

Hasan al-Turabi's Methodology in *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*: A Contextual and Ideological Approach to Qur'anic Interpretation

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Keywords: <i>Al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī</i> , exegesis methodology, social and political reform in Islam, sociopolitical approach in <i>tafsīr</i> , <i>tafsīr</i> <i>ḥarakī</i> .	Abstract This study examines the exegetical methodology of Hasan al-Turabi in <i>al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī</i> , a work distinguished by its <i>tawhīdī</i> (unificationist) and <i>ḥarakī</i> (activist) framework. Using content analysis and ideological critique, this study dissects its epistemological foundations and interpretive strategies. The findings reveal several key characteristics. <i>First</i> , the concept of <i>tawhīd</i> is not merely interpreted theologically but is operationalized as an epistemological principle and methodological foundation for a socio-political reform project. <i>Second</i> , his method selectively combines traditional sources (<i>tafsīr bi al-riwāyah</i>) with a dominant rational reasoning (<i>tafsīr bi al-dirāyah</i>), aligning with his ideological framework. <i>Third</i> , its structure employs a <i>tahlīlī</i> (analytical-sequential) method yet with a strong thematic touch through its tripartite systematics: a preface (<i>khulāṣah hadī al-sūrah</i>), a structural summary (<i>tartīl al-ma'ānī</i>), and a detailed contemporary analysis (<i>'umūm al-ma'ānī</i>). <i>Fourth</i> , its interpretive flow is analytic-inductive, moving from a holistic overview of the <i>sūrah</i> to specific meanings, thereby building an action-oriented systemic paradigm. However, the analysis also reveals several fundamental weaknesses. A heavy reliance on <i>ra'y</i> , while sidelining the corpus of Hadith, creates space for the instrumentalization of the text for ideological purposes. Furthermore, his work is criticized for its limited methodological originality and inconsistent application of his method, suggesting a potential selective bias. This study offers a structured methodological assessment, sharply highlighting the dynamics and limitations of the <i>tafsīr ḥarakī</i> genre within contemporary Islamic discourse.
Kata Kunci : <i>al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī</i> , metodologi tafsir, reformasi sosial dan politik Islam, pendekatan socio-politik dalam tafsir, <i>tafsīr ḥarakī</i> .	Abstrak Penelitian ini mengkaji metodologi tafsir Hasan al-Turabi dalam <i>al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī</i> , sebuah karya yang khas karena kerangka <i>tawhīdī</i> (unifikasionis) dan <i>ḥarakī</i> (aktivis)-nya. Dengan menggunakan analisis isi dan kritik ideologis, studi ini membedah fondasi epistemologis dan strategi interpretatifnya. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan beberapa karakteristik utama. <i>Pertama</i> , konsep <i>tawhīd</i> tidak hanya dimaknai secara teologis, tetapi dioperasionalkan sebagai prinsip epistemologis dan landasan metodologis untuk proyek reformasi sosial-politik. <i>Kedua</i> , metodenya secara selektif memadukan sumber-sumber tradisional (<i>tafsīr bi al-riwāyah</i>) dengan penalaran rasional yang dominan (<i>tafsīr bi al-dirāyah</i>) sesuai dengan kerangka ideologisnya. Ketiga, strukturnya menggunakan metode <i>tahlīlī</i> (analitis-sekuensial) namun dengan sentuhan tematik yang kuat melalui sistematika tiga bagiannya: sebuah pengantar (<i>khulāṣah hadī al-sūrah</i>), ringkasan struktural (<i>tartīl al-ma'ānī</i>), dan analisis kontemporer yang mendetail (<i>'umūm al-ma'ānī</i>). <i>Keempat</i> , alur penafsirannya bersifat analitik-induktif, bergerak dari gambaran umum surah menuju makna-makna partikular untuk membangun paradigma sistemik yang berorientasi pada aksi. Namun, terungkap pula beberapa kelemahan fundamental. Ketergantungan yang tinggi pada <i>ra'y</i> dengan mengesampingkan korpus hadis telah membuka ruang bagi instrumentalisasi teks untuk tujuan ideologis. Selain itu, karyanya dikritik karena orisinalitas metodologis yang terbatas dan penerapan metode yang tidak konsisten, yang mengindikasikan adanya bias selektif. Studi ini berkontribusi dengan menawarkan penilaian metodologis yang terstruktur, menyoroti secara tajam dinamika dan keterbatasan genre <i>tafsīr ḥarakī</i> dalam diskursus Islam kontemporer.
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Introduction

The interpretation of the Quran, or *tafsīr*, is an ever-evolving aspect of Islamic scholarship, continually adapting to meet the challenges of contemporary times.¹ Within this modern landscape, few figures are as influential and yet as controversial as Hasan al-Turabi. Born in 1932 and having passed away in 2016, al-Turabi was a prominent Sudanese intellectual, political leader, and ideologue whose career significantly shaped the discourse on political Islam in the Middle East and Africa.² His monumental work in exegesis, *Al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, is the central focus of this study, notable for its attempt to unify Islamic teachings with modern socio-political realities.³ *Al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* is positioned not merely as a theological work but as a socio-political project. Al-Turabi argues that the Qur'an serves as a comprehensive guide for all aspects of human life, including the political, social, and economic spheres. His approach is unique in its explicit attempt to integrate religion with politics, positioning him as a central figure in the discourse on political Islam. His *tafsīr* challenges traditional, static interpretations by emphasizing the Qur'an's applicability to contemporary issues such as governance, justice, and the role of women in society.⁴

Al-Turabi's political thought, particularly his vision of an Islamic state, adds a layer of complexity to his *tafsīr*. He believed that Islam and democracy could co-exist (although he rejects the term democracy as it was born from the womb of the West).⁵ With the Islamic system incorporating democratic values such as consultation (*shūra*), accountability, and participation. The interpretation of *shūra* in Al-Turabi's *tafsīr* presents it as a Qur'anic framework for democratic governance. However, this stance has sparked considerable debate. Supporters view him as a reformist advocating for political modernization. At the same time, critics argue that his vision allows for the manipulation of religion for political ends, particularly given his association with Sudan's National Islamic Front.⁶

The scholarly discourse on *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* is similarly polarized. Proponents like Ibrāhīm and Zein highlight his innovative *tawhīdī* (unification) paradigm for integrating theology, politics, and society, praising his emphasis on *tajdīd* (renewal).⁷ Conversely, critics such as Zulyadain et al contend that his exegesis functions primarily as a political manifesto

¹ Abd Mu'in Salim, *Metodologi Ilmu Tafsir* (Yogyakarta: Idea Press, 2005); Muhammad Abdel Haleem and Mustafa Shah, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199698646.001.0001>; Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Theological Approaches to Qur'anic Exegesis: A Practical Comparative-Contrastive Analysis, Culture and Civilisation in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2012).

² Abdullahi A Gallab, *Hasan Al-Turabi, the Last of the Islamists: The Man and His Times 1932–2016* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

³ Ḥasan al-Turabī, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, al-Ṭab'ah (Bayrūt: Dār al-Sāqī, 2004).

⁴ Ahmad Nabilul Maram, Husein Aziz, and M Ridlwan Nasir, "Interpreting Islamic Education For Social Change: Hasan Al-Turabi's Views on Women's Rights And Gender Equality," *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 12, no. 04 (March 11, 2023), <https://jurnal.staialhidayahbogor.ac.id/index.php/ei/article/view/5097>.

⁵ Ḥasan al-Turabī, "Islam, Democracy, the State and the West," *Middle East Policy* 1, no. 3 (March 11, 1992), <https://ixtheo.de/Record/1630827940>.

⁶ Mohammed Zahid et al., "Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Sudan," *Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 2 (2021): 449–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056240601119273>.

⁷ Esam Eltigani Mohamed Ibrāhīm and Ibrāhīm M Zein, "Hasan Al-Turabi's Approach to Qur'ānic Exegesis," *Intellectual Discourse* 22, no. 1 (March 12, 2014), <https://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/id/article/view/570>.

designed to legitimize Sudan's Islamic state project.⁸ They point to the tension between his progressive hermeneutics (e.g., support for gender equality) and the authoritarian policies associated with his political tenure.⁹

Al-Turabi's methodological approach is fundamentally an ideological-political project aimed at societal reconstruction, utilizing a rational and thematic interpretation of the Qur'an. However, it is important to recognize that his work shares common ground with other modern reformist interpreters. Like them, al-Turabi emphasizes the historical and social context of the Qur'an, seeks to derive universal values for social transformation, maintains a critical stance toward classical exegesis (*turāth*), and views *tafsīr* as a project for comprehensive change. His approach, however, differs from the ethical-epistemological 'double movement' theory of Fazlur Rahman, which aims to derive universal ethical principles.¹⁰ It is also distinct from the linguistic-hermeneutic approach of Naṣr Hamīd Abū Zayd, which analyzes the Qur'an as a "text" shaped by its cultural and linguistic context.¹¹ Furthermore, his method diverges from the liberationist hermeneutics of figures like Amina Wadud and Farid Esack, who read the Qur'an to champion gender and social justice from the perspective of the marginalized.¹² A key distinction is that while thinkers like Abū Zayd, Wadud, and Esack explicitly employ Western hermeneutic theories, al-Turabi's methodology is built upon a rational and ideological framework derived primarily from his engagement with the Qur'anic text and his political objectives. Al-Turabi, in contrast, adopts a socio-political and transformative framework in his ambition to institutionalize a comprehensive Islamic system based on his expanded definition of *tawhīd*.

Rather than merely extracting meanings or universal principles, al-Turabi explicitly positions *tafsīr* as a direct instrument for social engineering, political change, and the restructuring of the modern Islamic state. His key contribution is constructing an operational '*fiqh al-wāqī*' (understanding of reality) grounded in his exegesis, which mandates the exegete's active involvement in the political struggle. This 'activist-revolutionary' approach introduces a unique dimension to contemporary *tafsīr* methodology, particularly in its application to building a modern Islamic polity.¹³ Despite these criticisms, al-Turabi's *tafsīr* represents a significant shift in how contemporary scholars engage with the Qur'an. His work challenges traditional approaches, advocating for a more dynamic interpretation that addresses the realities of modern life. Therefore, this study aims to fill a critical gap in the literature by examining how al-Turabi's interpretive framework responds to contemporary social, political, and intellectual challenges. While much existing research has documented the general progression of *tafsīr*, few studies have explicitly focused on the methodologies

⁸ Zulyadain, Syamsul Wathani, and Akhmad Mughzi Abdillah, "Contestation of Islamism over the Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study on Al-Tafsīr Al-Tauhīdī of Hasan Al-Turabi," *Al-A'raf: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam Dan Filsafat* 19, no. 2 (December 30, 2022): 175–204, <https://doi.org/10.22515/ajpif.v19i2.5699>.

⁹ Liv Tønnessen, "Democratizing Islam and Islamizing Democracy – An Inquiry into Hasan Al-Turabi's Conception of Shūra in Light of Western Democratic Theory," *Nordic Journal of Human Rights* 27, no. 03 (March 12, 2009): 313–29, <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN1891-814X-2009-03-01>.

¹⁰ Rahman and Moosa, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*.

¹¹ Abū Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur'an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics*.

¹² Wadud, "Towards a Qur'anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice: Race, Class and Gender"; Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression*.

¹³ Turābī, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*.

employed by modern interpreters like al-Turabi, who engage with the complexities of modernity while remaining grounded in Islamic principles.

This study analyzes Hasan al-Turabi's methodology in *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* by examining four key dimensions that define his progressive, contextual, and ideological approach. These are: (1) the epistemological foundations guiding his interpretation; (2) the sources (*maṣādir*) and style (*lawn*) of his exegesis, particularly his reliance on rational judgment (*bi al-ra'y*) over traditional reports (*bi al-ma'thūr*); (3) his hermeneutic purpose, focused on the socio-political reconstruction of the Muslim Ummah and the dynamic revitalization of Islamic thought; and (4) the systematic structure (*tahlīlī*) he employs in presenting his tafsīr.

This research employs a rigorous qualitative text-based analysis framework. The analytical approach is grounded in an epistemological framework that systematically deconstructs the foundations of knowledge in al-Turabi's exegesis.¹⁴ This inquiry delves into the core of his interpretive project by examining the foundational sources (*maṣādir*) of his authority—such as reason and language—and the methods he uses to validate his claims, notably his departure from traditional exegesis. Furthermore, the analysis explores the ultimate purpose of the knowledge his *tafsīr* produces, questioning whether it is for political mobilization, legal reform, or spiritual renewal. It also scrutinizes the relationship he constructs between the interpreter, the sacred text, and contemporary reality (*al-wāqī'*). Through this epistemological lens, the research systematically examines the explicit and implicit foundations of al-Turabi's methodology, revealing how his intellectual and ideological commitments shape his interpretation of the Qur'an.

By focusing on al-Turabi's methodological approach, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary *tafsīr* and its relevance in addressing pressing issues. Rather than simply categorizing his work, this study offers a structured perspective on how Qur'anic interpretation adapts to modern challenges. In doing so, it will illuminate the enduring relevance of *Al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* as a response to the evolving needs of the contemporary world, thus contributing to ongoing discussions in Islamic political theory and jurisprudence. The authors acknowledge that, as with any qualitative textual analysis, the interpretation of data is subject to the researchers' perspectives and the scope of the secondary sources consulted.

Background of the Emergence of *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*

Although best known as a politician and legal scholar, Hasan al-Turabi also held a profound interest in Qur'anic studies. His most notable contribution in this field, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, developed initially from weekly public discussions in 1994. These gatherings brought together a diverse group of participants, including students, academics, and natural and social scientists. Each session, attended by approximately 15-20 participants, fostered an interactive environment where al-Turabi would pose questions about the verse under examination, encouraging critical engagement and diverse viewpoints.¹⁵

While lay participants often shared varied interpretations of the verses, traditional

¹⁴ Abdul Mustaqim, *Epistemologi Tafsir Kontemporer* (Yogyakarta: Idea Press, 2020).

¹⁵ Ibrāhīm and Zein, "Hasan Al-Turabi's Approach to Qur'ānic Exegesis."

scholars tended to be less forthcoming with new insights, possibly due to the restrictive frameworks within classical Islamic education. This conventional approach, which emphasizes memorization over independent reasoning or *ijtihād*, may inhibit critical thought and creativity. Unfortunately, political tensions forced the regular *tafsīr* sessions to end, and al-Turabi was ultimately detained due to conflicts with President Omar al-Bashir. Following his release, al-Turabi proceeded to complete *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, drawing solely from his intellectual efforts without any notes from previous discussions.¹⁶

In 2004, the first volume of *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* was published by Dār al-Sāqī in London, covering the initial ten *juz*, from sūrah al-Fātiḥah to sūrah al-Tawbah. This 942-page volume opens with a preface by Maḥbūb ‘Abd al-Salām, one of al-Turabi’s students, followed by a 16-page introduction by al-Turabi himself, where he outlines his methodological approach and motivations for undertaking this interpretive project. Seven years later, the second volume was published in Beirut by Arab Scientific Publishers. It encompassed another ten *juz*, from sūrah Yūsuf to sūrah al-‘Ankabūt, and further elaborated on his interpretive approach. It is important to note that these two volumes, covering the first twenty *juz*, are the only parts of the *tafsīr* to have been published, leaving the interpretation of the final ten *juz* of the Qur’an incomplete.

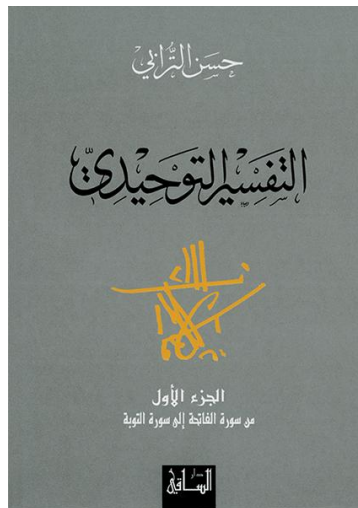


Figure 1. The cover of Hasan al-Turabi's *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* Volume 1, Dār al-Sāqī, 2004.

Al-Turabi’s motivation for writing this *tafsīr* was influenced by several factors. Early on, his father introduced him to classical religious sciences and the Arabic language, laying a foundation for his understanding of the Qur’an. Later, during imprisonment, al-Turabi studied various *tafsīr* works, analyzing different interpretations to deepen his memorization and comprehension of Qur’anic verses. His reflections on previous works led him to categorize interpretations into distinct types, such as linguistic, sufistic, rational (*aqlī*), historical, and jurisprudential (*fiqh*). He identified limitations in these approaches, notably the lack of thematic coherence within *sūrah* and insufficient attempts to connect verses for a unified understanding. Al-Turabi criticized these interpretations for being disconnected

¹⁶ Esam Eltigani Mohamed Ibrāhīm, *Hassan Turābī's Tafsīr: A Study of the Ideological Aspect of Al-Tafsīr Al-Tawhīdī* (ITBM, 2016).

from the broader, unified messages of the Qur'an.¹⁷

Al-Turabi argued that many classical commentaries, while valuable, do not fully address contemporary issues. He contended that traditional interpretations often focus solely on the historical circumstances of revelation rather than considering their relevance to recurring or future contexts. Al-Turabi believed that the Qur'an is eternal, containing broad and enduring meanings applicable beyond the specific historical events of each verse. Additionally, he noted that attempts to identify relationships between verses (*tanāsub bayna al-āyah wa al-suwar*) were often speculative and minimal. To address this, al-Turabi structured *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* to convey the unity of Qur'anic messages, aiming for an interpretation that would enhance readers' understanding of the Qur'an as a cohesive text.

The philosophy behind the name *al-Tawhīdī* reveals a critical motivation extending beyond literary unity. Al-Turabi spent much of his life championing a religio-political ideology, and this project was central to that cause. He observed that the term *tawhīd* was often narrowly associated with creed (*'aqidah*), a definition he sought to expand radically. In his own words, "*What I mean by tawhīd is that all of life is a complete system directed towards the worship of Allah, encompassing economics, art, politics, and religion.*"¹⁸ This comprehensive vision was manifested in a charter he authored, *al-Waḥdah al-Waṭaniyyah 'alā Tariqah al-Islām* (National Unity on the Path of Islam), which advocated for national unity founded on Islamic values. This charter's paradigm directly inspired the vision and title of his *tafsīr*.¹⁹

Al-Turabi's *tafsīr* also serves a dual purpose: it extracts meanings from the Qur'an that reinforce his religiopolitical ideology and sets a methodological example for other Islamic sciences, such as *fiqh* and *uṣul al-fiqh*, to reinterpret Islam from its foundational sources through a monotheistic framework. This approach places *tafsīr* at the core of shaping and disseminating a comprehensive Islamic worldview. His interpretation often used Quranic verses to communicate and justify his ideological views, particularly to the conservative Sufi community in Sudan.²⁰ By quoting Qur'anic passages that resonated with them, al-Turabi sought to bridge misunderstandings and clarify the distinctions between the Islamic movement he represented and other political ideologies, such as communism, which were sometimes viewed similarly. For instance, while a communist might advocate for the abolition of private property on purely materialistic grounds, al-Turabi uses Qur'anic verses on social justice, charity (*zakat*), and the prohibition of hoarding (*kanz*) to argue for an economic system that was divinely mandated, ethically grounded, and distinct from secular

¹⁷ Ḥasan al-Turābī, *Al-Tafsīr Al-Tawhīdī* (Bayruṭ: Arab Scientific Publisher, 2011).

¹⁸ Ḥasan al-Turābī, *Tajdīd Al-Fikr Al-Islāmī*, 3rd ed. (Jeddah: al-Dār al-Su'ūdiyyah li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī', 1987); Ḥasan al-Turābī, *Nazarāt fī al-Fiqh al-Siyāsī* (al-Khartūm: al-Sharikah al-'ālamīyah li-Khidmāt al-'Ilām : al-tawzī' Dār al-Ḥikmah, 1988), 180.

¹⁹ Ibrāhīm Muḥammad Zayn, "Al-Fann Wa Qaḍāyā Al-Huwiyyah Al-Sūdāniyyah: Qirā'ah Ta'wīliyyah Fī Manhaj Al-Tafsīr Al-Tawhīdī," *Al-Tajdīd* 20, no. 39 (2016): 249–81.

²⁰ The "conservative Sufi community" in Sudan refers to the large, traditional Sufi orders (*tariqas*), such as the Khatmiyya and the Ansar, which hold significant historical and socio-political influence. These groups are often characterized by their hierarchical structures, veneration of saints, and focus on spiritual practices that al-Turabi's modern, politically activist Islamist project sought to either challenge or co-opt for his ideological ends. Willow J Berridge, *Hasan Al-Turabi: Islamist Politics and Democracy in Sudan* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

atheism.²¹

Within Muslim-majority societies, Qur'anic interpretation has often served as a powerful tool, wielded by political and religious leaders to validate their authority and influence society. Al-Turabi's work highlights this dynamic, revealing how interpretations can be used to legitimize political action. Al-Turabi himself was acutely aware of this, often arguing that the stagnation of classical exegesis had rendered the Qur'an's power dormant, and a renewed, dynamic interpretation was necessary to reactivate its influence in public life.²² For al-Turabi, the impetus to create *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* also stemmed from two practical concerns: *first*, he noted that many translations offered fragmented interpretations, leading to misunderstandings, particularly among non-Arabic speakers. Second, he observed that classical commentaries frequently failed to address contemporary challenges, instead focusing on definitions rather than providing cohesive messages. He also criticized the reliance on *Israiliyyāt*—historical narrations that, in his view, sometimes distorted Quranic meaning.²³

Al-Turabi's emphasis on language as a powerful tool aligns with Habermas' notion that language inherently carries ideological meaning.²⁴ He viewed language as a vessel for preserving and transmitting culture, history, and ideology. Understanding the Quran's original Arabic was essential to him, as he believed each word had specific meanings that shaped the messages. His approach to *tafsīr* often involved examining the root meanings of words to reclaim their original significance while also interpreting them within contemporary language. Al-Turabi recognized language as a living entity that evolves with social and historical conditions, leading to shifts in the meanings of key concepts over time.²⁵ He viewed his interpretive work as a means to revive these meanings, reflecting modern realities while respecting the Quran's linguistic integrity.

In his interpretation, al-Turabi often sought to communicate the Qur'an's messages as a framework for influencing societal structures. This interpretative approach emphasizes rationality, reflecting his belief that language should be used to convey divine messages that impact religious and political ideology. For al-Turabi, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* is thus a tool that does not simply reveal the Qur'an's meanings but shapes societal discourse, aiming to influence contemporary realities. His work is not entirely objective but reflects specific ideological and social expectations. His interpretations, shaped by Sudanese political debates, implicitly support his religiopolitical ideology. He focuses on *tawhīd* (monotheism) and *tajdīd* (renewal) to strengthen the prominence of Islamic texts and traditions.²⁶ This ideological foundation seeks to counter secular and atheist influences that, in his view,

²¹ Berridge.

²² Al-Turabi's call for a renewed interpretation to reactivate the Quran's role in public life is a central theme in his works on Islamic reform. He argued that a departure from intellectual stagnation (*jumud*) was essential for Islam to offer viable solutions to modern problems. See, for example, his discussions on renewal in Hasan Al-Turabi, Turābī, *Tajdīd Al-Fikr Al-Islāmī*.

²³ Turābī, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*.

²⁴ Jürgen Habermas and William Outhwaite, *The Habermas Reader* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

²⁵ Ahmad Nabilul Maram, *Nalar Ideologi Politik Hasan Al-Turabi Dalam Tafsir Al-Tawhidi*, ed. Syamsul Arifin (Surabaya: CV. Pena Jaya Pers, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.31237/osf.io/u7j4m>.

²⁶ Alden Young, *Transforming Sudan*, vol. 140 (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

threaten Sudanese and broader Islamic societal structures.²⁷

Key Interpretive Principles

Before examining his exegesis methodology, it is essential to understand the two foundational principles that govern Hasan al-Turabi's approach to the Quranic text.

a. Arabic Language Key in Interpreting the Quran

Hasan al-Turabi's interpretive methodology emphasizes the centrality of the Arabic language in understanding the Quran.²⁸ He contends that mastery of the language is not just primary but sufficient for interpretation. He reinforces this principle by arguing that the Quran must be interpreted by its linguistic terms. He encapsulates this idea with the phrase:

وذلك تفسير القرآن بلغة القرآن.²⁹

(And that is the interpretation of the Quran with the language of the Qur'an.)

He further negates the need for intermediaries like translations, asserting bluntly that.

ولم يعول على ترجمانه عبر اللغات إلا الجاهلون بالعربية.³⁰

"And no one has relied on its translation across languages except those ignorant of Arabic."

This position underscores his belief that the Qur'an's meaning is intrinsically tied to its original linguistic medium, making proficiency in Arabic the foundational and indispensable key for any legitimate exegesis.

This perspective is evident in his interpretation of the letters *muqata'ah*, which appear at the beginning of certain surahs. According to al-Turabi, these letters signify that every part of the Qur'an is comprehensible through Arabic, reinforcing the Qur'an's accessibility to its initial Arab audience. For example, in his commentary on *alif lam mim* at the beginning of Sūrah al-Baqarah, al-Turabi explains that these letters reflect the Qur'an's clarity and challenge the eloquence of the Arabs. He elaborates:

الألف بهمزها: من الحروف الحلقية؛ اللام لسانية، الميم شفوية - وهي حروف متوالية
تمثل كل مخارج النطق بالحروف العربية، وهذا التمثيل للعربية في أول السورة إشارة -
أولاً - للبيان. فالقرآن كتاب بين واضح مركب من ذات حروف لغة العرب المفهومة
لأمة الخطاب.³¹

Al-Turabi notes that *alif* (a guttural letter), *lam* (a lingual letter), and *mim* (a labial letter)

²⁷ Turābī, *Tajdīd Al-Fikr Al-Islāmī*.

²⁸ Turābī, *Al-Tafsīr Al-Tawhīdī*.

²⁹ Turābī, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, 8.

³⁰ Turābī, 3.

³¹ Turābī, 28.

represent the spectrum of Arabic articulation points. Their placement at the beginning of Sūrah al-Baqarah emphasizes the Qur'an's linguistic foundation in Arabic, ensuring its clarity and accessibility. For al-Turabi, these letters symbolize the Qur'an's composition from Arabic elements, making it inherently comprehensible to its early audience.

He extends this interpretation to highlight the Qur'an's divine origin and miraculous nature. He states:

وهو إشارة - ثانياً - أنه كلام معروف لكنه مصدره وحى تحديداً لمن كذبوه من أهل
اللسان العربي انهم لم ولن يستطيعوا أن يأتوا بمثله ، وما محمد أن يأتي بمثله من عنده

It underscores that while the Qur'an uses familiar Arabic words, its language and eloquence are unparalleled, challenging Arabs to produce anything comparable. The Qur'an's linguistic perfection serves as proof of its divine authorship.

Al-Turabi further analyzes QS al-Baqarah [2]:2 , "this is the Book about which there is no doubt". He interprets *dhālika* ("that") not as an indicator of physical distance but as a marker of the Quran's elevated status. He explains:

ذلك : إشارة للأبعد بحرف خطاب ، وهي اشارة لرفعة القرآن ، ليس بعداً عن الإنسان
بل خطاباً يعليه للقارئ منذ الرسول ﷺ³²

This interpretation emphasizes the Qur'an's capacity to elevate the reader's understanding, starting with the Prophet Muhammad saw. Regarding (*al-Kitāb*), al-Turabi links it to the root *kataba* , meaning "to record" or "to bind." He explains:

فالكتاب لغة ليس بالضرورة مخطوطاً على الورق ولكنه هنا ارتبط بذلك المعنى لأن ما
سجل مخطوطاً أشد وقوعاً وإلزاماً.

Here, *al-kitāb* transcends its literal meaning of a written text to represent divine guidance that binds believers to moral and spiritual obligations. This interpretation aligns with his broader perspective of the Qur'an as a binding source of clarity and obligation for humanity.

In his commentary on Sūrah Ṭa-Ha, al-Turabi reiterates that the Qur'an was revealed as clear Arabic speech, enabling the Prophet Muhammad to memorize, understand, and convey its message effectively to the Arabs. This clarity underscores the responsibility of Arab audiences to preserve and transmit the Qur'an's meanings accurately through explicit Arabic expressions.³³

While al-Turabi's emphasis on Arabic mastery reinforces the Qur'an's accessibility, his assertion that linguistic competence alone suffices for Qur'anic interpretation has sparked scholarly debate. Classical scholars like al-Suyūṭī in *al-Itqān* outline additional prerequisites for interpreters, such as proper faith, ethical integrity, and comprehensive knowledge of Islamic fundamentals. Al-Suyūṭī argues that interpreters lacking these qualities may distort Quranic meanings due to sectarian or ideological biases.

³² Turābī, 28.

³³ Turābī, *Al-Tafsīr Al-Tawhīdī*, 708.

As critics would argue, the epistemological risk of al-Turabi's language-centric approach is that it can reduce exegesis to a purely technical, subjective exercise, detaching the sacred text from its spiritual and ethical moorings. Without these safeguards, the Qur'an becomes more vulnerable to being instrumentalized for specific political or social agendas, regardless of the exegete's linguistic prowess. By contrast, al-Turabi's approach democratizes Qur'anic interpretation, making it accessible to any proficient Arabic speaker. However, this perspective achieves its accessibility by potentially sidelining the very spiritual and ethical dimensions that classical tradition deemed essential for ensuring a balanced and authentic exegesis.

By emphasizing Arabic as the foundation for Qur'anic interpretation, al-Turabi underscores the Qur'an's clarity and accessibility for its intended audience. His interpretation of the letters *muqāṭa'ah*, *al-Kitāb*, and other elements highlights the Qur'an's linguistic excellence and divine origin. However, his methodology invites critical reflection on the balance between linguistic expertise and the broader qualifications necessary for exegesis. While his approach democratizes access to the Qur'an's meanings, integrating additional spiritual and ethical dimensions could provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding the Qur'an in traditional and contemporary contexts.

b. Considering Historical and Word Meanings in the Qur'an

Al-Turabi's interpretive methodology emphasizes the historical and linguistic depth of Qur'anic words, focusing on their root meanings to uncover nuances often overlooked in traditional exegesis.³⁴ He asserts that Arabic, with its unique root-based linguistic structure, evolves in response to societal and environmental changes.³⁵ Words with specific meanings for one era may expand, diminish, or shift entirely in subsequent contexts.³⁶ Recognizing this, al-Turabi encourages interpreters to trace words back to their original roots, a practice he extensively employs in his tafsīr, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*.

One of the key examples in his tafsīr is his analysis of *shayāṭinihim*, as mentioned in QS al-Baqarah [2]:14. Al-Turabi explains that this term is derived from the root (*shaṭana*), which means "to be distant." He interprets *shayāṭinihim* not merely as supernatural beings but as symbols of deviation and misleading influences. He elaborates:

وإذا خلوا عن هؤلاء وناجوا شياطينهم من أحبار اليهود أو بعض زعماء المنافقين قالوا
لهم مؤكدين أنهم معهم وأنهم مستهزون بالمؤمنين بمقالاتهم.

Here, *shayāṭinihim* refers to the Jewish leaders or hypocritical figures who encouraged deceit and resistance against the believers. Al-Turabi expands its traditional understanding by associating it with broader socio-political dynamics, portraying these figures as forces of corruption that distance individuals from divine guidance.³⁷ Further, al-Turabi analyzes the term *shayṭān* linguistically, linking it to the idea of separation from righteousness:

³⁴ Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn 'Umar al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ Al-Ghayb* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 2004).

³⁵ Turābī, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*.

³⁶ Johanna Pink, "Tradition And Ideology In Contemporary Sunnite Qur'ānic Exegesis: Qur'ānic Commentaries From The Arab World, Turkey And Indonesia And Their Interpretation Of Q 5: 51," *Die Welt Des Islams* 50, no. 1 (2010): 3–59.

³⁷ Turābī, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*.

وَشَظَنَ : ابتعد، فالشيطان من شطن عن الهدى.

He explains that a *shayṭān* is anyone or anything that diverges far from the path of guidance (*hudā*), whether human or otherwise. This interpretation connects the word's linguistic origin to its broader spiritual and social implications.

In the same passage, al-Turabi highlights the divine response to such deviation, stating:

اللّٰهُ يَكْفِئُهُمْ بِمَثَلِ فَعْلِهِمْ يَسْتَهْزِءُ بِسَفْهَمٍ وَيَزِيدُهُمْ طُغْيَانًا عَلَى سُنَّةِ التَّسْيِيرِ عَلَى
التَّخْيِيرِ وَالْمَدِّ حَسْبَ الْكَسِّ

It suggests that God mirrors their actions by leaving them to their arrogance and increasing their deviation (*tughyān*). The repeated deviations lead to spiritual blindness, as described:

لِيَمْضُوا عَامِهِينَ فِي الْبَصِيرَةِ كَأَنَّهُمْ عَمُونَ بَصَرًا يَتَرَدَّدُونَ بِنِفَاقِهِمْ فِي اضْطِرَابِ قَلْبٍ
وَحَيْرَةِ طَرِيقٍ.

This psychological and moral interpretation underscores the consequences of hypocrisy, with individuals wandering in doubt and confusion.³⁸

In *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, al-Turabi offers a profound linguistic analysis of terms like *al-kitāb* through rigorous historico-linguistic examination. This approach, however, is inconsistently applied, as exemplified in his exegesis of *al-Furqān* in QS Ālī ‘Imrān [3]:4. Here, he reduces the term to a functional 'discriminator between truth and falsehood' (*tamyīz al-ḥaqq min al-bāṭil*) while overlooking its morphological foundations—notably the root *f-r-q* (ف-ر-ق) and intensive *ifʿāl* form that signifies 'absolute criterion.' This omission starkly contrasts with his multidimensional treatment of *al-kitāb*, revealing selective application of methodology.³⁹ Coupled with dense linguistic complexity and embedded polemical framing, such inconsistencies substantiate his work's critiques of elitism and methodological unevenness.

Systematics of *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*

The selection of "*al-Tawhīdī*" as the title of his *tafsīr* was intentional, aiming to signify a unified ideological platform that integrates the theological concept of *tawhīd* with a comprehensive political, social, and epistemological framework for the contemporary Muslim communities that were the target of his reformist discourse. It is more than a title; it serves as a discursive strategy designed to sway readers toward his interpretations, fostering alignment with his broader vision for political and social order.

To accurately situate al-Turabi's work, it is helpful to clarify the standard classifications of Qur'anic interpretation. Methodologically, scholarship often identifies four main approaches, such as in the well-known framework proposed by al-Farmawi: *tahlīlī* (a detailed, verse-by-verse analytical method examining aspects like grammar, context, and legal rulings); *ijmālī* (a concise, summary-style explanation); *muqāran* (a comparative

³⁸ Turābī.

³⁹ Turābī.

method analyzing the interpretations of various scholars); and *mawḍūʿī* (a thematic method that collects and synthesizes all verses on a specific topic from across the Qur'an). Separately, the interpretation order typically follows either the *tartīb muṣḥafī* (the sequential order of the Uthmani codex, from al-Fātiḥa to al-Nas) or the *tartīb nuzūlī* (the chronological order of revelation).

In *al-Tafsīr al-Tawḥīdī*, al-Turabi employs the *tartīb muṣḥafī*, organizing his interpretation following the verse order of the Uthmani Mushaf. However, its methodology is a sophisticated hybrid. While its verse-by-verse progression gives it a *tahlīlī* structure, it is deeply infused with a *mawḍūʿī* sensibility, as al-Turabi consistently seeks to uncover the overarching themes unifying each sūrah and connect them to his central concept of *tawḥīd*. A crucial aspect of the work's systematics is its incomplete scope. As noted, the project was published in only two volumes. The first volume covers Sūrah al-Fātiḥah through Sūrah al-Tawbah, and the second volume was published by Arab Scientific Publishers, covering sūrah Yūnus to sūrah al-ʿAnkabūt. Consequently, the published exegesis stops there, covering only the first twenty *juz* of the Qur'an. Al-Turabi did not complete the interpretation for the final ten *juz*, and no further volumes were published. This incompleteness stands as a significant limitation of the work, leaving his systematic vision for the entire Qur'an unrealized.

This hybrid approach is operationalized through his consistent three-part division for each sūrah, designed to deepen understanding and clarify the Qur'an's thematic coherence. The first section is the summary of the sūrah's instructions (*khulaṣāh hadī al-sūrah*), where al-Turabi introduces the sūrah by explaining its name, order, central themes, content, and purpose. This introduction provides readers with essential context, including the circumstances surrounding each sūrah's revelation, thereby situating its teachings within the historical and social challenges of the time.

The second section, the order of meaning (*tartīb al-maʿānī*), systematically categorizes each sūrah into smaller, cohesive groups of verses, sometimes grouping them by individual verse. This approach reveals a structured narrative flow within each sūrah, allowing the reader to trace how meanings develop and connect to form an integrated message. For example, in sūrah al-Baqarah, al-Turabi organizes the verses into 23 thematic groups, with the largest containing 31 verses and the smallest just two. Other sūrahs follow a similar pattern but vary in their thematic subdivisions: Sūrah Ālī ʿImrān has nine groups, Sūrah al-Nisā' ten, Sūrah al-Māidah nine, and so on. This grouping demonstrates al-Turabi's intent to uncover thematic unity within each sūrah by arranging related verses, highlighting how the sequence of ideas addresses specific circumstances and challenges the Muslim community faces.

The third and final section, the general meaning (*ʿumūm al-maʿānī*), contextualizes the Qur'anic messages for contemporary Muslim and non-Muslim readers alike. Here, al-Turabi explains how the values within the sūrah can be applied to current societal issues, providing insights into the Qur'an's relevance to modern life. By doing so, he bridges traditional interpretations with contemporary realities, helping readers see the Qur'an as a source of guidance that remains pertinent to the challenges of today's world.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Turābī, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawḥīdī*; Turābī, *Al-Tafsīr Al-Tawḥīdī*.



Figure 2: The Systematic Layout of *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*. This page illustrates al-Turabi's distinctive tripartite structure for analyzing each *sūrah*: 1) *khulāṣāh hady al-sūrah* (summary of guidance), 2) *tartīl al-ma'ānī* (thematic arrangement), and 3) *'umūm al-ma'ānī* (general meaning). This organizational method is central to his project of demonstrating the Qur'an's thematic unity.

Methodological Approaches in *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*

Hasan al-Turabi's methodological approach in *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* can be identified through several key aspects: the sources of interpretation, the mode of presentation, and the character of his exegetical approach, which is distinctly socio-politically engaged and activist-oriented.⁴¹ In terms of interpretive sources, this work privileges rational-*ijtihādī* reasoning within an ideologically structured framework, while selectively engaging with transmitted reports (*tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr*). This rationalist orientation is not merely an academic exercise; it serves his broader ideological project of using exegesis for comprehensive socio-political renewal based on his expanded concept of *tawhīd*.

Its method of presentation follows an analytical framework (*tahlīlī*), interpreting the Qur'an sequentially while emphasizing the thematic unity within each *sūrah*. Although the idea of thematic coherence (*munāsabah*) was previously promoted by classical exegetes such as al-Biqā'ī and Fakhrudīn al-Rāzī, and later developed into a thematic method (*tafsīr mawḍū'ī*) by thinkers like Bāqir al-Ṣadr, al-Turabi's application of thematic lenses within a *tahlīlī* structure gives his *tafsīr* a distinctive character in the discourse of contemporary Qur'anic interpretation. Methodologically, this hybrid approach allows him to maintain a traditional verse-by-verse structure while ensuring that each section contributes to a

⁴¹ The character of al-Turabi's exegesis is often described as *ḥarakī* (activist or movement-oriented). It means the primary purpose of his interpretation is not merely for academic or spiritual contemplation, but to serve as a direct catalyst for social and political change. His approach treats the Quran as an operational blueprint for building a modern Islamic state and confronting contemporary challenges. For example, concepts like justice and consultation (*shūra*) are interpreted not as abstract ethical values, but as explicit mandates for reforming political governance and mobilizing grassroots action against oppression. This activist stance transforms exegesis from a passive scholarly activity into an active tool for social engineering and political mobilization, directly linking Quranic teachings to a specific transformative agenda, which has led critics to view his *tafsīr* as a political manifesto for his Islamist project in Sudan.

unified, overarching theme to address modern challenges. Unlike classical exegetes who often used *munāsabah* for rhetorical or spiritual purposes, al-Turabi weaponizes it as a hermeneutical tool to construct a cohesive ideological narrative aimed at political reform.

1. Use of Sources and Referencing Challenges

Al-Turabi's interpretive work has faced criticism for its limited citation of sources, which impacts the transparency of his arguments. He provides two reasons for this: first, many of his writings were completed while imprisoned, where he lacked access to specific references; second, he aimed to keep his books concise by avoiding excessive citations.

However, these justifications do not fully address the critical implications of this practice. The systematic lack of precise references weakens the work's academic credibility. It obstructs scholarly verification, making it difficult to trace the origins of Al-Turabi's claims and assess their validity against the sources Al-Turabi allegedly used. This practice opens his exegesis to accusations of intellectual bias, where sources may be selectively co-opted without proper acknowledgment. Furthermore, this avoidance of citation could be interpreted as a deliberate strategy to marginalize the authority of classical scholarship and establish his own personal, unmediated interpretive authority over the Quranic text.

Despite this, it is possible to trace his influences, as he primarily references works like *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wil Āy al-Qur'ān* by al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr ibn Ashūr*, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* by Mawdūdī, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān* by Sayyid Quṭb, and Muhammad Asad's English translation of the Quran. Al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*, in particular, is a frequently referenced source in al-Turabi's work, given its inclusion of various interpretations based on narrations from the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, and the Tabi'in (early followers). This broad reference base offers al-Turabi diverse perspectives and enhances his approach to Qur'anic interpretation.

2. Method of Explanation in *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*

A defining feature of al-Turabi's methodology is his consistent application of rational judgment (*tafsīr bi al-ra'y*) to reinterpret verses traditionally understood through literalist readings of transmitted reports. His interpretation of the creation of humanity in QS al-Nisā' (4):1 serves as a prime example of this rationalist and anti-literalist approach in action. The verse states:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ وَالْأَرْحَامَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا

"O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and dispersed from both of them many men and women. And fear Allah, through whom you ask one another, and the wombs. Indeed, Allah is ever an Observer over you."

In this verse, al-Turabi challenges the traditional understanding of human creation, rejecting the view often associated with Judaic tradition that Hawā' (Eve) was created from Ādam's rib. Instead, he asserts that the "rib" metaphor teaches how men should treat women

with care and respect, just as ribs protect vital organs. According to al-Turabi, this metaphor highlights women's unique roles and characteristics, which must be cherished and valued.⁴²

Expanding on the phrase "*naḥsin wāḥidatin*" ("a single soul"), al-Turabi interprets it to mean that the first human entity contained both male and female characteristics. He argues that Ādam and Hawā' were initially part of one being, a dual-gendered creation, from which the male and female elements were later separated. This interpretation aligns with other Qur'anic descriptions, such as:

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا...

"And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates, that you may find tranquility in them..." (QS al-Rūm [30]:21).

By rejecting the literal understanding of the rib narrative, al-Turabi offers a fresh perspective that emphasizes gender equality and interdependence. He sees this as a foundational principle for human relationships, urging men and women to recognize their shared origin and complementary roles. In doing so, he deconstructs notions of superiority or dominance and emphasizes the mutual respect and harmony prescribed in Islam.⁴³ Al-Turabi also interprets the Qur'anic emphasis on familial ties (*al-arḥām*) as a divine call to strengthen social cohesion. He argues that the reminder to honor kinship bonds underscores the Qur'anic vision of humanity as one interconnected family. This broader understanding challenges divisions based on ethnicity, race, or tribe and reinforces the Quran's universal message of unity and equality.⁴⁴

Through his interpretation of QS al-Nisā' (4:1), al-Turabi exemplifies his innovative approach to *tafsīr*, integrating rationality, symbolic meaning, and contemporary relevance. His method seeks to highlight the Qur'an's guidance on gender relations, social harmony, and equality in a manner that resonates with modern values. It offers profound lessons for Muslims to foster respect, compassion, and understanding in all aspects of life.

Regarding its depth of explanation, classifying *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* is complex, as it defies a single traditional category. While the work is sometimes mistakenly labeled as *ijmālī* (concise), its overall methodology is more accurately described as a hybrid that merges a *tahlīlī* (analytical) framework with a deep socio-thematic (*ijtima'ī-mawḍū'ī*) style. Unlike a genuinely concise exegesis such as *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, which offers brief and direct explanations of verses, al-Turabi's work is intentionally elaborate. He distinguishes his *tafsīr* by offering extensive introductory discussions for each *sūrah*, focusing on aspects such as the rationale behind its name, the context of its revelation, and its central themes. This detailed introduction aims to help readers grasp the values in the *sūrah* based on its revelation context and the socio-political circumstances of the early Muslim community.

For example, in his interpretation of *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, al-Turabi explains that the *sūrah*'s name reminds Muslims to learn from the Children of Israel's mistakes, particularly

⁴² Turābī, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, 243.

⁴³ Abdulai Abukari, "Education of Women in Islam: A Critical Islamic Interpretation of the Quran," *Religious Education* 109, no. 1 (January 12, 2014): 4–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2014.868203>; Maram, Aziz, and Nasir, "Interpreting Islamic Education For Social Change: Hasan Al-Turabi's Views on Women's Rights And Gender Equality"; Turābī, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, 236.

⁴⁴ Turābī, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*, 237.

in their hesitation and questioning of divine commands. Similarly, Sūrah' Ālī 'Imrān highlights the lineage of Prophet Jesus and the *sūrah's* role in refuting Christian claims about Jesus's divinity, situating the *sūrah* within its socio-historical context.⁴⁵ This unique structure, with its focus on contextual and thematic explanations, clearly differentiates *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* from works offering more straightforward summaries. However, while this approach provides rich, layered context for the academic reader, its narrative density and complex organization may challenge a lay audience seeking direct guidance.

3. Genre and Style of *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*

Al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī is known for its innovative approach, which emphasizes the social and historical dimensions of Quranic verses. Al-Turabi's monotheistic approach seeks to align the Qur'an's messages with the complexities of modern socio-political contexts.⁴⁶ Through this *tafsīr*, al-Turabi addresses a range of contemporary issues, such as public life, the role of women, and social justice, reflecting his commitment to making the Qur'an relevant to present-day concerns. His work is also marked by critical engagement with previous interpretations, which he critiques as lacking applicability or depth. Al-Turabi often draws on scientific and philosophical traditions to broaden the understanding of Quranic texts, though this openness has provoked mixed reactions. While some view his approach as overly liberal and reductive of the Qur'an's traditional meanings, others appreciate it as an inclusive and forward-thinking interpretation that expands the scope of Islamic understanding.⁴⁷

Al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī is classifiable as both *tafsīr adabī al-ijtima'ī* (socio-cultural exegesis) and *ḥarakī* (activist interpretation)—a dual character intrinsically tied to al-Ṭurābī's identity as a Sudanese political activist. This activist lens drives his non-passive engagement with the Qur'an, where verses become dynamic tools for confronting contemporary socio-political realities. His *ḥarakī* approach manifests in directives like the Qur'an's mandate to "clean up injustice" and establish "justice, politics, and rules for leaders", transforming exegesis into operational frameworks. The phrase "clean up injustice" calls for grassroots mobilization against systemic oppression, while "rules for leaders" transmutes Qur'anic ethics into governance reform.⁴⁸ Consequently, this *tafsīr* transcends mere commentary to become an *activist manifesto* that applies Qur'anic teachings to modern challenges—particularly justice, governance, and ethical reconstruction—thereby inspiring socio-political change.

⁴⁵ Guessoum.

⁴⁶ Ali Akbar and Abdullah Saeed, "Interpretation and Mutability: Socio-Legal Texts of the Quran; Three Accounts from Contemporary Iran," *Middle Eastern Studies* 54, no. 3 (May 4, 2018): 442–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2018.1426569>; Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014).

⁴⁷ Ulrika Mårtensson, "Through the Lens of Modern Hermeneutics: Authorial Intention in Al-Ṭabarī's and Al-Ghazālī's Interpretations of Q. 24:35," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 11, no. 2 (October 2009): 20–48, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2009.0003>.

⁴⁸ Turābī, *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī*.

Application of the Methodology: A Case Study of Sūrah al-Isrā'

To illustrate how al-Turabi's principles and methods converge in practice, his interpretation of the Night Journey (Isrā') in QS al-Isrā' [17]:1 serves as a compelling case study. This example applies his rational methodology (*tafsīr bi al-ra'y*), where he departs from the conventional, literal understanding of the event to prioritize its symbolic and spiritual meaning.

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أَسْرَى بِعَبْدِهِ لَيْلًا مِّنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ الْأَقْصَى الَّذِي بَارَكْنَا حَوْلَهُ
لِنُرِيَهُ مِنْ آيَاتِنَا إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ

"Glory be to Him who carried His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him some of Our signs. Indeed, He alone is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing."

Al-Turabi interprets the Prophet Muhammad's night journey as a visionary spiritual experience rather than a physical event. He supports this by connecting the event to the Qur'anic description of it as a "vision" (*ru'yā*) in verse 17:60. In his commentary, he makes this explicit:

فَاللَّهُ سُبْحَانَهُ أَسْرَى بِعَبْدِهِ الْفَقِيرِ إِلَيْهِ الرَّسُولِ الْخَاتَمِ مَنَاماً لَيْلاً مِنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى
الْمَسْجِدِ الْأَقْصَى لِيُرِيَهُ آيَاتٍ فِي آثَارِ وَصُورٍ مَخِيلَةٍ فِي الرُّؤْيَا⁴⁹.

"So Allah, Glorified is He, carried His needy servant, the final Messenger, in a dream (manāman) at night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, to show him signs in vestiges and imagined images in the vision (al-ru'yā)."

According to al-Turabi, the explicit use of the words *manāman* (in a dream) and *al-ru'yā* (the vision) confirms that the *Isrā'* was a spiritual event. He argues that its purpose was to strengthen the Prophet's conviction and prepare him for future revelations, not to perform a physical miracle.

He further interprets the journey as a symbolic act representing the continuity of prophethood. He explains the deep connection between the two mosques as rooted in the singular mission of monotheism (*tawhīd*) originating from Abraham:

فَقَدْ كَانَ الْإِسْرَاءُ بِالرَّسُولِ مِنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى الْأَقْصَى تَذَكُّرًا لَهُ حَافِظَةً إِلَى قِبْلَةِ مِلَّةِ
التَّوْحِيدِ الْحَنِيفِيَّةِ الَّتِي كَانَتْ تَطَهَّرُ مِنَ الْإِشْرَاقِ السَّائِدِ فِي الْأَرْضِ - تَطَهَّرُ بِسُطِّهِ فِيهَا
إِبْرَاهِيمُ وَأَسَّسَ لَهُ مَرْكَزَ عِبَادَةِ تَوْحِيدٍ هُوَ الْمَسْجِدُ الْحَرَامُ وَنَشَرَ ذُرِّيَّتَهُ الَّتِي أَنْزَعَتْ أَيْضاً
بُورَةَ لِلْمِلَّةِ فِي الشَّمَالِ وَأَسَّسَتْ فِيهِ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ الْمَسْجِدَ الْأَقْصَى⁵⁰.

"The Isrā' of the Messenger from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque was a reminder for him, motivating him towards the qibla of the monotheistic nation of Abraham (millat al-tawhīd al-ḥanīfiyyah), which was a purification from the prevalent polytheism... a purification that Abraham spread and for which he established a center

⁴⁹ Turābī, *Al-Tafsīr Al-Tawhīdī*, 495.

⁵⁰ Turābī, 508-9.

of monotheistic worship, which is the Sacred Mosque, and he spread his offspring who also planted a center for the nation in the north and established therein after him the Farthest Mosque."

This reading frames the journey not as a miracle of transport, but as a theological lesson reinforcing the Prophet Muhammad's role as the heir to the Abrahamic tradition of pure monotheism. Moreover, al-Turabi critiques the heavy emphasis on the physical aspects of the *Isrā'* in popular tradition, arguing that this distracts from the ethical and practical lessons of the Prophet's life. His approach consistently encourages Muslims to seek rational, symbolic, and spiritually relevant meanings from the Qur'an that can be applied to build a modern, morally grounded society.

In stark contrast to al-Turabi's symbolic reading, classical exegetes like Ibn Kathīr and Fakhruddīn al-Rāzī affirm the physical and miraculous nature of the *Isrā'*. According to their interpretations, the event was a literal, bodily journey from Mecca to Jerusalem. Both scholars emphasize that Prophet Muhammad physically rode the Buraq and led the other prophets in prayer, an event signifying his supreme status as the final and greatest messenger (*imam al-anbiya*).⁵¹ Al-Rāzī, using his characteristic rationalist-theological approach, goes so far as to defend the physical possibility of such a high-speed journey, arguing that if celestial bodies can move at immense speeds, a divinely-aided journey is certainly possible for the Prophet's body and soul (*jasad wa rūh*).⁵²

This comparison starkly highlights what is distinctive—and from a traditional perspective, problematic—about al-Turabi's methodology. While a rationalist like al-Rāzī uses reason to defend the literal miracle, al-Turabi uses reason to deconstruct it in favor of a symbolic meaning. The classical focus is on the event's miraculousness as proof of God's power and the Prophet's unique status. Al-Turabi, however, systematically shifts the focus away from the supernatural event itself and towards what he deems its practical, ethical, and ideological lesson: the continuity of Abrahamic monotheism as a foundation for a modern Islamic society. It demonstrates how his *ra'y* is not just interpretive but transformative, repurposing the narrative to serve a contemporary socio-political goal, even at the cost of sidelining the established, literal understanding held by mainstream tradition.

Table: Comparison of Interpretations of Sūrah al-Isrā' (17:1)

Aspect	Traditional Interpretation	Hasan al-Turabi's Interpretation
Nature of the Journey	A physical journey undertaken by Prophet Muhammad from the Sacred Mosque in Mecca to the Farthest Mosque in Jerusalem, using Buraq.	A spiritual vision or prophetic dream (<i>ru'yā</i>), aimed at showing the Prophet signs of God's greatness and strengthening his faith.
Meaning of " <i>Asrā</i> "	Interpreted as a physical journey.	Interpreted symbolically as a spiritual experience, supported by QS al-Isrā' [17]:60, which describes the event as a vision.

⁵¹ 'Imād al-Dīn Abī al-Fidā' Ismā'īl Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān Al-Adzīm* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 2011); Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ Al-Ghayb*.

⁵² Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ Al-Ghayb*.

Symbolic Understanding	Highlights the uniqueness of Prophet Muhammad and the significance of Masjid al-Aqsa in Islamic spirituality.	Represents the continuity of prophethood from Abraham to Muhammad, symbolizing the unity of the prophetic mission in spreading monotheism.
Emphasis on Miracles	Focuses on the physical miracle of the journey as evidence of the Prophet's elevated status.	Prioritizes spiritual lessons and God's signs over physical miracles.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Hasan al-Turabi's exegetical methodology in *al-Tafsīr al-Tawhīdī* is fundamentally an instrument for his socio-political project of Islamic renewal in Sudan. His approach is defined by a systematic tripartite structure (*khulāṣah*, *tartīl*, *ʿumūm*) and a firm privileging of rational *ijtihād* over a deep engagement with traditional sources. It positions his work squarely within the genre of political-activist exegesis (*tafsīr ḥarakī*), where the primary goal is not just interpretation but societal transformation. His linguistic focus, exemplified in his novel readings on gender and the Qur'anic worldview, offers innovative and contextually relevant insights that challenge static classical interpretations.

However, the primary strength of the *tafsīr*—its cohesive, goal-oriented vision—is also its greatest weakness. The heavy reliance on a language-centric *ra'y*, detached from the epistemological safeguards of Hadith and the broader exegetical tradition, leads to a significant ideological bias. While Turabī's project implicitly aims for societal well-being (*maṣlaḥah*), his methodology lacks a rigorous grounding in the higher objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*), making it susceptible to being a justification tool for a preconceived political agenda rather than an open-ended inquiry. The marginalization of established traditions, especially when his interpretations contradict them, raises critical questions about the instrumentalization of scripture and the hermeneutical integrity of his project.

This study contributes a nuanced methodological critique that moves beyond simply categorizing al-Turabi's work, demonstrating *how* his linguistic and structural choices systematically serve his ideological goals. While confined to the available volumes, these findings enrich the scholarly discourse on political exegesis and the tension between rationalist and traditional hermeneutics in modern Islam. Future research could systematically analyze the reception of his *tafsīr* in post-Turabi Sudan or conduct a comparative hermeneutical study of his method against other key Islamist exegetes. Ultimately, whether such a deeply contextualized exegetical model, born from the specificities of Sudanese Islamism, can offer a viable and universal framework for Qur'anic interpretation remains an open and challenging question for the future of contemporary Islamic thought.

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