influence on the revival of science and literature in Egypt. This revival was further supported by an environment that was increasingly receptive to intellectual advancement, as Al-Azhar and other educational institutions had begun to promote scientific development during the reign of Muhammad Ali.

Al-Afghani played a significant role in stimulating the revival of modern Arabic literature in three ways. First, he created a favorable intellectual environment by awakening religious values and fostering the spirit of Islam and nationalism. Second, he wrote political articles in elegant yet accessible language, thereby encouraging writers to develop modern literary expression. Third, many of his disciples became leading intellectuals and literary figures in Egypt. Among them was Muhammad Abduh, one of Al-Afghani's closest disciples and an inspiration for al-Manfaluti, a pioneer of modern Arabic prose. Another prominent disciple was Mahmud Sami al-Barudi, a pioneer of modern Arabic poetry whose literary thought was strongly influenced by Al-Afghani's ideas.

Muhammad Abduh's encounter with Jamaluddin Al-Afghani inspired his interest in Sufi philosophy. *Risalat al-Waridat* was the first collaborative work between the two scholars, written by Muhammad Abduh under the intellectual guidance of Al-Afghani. In this work, Abduh discusses

issues in *kalam* theology through a Sufi perspective, beginning with the concept of creation and related theological questions (Abduh, 1925).

Together with Al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh joined a secret political organization established by Al-Afghani known as the People's Independence Party. However, the movement was eventually discovered by the authorities. As a result, Al-Afghani was exiled to Istanbul, while Muhammad Abduh was dismissed from his teaching positions at Dar al-Ulum and Al-Alsun before being exiled to his hometown of Mahallat Nasr.

In 1884, Riyad Basha petitioned Khedive Tawfiq for Muhammad Abduh's pardon. Following his release from exile, Abduh was appointed editor of *al-Waqa'i al-Misriyyah*, the official government newspaper. Shortly afterward, he became editor-in-chief and assumed full responsibility for supervising the publication. Under his leadership, the newspaper underwent substantial reform. Rather than merely reporting government achievements or reproducing official policies, it also became a platform for constructive criticism of government decisions.

In addition to *al-Waqa'i al-Misriyyah*, Muhammad Abduh founded the newspaper *Ra'is al-Tahrir*, through which he published articles advocating constructive reforms in education, morality, society, and the economy.

During the Urabi Revolution, although Al-Afghani did not participate directly, his ideas became the principal intellectual force behind the growing awareness of independence and the rise of Egyptian nationalism. Inspired by his teachings, his students assumed leading roles in the Urabi movement (Syalasy, 1987). The revolution represented a continuation of Al-Afghani's earlier struggle against British domination in Egypt (Imarah, 1984). Nevertheless, the movement ultimately failed, resulting in Muhammad Abduh's imprisonment for three months, followed by six years of exile.

Beyond the political sphere, these two reformers also played an important role in modernizing Egypt's educational system, which they regarded as stagnant. Their educational reforms drew inspiration from scientific and technological developments in France. Saad Basha Zaghlul once declared before the Egyptian people:

"I am not the person behind Egypt's revival, as your orators claim. I cannot make such a claim, nor can I imagine doing so. In fact, your awakening began long before my time, during the eras of Muhammad Ali and Urabi, when Jamaluddin Al-Afghani and his followers and disciples played a decisive role. This is a truth that should never be concealed, for only the weak conceal the truth." (Syalasy, n.d.).

Anti-Colonial Activism

Read through the lens of the anti-colonial nationalism framework, Al-Afghani and Abduh's contribution to Egyptian nationalism operated on three interrelated levels: discursive, organizational, and pedagogical. At the discursive level, Al-Afghani taught science, literature, and philosophy while reviving an open culture of scientific inquiry that had stagnated under exclusivist religious instruction. He encouraged his students to produce writings on literature, social affairs, and politics. He also played a significant role in the revival of modern Arabic literature in three ways: by creating a favorable intellectual environment through the promotion of religious values and nationalism; by writing political articles in elegant yet accessible language; and by educating students who later became prominent intellectuals and writers in Egypt, including Muhammad Abduh, who inspired al-Manfaluti, a pioneer of modern Arabic prose, and Mahmud Sami al-Barudi, a pioneer of modern Arabic poetry (Husein, 1957).

Each of these three mechanisms deserves closer examination rather than merely being listed. Discursively, Al-Afghani's contribution lay not simply in the fact that he wrote, but in his deliberate use of a style that was accessible to a broader Arabic-speaking audience rather than

being confined to scholarly Arabic. This approach enabled political ideas concerning self-rule and resistance to colonial domination to circulate beyond the limited circle of traditionally educated *ulama* (Faqihuddin, 2022).

Organizationally, this discursive influence did not remain merely intellectual. Students and readers who had been exposed to Al-Afghani's writings became both the organizational actors and the carriers of the ideological vocabulary that supported the Urabi Revolt and the People's Party. Consequently, the nationalist movement that emerged in Egypt between 1879 and 1882 can be understood as the organizational manifestation of a discursive movement that had begun approximately a decade earlier.

Pedagogically, the chain of influence was equally significant. Al-Afghani's direct disciples, most notably Muhammad Abduh, together with literary figures such as al-Manfaluti and al-Barudi, did not merely inherit his political vision; they also reproduced his intellectual method. Through accessible prose and poetry, they continued to disseminate nationalist and reformist ideas long after Al-Afghani's exile in 1879 and his death in 1897. This continuity explains why Al-Afghani's influence on Egyptian nationalism endured well beyond his physical presence in the country (Hawi, 2017; Usman, 2022).

Religious Moderation (Wasatīyyah) in Ābduh's Thought

Muhammad Ābduh explained Islamic moderation through what he called the four guidances (*hidāyah*), drawn from his interpretation of Surah al-Fātiḥah, verse 6

اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ

("Guide us to the straight path") (Khatab, 2025)

The guidance of natural feeling and inspiration; the guidance of the five senses; the guidance of reason, which corrects the errors of feeling and the senses; and the guidance of religion, which corrects the errors of reason when it submits to desire. Together, these four guidances bind conscience, feeling, intellect, and religion as complementary sources of human happiness (Ābduh, 1905, 1927).

1. Three Domains of Religious Renewal

Building on the four *hidāyah*, Ābduh's call for the renewal of religious understanding centered on three domains: releasing the shackles of tradition that subject reason to illogical dictates from community or religious leaders; affirming that religion and science go side by side and do not contradict one another, since each has its own function needed by humans; and understanding religion as the earlier scholars understood it, by referring to its main sources rather than later accretions of debate.

a. Wasatīyyah as the Religious Infrastructure of Nationalism

Taken together, Ābduh's four-*hidāyah* scheme and his three domains of religious renewal correspond closely to *wasatīyyah* as balance between revelation and reason, justice in judgment, and avoidance of both rigid literalism and unchecked rationalism (Kamali, 2015). Moderatism in Ābduh's thought is not a separate theme from the nationalism discussed above but its religious infrastructure: a national community could only be mobilized around a religious identity that was rational, non-exclusivist, and open to science, which is exactly the kind of Islam Ābduh sought to construct through his *tafsīr* and journalism.

The four *hidāyah* are worth reading individually against this infrastructure claim rather than

only as a set. The guidance of natural feeling and inspiration and the guidance of the five senses ground religious knowledge in ordinary human experience available to any Egyptian, literate or not, which is what allows ʿAbduh’s moderation to function as a genuinely inclusive religious identity rather than a scholar’s abstraction. The guidance of reason, correcting the errors of feeling and the senses, is where ʿAbduh departs from both unreflective traditionalism and unreflective mysticism, insisting that revealed guidance must still answer to rational scrutiny a position that gave nationalist argument a non-sectarian vocabulary it could use even when addressing readers outside strict religious circles. The guidance of religion, correcting the errors of reason when reason submits to desire, is what keeps this rationalism from collapsing into a purely secular nationalism of the kind Al-Afgānī’s Egyptian and Ottoman critics sometimes accused reformers of pursuing. It is this fourth guidance, in other words, that lets wasaṭiyyah do double duty: it disciplines reason theologically while simultaneously supplying nationalism with a religious warrant that made mobilization legible, and therefore legitimate, to a broad Muslim Egyptian public rather than only to a Westernized elite.

b. Contemporary Testimony to the Movement’s Impact

The combined effect of this nationalist and moderatist activism was later acknowledged publicly by Saād Bāsyā Zaglul, who credited Al-Afgānī and his disciples as the true origin of Egypt’s awakening, as recorded in the following statement:

2. Synthesis

This contemporary acknowledgment is consistent with the analytical claim of this paper: that Egypt’s awakening rested on an organized, multi-level reform activism rather than isolated charisma, as expressed in Zaglul’s own words before the Egyptian people:

“I am not the person behind the revival of Egypt as your orators say; I cannot claim it and cannot imagine it. In fact, your awakening has occurred a long time since the time of Muhammad ʿAlī and ʿOrābī, in which Jamāluddīn Al-Afgānī and his followers and disciples played an important role in it; this is a truth that should not be covered up, because only the weak cover up the truth.”
– Saād Bāsyā Zaglul (*Syalasy, n.d.*)

Implications: Wasaṭiyyah as the Religious Infrastructure of Reform

This synthesis supports the argument presented in the Introduction that the nationalist and moderatist dimensions of Al-Afghani and ʿAbduh’s legacy are best understood as components of a single reform project rather than as two separate agendas. This interpretation is also consistent with the way later reform movements throughout the Muslim world, including those in Indonesia, drew simultaneously upon both dimensions of their thought ([Mahardika, 2023](#)). As this study adopts a qualitative textual approach, it does not include quantitative tables, figures, or equations.

Critical Comparison with Contemporary Scholarship

Placed within the context of contemporary scholarship, the Al-Afghani-ʿAbduh pairing analyzed in this study both confirms and extends existing interpretations. [Kemper \(2024\)](#) demonstrates that Al-Afghani’s anti-colonial framework was not confined to Egypt but also influenced Muslim communities in Russia. Read alongside the present findings, this suggests that the three interrelated mechanisms identified in this study, discursive, organizational, and pedagogical, accompanied Al-Afghani across different contexts rather than representing an Egypt-specific strategy. This observation strengthens the argument that his contribution to Egyptian nationalism constituted a localized application of a broader and transferable reform method rather

than an isolated historical phenomenon.

Similarly, [Amiruddin et al. \(2024\)](#) identify a wider revivalist-nationalist dynamic across the Muslim world during the same period, a finding consistent with the mutually reinforcing relationship between nationalism and religious reform identified in this study. However, their analysis does not specify the religious mechanism, *wasatiyyah*, through which revivalism acquired religious legitimacy. The present study addresses this gap by demonstrating how Abduh's framework of the four *hidayah* provided the theological foundation that legitimized Al-Afghani's nationalist movement. Without this doctrinal basis, Al-Afghani's nationalist mobilization could have been interpreted as a purely secular project and, consequently, less legitimate within a colonial Muslim society.

The findings of [Zahra and Fatimah \(2023\)](#) concerning Al-Afghani's Pan-Islamism and its influence on the development of Indonesian political parties further extend this pattern to a different national context. Likewise, [Mahardika \(2023\)](#) demonstrates that the influence of Al-Afghani on Sarekat Islam and Muhammadiyah extended beyond nationalist rhetoric alone. Instead, these Indonesian reform movements adopted the integrated framework identified in this study, in which nationalist mobilization was accompanied by the promotion of a moderate and non-exclusivist interpretation of Islam. This comparative perspective suggests that the unified reform strategy identified in colonial Egypt should not be regarded as a unique historical episode but rather as a recurring model employed by Islamic reform movements seeking political legitimacy under conditions of colonial domination or ideological pressure.

A contrasting perspective is provided by [Helmy \(2022\)](#), who examines the shift from Islamic modernism toward authoritarian appropriations of religious discourse. Whereas the integration of nationalism and moderation in the thought of Al-Afghani and Abduh functioned as a safeguard against both rigid exclusivism and unrestricted secularism, [Helmy \(2022\)](#) demonstrates that later movements selectively appropriated the same modernist legacy while abandoning its moderating dimension. As a result, nationalist mobilization was redirected toward authoritarian rather than pluralistic objectives. This comparison reinforces the theoretical argument advanced in the present study: moderate outcomes emerge not from nationalism or religious reform in isolation but from their integrated operation. This interpretation is consistent with [Helmy et al. \(2021\)](#), who conceptualize *wasatiyyah* as a lived and relationally embedded practice rather than merely an abstract theological doctrine. The findings of the present study substantiate this interpretation through evidence drawn from a single historical case.

Alternative Interpretations and Scope Conditions

Two alternative interpretations deserve explicit consideration rather than remaining implicit. The first is a charisma-based interpretation, which explains Al-Afghani's influence primarily through his personal charisma rather than through the three interrelated mechanisms proposed in this study. From this perspective, Zaghlul's testimony may be regarded as a retrospective attribution of heroic leadership rather than as evidence of a systematic reform strategy. However, the persistence of this pattern beyond Al-Afghani's lifetime, in Abduh's independent development of *wasatiyyah*, in the continuation of the discursive, organizational, and pedagogical pattern by his students following his exile, and in its subsequent reproduction within Indonesian reform movements documented by [Mahardika \(2023\)](#) and [Zahra and Fatimah \(2023\)](#), is difficult to explain solely in terms of personal charisma. By definition, charisma is personal and non-transferable. A purely charisma-based explanation would therefore predict that the movement's influence should have declined following Al-Afghani's departure from Egypt in 1879. Historical evidence, however, demonstrates that this was not the case.

The second alternative is a materialist interpretation, which attributes nationalist mobilization primarily to economic grievances arising from colonial exploitation rather than to religious moderation. The present study does not dispute that material grievances constituted a necessary condition for Egyptian nationalist mobilization. Rather, its argument is more limited and complementary than competing. Specifically, this study argues that *wasatiyyah* provided the legitimizing religious framework through which those material grievances could be transformed into a coherent and broadly supported nationalist movement instead of fragmenting along the divide between religious exclusivism and secularism. As noted by [Helmy \(2022\)](#), this division later weakened comparable reform movements in other contexts.

The scope condition derived from these two alternative interpretations is that the model proposed in this study should be expected to apply primarily to cases involving colonial or quasi-colonial rule over religiously plural or internally divided Muslim societies, where the challenge of political and religious legitimacy is particularly pronounced. Accordingly, the model is not intended to serve as a general theory of nationalism but rather as a context-specific explanation of reform movements operating under such historical conditions.

A related objection concerns the direction of causality. It may be argued that nationalist success preceded religious moderation and that moderation was subsequently employed merely as a legitimizing discourse, thereby reversing the causal relationship proposed in this study. The historical chronology, however, does not support this interpretation. Abduh's articulation of the four *hidayah* framework, together with his broader *tafsir* project, developed concurrently with the nationalist organizational activities of the 1870s and 1880s rather than after them. Furthermore, his appointment as Grand Mufti occurred only after his most active period of nationalist-oriented journalism following his return from exile. If religious moderation had merely served as retrospective legitimization, one would expect its doctrinal elaboration to have followed the consolidation of political authority. The available historical evidence does not support such a sequence.

This interpretation does not exclude the possibility of a reciprocal relationship over time, in which religious doctrine shaped political mobilization while successful mobilization, in turn, encouraged further doctrinal development. Nevertheless, it does reject the view that religious moderation functioned merely as a post hoc justification for a nationalist movement that would otherwise have succeeded independently. It is precisely this alternative interpretation that the evidence presented in this study is best positioned to evaluate.

Table 1. The Three Mechanisms of Al-Afgānī's Nationalist Strategy

Level	Mechanism	Description	Key Source
Discursive	Religious-literary writing	Preparing the right environment by arousing religious values and writing political articles in beautiful yet easily digestible language	Al-Magribī (1987)
Organizational	The people's independence party and the Ōrabī movement	Driving the awareness of independence that spearheaded the Ōrabī revolutionary	Syalasy (1987) ; Īmāroh (1984)

Level	Mechanism	Description	Key Source
		movement against British rule	
Pedagogical	Training students and writers	Producing students such as Muhammad ʿAbduh, al-Manfalūtī, and Mahmūd Sāmī al-Bārūdī, who became prominent movers and writers in Egypt	Amīn (1944)

Source: Authors' synthesis (2026), based on the primary and secondary literature reviewed in this study.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper sought to move beyond a purely biographical account by examining how Jamaluddin Al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh's activities contributed to the development of Egyptian nationalism and how Abduh's religious thought articulated wasatiyyah as the religious counterpart to that nationalist awakening. The findings demonstrate that Al-Afghani's movement promoted Egypt's struggle for independence and stimulated the revival of science and literature through three interrelated mechanisms: discursive, organizational, and pedagogical. At the same time, Abduh extended this reformist agenda into the religious sphere through the framework of the four *hidayah* and a three-domain program of religious renewal that together constitute wasatiyyah. Taken together, these findings support the central argument of this study: nationalism and religious moderation in the Al-Afghani-Abduh partnership are best understood not as two separate biographical outcomes but as complementary dimensions of a unified reform strategy, in which religious moderation provided the inclusive religious identity through which national mobilization could be achieved.

Theoretically, this reinterpretation contributes to the study of Islamic reform by demonstrating that wasatiyyah is not merely a theological doctrine but also functions as the legitimizing foundation of nationalist mobilization. This mechanism appears to have been replicated by later Islamic reform movements, including Indonesian organizations influenced by the intellectual legacy of Al-Afghani and Abduh ([Mahardika, 2023](#)). Practically, these findings suggest that contemporary religious moderation programs seeking broader public engagement may benefit from historical experiences such as the one examined in this study, where doctrinal moderation and political mobilization were deliberately developed as complementary components of a single reform strategy rather than as separate initiatives. More specifically, institutions designing such programs may draw important lessons from the sequence identified in this study, in which discursive preparation preceded organizational mobilization, while pedagogical transmission sustained both. This sequence suggests that a moderate religious message alone, without an accompanying discursive and organizational strategy, is unlikely to achieve a comparable level of public influence.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study is limited by its reliance on a small set of primary and secondary literature and does not include archival press sources or comparative cases from other reform figures of the

period; consequently, its conclusions describe a pattern rather than establish a generalizable causal claim. Future research could usefully compare Al-Afgānī and ʿAbduh’s nationalism-moderatism pairing with that of later reformers, such as Rashīd Ridā in Egypt or Indonesian reformist figures who drew on their thought, in order to test how far this pairing travels beyond the original Egyptian context.

A second limitation concerns source language and access: the primary materials consulted are Arabic-language texts by and about Al-Afgānī and ʿAbduh together with Arabic, English, and Indonesian-language secondary scholarship, which means Ottoman Turkish and Persian sources bearing on Al-Afgānī’s pre-Egyptian career, and French colonial administrative sources bearing on how the Egyptian authorities themselves perceived the movement, were not systematically reviewed; incorporating these would allow future research to test whether the nationalist-moderatist pairing identified here looks the same from the colonizer’s archival vantage point as it does from the reformers’ own writings. A third avenue for future research, following directly from the comparative reading offered in the Findings and Discussion, would be a structured comparison between this Egyptian case and the Indonesian reception documented by Mahardika (2023) and Zahra and Fatimah (2023), asking specifically whether Indonesian reform organizations reproduced the same three-mechanism nationalist structure and four-hidāyah moderatist structure identified here, or adapted them in ways that reflect Indonesia’s different colonial and religious context; such a comparison would allow the theoretical model proposed in the Literature Review to be tested outside the single case on which it was built.

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