

## Hasan al-Turabi's approach to Qur'ānic exegesis

Esam Eltigani Mohamed Ibrahim\* and Ibrahim M. Zein\*\*

**Abstract:** Author of numerous books in Islamic Studies, Hasan al-Turabi is considered an eminent and influential figure in international Islamic movements as well as a controversial thinker. Among his most prominent and most recent works is his Qur'ānic exegesis entitled "*al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*". This study discusses al-Turabi's fundamental postulates in his exegesis. Applying analytic and inductive methodologies, the research concludes that although *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* focuses on Islamic renewal and the establishment of an Islamic State, al-Turabi took this opportunity to express his general beliefs, which subsequently served as the foundation of his exegesis. The study also reveals that *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* can be classified among the modernist exegetical trends in *tafsīr* as it claims that the Qur'ān is open to personal interpretation and advances the argument on the historicity of both the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (SAW) and the tradition of *tafsīr*.

**Keywords:** Hasan al-Turabi; National Islamic Front; political Islam; Sudan; Tafsīr (exegesis).

**Abstrak:** Sebagai penulis beberapa buah buku pengajian Islam, Hasan al-Turabi dianggap figura yang terkenal dan berpengaruh dalam pergerakan Islam antarabangsa. Ia juga merupakan seorang ahli fikir yang kontroversial. Antara kerja-kerja yang menonjol dan terbaharu adalah tafsir Al Quran yang

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\* Esam Eltigani Mohamed Ibrahim is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Qur'an and Sunnah, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Malaysia, and a member of the International Institute for Halal Research and Training, IIUM. Email: [eibrahim@iium.edu.my](mailto:eibrahim@iium.edu.my). (✉).

\*\* Ibrahim M. Zein is a Professor in the Department of Usul al-Din and Comparative Religion, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Malaysia. Email: [ibrahimz@iium.edu.my](mailto:ibrahimz@iium.edu.my).

bertajuk "*al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*". Kajian ini membincangkan bagaimana al-Turabi membentuk asas tafsiran. Walaupun *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* berfokus kepada pembaharuan Islam dan pembentukan negara Islam, namun dengan menggunakan metodologi, analisis dan induktif, al-Turabi mengambil peluang tersebut untuk mengemukakan kepercayaannya secara umum dan seterusnya memberikan asas kepada tafsiran. Kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* dapat diklasifikasikan antara tren takwil moden sebab ia menuntut bahawa Al Quran adalah terbuka kepada interpretasi sendiri. Ia menjangkau pemahaman sejarah oleh ulamma dan cerdikiawan Al Quran sebelumnya. Disamping itu, ia menuntut gabungan peristiwa sejarah Islam, Sunnah Nabi dan tradisi tafsir.

**Kata Kunci:** Hasan Turabi; Parti Barisan Hadapan Negara Islam; Politik Islam; Sudan; Tafsīr.

Al-Turabi does not find solace in the classical commentaries of the Qur'ān or in the methods used therein. Although largely unknown as a *mufasssīr* (exegete of the Qur'ān), al-Turabi is deeply interested in Qur'ānic studies. He is convinced of the need to develop a new method of Qur'ānic interpretation that suits the needs of modern times. To do so, al-Turabi urges Muslims to understand the Qur'ān directly and not through the commentaries of the Qur'ān (al-Turabi, 2004). While maintaining the divine origin and viability of the Qur'ān, al-Turabi criticises Muslim scholars for not producing a viable method of interpreting the Qur'ān, and therefore recommends a new method.

Despite serving as the leader of the Islamic movement in Sudan for over four decades, many consider Hasan al-Turabi a radical fundamentalist inadvertently denying his renewal discourse the possibility of being modern. At best, al-Turabi is represented as irreparably torn between Islam and Western culture, and his theology is described as pertaining to the unity of traditional and modern Islam (Ibrahim, 1999).

Several studies focused on al-Turabi's intellectual and ideological developments. El-Affendi (1991) positioned al-Turabi's discourse within the fundamentalist and the reformist Islamic activism, sitting astride modernity and tradition, pragmatism and idealism, and calculation and faith. He linked al-Turabi's discourse to the ancient Sufi ethic, with its emphasis on the spirit rather than the letter of Islam, with the ability of man to genuinely enrich the original message by his

own endeavours. Ibrahim (1999) explores how al-Turabi assimilated modernity into theology in which modernity was seen as a God-given reality, which could lead to a more profound worship of God. Abdelwahid (2008) outlines al-Turabi's concepts of "Islamic art" and "Islamic music" in the fields of theatre, painting, and singing. Nevertheless, these studies did not assess al-Turabi's contribution to the area of *tafsīr* and *tafsīr* methodologies. The current study analyses al-Turabi's method of interpreting the Qur'ān as expounded in his *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*.

### **A brief biography of al-Turabi**

Hasan 'Abd Allah al-Turabi was born in Kasalā, eastern Sudan, in 1932. He was born into a religious family that has a long tradition of teaching Islamic sciences and practicing Sufism. The family settled in the village of Wād al-Tūrābī located on the Blue Nile south-east of Khartoum. His father Abdallah Dafa' a Allah al-Turabi (1889-1990) was a religious *qāḍī* (*Sharī'ah* judge) of the *Sharī'ah* Division of the Sudan Judiciary, which he joined in 1924 during the British colonial administration (Gallab, 2008; Ibrahim, 1999).

Al-Turabi studied traditional Islamic studies and Arabic language in addition to what he learned in modern schools. Following his graduation from Ḥantūb High School, al-Turabi entered the Faculty of Law at Khartoum University College (KUC), later University of Khartoum, and graduated with a Bachelor in Law four years later. In 1957, al-Turabi was sent by the KUC to Britain where he obtained his LL.M in Laws from the University of London. Upon his return to Sudan, he joined the Faculty of Law at the University of Khartoum as an assistant lecturer. In 1959 he was sent again by the University of Khartoum to France where he earned his PhD in Laws from the Sorbonne University (Ibrahim, 1999). Following his return from France, al-Turabi was appointed Dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of Khartoum.

Al-Turabi's intellectual and political leadership of the Islamic movement in Sudan spanned a period of more than 45 years. Beginning in 1964, he led the movement into a series of transformations, alliances, and collaborations, beginning with the Muslim Brotherhood (1964) and continuing with the Islamic Charter Front (1964-69), the National Islamic Front (1985-89), the National Congress (1998-1999), and the Popular Congress (2000-present).

Like many such historic personalities, al-Turabi has many followers and supporters inside and outside Sudan, in addition to many opponents and detractors. He was the ideological power behind the military regime of ‘Umar Hasan Aḥmed Al-Bashīr in 1989, and in 1996, al-Turabi became the speaker of the parliament from which his influence spread throughout the political establishments in Sudan. In 1999, a disagreement occurred between him and President al-Bashīr, resulting in his imprisonment for several years. Since then, al-Turabi has spent most of his time in prison, but it seems that he is returning to power again engaging the al-Bashīr government in national reconciliation in April 2014.

### **The development of *al-Taḥsīn al-Tawḥīdī***

*Al-Taḥsīn al-Tawḥīdī* started in 1994 as weekly open consultation sessions led by al-Turabi. The attendees, who ranged from 15 to 20 people, were men and women from different segments of the society such as students, traditional scholars (‘*ulamā*’), and academics who specialised in natural and social sciences. Al-Turabi sought diversification to solicit a variety of views. He would ask questions regarding different aspects of the verses to challenge the participants to think and to contribute, and to the surprise of many, some of the participants who were hardly qualified exegetes offered creative interpretations, whereas for the most part, traditional scholars (‘*ulamā*’) failed to contribute new ideas. This is perhaps due to the fact that most traditional education, with its insistence on the closure of the door of *ijtihād*, led to a decline in critical thinking, and focused on developing the lowest function of the brain, namely, memorisation. As a result, a number of traditional ‘*ulamā*’ excelled in memorisation, but failed in creativity.

Al-Turabi acknowledged that he benefited from these discussions, which, however, came to an abrupt end, as the political disagreement between him and President al-Bashīr intensified and eventually resulted in his imprisonment. When al-Turabi began writing *al-Taḥsīn al-Tawḥīdī*, he claimed that he did not refer to the audio recordings of those sessions, and therefore, this *taḥsīn* is a result of his own thinking thereby taking complete responsibility for the ideas presented therein (Personal Interview, 2011).

The first volume of the *taḥsīn* was published in 1994 by *Dar al-Saqi* publishing house in London under the title *al-Taḥsīn al-Tawḥīdī*, and

consisted of the first ten *ajzā'* (sections) of the Qur'ān from *sūrat al-Fāṭīḥah* to *sūrat al-Tawbah*. This volume included a forward written by al-Maḥbūb 'Abd al-Salām, a disciple of al-Turabi, who talked briefly about the history of *al-Tafsīr al-Tawḥīdī* and al-Turabi's *Tawḥīdī* perspective. This was followed by an introduction in which al-Turabi recapitulated the salient features of his *tafsīr*; its methodology and the reasons that inspired him to write it.

A little less than seven years after publishing the first volume, the second volume of the *tafsīr* was published in 2011 in Beirut under the same title. It consisted of the next 10 sections of the Qur'ān from *sūrat Yūnus* to *sūrat al-Ankabūt*. Strangely enough, the second volume consisted of the same introduction that was published in the first volume. This might have been necessitated by the importance of the introduction to the understanding of the methodology adopted in the *tafsīr*. The third and last volume of *al-Tafsīr al-Tawḥīdī*, which is expected to comprise the last sections of the Qur'ān, has yet to be published.

### **Justification for writing *al-Tafsīr al-Tawḥīdī***

Most commentaries, according to al-Turabi, do not address the contemporary era (2011). They are limited in scope as they focus solely on the period during which the Qur'ān was revealed without taking into consideration the broader context of the Qur'ānic audience. This is to say that Qur'ānic commentators focused on the specific circumstances of the revelation without abstracting thereof 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 Qur'ān to new environments. Qur'ānic commentators discuss the reasons behind the revelation as if the verses were revealed for a specific occasion or a particular person. Al-Turabi argues that commentators should describe the complete environment in which the verses were revealed. It might be true that a verse may address a specific incidence, but it is also addressing similar future incidences, as the relevance of the Qur'ān and its meanings are eternal. Thus, al-Turabi decided to write a *tafsīr* to assist the reader attempting to utilise exegesis to understand the message of the Qur'ān through observing the unity of its meanings. His goal is to analyse the environment in which the Qur'ān was first revealed and the influence it had on the people, as well as, explain the Qur'ān's message for contemporary society. The messages of the Qur'ān is for all

humanity and its exegesis should be the same. For al-Turabi, these were the reasons meriting his *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* (Personal Interview, 2011).

Al-Turabi often refers to the Qur'ān in propagating his religio-political ideology because according to him, most people view his ideas in Islamising the state, or politicising Islam as strange and reprehensible. This led him to continuously refer to the Qur'ān as a means to instigate some form of credibility particularly for its acceptance in the conservative *Sufī* society of Sudan, which initially failed to distinguish between the Islamic movement and the Communists, as both were strange in their views.

### **Organisation of *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī***

Al-Turabi consistently followed a textual strategy of dividing the commentary on each *sūrah* of the Qur'ān into three parts: the summary of the guidance of the chapter (*khulāṣat hady al-sūrah*), the sequence of the meanings (*tartīl al-ma'ānī*), and the general meanings (*'umūm al-ma'ānī*).

Al-Turabi begins his *tafsīr* of each *sūrah* with an introduction in which he talks about several aspects including the reasons for its naming, the order and the environment in which it was revealed, as well as the themes, the content, and the goals of the *sūrah*. He does this so that the reader can understand the values of the *sūrah* in accordance with the reasons for which it was revealed, and the requirements of the Islamic movement at the moment of its revelation, and how the themes of the *sūrah* satisfied these requirements.

This introductory section is important for contemporary reformers of religion in order to comprehend the values of the *sūrah* in much the same way Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) and his companions benefited. This goal cannot be achieved through a simple explanation of the meaning of the verses. It requires a thorough reflection of the contexts and the reasons for revelation so as to determine the specific purposes of the verse and the many implications it entails.

Subsequent to completing the introductory section of the *sūrah*, al-Turabi engages in an elaboration of the *sūrah* in what he calls *tartīl al-ma'ānī*, which is the second step in his strategy. He does this by dividing the *sūrah* into groups of verses, and then tackling the verses inside each group, often one after the other, explaining the meaning

of each verse, and establishing a link between it and the meaning of the verse before it in order for the verses in the group to appear as a connected series of meanings. For example, al-Turabi divides the verses of *sūrat al-Baqarah* into twenty-three groups with the largest group consisting of thirty-one verses and the smallest consisting of just two verses. Similarly, he divides *Āl-ʿImrān* into nine groups, *al-Nisāʾ* into ten, *al-Māʾidah* into nine, *al-Anʿām* into nine, *al-Aʿrāf* into five, *al-Anfāl* into seven, *at-Tawbah* into ten, *Yūnus* into eight, and *Hūd* into four groups. This shows the variations in grouping the verses of the *sūrah* according to the different themes contained therein.

Following the explanation of the sequential meanings of the verses in each group verse by verse and highlighting their impact on the people to whom they were first revealed, al-Turabi returns to the same group of verses and attempts to explain them as a group according to current realities and circumstances. He names this section *ʿumūm al-maʿānī* (the general meanings), which is the last step in his textual strategy. The purpose of this section is to address the contemporary reader, Muslim and non-Muslim, in order to clarify the values of the Qurʾān according to present realities.

### **The sources of *Al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī***

Among the misgivings of al-Turabi's intellectual discourse is that he does not reveal the sources and references upon which he relied in forming his ideas and arguments. This is evident throughout all his publications, including *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, resulting in all kinds of criticisms and allegations from his friends and adversaries. When asked as to why he did not enlist his references he gave two reasons: first, he authored most of his publications in prison where he did not have the luxury of citing references including publication versions and page numbers. Second, he did not want to make his book larger than necessary (Personal Interview, 2011). This makes the task of tracking his references very difficult.

Interestingly enough, when al-Turabi was asked to list the references that he utilised in his exegesis, he said that he read many *tafsīr* books while in prison and mentioned their titles. Obviously, this statement might contradict his first claim, and showed that not revealing his sources is part of his strategy and is perhaps not directly linked to his imprisonment. After reading *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* and comparing

its content with other books of *tafsīr*, the researchers conclude that the main sources of al-Turabi are *Tafsīr al-Manār* by Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Rashīd Riḍah, “*Tafhīm ul Qur’ān*” by Maulānā Mawdūdī, *Tafsīr “al-Zilāl”* by Sayyed Qutb, *Tafsīr ibn ‘Ashūr*, and the translation of the Qur’ān by Muḥammad Asad.

The following is an example of the similarities between some of al-Turabi’s opinions on *tafsīr* of some selected Qu’ānic verses and those of Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Rashīd Riḍah. Verses 4:10 read as follows:

O men! Fear your Lord Who created you from a single being and out of it created its mate; and out of the two spread many men and women. Fear Allah in Whose name you plead for rights, and heed the ties of kinship. Surely, Allah is ever watchful over you (Qur’ān, 4:1).

Muḥammad ‘Abduh said in his *tafsīr* of this verse that the “single being” mentioned in the verse is not necessarily Adam because such knowledge cannot be derived from intellectual assertions or the senses but is gained from *al-wahy* (revelation) alone (Riḍā, 1929). According to ‘Abduh, this verse and the Qur’ān as a whole did not mention that the first created being was Adam and if all previous exegetes of the Qur’ān say that the intended meaning of the “single being” is Adam, then they did not understand it from this verse of the Qur’ān. Rather it is from their belief that Adam is the father of all mankind, which is a knowledge that they gained from sources other than the Qur’ān.

If *Tafsīr al-Manār* questioned the claim of the consensus of the Muslims, Christians, and Jews that the first being created was Adam and from his rib was created his wife Eve (Ḥawwā’), then who is the first being? ‘Abduh’s opinion is to leave it unidentified since the Qur’ān itself did not clarify it; otherwise we will contradict the scientific and historical studies that claim human beings originated from more than one father (several Adams) or from a *qird* (monkey) (Riḍā, 1929).

Rashīd Riḍah, the compiler and the co-author of *Tafsīr al-Manār*, mentioned that there are other possible understandings according to modern researchers. The first is that the first created being could be Eve and then Adam was created from her through ‘Virgin reproduction’. Modern science proves that some female animals produce several children without impregnation by males. The second understanding is that the first being is a hermaphrodite; a creature that has both

masculinity and femininity, and has the attributes of both male and female (Riḍā, 1929).

Al-Turabi's explanation of the same verse is that Allah (SWT) was addressing all mankind, telling them that He has created them from a single being and from it He created the first male and female mates. It is possible that the male and female couple was initially a single being in a single living body that has the attributes of male and female, namely, a hermaphrodite mother. Then the male creature who is Adam separated from it, and the hermaphrodite being, Eve, retained its female attributes. In this regard, Adam is similar to Isa (Jesus) who was created without a father (al-Turabi, 2004).

Al-Turabi goes on to explain that the first woman was not created from Adam's rib as mentioned by the Israelites, and the authentic *ḥadīth* (narration) in which the Prophet (SAW) said that women were created from a serpentine rib was just an illustration given by the Prophet on how to deal wisely and gently with them (al-Turabi, 2004). It has nothing to do with the genesis of creation.

ʿAbduh refused to acknowledge the claim that Adam was the first created creature. Rashīd Riḍāh gave two possible scenarios for the first creation, that it could be either Eve, or a hermaphrodite that has masculinity and femininity at the same time. Al-Turabi combined the opinions of ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍāh without referring to them, saying that the first creation was not necessarily Adam; it may have been Eve who was initially a hermaphrodite before Adam was separated from her. It should be noted that this position is appealing for women, and more to the point, it is in line with his controversial pamphlets on women. All this is another continuation of his ideological stand on women in Islam. Taking ownership of the claim that the first being created by Allah (SWT) was Eve who was a hermaphrodite who produced Adam without a father similar to the way Isa was created from Mary, is an explanation devoid of sound textual evidence.

### **The foundations of al-Turabi's method**

Al-Turabi followed a modernist ideological methodology in what can be categorised as the modernist trend in exegesis (*al-itijāh al-ḥadāthī fī al-tafsīr*). It is modernist in the way that it claims that all of the Qurʾān is open to personal interpretation and cannot be limited to specific

meaning. It reinterprets the understanding of the Prophet (SAW) and at times belittles the achievements of previous scholars of the Qur'ān, and it claims the historicity of the *Sunnah* (tradition of the Prophet). This might pave the way for the position that the understanding of the Prophet (SAW) was only applicable to his time and that every era requires a new reading of the Qur'ān. It also calls on Muslims to better understand the Qur'ān by applying it to current practical situations rather than being satisfied with a theoretical exegetical understanding.

Al-Turabi's method is *Tawhīdī Tajdīdī* (unifying, renewal) and ideological in the way that it requires Muslim societies and governments to understand the Qur'ān through the principles of the *Tawhīd* religio-political ideology. This can only be achieved by looking at the Qur'ān without prior restrictions as if it is being revealed today, in an attempt to renew the religion in the light of current realities.

Al-Turabi's methodology of exegesis is a product of his religio-political theory of *Tawhīd*, and upon which the rules that govern his exegesis are based. That is the case not only for *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, but also for most of his intellectual contributions. For him, considering the state is an inseparable part of religion and not simply an important concept for exegesis, rather it is a principle of belief that must be fulfilled for Islam to be complete.

Al-Turabi's *Tawhīd* ideology played a major role in guiding the meanings of the Qur'ānic texts in *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* 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 role of the Islamic State throughout most of the history of Islam in guiding the public life through the teachings of the Qur'ān. He quoted the Qur'ān countless times to legitimise the *Tawhīd* ideology and to highlight the imposition of working as a group to establish religion in all walks of life. In his explanation of *sūrat Ibrāhīm*, for example, al-Turabi explains that the message of Prophet Ibrahim was to worship Allah as the lord and to unify the life under His worship (al-Turabi, 2011). Ibrahim's message was the basis for Prophet Muḥammad's (SAW) message, indicating the comprehensiveness of religion to all challenges of life, whether it be the rituals of worship, or the ethics of the society, or the method of

governance. Therefore, for al-Turabi, *sūrat Ibrāhīm* carried all these meanings of *Tawhīd* to testify that the guidance in life is only possible through *Tawhīd*. In addition, in his explanation of *sūrat Maryam*, al-Turabi claimed that the message of Prophet Isa was to worship Allah (SWT) as the only Lord and to unify all life under His worship. He went on to say, “later on the understanding of religion was altered and people were divided in their understanding of the principles of religion into different parties and they were misguided in life” (al-Turabi, 2011, p. 654). Al-Turabi considers not implementing the Islamic State an alteration to the principles of the religion, and that the State is a leading institution in implementing and understanding the message of Islam in its totality.

Few will disagree with al-Turabi that Islam covers all aspects of life including the State. However, that is not the same as saying that the Islamic State is a principle of belief that must be fulfilled for Islam to be complete. Such a belief led al-Turabi to view most of the Qur’ān from that perspective.

For al-Turabi, his religio-political theory of *Tawhīd* is central to the theme of *tajdīd* (renewal). *Tajdīd* is considered part of his overall theory of *Tawhīd* and one of its interfaces, and therefore, al-Turabi focuses on it throughout his exegesis to the extent that readers will notice its impact in every page. This axis consists of criticising classical and contemporary exegeses and exegetes, the call for a new rational exegesis, the call for the continuous renewal of religion, the call for the acceptance of the new Islamic movement, and criticising opposing and traditional scholars. As a result, the foundations of his method of *tafsīr* are based on a complete departure from the traditional method and a great emphasis on the *tajdīd* ethos. This methodological position required him to design a new textual strategy in understanding the Qur’ānic texts.

### **Fundamental rules for textual analysis**

Al-Turabi argues that the eternal Qur’ānic discourse must be understood today in accordance with the contemporary predicament of Muslims and free from narrations of the *salaf* (ancestors) and *turath* (heritage). Its meanings must be delivered rationally thereby negating many delusions about Islam. For al-Turabi, the Qur’ān can only be understood via reason, and “any attempt to interpret it must follow the methodology of *Tawhīd*” (al-Turabi, 2004, p. 15). Furthermore, to interpret the verses

of the Qur'ān based on the *Tawhīd* methodology he advances rules that provide him sufficient flexibility in the exegesis.

*Arabic language is the key to the understanding of the Qur'ān*

With a number of special historical and intentional specifications, al-Turabi's first and most important rule of interpretation in *tafsīr* is considering the Arabic language. Al-Turabi does not require from the exegete of the Qur'ān to fulfil any requirements or qualifications other than mastery of the language (al-Turabi, 2004; al-Turabi, 2011).

Al-Turabi utilises the disjointed letters at the beginning of some *sūrahs* to prove that there is nothing in the Qur'ān that is off-limits or unknown in meaning; because the intention of any speech is to convey meanings and to conclude that the exegesis of the Qur'ān is not exclusive to the righteous ancestors.

In the introduction of his exegesis, al-Turabi says that, "the Qur'ān is an Arabic book, in the Arabic tongue, and its meanings can be explained through the Arabic language" (al-Turabi, 2004, p. 15). Some of its Arabic letters were revealed at the beginning of certain chapters: *Alif-Lām-Mīm*, *Kāf-Hā-Yā*-*ʿAyn-Ṣād*, and *Hā-Mīm*, 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. By this, al-Turabi concludes that the Arabic language is the key to the understanding of the Qur'ān.

For al-Turabi to take the disjointed letters at the beginning of some *suwar* (singular, *sūrah*) as proof that there is nothing in the Qur'ān that is unknown in meaning, and to conclude based on that argument that the *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān is not exclusive to the Prophet (SAW) or the righteous ancestors is debatable and ideologically motivated. Some argue that it is a mistake to say that some of the Qur'ān does not mean anything, while others find it inaccurate to say that the Arabic language is capable of explaining everything in the Qur'ān. There have been numerous interpretations as to the meanings and purpose of the individual letters in the beginning of some *suwar*. It was said that these letters are the names of some of the *suwar*. It was also said that these letters are from the names of Allah. Others opine that these letters represent numerical values. However, the most common opinion for most Muslim scholars is that knowledge of these is for Allah (SWT) alone. This was reported

by some of the companions including Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, 'Alī, and Ibn Mas'ūd. Abū Bakr al-Ṣidīq is reported to have said that, "Every book has some secrets in it, and the secret of the Qur'ān is in the beginnings of the *suwar*", and as such they are considered unclear verses (*mutashābihāt*) (al-Suyūfī, 2004).

As a result of al-Turabi's belief that the entire Qur'ān can be understood from its Arabic language, we observe that al-Turabi often chooses an opinion on the meaning of the verse based on its linguistic meaning and disregarded strong opinions based on narrations from the Prophet (SAW) or his companions. For example, on the *tafsīr* of verse (2:238): "Guard the prayers, and the middle prayer, and stand up to Allah truly devout" (Qur'ān, 2:238).

Muslim scholars disagreed on which prayer is the middle prayer. Ibn 'Āshūr (2000) mentioned that there is no authentic narration from the Prophet (SAW) identifying this prayer, and the companions disagreed over it and produced different opinions, suggesting that it is either the *'Aṣr*, *'Ishā'*, or *Ṣubḥ* prayer. Al-Turabi (2004) asserts that the middle prayer that we have been asked to guard refers to the quality of the prayer, namely, that it needs to be done in time and with perfect presence of the mind. Although there are authentic narrations from 'Ā'ishah, 'Alī, and 'Umar that the middle prayer is either *'Aṣr*, *'Ishā'*, or *Ṣubḥ*, al-Turabi does not hesitate in offering a completely different opinion.

Al-Turabi chooses this opinion because it serves his ideology. For al-Turabi, the pattern of prayer represents a model and justification for the Islamic State. It is the preliminary school par excellence for instructing Muslims about the permanent unity of state and religion, and it is the miniature of all other acts of worshipping God. Therefore, for al-Turabi, the verses about *ṣalāh* are mentioned in the middle of the verses that talk about rulings on family as an indication that the all family life is a form of worship (al-Turabi, 2004). In addition, when Allah (SWT) asks us to guard a certain prayer, for al-Turabi, the meaning must be to guard all prayers, i.e., all life. Otherwise, if al-Turabi goes with the opinion of the companions and selects a single prayer such as the *'Aṣr* prayer, that will cause a serious blow to his argument about the prayer representing a model and justification for the Islamic State. This is a clear example of how al-Turabi's rules of *tafsīr* help advance his religio-political

ideology. Obviously, the Arabic language is important in understanding the Qur'ān, but al-Turabi's position utilises the language to advocate his ideological *Tawhīdī* postulate.

*Considering the historical meaning of the Qur'ānic language*

A derivative of the first, the second rule of al-Turabi's methodology in *tafsīr* is the necessity of taking into account the historical meaning of Qur'ānic language in exegesis. Al-Turabi (2004) asserts that Arabic is a language from a single root. It did not arise from various origins, which can generate disparity. Certain Arabic-Qur'ānic words have undergone an evolution in their meanings over the course of time. As a result, "many of the words in the Qur'ān have become unintelligible and the Qur'ān itself has become incomprehensible to the majority of its readers and listeners" (al-Turabi, 2004, p. 29). Therefore, in order to understand the meanings of the Qur'ānic language, al-Turabi claims that the exegete must return to the root of the words to uncover their original meanings.

Most exegetes throughout the history of Islam gave special attention to the roots of the Qur'ānic language. Others created lexicons and glossaries specially designated to the meanings of Qur'ānic words. Al-Turabi follows suite in *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* and refers to the roots of the Qur'ānic words to extract their meanings. The following are examples of some of the Qur'ānic words that al-Turabi clearly explained in terms of their roots and historical developments: "*Al-kitāb*" (the book) (Qur'ān, 2:2) "*Shayāṭīnihim*" (their devils) (Qur'ān, 2:14), "*al-asmā*" (the names) (Qur'ān, 2:31), "*wa-bu'ūlatuhunna*" (and their husbands) (Qur'ān, 2:228), "*mutajānifin*" (wilfully inclined) (Qur'ān, 5:3), "*al-arā'ik*" (raised couches) (Qur'ān, 18:31), and "*wahana*" (grown feeble) (Qur'ān, 19:4). However, al-Turabi does not comply with this method throughout his exegesis. He was selective, and skipped many Qur'ānic words that needed clarification, such as "*safiha nafsuhi*" (the one who debased himself) (Qur'ān, 2:130), "*al-qawā'id*" (the foundations) (Qur'ān, 2:127), "*ḥanīfā*" (pure faith) (Qur'ān, 2:135), "*shiqāq*" (defiance) (Qur'ān, 2:137), and "*al-furqān*" (the criterion) (Qur'ān, 2:53), to name a few. As a result, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* became very difficult for the average reader to understand due to the complexity of its language, a criticism not only to *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, but also of most of al-Turabi's writings.

### *Identifying the Qur'ānic terms*

The third rule of al-Turabi's methodology in *tafsīr*; which is also a derivative of the first, is the necessity of identifying the Qur'ānic terms in *tafsīr*. Al-Turabi says in the introduction of his exegesis that, "the Qur'ānic term when used in different places in the Qur'ān maintains a single meaning, and its origin could be a broad range that moves according to the context in which it is used" (al-Turabi, 2004, p. 216). The meaning of a Qur'ānic term can only be retrieved through induction, which is to examine the word in different contexts. After knowing the meaning of the Qur'ānic term, it should be used every time the term appears in the Qur'ān. This is called understanding the Qur'ān from the language of the Qur'ān.

Identifying the Qur'ānic terms is not a new concept in exegeses; it has been used by many classical as well as contemporary exegetes (Al-Ṭabarī, 1999; Mawdūdī, 1997; Quṭb, 1980). Al-Turabi complies with this method in some parts of his exegesis, for example in his *tafsīr* of verse (2:221), which reads:

Do not marry *mushrik* women (idolatresses) unless they believe; a slave woman who believes is better than a free woman who does not believe, even though the latter may appear very attractive to you. (Likewise) do not wed your women to *mushrik* men unless they believe; a slave man who believes is better than a free man who does not, even though he may be very pleasing to you. These *mushrik* people invite you to the Fire while Allah by His grace invites you to the Garden and His pardon, and He makes His revelations plain to the people so that they should learn a lesson and follow the admonition.

Al-Turabi (2004, p. 167) says, "the term *mushrik* in the terminology of the Qur'ān refers to the *Jahilī* (pre-Islam) Arab throughout its usages in the various locations of the Qur'ān." Al-Ṭabarī (1999) and Ibn 'Āshūr (2000, vol. 2) arrived at the same conclusion. Other examples of Qur'ānic terms identified by al-Turabi are *al-dīn* (religion), *al-taqwā* (God-wariness), *al-zann* (conjecture), *al-ḥikmah* (wisdom), and *al-maṭar* (rain) (al-Turabi, 2004, 2011).

Once again, al-Turabi does not comply with this method throughout his exegesis, and the use of the Qur'ānic terms in *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* are very limited in comparison with *Tafsīr Ibn 'Āshūr* for example. Some

of the Qur'ānic terms defined by al-Turabi such as *ṣalāt* (prayer), *qiblah* (qiblah), *risālah* (message), *dīn* (religion), and *ḥikmah* (wisdom), were given inner meanings that carry ideological principles such as *Tawḥīd* (unification) and *tajdīd* (renewal).

*Considering historical and epistemological developments*

The fourth rule of al-Turabi's methodology in exegesis, which is also a derivative of the first, is the necessity of taking into account historical and epistemological developments. Al-Turabi says that, "sincere exegesis must understand the Qur'ān from the language of the Qur'ān (the Qur'ānic terms), and through the shades of the meanings of its words during the time it was revealed (returning the Qur'ānic words to their roots) in order to control the meaning of the Qur'ān, and then convey its original impact to other generations in an Arabic language that they understand" (al-Turabi, 2004, p. 118).

The summary of al-Turabi's argument is that the exegete should first understand the Qur'ān for himself from the language of the Qur'ān and from the biography of the Prophet (SAW), and this is what al-Turabi carried out in the section named "*tartīl al-ma'ānī*". Based on this, the exegete should communicate to the present generation what the Qur'ān is telling in the present day context. This is what al-Turabi presents in the "*umūm al-ma'ānī*" section of his exegesis.

For al-Turabi, the Qur'ān has several layers and readings. It should not be dealt with in isolation from the historical reality in which it was revealed, neither should it be confined to the Muslim civilisation. With its first reading during the first era of Islam, the Qur'ān had additional derived readings in accordance with the spatio-temporal changes, and in accordance with historical and epistemological developments.

What is important for the readers to focus on in *al-Taḥsīn al-Tawḥīdī*, is the "*umūm al-ma'ānī*" (general meaning) section. The "*Tartīl al-ma'ānī*" (sequence of meanings) section is to illustrate to readers that the exegete is following the correct methodology in understanding the Qur'ān. That justifies why al-Turabi does not provide the meanings of a lot of difficult Qur'ānic words and Qur'ānic terms as pointed out in the previous section.

Understanding the Qur'ān from the language of the Qur'ān and from the original meanings of the words during their revelation, and then

conveying the meanings of the Qur'ān to later generations in an Arabic language that they understand is the argument that al-Turabi exploits to allow himself to give a fresh understanding of the Prophet's (SAW) account of revelation that differs from former exegeses and exegetes. This enables him to look at the verses of the Qur'ān and interpret them freely to support his ideology in the general meanings section of his exegesis ('*umūm al-ma'ānī*).

It can be concluded that the '*umūm al-ma'ānī* section is the true intention of *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, and therefore, after al-Turabi completes the third part of *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, the '*umūm al-ma'ānī* sections might be separated from the rest of the exegesis in a separate book, and could be by itself the modern exegesis of the Qur'ān. Though the three steps in al-Turabi's textual strategy are connected, yet the culmination of his contribution is given in '*umūm al-ma'ānī*.

In this most important section of *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, ('*umūm al-ma'ānī*), al-Turabi presents what he believes to be the Qur'ānic discourse for this time and age. This section contains extremely imaginative inner meanings of the Qur'ān that would make even the Sufi scholar Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638 A.H.) envious, as it is an exegesis that combines the theoretical/philosophical and the *Ishārī* Sufi explanation. It resembles the Sufi theoretical/philosophical *tafsīr* in the way that its inner meanings are based on premises pre-existing in al-Turabi's mind, and it resembles the Sufi *Ishārī tafsīr* because al-Turabi recognises that in addition to their inner meanings, the verses of the Qur'ān have other apparent meanings. Perhaps, the only difference is the novel textual strategy that is carefully designed by al-Turabi to render his ideological stand in a generally consistent corpus of Qur'ānic exegesis. It should be equally remarked that in some parts he is selective and highly subjective in his exegetical accounts.

## Conclusion

*Al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* claims that the Qur'ān is open to personal interpretation and cannot be limited to specific meaning. It takes a new position in understanding the role of the Prophet (SAW) and previous scholars of the Qur'ān, and it claims the historicity of the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (SAW). Therefore, the understanding of the Prophet (SAW) is a historical understanding that provides insights in our contemporary era, and a new reading of the Qur'ān is needed for every era.

The methodology followed in *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* is a modernist *Tawhīdī Tajdīdī* methodology that requires Muslim individuals, societies, and governments to understand the Qur'ān through the principles of the *Tawhīd* ideology. Al-Turabi's principles of *Tawhīd* focus on a preoccupation with renewing the Islamic religion and the establishment of the Islamic State. To support this ideology, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* employed ideological postulates in the form of fundamental rules in order to allow itself freedom and flexibility sufficient to bypass the recommended exegesis methods.

Regardless of whether most people agree with his opinions or not, al-Turabi is a truly creative person with no self-imposed limitations. He strived to break out of established patterns of thinking in order to look at the meanings of the verses in different ways. He developed a set of connecting steps in a textual strategy that further the cause of the ideological stand of the *mufasssīr*. However, we have to criticise him for taking it too far at times in his ambition to rationalise matters from the unseen world.

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