Tawḥīd and the Relevantisation of Qurʾānic Exegesis to Muslim Political Life: An Exegetical Interpretation of Al-Turabi’s Tafsīr

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Abstract

In his recently published Qurʾānic exegesis entitled al-Tafsīr al-Tawḥīdī, Hasan al-Turabi argued that the Qurʾānic discourse needs to be understood in accordance with the contemporary conditions of the Muslims. Its meanings must be interpreted in a rational and holistic manner. Most importantly, any attempt of a rationalistic interpretation must conform with the methodology of Tawḥīd. This research is an exegetical interpretation of al-Turabi’s writings about the concept of Tawḥīd and his thesis of Qurʾānic exegesis. The research relies on analytic and inductive methodologies to reconstruct a coherent understanding of al-Turabi’s position on Qurʾānic exegesis. The main postulate of al-Turabi’s position is the utilization of Tawḥīd in a comprehensive way. This means that all of life including politics is a complete system geared toward worshiping Allah (ā). Based on this notion, al-Turabi criticized past and present Muslim scholars, asserting that they missed the essence of Tawḥīd when they divorce politics from religion after the era of the first guided khilafas. This situation left its impact on all the sciences of Islam including Qurʾānic exegesis. As a result, nowadays reciting and memorizing the Qurʾān does not serve the purpose of providing a guiding hand for public life. Because of this and other factors religiosity has become sheer hypocrisy or completely irrelevant. For this situation to be reformed and for Islam to be correctly implemented, the Qurʾān must be interpreted in such a way that makes it the sole guide for life without differentiating the private sphere from the public one. The importance of this research, therefore, is that it presents the contribution of one of the eminent figures in the international Islamic movement on the relevantisation of the Qurʾānic sciences to contemporary human life.

Keywords: Monotheism, interpretation, relevantisation, politics, Turabi.

Abstrak


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betul, Al-Qur'an perlu ditafsirkan dalam segala cara yang memberi panduan hidup tanpa membezakan bidang seseorang. Kepentingan kajian ini, adalah untuk memberikan sumbangan salah seorang tokoh yang terkenal dalam gerakan Islam antarabangsa terhadap relevansasi sains Al-Qur'an bagi kehidupan manusia kontemporari.

**Kata kunci:** monotheisme, tafsiran, relevansasi, politik dan Turabi.

### Introduction
Al-Turabi asserted in the opening of “*al-Tafsīr al-Tawḥīdī*” that “any attempt to interpret the Qur’ān must conform with the methodology of Tawḥīd”\(^2\). The word Tawḥīd is usually linked exclusively to belief (*’aqīdah*), but for him, throughout his life and in all his publications, that wasn’t the only intended meaning.\(^3\) For al-Turabi, Tawḥīd meant that the “life is a complete system geared toward worshipping Allah S.W.T., including the economy, art, politics, and religion”.\(^4\) Based on this holistic position of Tawḥīd, al-Turabi criticized past and present Muslim scholars; claiming that they were afflicted with a political calamity that distanced them from the principles of religion and whose influence spread to the areas of jurisprudence and exegesis.\(^5\) As a result, religiosity in the public sphere was ignored and the light of the Qur’ānic verses was kept from the government system, treaties and peace accords.\(^6\)

### Qur’an Interpretations in Modern Times
More than any other genre of Islamic scholarship, the branch of Qur’ānic commentary is one, which has undergone significant changes in modern times. While some Islamic sciences such as theology (‘Ilm al-kalām) and philosophy (al-falsafah) have declined in importance, Qur’ānic exegesis has enjoyed tajdīd; in time-honored fashion it has acted as a vehicle for responses to internal and external challenges. The science of Qur’ānic *tafsīr* has a rich and varied scholarly tradition. Over the centuries it has been enriched by scholars from diverse backgrounds. Since the beginning of the 19th century, the modern era has witnessed the slow but steady increase of materialism all over the world. The more Europe and America advance in science and technology, the more they distance themselves from God and spirituality. The secular European countries controlled most of the Muslim world and spread their secular ideology among the Muslims.

On the other hand, the modern era has also witnessed the decline and backwardness of Muslims as they deviated from their religion and fell behind in almost every possible area of development. This painful reality of Muslims motivated Muslim reformers to turn to the Qur’ān, utilizing its teaching in their advocacy, education, and reform. As a result, several schools of thought have emerged in the Muslim world, leaning on new interpretations of the Qur’ān to reform the society. The most famous of these schools are the school of Muhammad ‘Abduh, and the school of the Muslim Brotherhood. These two schools of thought hold special importance because they have had an impact upon the interpretation of the Qur’ān in modern times, including *al-Turabi’s al-Tafsīr al-Tawḥīdī*. Most of the contemporary Qur’ānic interpretation trends, such as the rationalistic, scientific, literary and the activism trend, emerged from interpreters and thinkers influenced by these schools. One of the modern trends of Qur’ānic interpretation is the rationalistic trend (*al-īṭīḥād al-ʿAqīd fī al-tafsīr*), which is an interpretation of the Qur’ān while heavily engaging human reason. Evolved from traditional rational exegesis, modern rationalistic exegesis stressed the harmony between the Qur’ān and human reasoning. Muhammad ‘Abduh of Egypt (d. 1905) stressed the importance of utilizing the power of reason in Qur’ānic interpretation and discovering new meanings of the Qur’ān that could lead the Muslims to stay in touch with the true scientific and rational spirit of the Qur’ān.\(^7\)

‘Abduh believed that the prime message of the Qur’ān is to bring guidance to mankind.\(^8\) Out of this prime point several features of the methodology of ‘Abduh and his followers arise: they were reluctant to rely heavily on Hadith and narrations from the heritage while pondering on the meanings of the Qur’ān for the fear that some of their corpus were historically unreliable and thematically unreasonable, or in truth, due to the fact that dealing with hadith was

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8. Ibid.
not among ‘Abduh’s strengths and interests. Instead, he insisted on the use of al-Furqān (al-‘Imrān: 4), which literally means ‘the criterion’, but which, according to ‘Abduh, was interpreted as ‘intellect’, which Almighty Allah has provided for this task. Insofar as science is a result of experimental effort and that the universe has been created by Allah, there cannot be any discrepancy between the truths of the Qur’an and those of reason and science. Among the most famous contemporary exegetical works that can be categorized under this trend are the interpretation of al-Taḥrīr wa-al-Tanwīr by Muhammad Tāhir ibn ʿĀshūr, the interpretation of Marāghī by Ahmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī; al-Tafsīr al-Wādhī by Muhammad Maḥmūd Hijāzī; and the Qurʾānic interpretation of the Qurʾān by ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Khaṭīb.

Another contemporary trend of Qurʾānic exegesis, which is of importance to our research is the activism trend (al-‘ālāmī fīl-Qurʾān). This trend focuses on advocacy and activism, education, Islamic Jihād, and the implementation of Islamic law (Shariʿah). Some of the researchers belonging to this trend are Hasan al-Bannā, Sayyid Qūṭ, Saʿīd Hawā, Muhammad al-Ghazālī, al-Bahi al-Khālīf, Muhammad Qūṭ, Yūsuf al-Qarāḍāwī, ‘Alī ʿAbd al-Hamīm Maḥmūd, Ahmad Ḥasan Faḥāt, Muhammad Luṭfī al-Sabbaḥ, ʿAdnān Zarzūr, Hasan al-Turabī, and many others.

The most famous exegesis that falls under this trend is “In the shadows of the Qurʾān” by Sayyid Qūṭ. His interest in the Qurʾān evolved over time, and his view of the Qurʾān changed accordingly. In the first sixteen chapters of his exegesis he was interested in the cultural and intellectual aspects of the Qurʾān, and that part of the exegesis could be characterized as a typical theoretical exegesis. And after his imprisonment, he became an activist, and his exegesis methodology reflected that change. Through this activism trend Sayyid Qūṭ’s approach to exegesis changed from a theoretical approach to an approach that calls for a practical understanding of the Qurʾān in order to apply its teachings to everyday life. His goal in adopting this trend was to reduce the gap between Muslims and the Qurʾān, to define for Muslims the practical task of the Qurʾān, to show the thematic unity of the Qurʾān, and to link the Qurʾānic verses with the current realities of the Muslim ummah.

Sayyid Qūṭ viewed the Qurʾān in such a way aimed not to produce a theoretical commentary, but to focus on the verses that could help the Muslim Brotherhood Movement overcome some ideological issues. This has created a quantum leap in the area of exegesis, which was later followed by our own al-Turabī and many others, some of whom utilized the Qurʾān to support their preconceived ideas.

It is clear from the above that a considerable evolution had already taken place in exegesis by al-Turabī’s time. While the majority of the Qurʾānic commentators agreed that the clarification of the Qurʾānic message for ordinary Muslims was a priority, they differed in their emphases and methods.

**Criticizing Classical and Contemporary Exegesis and Exegetes**

In his careful examination of classical and contemporary Qurʾānic commentaries, al-Turabī argued that the majority of Qurʾānic commentaries are defective in nature and far from being comprehensive in their scope. Some of the commentators, al-Turabī argued, can be classified as linguistic, Sufi, ḥaql (based on human reasoning), historical, and ḥīṣī (legal), as each commentator’s specialization overshadowed his commentary of the Qurʾān. According to al-Turabī the shortcoming common in the reviewed commentaries is the rarity for which Qurʾānic commentators grouped and unified the meanings of the sentences in the āyāt (verse) for greater clarity in the meaning of the verse. Furthermore, they failed to associate the meanings of the verses together into a single cohesive method with a common theme or connected themes, and they failed to tie the meanings of the suwar (plural of ṣūrah) together in order to unify the meanings of the Qurʾānic discourse as a unified whole.

Furthermore, most commentators, al-Turabī argued, do not address the contemporary era. Most commentaries are limited in scope as they focus solely on the period during which the Qurʾān was revealed without a careful consideration of the general environment in which it was revealed. This is to say that Qurʾānic commentators focused on the specific circumstances of the revelation without developing a genuine sense of generalization that will, certainly, assist and guide our understanding of similar environments that would have some fundamental association with the original settings and circumstances; a process that would add clarity to the relevance of the Qurʾānic to new environments. Qurʾānic commentators discuss the reason behind the revelation as if the verses were revealed for a specific occasion or a particular person. Al-Turabī believed that a commentator should describe the complete environment in which the verses were revealed. It might be true that a verse may address a specific

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9 Hasan al-Turabī, Personal Interview by the author, Khartoum, Sudan, 1st January 2011.
10 Ibid.
incidence, nevertheless the Qur’ānic discourse is universal and by virtue of its universality is also addressing similar future incidences. Based on this reasoning, it has been argued that the meanings of the Qur’ānic verses are eternal.\(^\text{11}\)

As for the books that were authored specifically to identify the relationships between the verses of the Qur’ān (tanāsūh al-dāyāt wa-al-suwar), according to al-Turabi, they are very limited and rely on sheer speculation. Accordingly, he decided to write a tafsīr to assist the reader who is trying to utilize tafsīr to understand the message of the Qur’ān through the principle of the unity of its meanings.\(^\text{12}\) His objective is to analyze the environment in which the Qur’ān was first revealed and the influence it had on the people then, as well as explain the Qur’ān’s message for contemporary society. Since the messages of the Qur’ān are for all humanity for all times, there is an ongoing need for tafsīr (pl. of tafsīr) relevant to the ever evolving communities of man.\(^\text{13}\)

For al-Turabi, the importance of maintaining the relevance of tafsīr was such that he took advantage of every opportunity in his al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī to criticize classical and contemporary exegesis and exegesis in his effort to prove that a new tafsīr is warranted. He stated that most classical exegeses did not highlight the wisdom from the Qur’ānic verses related to natural phenomena, and did not ascertain the connection between Qur’ānic verses and the everyday life of humans. Classical Qur’ānic commentators appear to have been preoccupied with verses that deal with eschatological matters and failed to relate the meanings of such verses to our life on this earth.\(^\text{14}\) Furthermore, they seem to have ignored the negative religious ritual and intellectual habits of the jāhiliyyah period despite their prevalence in the Qur’ān.\(^\text{15}\) This criticism of al-Turabi shows both the parameters of new direction in Tafsīr and, perhaps, the expected methodic and substance results of this endeavour.

The Formation of A New Approach

The best approach to tafsīr agreed upon by most scholars is the explanation of the Qur’ān by the Qur’ān “al-Qur’ān yafassir ba’da hu ba’da,”\(^\text{16}\) followed by the Sunnah of the Prophet ( صلى الله عليه وسلم), because the Sunnah explains and elucidates the Qur’ān. Finally to turn to the reports from the sahābah and tābi’īn and one’s own ijīhād only if there is no explicit verse in the Qur’ān or the Sunnah that may explain the verse.\(^\text{17}\) These are the foundation of the theory of Qur’ānic exegesis which have been accepted by the ‘alama’. Al-Turabi felt that there is a need to advance an alternative approach in order to understand the verses of the Qur’ān through the lens of Tawhīdī as a means to challenge secularism or “al-shirk al-siyyāṣī”. This new approach does not nullify the foundations of Qur’anic exegesis, but rather develops a new focus within that framework. It might be argued by some scholars that it is more than a refocus within the framework. It is rather an altogether new perspective.

The justification forwarded by al-Turabi for the need of a new approach is that the Qur’ān must now address the Muslims of today who have inherited the accumulated centuries of knowledge and experiences, which was not available to the Muslims during the time of revelation. For this reason the Qur’ān needs to be understood today in accordance with the contemporary conditions of the addressees.\(^\text{18}\) This claim taken together with al-Turabi’s general critique of Quranic exegesis may be regarded as a new hermeneutical approach that emphasizes the dynamics of the relationship between the particular and the universal in our process of understanding.

Analyzing al-Turabi’s approach to Qur’ānic exegesis reveals that he distinguished between the Qur’ān; the eternal words of Allah, and the understanding of the Qur’ān or the heritage, which includes the reports from companions, and the opinions of the scholars and the interpreters of the Qur’ān throughout Islamic history. Secondly, he realized that the Qur’ān contains two discourses. The first discourse pertains to the time of revelation in which the Ummah was undergoing a complete transformation from Jāhiliyyah to Islam, and the second discourse is its eternal message and teachings for the successive periods and generations including the present generation.\(^\text{19}\) Finally, al-Turabi formulated an important hermeneutical supposition that the Qur’ānic discourse for the time of revelation should be understood from the Sunnah and turāth,

\(^{11}\) Ibid.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Al -Turabi, al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī, 1:29.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 1:29.
while understanding the eternal Qur’anic message for all ages does not depend on such narrations as much as the former discourse.20

Based on the above distinction, al-Turabi divided his commentary of each sūrah of the Qur’ān into three parts, namely the summary of the guidance of the chapter (khulāsat hadīt al-sūrah), the sequence of the meanings (tartīl al-maʿānt), and the general meanings (ʿumūm al-maʿānt).

Al-Turabi begins his tafsīr of each sūrah with an introduction to the sūrah in which he talks about several aspects including the themes, the contents, and the goals of the sūrah. He then proceeds to the tartīl al-maʿānt section, which contains the specific meanings of the Qur’ānic verses in the context in which they were revealed. The importance of this section is manifested in the fact that although Arabic is a language that must conform to its linguistic root, the ever-changing contexts give different shades to linguistic terms.21 The meanings of words are subject to processes of metamorphosis that result from changing social, cultural, economic, political contexts. A semantic field may broaden or contract with the introduction or extinction of technologies and nuances.22 The meanings of some Qur’ānic terms have evolved due to the changing times; their meanings have shifted and are continuing to shift.23 As a result, many of the words in the Qur’ān, opines al-Turabi’s, have become unintelligible and the Qur’ān itself has become incomprehensible to the majority of its readers.24 Therefore, in order to ensure the relevance of Qur’ānic exegesis to contemporary conditions, al-Turabi thought it important to first uncover the original meanings of the Qur’ān in the context in which it was revealed.25

Subsequent to completing the tartīl al-maʿānt, al-Turabi goes back to the same group of verses and attempts to extract general or abstract meanings from the specific ones to later be applied according to changing realities and circumstances. He named this section ʿumūm al-maʿānt. The justification for this section originated from his belief that the Qur’ān was revealed in Arabic and its meanings must therefore be explained through the Arabic language.26 Some of its Arabic letters were revealed at the beginning of some chapters, such as: Alf-Lām-Mmtm, Kāf-Ḥā-Yā-ʿAyn-Šād, and Ḥā-Mtm, to certify that the Qur’ān is speech composed of elements of the Arabic language, and to confirm that its message is clear and understood by the early Arabs.27 From here al-Turabi concluded that Arabic language is the key to understanding the Qur’ān, and there is nothing in the Qur’ān that is off-limits or unknown in meaning, because the intention of any speech is to convey meaning.28 More to the point, the intended meaning is given in the semantic and syntax of the sentence. This needs to be understood within the general message of the Qur’ān.

The Implications of The New Approach
Among the positive implications of this new approach to the understanding of the Qur’ān is that al-Turabi is able to successfully define the role of the mufassir and re-introduce the Qur’ānic exegesis as an independent Islamic science that does not interfere or overlap with other disciplines such as Islamic jurisprudence or theology. This is evident from his criticism of the various trends of Tafsīr in which the commentator’s specialization overshadowed his commentary of the Qur’ān, and from his insistence that elaborating the detailed fiqh rulings is not the role of the mufassir. Thus, tafsīr for al-Turabi is a separate science that does not carry the burden of other Islamic sciences. Rather it does have its own rationale and subject matter. Therefore, according to this new approach of al-Turabi, the mufassir should not impose his fiqīr or kalām and ʿlughawī craft on the Quran text. Obviously, the mufassir will assume only one role and devote all his effort to the designate role of the mofassir as has been outlined by al-Turabi.

Secondly, having the ʿumūm al-maʿānt of the Qur’ān is a step forward towards making it relevant to contemporary times. However, the meanings derived from the ʿumūm al-maʿānt are unlimited in nature, based on pure speculation, and certainly requires another tartīl al-maʿānt in order to apply them to the contemporary context. This movement from the specific to the general will obviously create new dynamics for a concrete application in order to make the general meaning relevant to specific contemporary situation.

Thirdly, the apparent claim of ownership of “the general meanings of the Qur’ān” may indicate that any future attempts at Tafsīr may need to refer to al-Tafsīr al-Tawḥīdī in order to apply the Qur’ān to specific realities, and that may be used as a pretext to ignore the exegetical heritage of the Muslims. Most important of all, the general meaning of al-Tafsīr al-Tawḥīdī as a product of his hermeneutical strategy

20 Ibid., 1:29-30.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 1:16-17.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 1:29.
25 Ibid., 1:16.
26 Ibid., 1:15.
27 Ibid., 1:17.
28 Ibid., 1:27.
will not continue to be a general meaning for the coming generations of scholars. Evidently, it will be part and parcel of the legacy of `tartt al-ma’ānt out of which the new generation of scholars will derive `umūm al-ma’ānt. There is no reason for this hermeneutical strategy to stop at the work of al-Turabi. As a result, relativity in understanding the Quranic text will arise. It is not clear which part of this new approach is meant to be constant and part of the eternal message of the Quran and which part is changeable.

**Conclusion**

Al-Turabi’s Tawḥīd ideology played a major role in guiding the meanings of the Qur’ānic verses in his al-Tafsīr al-Tawḥīd through concentrating on social and public rather than personal or individual issues, addressing the Muslims as a group, and providing guidelines for their public and state affairs; a deficiency that exists in most exegeses due to, according to al-Turabi, the absence of the Islamic State throughout most of the history of Islam. He quoted the Qur’ān countless times to legitimize Tawḥīd as an ideology and as a valid methodology of Qur’ānic exegesis. This required multiple readings of the Qur’ān because for al-Turabi, all the verses that address the Muslims during the time of revelation also address those who are carrying the mission of renewing religion in present times. Therefore, the verses first need to be looked at in the context in which they were revealed in order to extract general meanings thereof and utilize the general meanings to address contemporary conditions. Although al-Turabi’s approach is a step forward toward presenting Tafsīr as an independent discipline, it proves to be controversial and may be used as a pretext to belittle classical exegetical efforts. However, this new strategy in approaching Qur’ānic exegesis, which has three distinct steps, may constitute an obstacle for future generations of mufassirūn because the `umūm al-ma’ānt will always be relatively conceived by the specific mufassir in a particular time and as such it cannot be seen as an absolute `umūm.

**References**


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