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Qur'ānic Exegesis in Malaysia: General Overview with Special Reference to the Recent Development¹

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Abstract: This paper discusses the general historical development of Qur'ānic exegesis in Malaysia since its independence until today via two perspectives, namely the historical development of Qur'ānic exegesis and recent improvements of Qur'ānic exegesis. It applies two methodologies, historical to collect relevant data and analysis to scrutinize the collected data. The paper concludes that the Qur'ānic exegesis in Malaysia owes its birth and development from earlier Muslim exegesis, particularly those written in Arabic. The contributions of Indonesian scholars has continued until today through writings and public lectures. Although most of the work is primarily translations which developed from prior exegetical pioneers, they offered innovative additions especially through *tafsīrs* that apply a more wholesome societal approach.

Keywords: *Qur'ān, Tafsīr, Malaysia, traditional, modern*

Abstrak: Artikel ini membincangkan perkembangan *tafsīr* di Malaysia secara umum dari awal sehingga sehingga ke hari ini. Ia menggunakan dua metodologi iaitu historis untuk mengumpul maklumat berkaitan dari sudut sejarah perkembangan *tafsīr* di Malaysia dan metod analisis untuk mengkaji perolehan data. Artikel ini merumuskan bahawa pentafsiran di Malaysia bersandarkan kepada buku-buku *tafsīr* Arab klasik di samping terjemahan *tafsīr* tersebut di dalam Bahasa Indonesia dan pentafsiran di Malaysia sentiasa berterusan sehingga ke hari ini melalui berbagai cara. Meskipun kebanyakan pentafsiran adalah dalam bentuk terjemahan dan pergantungan kepada *tafsīran* awal namun terdapat inovasi dan usaha untuk mencernakan pembaharuan idea khususnya *tafsīran* yang berbentuk kemasyarakatan.

Kata Kunci: *Qur'ān, tafsīr, Malaysia, traditional, modern*

Introduction: The Historical Emergence of *Tafsīr* in Malaysia

Malaysia was previously known as “Tanah Melayu”, literally meaning “the Land of the Malays” which now consists of thirteen states that are divided into the East and West Peninsula. It gained its independence in 1957. The majority of its citizens are Muslims. Islam, being the religion professed by Muslims, made its way to Tanah Melayu before the 15th century. In tandem with the acceptance of Islam by the native locals, Qur'ānic teachings which comprise of readings and exegesis, or *tafsīr*, grew in momentum. Exegesis is a science that strives to give the best possible meanings of all Qur'ānic verses.

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According to Ismail Yusoff and Mustafa, many scholars believe that the development of Qur'ānic exegesis in Malaysia is “a continuation of the study of Qur'ān conducted via study circles (*halaqat*) and *muşollā* (prayer place)” (Haziyah & Latifah, 2013). It is also due to “the development and expansion of religious education among the local Muslim communities in the 12th century which grew rapidly in the following centuries. However, religious studies at that time was principally centered within the teaching of *'aqidah* (beliefs), *taşawwuf* or *akhlāq* (ethics) and *fiqh* (daily worship activities) as well as recitation of the holy Qur'ān (Haziyah & Latifah, 2013). As for the teaching of Qur'ānic exegesis, it has been assumed that it was taught along with those subjects with the Qur'ān is its main source.

Quranic commentary in Malaysia was done in the form of oracle lectures and written documentation. However, it is rather difficult to trace the first written manuscript of Qur'ānic commentaries in Malay before the 20th century. A number of researchers suggested that the early development of Islam in Malaysia had accentuated on the matter of belief, *fiqh* and *akhlāq* whereas the Qur'ānic commentaries were done through the teaching of these three subjects.

The first known *tafsīr* activity dated back in the 17th century though the work of Sheikh Abdul Malik bin Abdullah, known as Tok Pulau Manis (d. 1736) who had reportedly transcribed the *tafsīr* work of Indonesian scholar Abdul Rauf al-Fansuri al-Singkeli (d.1693), the author of *Tarjumān al Mustafīd*, recognized among scholars as the first written *tafsīr* by an Aceh-Malay based Muslim. Riddell suggests that it was probably written in 1675. The striking element in this work is the use of major Arabic Qur'ānic commentaries which centered on three prominent books; *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* by al-Maḥallī (d.1459) and al-Suyūṭī (d.1505), *Lubāb al-Ta'wīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl* by al-Khāzin and *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta'wīl* by al-Bayḍāwī (Haziyah & Latifah, 2013).

Riddell suggests that there is evidence that the *tafsīr* could be possibly written earlier than that in which a manuscript containing Qur'ānic writing in Malay is presently held in the collection of the Cambridge University Library (Haziyah & Latifah, 2013) although it is not stated whether it is Malay Malaysian or Indonesian. Ervan Nurtawab cites that Van Ronkel has identified it as belonging to Thomas Erpenius (d.1624) who “had obtained it from a traveler who had visited Aceh sometime in the first decade of the seventeenth century” (Ervan Nurtawab, 2016).

This manuscript indicates that it relies heavily on three classical Arabic Qur'ānic commentaries; *Ma'ālim al-Tanzīl* by al-Baghāwī (d.1122), *Lubāb al-Ta'wīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl* by al-Khāzin (d.1340) and *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta'wīl* by al-Bayḍāwī (d.1286) (Riddell, 2016). The reliance on these Qur'ānic commentaries was not only identical to *Tarjumān al-Mustafīd*, but can also be seen in the later Quranic Malay manuscripts such as *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān* by Muhammad Said in 1934.

Contrary to the Riddell hypothesis, other researchers regarded that the writing of Quranic commentaries in Malay began in the early period of 20th century. However, Qur'ānic exegesis studies other than the writings were initiated during the late 17th century or early 18th century and were taught in *pondok* (Haziyah & Latifah, 2013).

Pondok (hut) grew rapidly in the mid-19th century as a new education system, especially in the states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Perak and Kedah after local clerics who received their religious education from Aceh, Pattani, Mecca and Medina opened their own *pondok* in their respective hometowns to teach religion within their immediate communities (Haziyah & Latifah, 2013).

Tafsīr studies in *pondok* began with the teacher reading to the students classical *tafsīr* texts in Arabic from the beginning to the end of a specific reference book. The teacher would explain the textual content of the book by focusing on the meaning of the words, Arabic grammatical analysis and *qirā'āt* (variant readings) explanation. Not much attention was given to related current problems namely politics, economics or social issues. Among the books used at that time were commentaries of Jalālayn, al-Nasafī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Khāzin, al-Bayḍāwī and *Tarjumān al-Mustafīd* by al-Singkeli (Abdul Hafiz, 2001).

Mosques are also another place where *tafsīr* was widely taught. It was introduced in the state of Kelantan in early 20th century where the methodology of *tafsīr* was also found to be taught there during that time. It has been learnt that Haji Nik Abdullah Wan Musa (d.1935) have already used the book *al-Fawz al-Kabīr fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr* which was authored by al-Dihlawī (Haziyah & Latifah, 2013).

Another place that was used for *tafsīr* studies in early 20th century was the madrasah or religious schools. It was a switch progress from traditional methods at the *pondok* and mosques to a new and more formal system of learning. It was established by local scholars due to the influence of the reform movement in the Middle East.

As a result, *tafsīr* was taught at the *madrasah* and common schools. The mainly reform oriented *tafsīr* books were used at these schools. For example, *Tafsīr al-Maraghī* was studied as a textbook in common religious schools in Kelantan in 1945 and was later similarly used in common schools after 1960. Other than that, *Tafsīr al-Fātiḥah* and *Tafsīr Juz' 'Amma* by Muhammad 'Abduh were also used alongside with other existing *tafsīr* books such as *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* and *Tafsīr al-Nasafī* (Haziyah & Latifah, 2013).

At the national education level, the *tafsīr* subject was first included in the syllabus of religious education when it was compiled in 1959 for the government schools and subsequently implemented in 1962. The teaching focused on brief explanations of the meaning of selected Qur'ānic verses that are related to issues of faith, ethics and jurisprudence. The textbook used was compiled by the Ministry of Education. Eventually In 1970, the syllabus for Qur'ān studies was amended and *tafsīr* ceased to be taught in primary schools and was later replaced by the writing and phonetics of Qur'ānic letters and reading short *Sūrah*s. These changes were first implemented in the New Curriculum for Primary Schools (KBSR) cohort in 1983 (Haziyah & Latifah, 2013).

Apart from the schools, *tafsīr* has also been taught as a subject in higher institutions, particularly after the establishment of public and private universities where *tafsīr* has become a fundamental course in a specific Islamic department or faculty. This led to the

publication of a number of books pertinent to *tafsīr* which was partly motivated by promotion requirements.

***Tafsīr* Books in Malaysia in the 20th and 21st centuries**

A group of lecturers at National University of Malaysia have listed a considerable number of *tafsīr* books in Malaysia, based on the methodology of its *tafsīr* writings; the criteria of which has been laid down by contemporary Arab Muslim scholars namely *taḥlīlī*, *mawḍū'ī*, *ijmālī* and *muqārin*.

Haziyah and others conclude that the *tafsīr* writings emerged significantly from 1920 onward in which 39 published *tafsīr* works were recorded (Haziyah et al., 2012). The publications can be divided as follows; 14 translations (35.8%), 5 *tafsīr ijmālī* (12.8%), 16 *tafsīr taḥlīlī* (41%) and 4 *tafsīr mawḍū'ī* (10.2%). It shows that the work initially began with the translation of selected *Sūrah* and juzuk, i.e. *Sūrah al-Fatihah* and *Juzu' 'Amma* by Sheikh al-Hadi (d. 1934), believed to be most commonly recited by Malaysian Muslims during their prayers. These were considered the translation or adaptation of Muhammad 'Abduh's commentary. At first, the interpretation of *Juz' 'Amma* was published serially in *Majalah al-Ikhwan* beginning from 16th February 1928 before it was subsequently printed by Jelutong Publication, Penang in 1929 (Talib Samad, 1992).

Since the 1930's, our country has seen an increase in different styles of commentaries i.e. from translations to *tafsīr taḥlīlī* and *tafsīr ijmālī*. For example, Sheikh Uthman Jalaluddin (d. 1952) translated the interpretation of *Sūrah al-Baqarah* from the book *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* and elaborated on it. He then recorded it in the book *Anwār al-Hudā*. Meanwhile al-Marbawī (d. 1989) also translated the interpretation of *Sūrah Yasin* from *Tafsīr al-Syawkānī* in addition to producing his own commentary entitled *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān Juz' alif lām mīm*. It was also at this time that a Malay Quranic commentary book, *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān* that consisted of all 30 *ajzā'* (volumes) was produced. Although it was written by Muhammad Said Umar (d. 1932) from 1925 to 1927, it was only published in 1934 (Talib Samad, 1992). Although this *tafsīr* follows the work of Arab Muslim interpreters, the significant innovation adopted by this *tafsīr* is that the verses were divided into sections with a given a topic, a novel approach which was known later known as *al-waḥdah al-mawḍū'ī* (unifying topic).

In the 1940's, several attempts were made to produce a complete *tafsīr* work. It started with the effort of Abdullah Abbas Nasution (d. 1987) who produced a literal interpretation of the meaning of Qur'ānic verses in 1940. In 1947, Nik Muhammad Salleh Wan Musa wrote *Falsafah Berumahtangga* based on *Sūrah al-Mujādalah*. Although it has been suggested that it uses a thematic method of interpretation, the researcher would rather suggest that it is an interpretation based on unifying themes (*al-waḥdah al-mawḍū'īyyah*) of the *Sūrah*. In 1949, Mustafa Abdul Rahman (d.1968) produced *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Ḥakīm*. This *tafsīr* has drawn the attention of many researchers amongst them are Mustafa, Wan Sabri, Sayuthi and Nadzirah.

The author of this *tafsīr* was able to complete 27 volumes of the Qur'ān, inspired by the need of Malays to understand the real message of the Qur'ān in their own language using the Jawi script. He says, "due to this reason this *tafsīr* is published and its writing

is guided by the *tafsīr* written by past scholars” (Wan Sabri, 2003). It seems that his ultimate reason was to inculcate Qur’ānic worldviews into the Malay minds. He says, “Al-Qur’ān is not revealed to be an amulet or a precious thing to be kept, but verses of al-Qur’ān are revealed to be read, comprehend the meaning and to practise its injunctions (Wan Sabri, 2003). The author uses the *taḥlīlī ijtima’ī* method which combines many existing trends of *tafsīr* such as *tafsīr bi al-ma’thūr* as well as *tafsīr bi al-ra’yī*. His main references for *ijtima’ī* analysis are *Tafsīr al-Manār* as well as al-Marāghī and Maḥmūd Shaltūt, on top of classical *tafsīrs* of al-Ṭabarī, al-Bayḍāwī and al-Khāzin, to name a few. His interpretation of the holy Qur’ān also manifests his reformist inclination which was against some traditional Malay beliefs (Wan Sabri, 2003). For example, his interpretation of Q.5: 35 rejects traditional Malay *wasilah* (means) to Allah through the medium of superstitions, spirit, seriously going against an *‘ālim* and others (Wan Sabri, 2003).

The decades of 1950’s and 1960’s showed an increase to a total of five and eight *tafsīrs* respectively. The focus, however, had not changed and was still centered on the interpretation of *Juz’ ‘Amma* and *Sūrah al-Baqarah*. In 1968, a significant Qur’ānic commentary writing received support by the Malaysian government with the appointment of a group of scholars led by Sheikh Abdullah Basmeih (d. 1996) to produce *Tafsīr Pimpinan Rahman*. On the contrary, in the 1970’s, the number dropped tremendously before rebounding in the 1980’s and 1990’s with a steady rise to a total of six and nine respectively (Haziyah et al., 2012).

In terms of methods, the translation work dominated the style of Qur’ānic commentaries as it tried to fulfil the needs of the community at that time to understand the meaning of *Sūrahs* that were commonly recited on a daily basis. Arabic *tafsīr* books became a main reference such as *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, Jalālayn, Bayḍāwī, Nasafī and Alūsī. The 1970’s and 1980’s witnessed the influence of *Zilāl al-Qur’ān* on the local communities in which plenty of effort was made to translate it. All of them ended in a volume or two of the Qur’ān except Yusof Zaky who had successfully completed a full translation of *Tafsīr fī Zilāl al-Qur’ān*.

The Writing of *tafsīr* in Malaysia in the 21st century

Siti Wahidah and Muhd Najib have listed around 66 writings that can relate to *tafsīr* writings in Malaysia this century. These writings can be grouped as follows:

Types of <i>Tafsīr</i>	Quantity
Translation	19
Analytical <i>tafsīr</i>	24
Brief <i>tafsīr</i>	5
Thematic <i>tafsīr</i>	18

The writing of *tafsīrs* from 2001 to 2015 differed from time to time. In 2001, only one writing was produced whereas in 2002 three writings were produced. Some of the *tafsīrs* were initially compilations of lecture series. As an example, al-Tibyan Dalam Menafsirkan al-Qur’ān *Tafsīr Sūrah Luqmān (al-Tibyān in Interpreting the Qur’ān the*

Interpretation of Sūrah Luqmān) by Sheikh Abdul Hadi Awang was a compilation of a series of religious Qur'ānic interpretation lectures which were conducted weekly by the author at a mosque in Marang, Terengganu. That compilation could be considered as legacy of his contribution to our Muslim community (Jurnal Turath, 2017).

Abdul Hadi Awang, a prolific writer, known as Tuan Guru Haji Abdul Hadi Awang born in 1947 in Terengganu, Malaysia who graduated with a Bachelor Degree from Medina University and a Master Degree from al-Azhar. He started teaching his weekly *tafsīr* in 1976 at his mosque in Rusila, Terengganu; and regularly writes a *tafsīr* column in a local newspaper, Harakah. After almost 40 years, he has recently completed teaching the *tafsīr* for the second time at his mosque. Unfortunately, his *tafsīr* has not been completely documented except for a number of selected chapters. In his words,

“I felt heavy and fear to write *tafsīr* al-Qur'ān since it is the Book of Allah and His Words that is free from deficiency... as numerous problems have occurred in tandem with existing problems that require Qur'ānic guidance and its explanation for easy understanding. Thus I come forward seeking Allah's help to state an explicit and implicit knowledge contained in this miraculous Book (Haziyah, 2017).”

Abdul Hadi's *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān has a great impact on the Malaysian Muslims society. His *tafsīr* circle attracted a great number of followers as well as avid researchers to an extent that four researches were successfully conducted (Haziyah, 2017).

The number continued to increase in 2003 and 2004 but started to decrease in 2005 onward until 2008 when the number of publications indicated the tendency to have more *tafsīr* writings published. However, from 2013 onward, the number of writings started to decline until in 2015 where only one book was published. This period also witnessed an upsurge of interest among writers to employ the thematic method in which a whopping 18 books were published.

Another kind of this *tafsīr* was the *tafsīr* of Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat. Nik Abdul Aziz known as Tok Guru was the former Chief Minister of the state of Kelantan who regularly conducted his Friday weekly *tafsīr* circles. Three chapters of his *tafsīr* lectures were successfully published. He combines *al-ma'thūr* and *al-ra'yī*, and relates them with current issues of his time.

Out of 24 books on the *tahlīlī* method, only two had complete interpretations of the whole Qur'ān. The first was *al-Muhtamir Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* by Asmaji Aes Muhtar (2004) and the other one was *Tafsīr Mubīn*. Asmaji took four years to accomplish the work which he aimed to be a moderate, light and easy to understand reference. As for *Tafsīr Mubīn* which was co-authored by Salahuddin Abdullah and Omar Khalid (2009), its writing was motivated by the need to provide for the children of the authors and as response to suggestions from their colleagues to write a more moderate *tafsīr* (*Tafsīr Mubīn*, 2009). This *tafsīr* follows the approach of *Ṣafwah al-Tafāsīr* and uses *Tafsīr al-Manār*, *al-Marāghī* and *Zilāl al-Qur'ān* as their main sources of reference. This *tafsīr* was also monitored by a proofreading and evaluation committee (*Tafsīr Mubīn*, 2009).

In 2008, the Selangor Council of Islamic Religion (MAIS) cooperated with the International College University of Selangor (KUIS) to compose a complete *tafsīr* expected to be completed within five years. The purpose of this project was to serve the need of Muslim communities, particularly in Malaysia, who are unable to comprehend the Arabic language, as well as to safeguard them from bewildering ideas or ideologies (*Tafsīr Mubin*, 2009).

One of the more significant recent *tafsīrs* is *Tafsīr Pedoman Muttaqin* by Abdul Hayyei Abdul Sukor, a former lecturer of University Malaya. The work was coined by the former Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who proposed that *tafsīrs* should be dynamic in tandem with the quintessence of Islam which eventually caused the Department of Islamic Religion Malaysia (JAKIM) to confer a mandate to Abdul Hayyei to compose a book of *tafsīr* as a guide for Muslim communities and Islam in Malaysia (*Tafsīr Mubin*, 2009). The first two volumes of this *tafsīr* were produced in 2005 and the whole *tafsīr* is expected to be finally completed in 2022.

Another Malay *tafsīr* discovered during this period is the *tafsīr Membongkar Rahsia al-Qur'ān* (2008). It is an effort by a group of a supervising committee and seven writers in cooperation with the al-Hadhari Training Consultants and Pusat Islam University Malaysia. It is believed that the work was also inspired by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Presently, only the *Sūrah al-Fātiḥah* has materialized although the aim is to produce a complete *tafsīr* of the whole holy Qur'ān.

This *tafsīr* focuses on relating the Qur'ānic commentaries to human culture and civilization. It aims to collaborate humans and any sacred knowledge when discussing the meaning of the Qur'ānic passages. Thus, it will pave a way for a scientific commentary of the Qur'ān that has drawn extraordinary attention from a number of modern scholars.

Some of the approaches taken by this *tafsīr* are a combination of *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* and *bi al-ra'yī*, a renewal of classical thoughts through a more contemporary and modern approach, less consideration to grammatical and metaphorical issues, the use of modern Malay language without the influence of Arabic language, consideration to *asbāb al-nuzūl* (reasons of revelation) and highlighting the modern scientific theories (*Membongkar Rahsia al-Qur'an*, 2008). Nevertheless, this *tafsīr* seems to have widened the coverage of exegesis with discussions that traverse beyond the literal meanings of the verses.

Recent Development

The following *tafsīrs* have not been referred to in the earlier part of this discussion. Since 2013, there has been no significant development as far as Qur'ānic commentaries are concerned. Besides a published Qur'ānic commentary, we now have *tafsīr* programs at radio stations such as IKIM Radio every weekday mornings. Not to be forgotten is the inclusion of the subject of *tafsīr* in public and private higher institutions especially to those who have accepted to do Islamic study programs.

Apart from the list provided earlier, there are at least two *tafsīrs* that have been published, both using the method of analytical exegesis. The first is *al-Hāfīz fī al-Tafsīr* while the second is *Tafsīr Sūrah al-Mulk*.

Al- Hāfīz fī al-Tafsīr uses a method of analytical *tafsīr* composed by a group of religious teachers at IQKL (Institusi Qur'ān Kuala Lumpur /Qur'ānic Institution Kuala Lumpur) supervised by an expert committee. It is an effort aimed to produce a complete Qur'ānic commentary in Malay to be used by adolescent students of *tahfīz* (memorization of Qur'ān) schools and as well as by the lay public. The first two volumes consisting of the first eight chapters of the holy Qur'ān were published in 2013. It is a moderate *tafsīr* which focuses on simplifying Qur'ānic understanding with the explanation of its vocabularies (*Al-Hafiz Fi al-Tafsir*, 2013). Although the *tafsīr* relies heavily on Arabic Qur'ānic commentaries, an attempt has been made to deduce significant messages of the holy verses for the benefit of those who study it.

Tafsīr Sūrah Mulk was authored by Zahazan Mohamed entitled *Agungnya Kerajaan Allah (A Great Sovereignty of Allah)* in 2015. Prior to this writing, he has conducted morning weekday commentaries on IKIM Radio (ikim.fm). The reason for writing this *tafsīr* is as he says, “as a response to the request from colleagues, students, fans and followers of my commentary lectures at ikim.fm” (Zahazan, 2015). His aim is to correct Muslims’ understanding towards *tafsīrs*. He chose *Sūrah al-Mulk* as a response to his colleague’s advice to begin with a short *Sūrah*, in particular that *Sūrah*, as it holds a significant position to the Prophet (Zahazan, 2015).

According to him, his methodology in this *tafsīr* is a combination between *al-ma'thūr* and *al-ra'yī* by referring to numerous *tafsīr* books and correlate with the current issues that he has personally undergone (Zahazan, 2015). This *tafsīr* commences with some introductory remarks on *maqāṣid al-Qur'ān* (the purposes of the Qur'ān), ways of interaction with the Qur'ān and the excellence (*faḍīlat*) of *Sūrah al-Mulk*. The author divides the *Sūrah* into sections under a single unifying theme (*al-waḥdah al-mawḍū'iyah*). He gives great attention to the importance of philological analysis of its Arabic meaning as an imperative apparatus to comprehend Qur'ānic verses. A combination of renowned classical and modern Arabic Quranic commentaries were used such as of al-Ṭabarī, Abū Ḥayyān, Ibn Ashūr and al-Sya'rāwī; as well as Indonesian *tafsīrs* such as of Hamka and Misbah. The *tafsīr* concludes with deduction of a significant meaning. Value-adding to this *tafsīr*, the author also furnishes it with relevant images to help capture the essence of the messages.

Conclusion

To sum up, *tafsīr* efforts in Malaysia have a long historical background dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries. Since then, it has continued to be taught and written by a great number of accomplished scholars and reputable writers. Four types of *tafsīrs* have been used in which the main focus is the translation and *tafsīr taḥlīlī* with a combination of *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* and *bi al-ra'yī*. Contemporary issues have been tackled particularly by those who adopted the approach of *tafsīr ijtimā'ī*. *Tafsīr* is not only taught at madrasah and mosques but also at higher institutions of learnings as well as through the media.

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