Beyond Tradition: Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī's Impact on Contemporary Qur'ānic Exegesis

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Abstract

This article examines the tradition of Qur'ānic exegesis before Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) and the innovative approaches, he introduced, to the discipline. Using an inductive method, it analyses his books, articles, and speeches. Before him, Qur'ānic exegesis was dominated by classical methods focused on syntax, grammar, jurisprudence, and theology, failing to meet contemporary needs. Al-Afghānī did not write any Qur'ānic commentary in the classical style. Still, his articles on Qur'ānic themes in al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā *resemble independent exegeses, following a late Ottoman style. He advocated for a subjective and critical reading, centring only on the Qur'ān and rejecting linguistically focused exegesis. He emphasized the Qur'ān's relevance to contemporary issues, highlighting its social, cultural, anthropological, and political messages.*

Keywords

Qur'ān, exegesis, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, tradition, impact.

Introduction

Many studies have been produced on Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī's (d. 1897) understanding and interpretation of the Qur'ān. The first of these was the article titled "Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī wa Ārā'uhu 'l-Tafsīriyyah wa Atharuhu fī Tafsīr al-Manār."[1] This study extensively discusses al-Afghānī's biography, often repeating previously mentioned information in other sources about his political, social, cultural, and religious endeavours. However, it lacks a deeper exploration of al-Afghānī's understanding of Qur'ānic exegesis. The author makes a methodological flaw by questioning al-Afghānī's contribution to Qur'ānic exegesis without examining the past scholarship on the subject. Furthermore, in the section that discussed al-Afghānī's understanding of exegesis, the

[1] Khaled Abdullah Ali Briah, "Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī Ārā'uhu 'l-Tafsīriyyah wa Atharuhu fī Tafsīr al-Manār," *İlahiyat* 6 (2021): 81-108.

absence of primary sources such as *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā* is notable. Instead, the author relies on secondary sources, undermining the scholarly rigour of the analysis. To enrich al-Afghānī's method of exegesis, referencing primary works such as *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā*, *al-Radd 'alā 'l-Dahriyyīn*, and *Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī: Dhikriyyāt wa Aḥādīth* is essential. Additionally, the article's descriptive style limits analytical depth, failing to evaluate al-Afghānī's hermeneutics and their implications critically.

Another article produced on al-Afghānī's exegesis is "al-Tafsīr wa Su'āl al-Tajdīd fī 'l-Khiṭāb al-Iṣlāḥī: Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī wa Muḥammad 'Abduh Unmūdhajayn."[2] In its introduction, the author examined concepts such as exegesis (*tafsīr*) and renewal (*tajdīd*) in detail. However, the author gave very brief information about al-Afghānī's understanding of Qur'ānic exegesis, which is a slightly expanded version of what Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1345/1935) had previously mentioned in the preface of his Qur'ānic commentary *al-Manār*.[3] Therefore, the article did not add anything new to the existing body of knowledge on al-Afghānī and his method of renewal. However, some examples from Muḥammad 'Abduh's (d. 1323/1905) approach to *tafsīr* while talking about al-Afghānī's approach to *tafsīr* were mentioned. The author also failed to compare the new perspectives that al-Afghānī and 'Abduh brought to Qur'ānic exegesis. Thus, the article is mostly a repetition of previous studies. Finally, the author did not include previous scholarly works on the exegeses of both al-Afghānī and 'Abduh.

Nevertheless, the studies we reviewed above also contain some essential information. The present article aims to fill an academic gap in studies on al-Afghānī's exegetical understanding.

Characteristics of al-Afghānī's Perception of Qur'ānic Exegesis

According to al-Afghānī, the discipline of exegesis before his time was dominated by the principle of transmission (*naql*), which constrained critical engagement with the texts and limited the incorporation of contemporary interpretations. As in the previous Qur'ānic commentaries, they were shaped by repetition and so-called religious/faithful reading. Meanwhile, the dominance of Salafist understanding of Qur'ānic exegesis deprived the exegetical discipline of rationality, criticism, and new

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[2] Nūr al-Dīn Bāb al-'Iyāṭ, "al-Tafsīr wa Su'āl al-Tajdīd fī 'l-Khiṭāb al-Iṣlāḥī: Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad 'Abduhu Unmūdhajayn," *Al-Sāwarah li 'l-Dirāsāt al-Insāniyyah wa 'l-Ijtimā'iyyah* 9, no. 1 (2023): 47-68.

[3] Muḥammad Rashīd b. 'Alī Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Ḥakīm* (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-'Āmmah li 'l-Kitāb, 1990), 1:11.

approaches. Qur'ānic commentaries were dominated by parables, superstitions, narratives about sectarian doctrines, unauthentic Prophetic traditions, and Israelite reports. Al-Afghānī attributed the stagnation in the religious and scientific fields to the element of imitation and accused imitator jurists and Sufi scholars of a superstitious understanding of this field. Because of this, he directed his student Muḥammad 'Abduh away from the teachings of Sufism and towards philosophy.[4] He devoted all his efforts to a Qur'ān-centred understanding of religion. He realized the grip of exegetical transmission/*naql*, pure knowledge, and regression.[5] According to al-Afghānī, like in the last period of the Ottoman Empire, the tradition of commentary and annotation (*sharḥ*), which we call processing, detailing, and interpreting the existing ones instead of developing new perspectives on exegesis, became widespread. This situation was due to the Muslim *ummah*'s backwardness in the religious and cultural fields. 'Abd Allāh Shiḥātah (d. 2002), who wrote various academic articles about Muḥammad 'Abduh, describes the period before al-Afghānī and 'Abduh as a period of regression in the science of exegesis.[6] It is possible to evaluate this period as one in which the traditional method continued and the search for new methods in *tafsīr* slowed down. Moreover, according to al-Afghānī, instead of being productive, repetition and imitation (*taqlīd*) became obstacles to the development of exegetical discipline. He emphasized that it is acceptable to carry the burden of the inferences and interpretations of previous scholars and Qur'ānic commentators on our shoulders only to a limited extent.[7] As 'Abduh stated, the traditional Qur'ānic commentaries distanced themselves from Qur'ānic topics and became limited to the issues of syntax, jurisprudence, and sectarianism. For this reason, he calls such exegeses *al-tafāsīr al-jāffah* (stagnant exegeses).[8] Both al-Afghānī and 'Abduh realized the deviation of the exegetical discipline from its goal and the true path, which became extraordinarily harmful. In addition, they saw this issue as the biggest obstacle to the development of exegesis. The discipline of exegesis had become a field that was disconnected from the social domain, turning a deaf ear to the real problems of Muslim society.

Before al-Afghānī, Muslims failed to effectively respond to the Western scientific developments and the debates these developments

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[4] Muḥammad Rashīd b. 'Alī Riḍā, *Ta'rīkh al-Ustādh al-Imām al-Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abduh* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Manār, 1931), 1:c-n.

[5] Aḥmad Shāyib, *Muḥammad 'Abduh* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Majallah al-Jadīdah, 1932), 16–17.

[6] 'Abd Allāh Shiḥātah, *'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2001), 27.

[7] 'Abd al-Qādir al-Maghribī, *Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī: Dhikriyyāt wa Aḥādīth* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d.), 62-63.

[8] Muḥammad 'Imārah, *al-A'māl al-Kāmilah li 'l-Imām al-Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abduh: Taḥqīq wa Taqdīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1988), 4:11.

provoked. The idea that the Muslim world fell behind in the race of civilizations became widespread in the West. Furthermore, it was generally accepted that religion is a barrier to scientific development. Therefore, al-Afghānī's rejection of Ernest Renan's conference on Islam and science at Sorbonne University was a strong rebuttal to the claim that Islam and the Qur'ān are behind the times.[9]

In the pre-al-Afghānī time, the Qur'ānic commentators did not study the issue of morality/ethics from a sociological perspective. The qualities of virtuous individuals, as mentioned in the Qur'ānic verses, were not emphasized sufficiently. Al-Afghānī observed Muslim society deeply and analysed the reason for the decline of Muslims, especially in terms of morality. He shared his ideas about bigotry, oppression, nationalism, and suspicion through articles and speeches.[10]

Al-Afghānī's New Perspectives on Qur'ānic Exegesis

Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī did not attempt to write a Qur'ānic exegesis in a conventional style, in which the Qur'ānic verses are interpreted *sūrah* by *sūrah*, starting from Sūrat al-Fātiḥah. However, he interpreted various extracts of the Qur'ān in articles he wrote for the journal *al-ʿUrwah al-Wuthqā*. Generally, he dealt with topics he wrote about in the example of one or a few verses and approached the issue from his perspective. Since we do not have any complete Qur'ānic commentary written by him, we can collect his Qur'ānic comments and interpretations from his articles. Furthermore, some of his lectures were transcribed and published in the form of books and notes.

Almost every article that al-Afghānī wrote in the journal *al-ʿUrwah al-Wuthqā* was started with a verse and sometimes with a Prophetic tradition,[11] followed by an explanation of the general meaning of the verse or the Prophetic tradition. Therefore, his occasional social, political, cultural, and anthropological evaluations resemble independent exegetical treaties written by commentators, especially those written in the last period of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, these articles can be considered separate exegetical treatises. Since al-Afghānī deals with a subject based on Qur'ānic verses or Prophetic traditions, occasionally, he interprets the Qur'ān with the Qur'ān and explains one Qur'ānic verse with another. Giving each article a title appropriate to the

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[9] Majdī ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ, *al-Islām wa 'l-ʿIlm: Munāẓarat Rīnān wa 'l-Afghānī* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-Aʿlā li 'l-Thaqāfah, 2005), 53.

[10] Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ʿAbduh, *al-ʿUrwah al-Wuthqā* (Cairo: Mu'assasat Hindāwī, 2015), 41, 71.

[11] Ibid., 103.

theme of the verse is an example of the thematic exegesis of a verse. The seventeenth chapter of the journal *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā* entitled "*Imtiḥān Allāh li 'l-mu'minīn*" (Allah's test of the believers) is an example of a thematic exegesis of a verse. In the same chapter, al-Afghānī starts the subject with verses one to three of Sūrat al-'Ankabūt and explains the general meaning (*al-ma'nā al-ijmālī*). He then interprets the verses in the light of the forty-fourth and forty-fifth verses of the Sūrat al-Tawbah.[12]

An essential method on which al-Afghānī's understanding of interpretation is based in anthropology. He used the anthropological method as a tool in exegesis and accepted Qur'ānic verses as a reference in explanation. When we look at the examples of al-Afghānī's Qur'ānic comments in this literature, we find that the science of anthropology, especially cultural anthropology, is among his important sources of interpretation. For example, he interpreted the verse "Do they never travel the earth?"[13] with an utterly anthropological approach. According to al-Afghānī, the fact that the Qur'ān deals with past communities indicates their destruction, the arrival of new tribes in their place and that those who obey the divine commands succeed in this world and the hereafter. However, those who cause corruption on the earth ignore the divine limits and suffer punishment because they wrong themselves. Al-Afghānī's expression "When we ponder the verses of the Qur'ān" shows that his approach to exegesis is that of pondering and in-depth thinking. Another prominent element in al-Afghānī's understanding of Qur'ānic exegesis is the concept of foresight (*al-baṣīrah*). By this, he means making an effort to understand the essence of something. Moreover, those whose insight is not closed can understand the wisdom contained in divine commands and prohibitions.[14] He describes the situation of the people whose insight does not lead them to the right path and refers to the verse: "Have they never thought about this word (the Qur'ān)? Or has something come to them that did not happen to their ancestors?"[15] saying, "Have they not thought about the word/Qur'ān adequately and appropriately, with the phrase '*A fa lam yaddabbarū 'l-qawl*?'" This implies that al-Afghānī's method of understanding the Qur'ān is *tadabbur* (pondering). "*Tadabbur*" is a kind of theoretical effort to use mental

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[12] Ibid., 141–43.

[13] Qur'ān 22:46.

[14] Al-Afghānī and 'Abduh, *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā*, 147–51.

[15] Qur'ān 23:68.

faculties in pursuing meanings that are unclear and thinking about the outcome of things while trying to see results from the beginning.[16]

Al-Afghānī covers several topics in his articles: firstly, applying the laws (*sunan*) of Allah for previous communities to Muslims; secondly, disagreements between the prophets and their people and the dual conflict between truth and falsehood and the traditions and principles of belief of their contemporary societies; thirdly, presenting a qualitative study investigating the collapse of tribes and states and the reasons for their extinction; fourthly, dealing with topics such as the disbelief of societies and the resulting frustration, and the fact that they move away from the enlightenment of reason and ideas.

Al-Afghānī emphasizes that divine wisdom in punishment is not arbitrary but results from people's choices, quoting the verse: "Verily never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change what is within themselves."[17] He constantly referred to this verse to the extent that it became a symbol of his understanding of reform and renewal. For this reason, he moved in constant change and development.[18]

Another noteworthy point in al-Afghānī's Qur'ānic hermeneutics is the method of political exegesis. A distinctive aspect that differentiates him from 'Abduh is his desire to carry out reform and renewal activities in the political field and revitalize the Islamic civilization using political arguments. In the twenty-first chapter of the journal *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā*, al-Afghānī discussed Russia's plans for an invasion of India in 1801 and quoted the Qur'ānic verse: "Be not like those who are divided amongst themselves and fall into disputations after receiving Clear Signs."[19] The end of this verse: "For them is a dreadful penalty" is particularly important for him.[20] He stated that Russians would not easily defeat Muslims, but it would be possible if they received support from the Afghans and Persians. Consequently, al-Afghānī argued that Muslims would be defeated only because of the factional divide.

Al-Afghānī's goal was to convey the Qur'ānic message to society and seek solutions to social and political problems from a Qur'ānic perspective. The ideal state of society which he designed in his mind is based on the

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[16] 'Abd al-'Azīz b. 'Abd al-Salām, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Abd Allāh b. Ibrāhīm al-Wahbī (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1966), 388.

[17] Qur'ān 13:11.

[18] Al-Afghānī and 'Abduh, *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā*, 159-64.

[19] Qur'ān 3:105.

[20] 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān* (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2001), 154.

principles of justice and openness to rights and freedoms, which are inspired by the Qur'ān. He highlighted the political dimension of the Qur'ān and strived to shed light on the life under its leadership. He called on Afghans to cooperate with the Iranians and advised them to be alert and prepared against Russian conspiracies. He aimed to unite all believers under the single identity of Islam.[21] Al-Afghānī saw the Qur'ān as a set of values. When he encountered any political situation, he tried to present its solution through the Qur'ānic political values. Whenever he confronted moral problems, he sought guidance from Qur'ānic moral and civilizational values. In addition, Al-Afghānī closely followed the political and social issues discussed in the Eastern and Western worlds and did not lag behind his times. He visited France, India, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, Germany, Russia, etc. He closely observed the political, social, cultural, and scientific developments of his century and listened to the problems of the minorities in his region.[22] Ḥasan Ḥanafī detailed and mapped the travels of al-Afghānī.[23] In the second half of the nineteenth century, al-Afghānī wrote several articles to make Muslims aware of the traps of the British and explained their colonial ambitions. Some of these articles are titled as follows: "British Policy in the East"; "British Ruin in Sudan"; "British Political Suffering in Egypt"; "British Traps in Egypt"; "England on the Black Sea Coast"; "Journal *al-ʿUrwah al-Wuthqā* and British Journals."[24] According to Muḥammad Ghazālī, al-Afghānī was among the first thinkers who realized hatred for Muslims existed in Western colonialism and warned them of it.[25] His frequent references to the Qur'ānic verses in such writings can be an example of his political commentary.

Al-Afghānī adopted a sociological approach to the interpretation of the Qur'ān, presenting it as a comprehensive guide for all aspects of life. He emphasized the Qur'ān's social dimensions, particularly focusing on morality and ethics. This reading, which can be considered a kind of allegorical interpretation, is generally related to values such as *tahdhīb al-akhlāq* (refinement of morals), *taṭhīr al-qulūb* (purification of hearts), *īqād nīrān al-ghayrah* (kindling the fire of zeal), *al-taʿaṣṣub* (nationalism), *jamʿ al-kalimah* (unity).[26] Al-Afghānī asserted that the revival of the

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[21] Al-Afghānī and ʿAbduh, *al-ʿUrwah al-Wuthqā*, 157-58.

[22] Muḥammad Bahī, *al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-Ḥadīth wa Ṣilatuhu bi 'l-Istiʿmār al-Gharbī* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, n.d.), 62.

[23] Ḥasan Ḥanafī, *Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī: Al-Miʾawiyyah al-Ūlā 1897–1997* (Cairo: Muʾassasat Hindāwī, 2023), 28.

[24] Al-Afghānī and ʿAbduh, *al-ʿUrwah al-Wuthqā*, 183, 175, 211, 461, 251, 269.

[25] Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Jurʾāt Jadīdah min al-Ḥaqq al-Murr* (Cairo: Dār Nahḍat Miṣr, n.d.), 5:4.

[26] Al-Afghānī and ʿAbduh, *al-ʿUrwah al-Wuthqā*, 52.

Muslim community hinges solely on moral principles. He argued that nations can endure and thrive only when they uphold positive virtues and eschew negative attitudes and behaviours. He advocated for the purification of the soul from worldly desires, the refinement of moral character, and the replacement of divisive behaviours like backbiting and bigotry with Islamic values. He maintained that societies lacking moral maturity cannot compete in the pursuit of civilization.

For al-Afghānī, the moral teachings of the Qur'ān aspire to establish an ideal society. Comparing the fundamental principles of Islam and Christianity, he contended that Islam inherently prioritizes all virtues and possesses a more robust social structure compared to Christianity. He suggested that Christianity, lacking a strong sociological aspect, tends to emphasize peace and comfort in all aspects of life. Islam enjoins the acquisition of all the virtues and sciences necessary to ensure peace and tranquillity after balancing worldly and otherworldly affairs. However, according to al-Afghānī, Christians were closer to the Qur'ānic society's characteristics than Muslims, despite their social, cultural, and political vision being so developed. Even though their religion does not encourage them, they are the most advanced in technology, military industry, and scientific developments and have the most equipped armies worldwide. He highlighted a verse in the Qur'ān that emphasizes readiness for various war scenarios, urging Muslims to prepare their strength to the fullest extent. The term "*quwwah*"[27] (power) in this context is primarily interpreted as encompassing weapons, war tools like arrows, and anything that enhances one's military capabilities. He asserted that this verse mandated Muslims to manufacture fully equipped and modern weaponry.

Al-Afghānī's interpretation of the Qur'ān differs from the prevailing linguistic and classical exegesis. In this context, his interpretations are based on wisdom and rationalism. The Qur'ānic interpretations go beyond linguistic analyses and word-centred interpretations. He argues that disciplines like Arabic grammar are auxiliary sciences and should not be the primary focus of Qur'ānic exegesis. In his efforts to interpret the Qur'ān within his contemporary context, al-Afghānī remained independent of any sectarian or ideological influence. His approach to theological exegesis is essentially based on the Qur'ān.[28] Therefore, he did not refer to any sectarian, juristic or theological disputes or issues in his Qur'ānic interpretations. For him, Qur'ānic exegesis must be

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[27] "Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power." Qur'ān 8:60.

[28] Maghribī, *Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī*, 34.

informed by Qur'ān-centred readings. Otherwise, interpretation will remain in a vicious circle. He emphasized that Qur'ānic exegesis should no longer consist of the repetitions of the previous interpretations and should turn into action in the practical sense.

Al-Afghānī sought to transform the discipline of Qur'ānic exegesis from composition to action, from descriptive method to philosophical and sociological approach, and from imitation to originality. For him, there is a need for restructuring the discipline of Qur'ānic exegesis and the Muslim Ummah can reach scientific and practical maturity if Qur'ānic exegesis is cleared of all kinds of doubts and understood properly.[29] Analysing al-Afghānī's method of interpretation, Ḥanafī says,

> He interprets the verses by referring to individual or social experience and transforms the verse into a psychological, social or historical law as if the verse becomes a reality, and the ruling of the *sharī'ah* becomes the law of history. He does not derive the meaning of the verse from the text according to the rules of the Arabic language, as the commentators do, but rather tries to find a reflection in the external world to confirm the verse by fixing the experiences and events in the external world. As in the known experimental method, the environment is the most accurate confirmation of revelation. His exegetical approach prioritizes the ascent of meanings from the bottom to the top, rather than descending from the top to the bottom as a criterion. However, the Sufis' method is exactly the opposite. Here, the Qur'ān transforms from recitation to vision, speech to reality, words to revolution, and revelation to history.[30]

This method of interpretation makes its goal to present all kinds of problems to the Qur'ān and find their solutions in its light. This vertical understanding of interpretation reflects the perspective of sociologists on the Qur'ān. Al-Afghānī presents the problems of the society he lives in with the Qur'ān. According to al-Afghānī, the discipline of Qur'ānic exegesis remained in the shadow of the previous Qur'ānic commentaries and could not go beyond repeating established interpretations. This gave rise to the problem of originality. Since classical Qur'ānic commentaries were dominated by grammatical issues and sectarian or juristic debates, Qur'ānic exegesis turned into everything except exegesis. Qur'ānic exegesis ceased to be an effort to understand the Qur'ān; rather, it became a field where various disciplines were discussed. For this reason, its main purpose, guidance, was neglected. That is why 'Abduh considered these types of Qur'ānic exegeses *al-tafāsīr al-jāffah* (stagnant exegeses).[31] Al-Afghānī initiated a new Qur'ānic exegesis movement and rejected linguistic

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[29] Ibid., 63.

[30] Ḥanafī, *Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī*, 33-34.

[31] 'Imārah, *al-A'māl al-Kāmilah*, 4:11.

exegesis, which was limited to the exegesis of words. He developed a method of Qur'ānic exegesis that was centred on meaning.

Thus, with al-Afghānī and his student 'Abduh, the general tendency in Qur'ānic exegesis shifted to a literary and social approach. Additionally, for the first time examples of political, archaeological, and psychological interpretations began to emerge. The number of scientific commentaries, including al-Afghānī's, began to increase. For example, he interpreted the form of rapid communication which is discussed in verse 35 of Sūrat al-Naml as wireless telegraphy. It is highly probable that if it had existed in our time, al-Afghānī would have interpreted this form of communication as smartphone-infrared.

Although al-Afghānī did not write a separate Qur'ānic commentary, he defended the idea that the Qur'ān should be understood on a new level in the modern age and put forward some principles for it. These principles were later developed by 'Abduh and presented as an understanding of Qur'ānic exegesis. In the light of these principles, modern Qur'ānic exegesis began. Al-Afghānī made a name for himself with some of his innovative ideas in the political and religious fields. When we think about it, we realize that these innovations and principles are not arbitrary. Rather, he introduced them after thoroughly examining the Qur'ānic exegetical tradition and identifying its deficiencies and methodological flaws.

It should not be forgotten that al-Afghānī's religious teachings emerged as a reaction against the ever-developing philosophical trends in the Western world. He introduced the idea of reinterpreting the Qur'ān and the *sunnah* with a new philosophy to keep up with the rapid pace of the modern age and looked for solutions, in the Qur'ān, to challenges imposed by the Western civilization. His attempt at scientific interpretation clearly shows these efforts. He quickly accomplished this step thanks to his knowledge of Islamic and Western philosophy and deep understanding of Islamic culture. Ernest Renan admits, "When I met al-Afghānī, I was amazed by his broad horizons, scientific openness, and freedom of thought, and I was very impressed by him. I thought I was face-to-face with Avicenna (d. 428/1037) and Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198)."[32]

Besides al-Afghānī, Muslim political thinkers such as Sayyid Abū 'l-A'lā Mawdūdī (d. 1979) and 'Ubayd Allāh Sindhī (d. 1944) are among those who responded to the progressive philosophy of the West. Especially

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[32] Qadrī Qal'ajī, *Silsilah min A'lām al-Ḥurriyyah: Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad 'Abduh, Sa'd Zaghlūl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kātib al-'Arabī, n.d.), 7; Maghribī, *Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī*, 37.

Mawdūdī's *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* and Sindhī's *Ilhām al-Raḥmān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*[33] are considered political commentaries in this regard. Indeed, Mawdūdī sought solutions to political and social problems of society by looking at them from a Qur'ānic perspective. According to him, the remedy for the current situation is a *tajdīd* (renewal movement) that will restore the true Islamic faith. This movement will succeed through the gradual implementation of a programme that includes reform measures in the understanding of religion, organization, and socio-political life. To be freed from cultural and political imperialism, Muslim society must start a movement of *tajdīd* based on the Qur'ān and *sunnah* and extend from individual to society.[34] This led Mawdūdī to address Muslims' challenges through a political approach in the light of the Qur'ān.

Al-Afghānī's doctrine of exegesis stems from the reform and renewal movement that he spearheaded in the realms of politics and society. He advocated for the wide-open door of *ijtihād*, urging Muslims to delve into the meanings of the Qur'ān to comprehend its message. According to him, anyone—who is proficient in Arabic, acquainted with the scholarly heritage of the early Muslims, and possesses the knowledge of *ḥadīth*, *ijmā'* (consensus), and *qiyās* (analogy)—can derive injunctions from the Qur'ān.

Looking at al-Afghānī's writings and speeches, one sees that when he talks about the interpretation of the Qur'ān, he observes the rules of Arabic grammar and does not impose any forced meanings other than the obvious meanings of the words.[35] His interpretations ensured the unity of the Qur'ān and the *sunnah*. His philosophy of call (*da'wah*) to Islam is fundamentally based on the Qur'ān. He was amazed by the Qur'ānic call (*da'wah*) activity and its rhetorical force. He states that Europeans were also influenced by the Qur'ān's call (*da'wah*) and that the Qur'ānic rhetoric through the language of call (*da'wah*) is compatible with the human mind. The Qur'ānic rhetoric and teachings always lead people to the truth using philosophical methods (rational reasoning, inference, and proof).[36] The Qur'ānic language is rich with expressions that engage the human mind, rather than adopting a monotonous and unstimulating style of communication. According to him, many Qur'ānic verses refer to causal relationships between events and reveal secrets and wisdom behind them.

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[33] 'Ubayd Allāh al-Sindī, *Ilhām al-Raḥmān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, comp. Mūsā Jār Allāh, ed. Muḥammad Nūr Murshid al-Makkī and Ghulām Muṣṭafā al-Qāsimī ('Azīzābād: Ṭubi'a 'alā nafaqat Mawlānā al-Ḥājj 'Azīz Allāh, n.d.).

[34] Ahmad Anis, "Mevdûdî," in *İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi, 2004), 29:432-37.

[35] Maghribī, *Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī*, 28-29.

[36] Al-Afghānī and 'Abduh, *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā*, 98.

Al-Afghānī's exegetical thought is entirely shaped by questioning and is reinforced with philosophical arguments and critical methods employed by the Qur'ān. The call (*da'wah*) to Islam was made exclusively with the Qur'ān in the early periods of its revelation. The Qur'ān's rich use of rhetoric convinced both Arabs and non-Arabs and was sufficient for the call (*da'wah*). Based on this proposition, al-Afghānī argued that the Qur'ān could be sufficient today and that the preaching should be made only with it. The Qur'ān itself is the source and reason for guidance. His philosophy of call (*da'wah*) is based on the verse: "Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: They are the ones to attain felicity."[37] He states that linguistic interpretations and discussions about the provisions and Qur'ānic rulings overshadow the message of the Qur'ān and do not serve as a helpful guide. He believed that many interpretations were not aimed at this purpose but rather appeased a particular group of people. Al-Afghānī rejected ideological and sectarian interpretations, arguing that interpretation was often manipulated for political gains. Consequently, interpretations used for political ends should not be regarded as sacred and should be viewed as subjective interpretations. Therefore, with this discourse, he rejected using the Qur'ān as a means of political interest. In this respect, he differs from Mawdudī.

Al-Afghānī also engaged in the debate on the existence of *mu'arrab* (Arabized) words in the Qur'ān. For example, interpreting the Qur'ānic verse (72:3), he stated that the word "*jadd*" was taken from Persian or Hindi and meant throne. He argued that languages can be influenced by each other and that this is an inevitable phenomenon. He was too permissive about *mu'arrab*. However, he did not have enough knowledge on this subject. Even the scholars who accepted the existence of foreign words in the Qur'ān did not count the word "*jadd*" in the above verse among the *mu'arrab* words. Like other aspects of the sciences of the Qur'ān, the issue of *mu'arrab* is also one that is debated and disputed by scholars. For example, Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820),[38] Abū 'Ubaydah (d. 209/824),[39] Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923),[40] and many other scholars have argued that there is no *mu'arrab* in the Qur'ān. Those who

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[37] Qur'ān 3:104.

[38] Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Risālah*, ed. Aḥmad Shākir (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ḥalabī, 1940), 47.

[39] Abū 'Ubaydah Ma'mar b. al-Muthannā, *Majāz al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Fu'ād Sīzkīn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, n.d.), 1:17.

[40] Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2000), 1:18.

accept the existence of *mutashābih* (obscure) in the Qur'ān refer usually to unique names and words such as Sundus and Istabraq as examples. In our opinion, the view that the Qur'ān does not include words from other languages except for proper nouns is more accurate and more in line with the wisdom of revealing the Qur'ān in clear Arabic.[41] In this context, Ibn Fāris said, "If there were anything in the Qur'ān in a language other than Arabic, there would be a concern that the Arabs would not be able to create a similar version of the Qur'ān because it contained words in languages they could not know."[42]

Another issue is that the Qur'ān has a unique linguistic style. The fact that a word is found in Persian, Hindi or any other language does not negate its Arabic origin. This is because it is normal for a word to be found in different languages. The mere existence of a typical word in other languages is not sufficient evidence for its being *mu'arrab.* Etymological and semantic studies, rhetoric and many other types of research that have been done since the early centuries verify this fact. This is because Arab scholars and linguists have claimed that the origin of these words is Arabic. Al-Shafi'ī also pointed out that languages have been influenced by each other for various reasons over time.[43] Therefore, it is inevitable that there are similarities between languages, and "there is no language other than Arabic in the Qur'ān. Arabic may align with other languages; however, the notion that it exists in its pure form, without any mixture in terms of origin or lineage, has been widely accepted."[44] Al-Afghānī's engagement with the issue of certain Qur'ānic words having potential non-Arabic origins (*mu'arrab*) underscores his involvement in a long-standing debate within the classical exegetical tradition. This indicates that he was not entirely independent of traditional frameworks and may have been drawn into the recurring discussions of earlier exegetes. Consequently, this aspect of his work not only sheds light on his methodology in Qur'ānic exegesis but also reveals his perspective on certain aspects of Qur'ānic studies.

Translating the Qur'ān into other languages was a disputed issue during al-Afghānī's time. He argued that the meanings of the Qur'ān could be understood by all Muslims only through translation. He took

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[41] Manṣūr Maḥmūd Ḥasan Abū Zaynah, "Qaḍiyyat al-Mu'arrab fī 'l-Qur'ān al-Karīm: Taḥqīq wa Ta'ṣīl," *Majallat al-Sharī'ah wa 'l-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyyah* 30, no. 101 (2015): 61-96.

[42] 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-'Āmmah li 'l-Kitāb, 1974), 125; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Muhhadhdhab fī Mā Waqa'a fī 'l-Qur'ān min al-Mu'arrab* (Beirut: Maṭba'at Faḍālah, n.d.), 58.

[43] Al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Risālah*, 34.

[44] 'Abd Allāh b. al-Ḥusayn Sāmirī, *al-Lughāt fī 'l-Qur'ān*, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Risālah, 1946), 19.

concrete steps in this regard. Despite all differences, al-Afghānī sought to gather Muslims from all over the world under the banner of Islam and invited everyone to unite under the leadership of the Qur'ān. That is why, he constantly searched for solutions. As a result of his meetings with Russian politicians, he emphasized that Muslims in Russia should perform their religious obligations freely. Subsequently, he held many workshops to translate the Qur'ān into Russian.[45] After journal *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā* was closed in Paris, he left for St. Petersburg and held meetings with the Tsar of Russia. He received approval from the Tsar for the printing of religious books and the Qur'ān in the Russian language.[46] He vigorously endeavoured to ensure that Muslims lived by the teachings of the Qur'ān and had a correct understanding of their religion. To achieve this goal, he frequently referred to authentic sources of Islam[47] and constantly reminded his fellow Muslims that an authentic interpretation of the Qur'ān is a necessity of their age.[48] Al-Afghānī advocated for purifying religion from imitation, emphasizing the importance of focusing on the wisdom behind religious duties. He believed that thoroughly researching religion and understanding it with evidence was the most effective way to internalize its teachings. For him, blind adherence to ancestral religion without evidence does not constitute genuine belief but rather is a mere tradition.[49]

The Qur'ān and its exegesis are at the centre of al-Afghānī's thought. He talked about the wisdom of the Qur'ān and its relevance to the environment he lived in, regardless of the intellectual and cultural level of the listeners. 'Abduh later criticized this attitude. Indeed, 'Abduh believed that such analytical topics should not be discussed openly in front of everyone and that these matters should only be debated among experts. Upon hearing of his arrival in Egypt, Ḥasan al-Ṭawīl together with his student 'Abduh visited him in Khān Khalīl, a town in Cairo. 'Abduh met al-Afghānī for the first time and asked him about the interpretation of some Qur'ānic verses. After explaining these verses from the perspective of Qur'ānic commentators and Sufi scholars, al-Afghānī added his own

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[45] Hayrettin Karaman, "Cemaleddin Efgani," in *İslam Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Diyanet İslam Ansiklopedisi, 1994), 10:458.

[46] Edward. G. Browne, *The Persian Revolution of 1905-1909* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 9-10.

[47] Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 112-13.

[48] Ibid., 124.

[49] Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, *al-Radd 'alā 'l-Dahriyyīn*, trans. Muḥammad 'Abduh (Cairo: al-Maṭba'ah al-Maḥmūdiyyah al-Tijāriyyah, 1935), 72-73.

interpretation. Influenced by al-Afghānī's Qur'ānic philosophy and interpretations, 'Abduh later studied the book *Ithbāt al-Wājib: Al-Zawrā' wa 'l-Ḥawrā'* by al-Dawwānī al-Ṣiddīqī (d. 908/1502) with him.[50]

One of the significant Islamic issues discussed by al-Afghānī is Pan-Islamism. The concept of Pan-Islamism began to spread globally from Afghan territories in 1839, primarily through the efforts of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī.[51] He frequently referred to Pan-Islamism in various issues of *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā*, using terms like *al-waḥdah al-Islāmiyyah*, *waḥdat al-ummah*, *al-jāmi'ah al-Islāmiyyah*, and *al-waḥdah*. He wrote extensively on this subject, focusing on fostering collective consciousness among Muslims, particularly through the lens of the Qur'ān and the *sunnah*.[52] The term Pan-Islamism, understood as a notion of Islamic unity, first appeared in the Western world in 1882 in an English translation published by *The Times*. Similarly, its French translation was introduced earlier, in 1881, by M. G. Charmes in *Des Deux Mondes*.[53] Pan-Islamism, however, was not confined to promoting Islamic unity and solidarity alone. As part of its broader vision, it established a foundation through newspapers, universities, and intellectual discourses, addressing issues related to education, political Islam, and sociological and epistemological perspectives.[54]

According to al-Afghānī, Pan-Islamism was an ideology aimed at uniting Muslim lands through a shared essence (Islam) as a counter-movement against Western colonialism. In the political realm, al-Afghānī is regarded as a pioneer of the modernist movement. Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) argues that al-Afghānī focused on two fundamental issues: Pan-Islamism and populism.[55] He viewed Pan-Islamism as the only force capable of challenging Western political dominance and believed it to be the vehicle through which Muslim political unity could be realized. While Fazlur Rahman contends that al-Afghānī's Pan-Islamist ideal was never fully achieved, it nevertheless sparked an awakening among various groups and regions around the world.[56]

Conclusion

The article analyses the tradition of Qur'ānic exegesis before Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and his approach in an attempt to make it relevant to contemporary readers with an analysis of why Muslims lagged behind

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[50] Riḍā, *Ta'rīkh al-Ustādh*, 26.

[51] Eşref Edip, "Panislamizm," *Sırat-ı Müstakim* 7, no. 173 (1327): 272.

[52] Afghanī and 'Abduh, *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā*, 97, 103.

[53] Metin Hülagü, *Pan-İslamizm Osmanlının Son Umudu* (İzmir: Yitik Hazine Yayınları, 2006), 15.

[54] Edip, "Panislamizm," 273.

[55] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, trans. Hassun es-Suray (Beirut: al-Şabake al-Arabiyya, 2017), 349.

[56] Ibid., 350.

Western society. Al-Afghānī observed that the backwardness of Muslims stemmed from misunderstanding the Qur'ān. He looked for the causes of scientific, political, cultural, and social stagnation of Muslims in the sources of Islamic civilization itself. He made efforts to revitalize Islam in the face of the West. He contended that Islamic civilization could excel in the competition for progress but achieving this required thinkers, scholars, and intellectuals. He criticized the traditional style and methods of Qur'ānic exegesis, deeming them insufficient for contemporary needs. For him, the discipline of exegesis lagged behind the time because it was monopolized by religious factions. The lexical language—full of challenging and complex terms—did not appeal to modern Muslims. He observed that Qur'ānic exegesis, an attempt to explain the meanings of the Qur'ān, distanced itself from this mission and became a medium for discussing disciplines such as the Arabic language, legal injunctions, and sectarianism. Al-Afghānī witnessed the suffering of Muslims and had the opportunity to examine their problems on the spot. In this respect, he was an activist sociologist. He met and exchanged ideas with the leading figures of his time. The most remarkable of them was his critical response to Ernest Renan after his conference on Islam and science.

Al-Afghānī provided a modern perspective to Qur'ānic exegesis and took concrete steps to liberate it from the discussions of classical theological issues. His understanding of interpretation diverged significantly from conventional styles, focusing on political, social, and anthropological perspectives. He criticized the classical method of exegesis and stated that classical discussions, linguistic analyses, and the opinions of past exegetes should not be the focus of Qur'ānic exegesis. He did not quote the interpretations of previous scholars in his Qur'ānic interpretations. He emphasized that anyone with sufficient knowledge of Arabic and other Islamic sciences can understand the Qur'ān and make judgments. Acting with the slogan "Only the Qur'ān," he put the Qur'ān at the centre of both religion and all other fields. He was not ignorant of the issues related to the Qur'ān, such as the need for its translation, which was discussed in his time, and took a clear stance on this issue. He generally influenced the coming generations of Qur'ānic scholars. The fundamental objective of al-Afghānī was to unite the fragmented Muslim world under the banner of the Qur'ān through the doctrine of Pan-Islamism. He invested significant efforts in achieving this goal. His legacy continues to influence modern Islamic thought.

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