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## **MODERNIST REINTERPRETATIONS: RETHINKING *AL-QUR'ĀN* AND *AS-SUNNAH* THROUGH THE EYES OF M. ARKOUN AND AL-JABIRI**

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the Arab modernists and their understanding of *al-Qur'ān* and *as-Sunnah* in the light of the thoughts of M. Arkoun and Al-Jabiri. The researchers seek to explore the narrative of M. Arkoun and al-Jabiri by focusing on their views of *al-Qur'ān* and *as-Sunnah*. This research is both theoretical and philosophical, and therefore, is qualitative and depends much on textual research. The resources include printed and online materials. To analyse the data, the researchers have adopted critical and analytical methods. The findings show that the Arab modernists like M. Arkoun and Al-Jabiri were among the Muslim intellectuals who were triggered and thus influenced by the crisis of European modernity that engulfed the Arab world. Unfortunately, in the modern period, these Arab modernists and other Muslim modernists have completely rejected classical methodologies, instead, they borrowed the Western methodologies to study *al-Qur'ān* and *as-Sunnah*, and even in validating *aḥkāṁ*.

**Keywords:** *Al-Qur'ān* and *as-Sunnah*, Arab Modernist, Islamic Thought, Arkoun, al-Jabiri.

### **Introduction**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Islamic world was bewildered by the coming of many contemporary Muslims who advocate peculiar and unusual ideas and concepts on the

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teachings of Islam. Those scholars originated from Muslim countries such as India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Algeria, Sudan, and Egypt. These people are also known as the Arab modernists. They asserted the need to ‘reinterpret and reapply’ the understanding of *al-Qur’ān* and *as-Sunnah*, formulating the principles to meet the requirements of modern life and the challenges from Europe’s influence.

The age of European development and extension, diffusion, and domination – indirectly called the Age of Discovery by Europeans – initiated in the 16<sup>th</sup> century but reached its finishing point in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thus, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the stability of power had shifted to Europe, and much of the Muslim world found itself dominated by the European imperial powers, representing its political, economic, and military incapability, thus challenging the narrative of Islamic dominance and authenticity itself. It was during European colonial development that modern Islamic thought developed. To put it in simpler words, the European diffusion of the Middle East and India and the deterioration of Muslim dominance in these regions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century triggered the crisis that demarcated the responses of Muslim intellectuals to European modernity.

M. Arkoun and Al-Jabiri were among the Arab modernists representing the Muslim intellectuals who were triggered, and thus, influenced by the crisis of European modernity that engulfed the Arab world. They knew Arabic and mastered Western knowledge. They drafted numerous books and articles focusing on *ḥadīth*, *tafsīr*, jurisprudence, and other issues related to Islamic Thought. The thoughts of these scholars, also known as Contemporary Islamic Thought, were pioneered by scholars like Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduh, and Rashid Ridha. Therefore, this research aims to analyse the thoughts of the Arab modernists in understanding *al-Qur’ān* and *as-Sunnah*, and whether their understanding of *al-Qur’ān* and *as-Sunnah* is compatible with the Islamic teachings.

Few studies have critically evaluated how Arab modernists in general, and Mohammed Arkoun and Muhammad Abid Al-Jabiri, in particular, used Western approaches to understand *al-Qur’ān* and *as-Sunnah*, often at the expense of classical Islamic traditions, even though numerous studies have looked at modernist trends in Islamic thinking. Muhaemin Latif, in his research paper, entitled “*Muhammad Shahrur as A Contemporary Muslim Intellectual: A Preliminary Exploration*”<sup>1</sup>, describes Muhammad Shahrur's intellectual development but only mentions Arkoun and Al-Jabiri in passing, ignoring their more profound philosophical divergences from Islamic dogma. While referencing well-known Arab modernists, Uthman

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<sup>1</sup> See, Muhaemin Latif, “Muhammad Shahrur as A Contemporary Muslim Intellectual: A Preliminary Exploration, *Jurnal Diskursus Islam*, Vol. 8, No. 1, (2020): 1–15.

and Onire cover both classical and contemporary approaches to tafsir in their paper, entitled “*The Interpretation of Islamic Education: Perceptions of Modernist and Classical Thinkers on The Qur’anic Exegesis*,” without providing a thorough critique of their epistemic dependence on Western paradigms.<sup>2</sup> Although Arif and Lessy provide a targeted explanation of Al-Jabiri's al-Qur’ānic hermeneutics in their paper entitled “*Al-Jabiri’s Quranic Hermeneutics and Its Significance for Religious Education*,” specifically his insistence on objectivity and contextual readings, they do not examine the wider ramifications of his ideas in undermining traditional notions like *ijmā’*, *shūrā*, or *waqf*.<sup>3</sup> While Ra’of acknowledges the disruptive influence of Western philosophy on Islamic intellectualism in his thesis, “*A Study of the Problematic Tradition and Modernity in Islamic Thought*,” he does not directly criticize how Arab modernists assimilated orientalist ideas.<sup>4</sup> When taken as a whole, these works don't adequately examine how heavily Western intellectual traditions impacted Arkoun and Al-Jabiri or how their reinterpretations have fuelled the growth of feminist, secularist, and liberalist movements in modern Muslim discourse. This paper bridges that gap by critically examining how these intellectuals, who belonged to a larger Arab modernist school, changed Islamic epistemology by ignoring the rich heritage of Islamic civilization and embracing foreign approaches, many of which have their origins in colonial-era orientalist scholarship. This helps to clarify how their extensively translated and disseminated writings have shaped modern Islamic philosophy in ways that still impact reformist and secularist movements today.

A qualitative research methodology based on theoretical and philosophical analysis is used in this study. The research is mostly textual and analytical due to the intellectual nature of the subject, which deals with abstract concepts and critical reinterpretations of Islamic thinking. The researchers compared and examined M. Arkoun and Al-Jabiri's perspectives on *al-Qur’ān* and *as-Sunnah* using a critical-analytical method. The primary materials written by these thinkers, as well as secondary scholarly analyses that are accessible in print and digital media, make up the data sources. Discourse analysis is also used in the study to examine the terminology, underlying presuppositions, and interpretive strategies used by modernist writers. Engaging with Western critical theory, particularly the methodology of hermeneutics, deconstruction, and epistemological critique, which is

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<sup>2</sup> Yusuf Olawale Uthman and Owa-Onire, “The Interpretation of Islamic Education: Perceptions of Modernist and Classical Thinkers on The Qur’anic Exegesis,” *Tafkir: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Education* 3, no. 1 (January 2022): 77–91, <https://doi.org/10.31538/tijie.v3i1.129>.

<sup>3</sup> Mahmud Arif and Zulkipli Lessy, “Al-Jabiri’s Quranic Hermeneutics and Its Significance for Religious Education,” *KEMANUSIAAN the Asian Journal of Humanities* 30, no. 1 (May 2023): 34–56.

<sup>4</sup> Abdul Mukti Ro’uf, “A Study of the Problematic Tradition and Modernity in Islamic Thought,” *Millatī, Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities* 9, no. 1 (June 2024): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.18326/mlt.v9i1.572>.

essential to Arkoun and Al-Jabiri's approaches, is one of the research's philosophical pillars. Discourse analysis is also used in the study to examine the terminology, underlying presuppositions, and interpretive strategies used by these modernist academics. The research attempts to offer a thorough understanding of the methodological transformations that characterize Arab modernist readings of Islamic Sources by combining Western philosophical methods, traditional Muslim approaches, and current scholarly discourse.

### **Mohammed Arkoun (1928-2010): Life and Background**

Professor Mohammed Arkoun was born into a traditional, prolonged family in Taourirt-Mimoun, a small town in the Great Kabylia, in February 1928.<sup>5</sup> As a Berber in colonial Algeria, he primarily spoke neither the language of the colonial rulers nor that of *al-Qur'ān*, and as a result, found himself demoted from an early age. He joined a college run by the White Fathers and finished his schooling in Oran, and in Algiers. He started degrees in Arabic literature, law, philosophy, and geography. He organized his scholarly status with his early studies (1969, 1970) of the Persian historian and philosopher Miskawayh. As he began to contemplate how one might rethink Islam in the contemporary world, his cultured questioning produced a counterpoint to the highly ideological interpretations that had conquered debate in both the Muslim world and the non-Muslim West.

Arkoun is the writer of several books in French, English, and Arabic, together with *Rethinking Islam* (Westview Press, 1994), *L'immigration, défis et richesses* (Centurion, 1998), and *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (Saqi Books, 2002). His quick studies emerged in numerous academic journals, and his works have been translated into various languages.<sup>6</sup> In 2001, Arkoun was requested to deliver the Gifford Lectures, which qualify a distinguished scholar to contribute to the improvement of theological and philosophical thought; there he was proclaimed as the recipient of the 17<sup>th</sup> Giorgio Levi Della Vida Award for his lifetime contribution to the field of Islamic Studies. As a visiting Professor, he taught at Temple University, the University of Louvain-la-Neuve, the University of California, Princeton University, the University of Amsterdam, and the Pontifical Institute of Arabic Studies in Rome. He also served as a jury member for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. At his passing, he was Emeritus Professor at La Sorbonne as well as Senior Research Fellow and member of the Board of Governors of the Institute of

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<sup>5</sup> Abdou Filali-Ansary and Aziz Esmail, eds., *The Construction of Belief: Reflections on the Thought of Mohammed Arkoun* (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Ismaili Studies (IIS) in London. In October 2009, the IIS organized a conference in honour of Arkoun's endeavours to reestablish the study of Islam, who died in September 2010.<sup>7</sup>

### **Arkoun's Fundamental Thought and His Views on *al-Qur'ān***

During his studies, Arkoun was very aware that language, thought, history, and power are parts that can establish interactions. This attracted his attention, as a Muslim, the development of the Western world provided many intellectual inspirations which encouraged his aspirations to wrestle more intensely with the competition in his country against rational and critical attitudes towards the West.

Arkoun, who introduced the need for a "critical history of the text passed down with the name of *al-Qur'ān*," voiced a more self-assured and critical viewpoint. He also acknowledged the holy text as something now missing and irretrievable, no longer the result of transcendence, disputing that the divine source has become distorted due to the pressure of political ideology. Arkoun's "critique of Islamic reason" combined the legacy of the French Enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> Along with that, he reopens the *ijtihad* way. The fact is that *ijtihad* is only an ideological means of the authority. Thus, he suggests that *ijtihad* can be broadened with the experimental critique of the Islamic perspective of Reason.

The pivotal point of Arkoun's thought lies in the keyword "epistemological criticism". This term is used in his various works, although in different contexts.<sup>9</sup> So, it can be said that Arkoun is one of the contemporary thinkers who is counted as a pioneer in the study of epistemological criticism of intellectual works, especially in the study of the science of *al-Qur'ān*. The concept is applied in most of his works, though in a diverse framework. The epistemological thoughts and connotations in his concept are acute because they focus on the scientific building of religious sciences. The core distinctiveness of Arkoun's thought is in the adjoining between the Western world and the Islamic world, which was in line with his dream to assemble the detailed amalgamation of numerous ways of thinking. The effort in uniting the two elements, the most celestial of Islamic thought, which is according to him is Islamic Reason and the most treasured in the modern western thought, which is the modern thought itself, is his aspiration that inspires his activities and works, that is specific uniting of various ways of thinking. Arkoun's epistemological and methodological fundamentals

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<sup>7</sup> Abdou Filali-Ansary and Aziz Esmail, *The Construction of Belief: ...*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, "Towards the New Approach of Islam," *Journal Ulumul Qur'an*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (1990): 54.

<sup>9</sup> See for example Mohammed Arkoun, *Tārikhiyyah Al-Fikr al-'Arabī al-Islāmī* (Beirut: Markaz al-Inmā' al-Qaumī, 1986), 22, 31–32, 295.

were captured from the mixture of Descartes' rationalism, Kant's criticism, Saussure's structuralism, Barthes, Hjelmslev's, and Greimas' semiotics and "the Paris school," the myth perception from Ricoeur, the treatise and episteme from Foucault, and the deconstruction from Derrida.<sup>10</sup>

Descartes proposed a theory of truth that was constructed on logical reasoning and undoubtedly focused on the subject, not on experimental verification. While Kant criticized the logic of empiricism–positivism, nonetheless, he himself in fact approves the complexity of logical reasoning, which has clarity and rationality in its method. That is why his entire philosophical construction is mostly influenced by logical language formulation.<sup>11</sup> If we glance around, a critique of Islamic thought, it appears he followed Kant's logic, which is in fact unlike from deconstruction method.

Saussure distinguishes between language as a system (*langue*) and language as a speech (*parole*). *Parole* is an activity, or a process, and it is diachronic. *Langue* as a structure is a web of internal relationships amongst elements of language and it is synchronic. *Parole* is individual and intentional, as *langue* is collective and anonym. Reflecting from the theory, Arkoun projected to reread Islamic texts, so that *Al-Qur'ān* is not only as *langue*, but also as *parole* for the society nowadays.<sup>12</sup> He claims that in the performative characteristic with the symbolic analysis, which make possible *Sūrah al-Fātihah*, turn out to be *parole* for anyone who read it.

Barthes defined that semiology started from language basic system, which is *langue* and *parole*. Two of Saussure's theses he established were the concept of sign and the subjective and conventional as the characteristics of sign. According to him, a human being in his speech does not unswervingly talk about "reality," but uses many signs related to rules. The signs, as the mixture of signifier and signified, can become a signifier in the second-level semiotic system, which is called myth. Arkoun established Barthes' and Ricoeur's mythical approach in understanding and viewing *Al-Qur'ān* and Islam.<sup>13</sup> He applied Ricoeur's term to organize a kind of duplication of religious experience in the anthropological study of mythical or symbolic reading of *Sūrah al-Fātihah*. According to him, like Biblical stories, *the Qur'ānic* text is also mythical. This implies that in the socio-historical context, *the Qur'ānic* text has changed into a dead corpus.

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<sup>10</sup> Siti Rohmah Soekarba, "The Critique of Arab Thought: Mohammed Arkoun's Deconstruction Method," *Makara, Sosial Humaniora* 10, no. 2 (December 2006): 80.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Foucault described *episteme* as the way to view and know reality. Human beings from time to time grasped the reality contrarily. So, they talked about reality differently. The way people talked about reality, he called discourse. Foucault categorized episteme into three according to past time, the Middle Ages, and contemporary time. Arkoun revised Foucault’s thought by applying episteme ideas to his partition of three historical periods in the forming of Arab – Islam thought: classical, scholastic, and modern.<sup>14</sup> Although he did not take over all of Foucault’s philosophical views, the terms episteme, discourse, and archaeology got their specific meaning from him and are often used in his writings.

Arkoun’s struggles with historical theories and language philosophy that flourished in France seem to have contributed significantly to the format and his intellectual vision of seeing Islam, which can be seen, among other things, in his appreciation of the method of hermeneutics. Arkoun, who considers *al-Qur’ān* as a text, tries to find the meanings that have become eliminated or forgotten due to the process of closing and freezing by the classical interpretation tradition. So, according to Arkoun, linguistics is the key to entering *al-Qur’ān*.

### **Arkoun’s Application of the Deconstruction Method**

It is important beforehand to understand the meaning of deconstruction. Initiated by the philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), deconstruction is an approach to understanding the relationship between text and meaning. Deconstruction is a kind of inner critique that reveals that the meaning of words only comes into being in relations of consistency and variance.<sup>15</sup> In another definition, ‘deconstruction can best be described as a theory of reading whose purpose is to undermine the logic of opposition within texts.’<sup>16</sup> While deconstruction does not anticipate uncovering the real meaning of a text, it does encompass two things, which are:<sup>17</sup>

1. A consideration of what is missing from the text, and
2. Foregrounding in the text, the absent or the missing.

In discussing the deconstruction method applied by Arkoun, he was influenced by structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction with their insistence on linguistic

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<sup>14</sup> Siti Rohmah Soekarba, “The Critique of Arab Thought: Mohammed Arkoun’s Deconstruction Method,” 80.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas A. Schwandt, *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry* (United Kingdom: SAGE Publications, 2007), 63.

<sup>16</sup> David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 121.

<sup>17</sup> Usman Khalil and Abida Khan, “Islam and Postmodernity: M. Arkoun on Deconstruction,” *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 3, no. 1 (2013): 31.

analyses, Arkoun attempts to ‘reemphasize the marginalized meaning’, the hidden or the forgotten or the ones polluted by exterior aspects because of the abundant coverings and freezing processes Islamic thinking has gone through. However, Arkoun believes that a “reconstruction” of a discourse must follow deconstruction after that discourse has been made free of the boundaries, restrictions, freezing, and falsifications covering it.<sup>18</sup>

After observing the logocentrism in Islamic traditional thought—what Arkoun referred to as *turāth*—he argued that the most important task for contemporary Muslims is to deconstruct their understanding of *turāth*. However, the term *turāth* must be clearly distinguished between the two different definitions. First, Tradition (*Turāth*) (with a large T), which is a transcendent tradition that is always understood and perceived as an ideal tradition that comes from God, and *Turāth* cannot be changed by historical studies. Second, traditions or *turāth* (with a small t), namely traditions formed by human history and culture.

Between these two types of traditions, Arkoun put aside the first tradition (*turāth*), because, according to him, these traditions were beyond the knowledge and capacity of human experience. Thus, the object of deconstruction is the second type of *turāth*, namely *turāth* formed by the conditions of historical space-time. Then, deconstruction, which is a philosophical strategy, intellectual strategy, and mode of reading, as well as methods of reading and interpretation, are used to understand *turāth*’ discourse in a new way according to historical-sociological developments. Therefore, deconstruction seeks to trace concepts, discourses, or interpretations that define other discourses or interpretations.

Asserting on a transcendental explanation of the oral language, Arkoun describes the move from verbal to written form of language as a modification from the language of the Prophet ﷺ into a teaching sermon in the controlled settings of human condition open to a diversity of contexts. An uncompromising perception with an inclination towards a closed interpretation, rejecting other interpretations, explained and classified the Prophet’s ﷺ teaching discourse. Consequently, a “text” into “pretext” (arguments), simply repeated frequently without thinking, provided to the authentication of a certain group authority.”<sup>19</sup>

Enquiring to be critical of traditional Islamic methods and opening the holy texts of Islam for the historical and modern linguistic research, Arkoun proposed to the Muslim intellectuals to deconstruct past thinking as well as the classical interpretations of the holy texts. He engaged the deconstruction method to restructure scientific traditions of classical Islam, believing that without inducement and the curriculum of openness as the standards of

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<sup>18</sup> Usman Khalil and Abida Khan, “Islam and Postmodernity: M. Arkoun on Deconstruction,” 35.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

modern Western research, the standard of Islamic knowledge will not reach the same level in the eyes of traditional Islamic experts, the orientalists, and the world at large.<sup>20</sup>

Arkoun not only gives courtesy to classical texts from Islamic scientists, but he also examines the scripture or holy texts. To him, one of the targets of reading the texts, the Holy texts, was to acknowledge them in the fluctuating state and condition. Meaning that, religious teachings from the Holy texts should adapt and not be against every state and condition. Here, what Arkoun tried to do was to blend between tradition and modernity through an innovative method. For Arkoun, the integrated interpretation is an interpretation that sees the connection between language, thinking, and the historical dimension. To do this hermeneutical interpretation, the first step is to distinguish and to show which one is the first/former original text, and which is the hermeneutical text. Arkoun intended to bring the Islamic thought into *Al-Qur'ānic* discourse as it is, which is open to various readings and at the same time open to different understandings.<sup>21</sup>

The difficulty Arkoun faced in his project was that *al-Qur'ān*, as the primary text or original event, had already been interpreted and transformed by Islamic thought into various forms of secondary or hermeneutical texts. The covering is such that it hinders to understand *al-Qur'ān* as it is.<sup>22</sup> To overcome this problem, Arkoun borrowed Derrida's "deconstruction's" method or "uncovering," and archaeological analysis used in examining historical artifacts. By this archaeological analysis, he tried to do an historical clarification on hermeneutical texts from certain thinking tradition, that is to clarify and clean the "dust" of space and time which covered them so that it will be noticed the relation between texts from historical stages and social context, the generation and the various thinking movement in the same historical time.<sup>23</sup>

In this case, Arkoun revealed that there should always be a connection between language, thinking, and history. Islamic society, and religious society in general, should be fully aware that there is a dialectical relation between language, thinking, and history. No other religious thinking that loosely untied from language and history. Concerning *al-Qur'ān*, Arkoun insisted that the holy Book of Moslems is words, language, cultural and religious phenomena coming up from its situation, so that it would not producing meaning, except in its context; and in its turn, creating an awareness' structuralized, furthermore *al-*

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<sup>20</sup> Usman Khalil and Abida Khan, "Islam and Postmodernity: M. Arkoun on Deconstruction," 35.

<sup>21</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *Arab Thought* (New Delhi: OUP, 1988), 25–40.

<sup>22</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *Al-Fikr al-Islamy: Naqd Wa al-Ijtihad*, (London: Dar as-Saqi, 1990), 232.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 233–234.

*Qur'ān* is a religious text to read and to live through.<sup>24</sup> From the above definitions, it highlights that deconstruction is a theory or principle that advocates that a scripture or the verses in it have the meaning intended by the author, meaning that the text has various meanings. Thus, it depends on the reader to choose which meaning he favours most. As a result, in accepting the method of deconstruction in understanding *al-Qur'ān* and *as-Sunnah*, one will not depend on and thus reject the writings, works, and explanations from the Prophet (P.B.U.H.), Companions, successors, and the classical Muslim intellectuals' scholars. As a result, the understanding of *al-Qur'ān* will depend on one's desires and interests.

### **Muḥammad 'Abd Al-Jabiri (1935-2010): Life and Background**

Muḥammad 'Abd Al-Jabiri (27 December 1935 – 3 May 2010) was a Moroccan critic and professor of philosophy and Islamic Thought at Mohammed V University in Rabat. He was also an expert in Arabic and Arabic literature.<sup>25</sup> Al-Jabiri comes from Figuig, on the Moroccan-Algerian border – a disputed area that was later the scene of the so-called 'War of the Sand' between the two newly independent countries in the early 1960s. Already during his high school years, Al-Jabiri became politically active in the Istiqlal Party. His political mentor at the time was Mehdi Ben Barka, who arranged for him to begin writing for the Istiqlal periodical *Al-Alam*. Al-Jabiri followed Ben Barka when the latter split from the party to form the UNFP in 1959. Because of his involvement in leftist politics, Al-Jabiri was incarcerated for a few months in 1963. He continued his activities in the UNFP also after the mysterious disappearance of Ben Barka in 1965. In 1975, he joined the USFP as it split from UNFP and became a member of its politburo.<sup>26</sup>

Alongside his political work, in 1958 Al-Jabiri had begun studying philosophy at the universities in Damascus and Rabat. In the mid-sixties, he pursued his doctorate while also teaching philosophy at high schools and assisting in the writing of several textbooks. These books were quite influential in shaping the thoughts of students during the late sixties and early seventies. They emphasized the relationship between culture and society, and the significance of knowledge and education to effectuate social change. Thus, they prefigure Al-Jabiri's later scholarly preoccupation with epistemology (the philosophy of knowledge)

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<sup>24</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *Various of Reading of Al-Qur'an* (Jakarta: INIS, 1990), 185–86.

<sup>25</sup> The Free Encyclopedia, "Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri," Wikipedia, accessed January 12, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammed\\_Abed\\_al-Jabri](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammed_Abed_al-Jabri).

<sup>26</sup> Carol Kersten, "A Moroccan Philosopher in Indonesia: The Influence of Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri on Indonesian Islamic Thinking," *Critical Muslims: Introducing Alternative Voices from The Muslim World* (blog), 2015, <http://caroolkersten.blogspot.com/2015/02/a-moroccan-philosopher-in-indonesia.html>.

and its impact on history and politics.<sup>27</sup> Al-Jabiri was very much influenced by the Moroccan-born geographer and historian Yves Lacoste, especially the latter's Marxist interpretation of *Ibn Khaldun: The Birth of History and the Past of the Third World* (1965). So impressed by the study, he chose to make the 14th-century courtier and scholar the focus of his doctoral research. In his findings, al-Jabiri presents the medieval North African statesman and savant's theory of the rise and fall of civilizations as a structural and systemic alternative to the Ash'ari projection of history, through which Ibn Khaldun nevertheless managed to keep his admiration for Ghazali's Sufism intact.<sup>28</sup>

In this endeavour, he was intellectually mentored by one of Morocco's leading philosophers at the time, M. Aziz Lahbabi: who would oversee Al-Jabiri's first doctoral thesis on Ibn Khaldun's philosophy of history, which was submitted in 1967. Another philosopher, Najib Baladi, directed Al-Jabiri's further research for the so-called *doctorat d'état*, a degree comparable to the German *Habilitation*. This resulted in the publication of Al-Jabiri's first monograph, appearing in 1971 under the title *The Thought of Ibn Khaldun: Asabiyya and State: Theoretical Outlines of Khaldunian Thinking about Islamic History*.<sup>29</sup>

Aside from his academic career as a lecturer and later professor of philosophy at Université Mohammed V in Rabat, throughout the 1970s, Al-Jabiri remained preoccupied with his political work in the UNFP and USFP. However, from 1980 onwards, he decided to concentrate more on systematically writing down his ideas regarding the relationship between knowledge and power in the development of Islamic thinking.<sup>30</sup>

He is considered to have been one of the major intellectual figures in the contemporary Arab world. Al-Jabiri has been involved in politics and journalism, and he is the main editor of the journal *Fikr wa-Naqd* (Thought and criticism), published in Rabat. His philosophy must be understood in the context of the effort to modernize his country while at the same time preserving its cultural identity.<sup>31</sup>

Al-Jabiri is a prolific writer; his large project, *The Critique of the Arab Mind*, is in three volumes: *Formation of the Arab Mind* (1984), *Structure of the Arab Mind* (1986), and *The Arab Political Mind* (1990). Al-Jabiri emphasizes the concept of cultural legacy (*turāth*) and analyses different readings of it.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Carol Kersten, "A Moroccan Philosopher in Indonesia: ...".

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Thomson Gale, "Al-Jabiri, 'Abd (1935–)," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

### **Al-Jabiri's Fundamental Thought**

Al-Jabiri is one of the most eminent contemporary Arab Muslim philosophers. Most of his writings focus on the complex relationship between Islamic heritage (*turĒth*) and modernity, and his ideas regarding the question of compatibility of modern and Islamic human rights concepts should be seen in this larger context. With respect to the challenge of compatibility between two human rights schemes, al-Jabiri's theoretical methodological framework is that of comparative philosophy, whose overall aim is to develop a culturally specific theoretical framework deemed necessary for effective cultural implementation of modern concepts of human rights into the contemporary Arabo-Islamic conscience.<sup>33</sup>

Concerning the supposed secularism of modern human rights schemes, al-Jabiri argues that the concept of secularism as employed by European philosophers "who initiated the Enlightenment and worked towards the establishment of human rights in modern thought" did not oppose religion per se but institutionalized religion, specifically in its medieval Church form. European philosophers' concept of human rights has its origins in natural religion, which they considered to be Divine. Hence, this concept of secularism does not preclude a religion-based referential authority per se.<sup>34</sup>

### **Al-Jabiri's Exegetic Methodology and the Presentation of *al-Qur'ān***

During the last years of his life, al-Jabiri concentrated on a direct dissertation of *al-Qur'ān*. The book in which he addresses the Holy Book consists of two parts. The first is an introduction to *al-Qur'ān*, entitled *Madkhal ilā al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, "Introduction to the Noble Qur'an" (2006), and the second is a sort of Qur'anic commentary entitled *Fahm al-Qur'ān al-Ḥakīm: Al-Tafsīr al-Wāḍiḥ ḥasb Tartīb al-Nuzūl* "Understanding *al-Qur'ān*: A clear exegesis based on the order of descent" (2008), based no longer on the 'uṯmānian organization of the surahs (order and length of the chapters still read today) but according to the chronological order in which the revelation was passed on. Although not entirely innovative, this criterion shows harmony between Muhammad (P.B.U.H.)'s biography and the development of the path followed by the generation and genesis of *al-Qur'ān*.<sup>35</sup>

Basically, al-Jabiri proposed on the one hand to separate the text's ideological and preaching manipulation, while on the other presenting *al-Qur'ān* to the broader public, Arab-

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<sup>33</sup> Adis Duderija, *The Imperatives of Progressive Islam* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2017), 100.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>35</sup> Mariangela Laviano, "Al-Jabiri and His Introduction to the Qur'ān," in *Islam, State, and Modernity Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri and the Future of the Arab World*, ed. Zaid Eyadat, Francesca M. Corrao, and Mohammed Hashas (U.S.A.: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2018), 109–25.

Muslim and not, as the fundamental Book that has led to awareness of a world-crossroad in which different civilizations and cultures have coexisted and shared the same spaces. In presenting *al-Qur'ān*, al-Jabiri investigates two large areas: the Book and its contents. More specifically, he addresses three key subjects; the *Qur'ānic* environment, hence the *milieu* in which the three (Semitic) revealed religions originated; the creation of the Holy Book, hence the process of its generation and genesis; and, *finally*, the narrative, the stories present in *al-Qur'ān*, which he considers *Qur'ānic* events (and not historical ones), are justified within the framework of the Revelation, and therefore, have their own objectives and finalities.<sup>36</sup>

According to historical-biographical sources, one cannot be certain as far as the Prophet's literacy is concerned, and in this sense, *al-Qur'ān* is not noticeably clear. As used in *al-Qur'ān*, the word *ummiyya* and its derivatives do not have just one meaning, but a range of meanings depending on various contexts. Among them, for example, it can mean not knowing the Scriptures and therefore a sort of "gentile." This issue is of significant importance and the traditional interpretation has concentrated a great deal on this subject in order to eliminate any suspicion regarding the fact that Muhammad (P.B.U.H.) might have read ancient Holy Books and therefore have written *al-Qur'ān* himself, thereby eliminating the Holy Book's miraculous aspect and consequently his prophetic calling, The Prophet, according to al-Jabiri, was capable of reading and writing.<sup>37</sup>

Analysing matters in this manner, the Moroccan intellectual places *al-Qur'ān* in "its" context, proposing reflections on the nature of Muḥammad (P.B.U.H.)'s Revelation that are not entirely new but symbolize the continuity of the divine message to humankind. Al-Jabiri summarizes *al-Qur'ān* in five main points: the Revelation (*wahy*), Gabriel (loyal spirit), Muḥammad (he who warns), clear Arab language (means of the revelation), and previous revelation (ancient Holy Books). The combination of these five points leads to a three-dimensional discussion of the *Qur'ānic* phenomenon. A temporal dimension that emerges in the Revelation between Muḥammad (P.B.U.H.) and previous Messengers; a spiritual dimension reflected in the period during which the Prophet received and accepted the revelation; a social-religious dimension concerning the process of Muhammad passing on the message to his people.<sup>38</sup> The "Qur'anic phenomenon" (*al-zāhira al-Qur'āniyya*) and the path it followed during the twenty-three years of the revelation are not just a spiritual

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Muhammad 'Abd al-Jabiri, *Madḥal Ilā Al-Qur'ān al-Karīm. Fī al-Ta'Rīf Bi-l-Qur'Ān* (Beirut: Al-Markaz Dirasāt al-Waḥda al-'Arabiyya, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Laviano, "Al-Jabri and His Introduction to the Qur'ān."

experience, a prophetic mission, and a message (*risāla*), but also an “Arab phenomenon” (*al-zāhira al-‘arabiyya*) because of its linguistic, social, and cultural affinity. Al-Jabiri, therefore, believes that the “Qur’anic phenomenon” is the expression both Qur’an and of the cultural-religious traditions represented by “Qur’anic sciences” (*‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*), traditions, therefore, that must not be eliminated, but that need to be constantly interpreted and re-interpreted repeatedly.<sup>39</sup>

According to the Moroccan intellectual, *al-Qur’ān* is a concentration of ethics, but it is its interpretations that constitute that *turāth* that is the subject of an objective critique. Al-Jabiri approached *al-Qur’ān* as a philosopher and not as a theologian. In his discourse on the Holy Book, he refers to the principle invoked by many *‘ulamā’* according to whom the “Qur’an defines itself” without, however, excluding the various versions (*riwāyāt*) on which the classic *tafsīr* relies. The methodology he proposes for a reinterpretation of *al-Qur’ān* and its phenomenon is based on the disjunctive/re-conjunctive theory, the explanation of which proceeds in the light of those two principles (already used by the author for a systematic and objective reinterpretation of the cultural traditions) present in the introduction of his book *Naḥnu wa-l-turāth*.<sup>40</sup> Based on these principles, *al-Qur’ān* will be read as a text that is contemporary both unto itself and to us. It is hence a reinterpretation based on contemporaneity at two “levels” and at two “speeds.” It is contemporary to itself for its social, cultural, and linguistic aspects. Thus, its meaning will be contemporary concerning its context and its understanding and intelligibility.<sup>41</sup>

Ensuring *al-Qur’ān* is contemporary to itself will mean separating it from us, while making it contemporary to us will mean bringing it closer and connecting it to us. Its interpretation will therefore be based on the concepts of “disconnection” and “reconnection,” understood as essential methodological steps. The first stage, separating the Book from the readers, is of fundamental importance since the Arab reader reads passively without exploring or researching, but simply applying his reference system. The direct consequence is that reasoning no longer becomes an interpretive effort (*ijtihād*) but simply remembering. What al-Jabiri proposes consists of materially achieving a detachment of the meaning before reading the words. The second phase, instead, consists of connecting the Text to the reader only at a level of understanding, and therefore the field of interest of the reader himself.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Muhammad ‘Abd al-Jabiri, *Naḥnu Wa-l-Turāth. Qirā‘āt Mu‘āṣira Fī Turāṭinā al-Falsafī* (Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqafī al-‘Arabi, 1993).

<sup>41</sup> Laviano, “Al-Jabiri and His Introduction to the Qur’an.”

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Al-Jabiri's interpretation of *al-Qur'ān* and religious traditions, which one can define as "rational," places emphasis on individual and rational interpretation, valorising everyone's use of reason. His textual and historical approach excludes *a priori* the more spiritual and mystical, defending the holiness of *al-Qur'ān* but not of its interpretations.

### Critics and Conclusion

M. Arkoun and Al-Jabiri are among the Arab modernists who were triggered and thus influenced by the crisis of European modernity that entered the Arab world. They have knowledge of Arabic, and at the same time master Western knowledge. They authored numerous books and articles focusing on *ḥadīth*, *tafsīr*, jurisprudence, and other related issues from the perspective of Islam. The thoughts of these scholars are also known as contemporary Islamic Thought. After analysing and examining the thoughts, works, methodologies, and theories of these two Arab modernists in understanding *al-Qur'ān* and *as-Sunnah*, there are problems with these intellectuals. They are not applying the general methods used by earlier Islamic scholars who followed the traditions of early Islamic societies. In *tafsīr*, *mufasssīrūn* argue that to interpret *al-Qur'ān*, one should investigate *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* and *riwāyah*. These are very substantial methods. On the other hand, if one interprets *al-Qur'ān* only by using *tafsīr bi al-ra'y* or opinion, it means that he uses the knowledge and experience to understand *al-Qur'ān*, which is not acceptable. In the past, such a kind of understanding to evaluate *al-Qur'ān* and *as-Sunnah* while rejecting the *ḥadīth* and sayings of the companions was not considered at all.

In terms of understanding Islamic Law, the Arab modernists reject Shariah laws and the *ijtihād* of *fuqahā*. The scholars of *fiqh* deduce *aḥkem* through robust principles of *uṣūl al-fiqh* whose sources are *al-Qur'ān*, *ḥadīth*, *ijmā*, *istiḥsān*, *'urūf*, and *maslahah* among others. This is vastly different from adopting the techniques of only using one's own knowledge and logic, let alone Western concepts and theories. Indeed, the methods of understanding *al-Qur'ān* and *as-Sunnah* through Muslims' heritage are agreed upon by the early Muslim societies, including those who lived during the time of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, his companions, their successors, followers of the successors, and the living contemporary scholars of our age. All of them are in the consensus that as Muslims, the knowledge of Islamic and Muslim heritage can never be rejected and neglected when dealing with *al-Qur'ān* and *as-Sunnah*. Those scholars in the past worked extremely hard in preserving the true teachings as conveyed by the Prophet ﷺ. Unfortunately, in the modern period, these Arab modernists and other modernist Muslims have completely rejected classical

methodologies and instead borrowed the Western methodologies to study *al-Qur'ān* and *as-Sunnah*, and even in validating *aḥkām*.

The methodologies used by these Arab modernists were all commonly the same, i.e., hermeneutics, historicism, and deconstruction, which were developed and established by Western thinkers and scholars to study the Biblical scriptures, evaluate, and understand them. Western scholars who developed these methods and theories believe that the Bible was not revealed by God, and in fact, is just an ordinary book. When Arab modernists wanted to reinterpret, review, and reconstruct Islam, instead of following the classical methods of Muslim heritage, they followed one or all of the methods introduced by Western scholars. For example, the method of deconstruction, which has been upheld and applied by Mohammed Arkoun, can be understood that deconstruction is a theory or principle that advocates that a scripture or the verses in it have the meaning intended by the author, meaning that the text has various meanings. Thus, it depends on the reader to choose which meaning he favours most. As a result, in accepting the method of deconstruction in understanding *al-Qur'ān* and *as-Sunnah*, one will not depend on? and thus rejecting the writings, works, and explanation from the Prophet (P.B.U.H.), Companions, their successors, and the classical Muslim scholars. Thus, in applying this method, one will use his own opinion to interpret *al-Qur'ān* without needing any books as a reference. Thus, one will read by his own and understand *al-Qur'ān* according to his mind and view.

Regrettably, these are what have been done by the Arab modernists who belong to the same school of thought. They questioned many Islamic systems like *shūra* and *waqaf*, which were very much influenced and mesmerized by Western culture and civilization. Their approaches to *al-Qur'ān* were somehow confusing, and they tend to refer to Western civilization, while Islamic civilization was one of the richest civilizations in world history, which ironically has been borrowed by Westerners who rebranded it in their own ways. The world of Orientalism spread during the colonization era, where Muslims were given knowledge by colonials, and the same methodologies were applied to study religion. These people were partly influenced by the writings of the Orientalists. The impact in general was the emergence of Muslim feminists, modernists, secularists, and liberalists who are much influenced by these Arab modernists through their thousand books, which are available everywhere and have been translated into various languages.

It seems that in any situation and circumstances, we should not be the *muqallidūn*, or else, we will be carried far away from the true Islamic teachings of *al-Qur'ān* and *as-Sunnah*. Nonetheless, in some respects we should be *muqallidūn*, for example, in the

following of the Prophet (P.B.U.H.), which is a good *taqlīd*, and a *taqlīd* that we should follow in every action of our daily life. The most important thing in understanding *al-Qur'ān* and *as-Sunnah*, is also to refer to the history, which, in doing that, we can also be more capable, knowledgeable, and critical without being outdated or backwards. In short, the history of our glorious past, which is full of a sea of knowledge, can never be divorced from the present.

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