

## Challenging al-Dhahabī's (1915-1977) Authority in the Historiography of Tafsīr: A Clarification of His Salafī Outlook

Mu'ammār Zayn Qadafy  
 UIN Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta  
 mu'ammār.zayn.qadafy@uin-suka.ac.id

### Abstract

Recent discussions of modern historiographies of tafsīr show that *al-Dhahabī's al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn* used the radical hermeneutic of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328) as a philosophical underpinning, leading his book to present a somewhat salafī-history of the genre. This approach affirmed that the Qur'ān was repositioned squarely where the hermeneutical tools were unequivocally restricted to a hadith-inherited mode. A more holistic study on al-Dhahabī's scholarship, however, has yet to be undertaken. This article seeks to complete (and to some extent clarify) the image of al-Dhahabī's salafī leanings by situating his scholarship in the battlefield of ideas in Egypt from the 1940s to 1970s and undertaking a close reading of his other major books of tafsīr, including (1) *al-Wahy wa al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, (2) *al-Isrā'īliyat fī al-Tafsīr wa al-Hadīth*, (3) *al-Ittijāhāt al-Munharifah fī al-Tafsīr*, (4) *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, and (5) *Tafsīr Ibn 'Arabī*. This article outlines Dhahabī's systematic approach to the historiography of *tafsīr*. While his first three books provide theoretical considerations of what constitutes a good *Qur'ānic* commentary, the remaining two works are where he applies these theories into concrete judgements and classifications of tafsīr works. Besides the fact that Dhahabī has revitalized the problematic division of *Tafsīr bi al-Ma'thūr* and *Bi al-Ra'y*, several new key arguments highlighting his salafī outlook are identified throughout his books, namely his reinforcement of the value of the isnād system and his blatant attacks on commentaries that are not based on inherited interpretive materials. By shedding light on Dhahabī's salafī orientation, this article argues for the need for alternative sources of the historiography of tafsīr to be studied in Indonesian Islamic Universities.

**Keywords:** al-Dhahabī, al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn, tafsir Historiography

## Introduction

The elevated prestige of *tafsīr* (the process of interpreting Islamic religious precepts), as a distinct Islamic literary genre, is related to the nobility of the Qur'ān.<sup>1</sup> Given that all Islamic movements produce their own hermeneutical approach to the holy text,<sup>2</sup> the history of the *tafsīr* tradition from its early development to the current day is likely the richest and most fascinating among the branches of traditional Islamic science. *Tafsīr* historiographies initially took the form of encyclopaedias and were not concerned with narrative coherence to connect one *tafsīr* work with another, but emphasised their role as reference materials, although to a certain extent, they could also serve as source of the intellectual history of the community in which they circulated. These encyclopaedias were either catalogues of the Qur'ānic commentaries or commentators.<sup>3</sup>

*The Collection of Ibn al-Nadīm* (d. 385/995)<sup>4</sup> was the archetypal encyclopaedia to list *tafsīr* works. This book was, for a time, not acknowledged for its scholarly worth and was viewed as a mere library catalogue until recent studies showed the historical awareness the author possessed in writing it.<sup>5</sup> Stewart, for instance, does not hesitate to call Ibn al-Nadīm a historian, after reading his section of the Islamic law schools.<sup>6</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm listed 45 Qur'ānic commentaries, tying them to one of

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1 The emphasis on the nobility of *tafsīr* that is associated with the nobility of the Qur'ān is present in the preambles of almost all books of *tafsīr*, along with several other points such as praise to Allah and the apostle, personal experience of the mufassir in writing and clarification of *tafsīr* methods. Karen Bauer, 'Justifying the Genre: A Study of Introductions to Classical Works of *Tafsīr*', in *Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qur'ānic Exegesis (2nd/ 8th - 9th/15th)*, ed. Karen Bauer (London: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2013), 39–65; In his Qur'ānic commentary, Ibn 'Aṭīyyah for instance, said "Sharaf al-'Ilm 'Alā Sharf Qadr al-Ma'lūm". See: Ibn 'Aṭīyyah al-Andalusī and Abd al-Salām 'Abd al-Ṣafr Muhammad, *Al-Muharrar al-Wajīz Fī Tafsīr al-Kitāb al-'Azīz*, 3rd ed. (Lebanon: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2011), vol. 1: 34.

2 Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1990), 11.

3 Ibn al-Khūjah's classification of historical books on *tafsīr* based on their usefulness in his introduction to Ibn 'Ashūr's work is among those that inspired me to propose three categories of historical books of *tafsīr*. Firstly, what Ibn al-Khūjah calls the abstraction motivation of the book (*tajrīd li-al-mu'allafāt*), I call it the encyclopaedia based on the name of the book. Secondly, the motivation of detailing opinions (*tafsīl al-Qaul*) I consider to be the main characteristic of character-based encyclopaedias. Thirdly, the motivation of detailing periods and explaining developments (*tahdīd li al-Marāhil wa bayan li al-Taṭawwurāt*) I consider to be manifest in a true historiographical book. See: Muhammad al-Habīb Ibn al-Khūjah, 'Taqdīm', in *Al-Tafsīr Wa Rijāluhu*, by Muhammad al-Fāḥil Ibn 'Ashūr (Tunis: Dār al-Salām, 2008), 9–10.

4 Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq al-Nadīm, *Kitāb Al-Fihrist*, ed. Riḍā Tajaddud, n.d.

5 See for instance: Shawkat M. Toorawa, 'Proximity, Resemblance, Sidebars and Clusters: Ibn al-Nadīm's Organizational Principles in "*Fihrist* 3.3"', *Oriens* by Brill 38 (2010): 217–47.

6 In his book, Ibn al-Nadīm lists eight schools (*madhhab*)s of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), starting with Mālik, Abū Hanīfah, Shāfi'i, Dāwūd, Shī'ah, al-Muhaddithūn, al-Ṭabarī and Khārijī. Not only does Ibn

four regional centers: Makkah, Madinah, Kufa, or Basra. The author's endeavour to revive the significance of the Shī'ah Qur'ānic commentaries in the *tafsīr* tradition is what stands out most about this book.<sup>7</sup> Considering the huge amount of data Ibn al-Nadīm presented, interpreted, and organized into sequences, one can only imagine how challenging it must have been for him to compile his catalogue in the pre-print era.<sup>8</sup>

The second encyclopaedia of the classical Islamic literature that also has entries on *tafsīr* is *Kashf al-Ẓunūn 'an Asāmī al-Kutub wa al-Funūn* by Hajjī Khalīfah (1609-1657).<sup>9</sup> When reading this text, one should keep in mind that it tells a plain history, untainted by sectarian leanings. Khalīfah always expounded on the book of a particular scholar in a rather appreciative manner while underlining its reception among academic society. Even so, his writings did reveal some fascinating details that might influence the way later historians of *tafsīr* approach the history of the genre, such as the great role that Zamakhsharī and Bayḍāwī<sup>10</sup> played in centuries following their death and the limited popularity of Ṭabarī's work in 17<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman era<sup>11</sup>.

The third catalogue, entitled *al-Fihris al-Shāmil li al-Turāth al-'Arabī al-Islāmī al-Makḥṭūṭ*,<sup>12</sup> includes the names of authors along with manuscripts around the world that are associated with them. Interestingly, super-commentaries (*tafsīr hāshiyah*)<sup>13</sup> were also included and their number far exceeds what was previously

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al-Nadīm's inclusion of the Shī'ah and Khārījī *madhhabs* make his work different from similar book catalogues, the mention of Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 765) after Mālik (d. 795) is also interesting, as the former died before the latter. Stewart believes that Ibn al-Nadīm was well aware that the *Madhhab* of Abū Ḥanīfah was not founded directly by him, but by one of his followers who died after Mālik and before Shāfi'ī (d. 820). Devin Stewart, 'The Structure of the Fihrist: Ibn al-Nadim as Historian of Islamic Legal and Theological School', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 3 (2007): 373–75.

7 Dimitry Frolow, 'Ibn Al-Nadīm on the History of Qur'ānic Exegesis', *Wiener Zeitschrift Für Die Kunde Des Morgenlandes* 87 (1997): 65–81.

8 Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton, *Cartographies of Time*, 1st ed (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010), 96.

9 Ḥājī Khalīfah, *Kashf Al-Ẓunūn 'an Asāmī al-Kutub Wa al-Funūn* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1994).

10 Khalīfah, vol. 1: 197-202.

11 While the entry on Baiḍāwī is seven pages, the entry on Ṭabarī is only about a quarter of a page. See: Khalīfah, vol. 1: 360.

12 Al-Fihris al-Shāmil Li-l-Turāth al-'Arabī al-'Islāmī al-Makḥṭūṭ, *'Ulūm-l-Qur'ān, Makḥṭūṭāt-l-Tafsīr Wa 'Ulūmihi* (Amman: al-Majma' al-Malikī li-Buhūth-l-Ḥaḍārah al-'Islāmīyah, 1989).

13 This is a book that explains and elaborates on the contents of the book of *tafsīr* regarding the position of the *hāshiyah* genre in the intellectual history of *tafsīr*, see: Walid A. Saleh, 'The Gloss as Intellectual History: The Hāshiyahs on al-Kashshāf', *Oriens* by Brill 41 (2013): 217–59; Walid A. Saleh, 'The Hāshiyah of Ibn Al-Munayyir (d. 683/1284) on al-Kashshāf of al-Zamakhsharī', in *Books and Written Culture of the Islamic World: Studies Presented to Claude Gilliot on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday*, ed. Andrew Rippin and Roberto Tottoli (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2015), 86–90.

collected by Hajjī Khalīfah in *Kashf al-Ẓunūn*. Perhaps the most astonishing entry in *al-Fihris al-Shāmil* is on Zamakhsharī's Qur'ānic commentary. The entry lists a total of 886 manuscripts around the globe while its *hāshiyah* reached 83.<sup>14</sup> This number highlights that Zamakhsharī's popularity in the years following his death was unrivalled. In addition to these three encyclopaedias, an Indonesian scholar, Muhammad 'Afīf al-Dīn al-Dimyātī, has recently written *Jam' al-'Abīr*.<sup>15</sup> The book's contribution to the historiography of *tafsīr* is yet to be explored.

Another type of encyclopaedia focuses more on describing the *mufasssirs* than their works. Three works were written between the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 17th century, entitled *Ṭabaqāt al-Mufasssīrīn*. Each was compiled by Al-Suyūṭī (d. 911-1505),<sup>16</sup> which was later refined by his students Al-Dāwūdī (d. 945/1538)<sup>17</sup> and one by Ahmad Ibn Muhammad al-Adanhawī (11 AH/17 CE).<sup>18</sup> The organisation of these three books is different. While Suyūṭī and Dāwūdī adopted an alphabetical order, Adanhawī opted for a chronological-alphabetical arrangement according to a specific periodisation. Further research is needed on what changes Dāwūdī made to his teacher's work, as well as how significant the influence of Adanhawī's chronological arrangement was in his reading direction of the history of the *mufasssirs*. Because these three encyclopaedias tend to exalt the *mufasssirs* by describing their intellectual journeys and the accolades that other scholars bestowed upon them, they are not meant to provide a thorough account of how the genre of *tafsīr* developed.

This lack of historical vision in the genre of the pre-modern encyclopaedias of *tafsīr* is the gap that the modern *tafsīr* historians wish to fill. Both the historiography of *tafsīr* and the historiography of the Qur'ān emerged and grew in Muslim circles in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, following the rise of Western critical historical scholarship.<sup>19</sup> Ignaz Goldziher's work on the historiography of *tafsīr*<sup>20</sup> was immediately welcomed by Amīn al-Khūlī, who published a long article on the history of *tafsīr* in the first

14 Al-Fihris al-Shāmil Li-l-Turāth al-'Arabī al-'Islāmī al-Makḥḥūṭ, *'Ulūm-l-Qur'ān, Makḥḥūṭāt-l-Tafsīr Wa 'Ulūmihī*, 155–88.

15 Muḥammad 'Afīf al-Dīn Dimyātī, *Jam' Al-'Abīr FI Kutub al-Tafsīr* (Dār al-Nibrās: Cairo, 2019).

16 Jalāl-l-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Mufasssīrīn*, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad 'Umar (Kuwait: Dār al-Nawādir, 2010).

17 Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn 'Alī Ibn Aḥmad al-Dāwūdī, *Ṭabaqāt Al-Mufasssīrīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 1983).

18 Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad al-Adanhawī, *Ṭabaqāt Al-Mufasssīrīn*, ed. Sulaimān Ibn Ṣāliḥ al-Khazzī (Medina: Maktabah al-'Ulūm wa al-Ḥikam, n.d.).

19 See for instance: Morteza Karimi-Nia, 'The Historiography of the Qur'ān in The Muslim World: The Influence of Theodor Nöldeke', *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies* 15, no. 1 (2013): 46–68.

20 The original German book was entitled *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* (publ. 1920), and it had been translated into Arabic and also Bahasa Indonesia. See: Ignaz Goldziher, *Mazhab Tafsir dari Aliran Klasik Hingga Modern*, trans. M. Alaika Salamullah (Yogyakarta: EL Press, 2003).

edition of the 1933 *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. There, Al-Khūlī attempted to reinforce the Qur'ān's nature as a literary work and the idea that it is ought to be treated as such. Al-Khūlī's disregard for the role of the rich scholastic tradition in *tafsīr*-making endeared him to the proponents of the Salafī *tafsīr* paradigm<sup>21</sup> that accepts the legitimacy of only the Qur'ān, the hadith and the opinions of the early generations of Islam in the interpreting the Qur'ān.<sup>22</sup>

In response to al-Khūlī's article, Muslim scholars began to realise the importance of writing a proper history of *tafsīr*, whatever its motives. The assumption that chronology and geography are the two eyes of history<sup>23</sup> was utilised by the historiographical works that soon appeared. Chronologically, the *tafsīr* historiographies that emerged included those by Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabī (d. 1977),<sup>24</sup> Al-Fāḍil Ibn 'Ashūr (d. 1970),<sup>25</sup> 'Abd al-Rahmān Muhammad Khalīfah (d. 1979), Ibrāhīm Rufaidah (d. 1999),<sup>26</sup> Munī' 'Abd al-Halīm Mahmūd,<sup>27</sup> Ṣalāh 'Abd al-Fattāh al-Khālidī (d. 2022),<sup>28</sup> Muṣṭafā Muslim,<sup>29</sup> and 'Abd al-Ghafūr Mahmūd Muṣṭafā Ja'far.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, works by Muhammad Alī Iyāzī,<sup>31</sup> Muhammad Hādī Ma'rifah (d. 2006),<sup>32</sup> and Muhammad 'Alī al-Riḍā'ī al-Iṣfahānī appeared from the Shī'ī camp.<sup>33</sup>

Up to this point, we have seen how *tafsīr* historiography proliferated, notably in the Middle East (Egypt and Tunisia). The extent to which these works interact with, complement and criticise each other remains unclear until more rigorous research is undertaken. The 1970s was a formative period for modern Sunnī

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21 A comprehensive explanation of the meaning of the term salafīyah will be discussed in a separate section of this article.

22 Walid A. Saleh, 'Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of Tafsīr in Arabic: A History of the Book Approach', *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies*, October 2010, 11–12, <https://doi.org/10.3366/E146535911000094X>.

23 Rosenberg and Grafton, *Cartographies of Time*, 96.

24 Muhammad al-Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufasssīrūn* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 1985).

25 Muhammad al-Fāḍil Ibn 'Ashūr, *Al-Tafsīr Wa Rijāluha* (Majmū' al-Buhūth al-Islāmiyyah, 1970).

26 Ibrāhīm 'Abdullāh Rufaidah, *Al-Nahw Wa Kutub al-Tafsīr* (al-Dār al-Jamāhīriyyah, 1962).

27 Munī' 'Abd al-Halīm Mahmūd, *Manāhij Al-Mufasssīrīn* (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Miṣrī, 2000).

28 Ṣalāh 'Abd al-Fattāh al-Khālidī, *Ta'rīf Al-Dārisīn Bi Manāhij al-Mufasssīrīn* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 2008).

29 Muṣṭafā Muslim, *Manāhij Al-Mufasssīrīn* (Riyadh: Dār al-Muslim, 1994).

30 'Abd al-Ghafūr Mahmūd Muṣṭafā Ja'far, *Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufasssīrūn Fī Thaubihī al-Jadīd* (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2012).

31 Muhammad 'Alī Iyāzī, *Al-Mufasssīrūn Hayātuhum Wa Manhajuhum* (Teheran: Wizārah al-Thaqāfah wa al-Irshād al-Islāmī, 1966).

32 Muhammad Hādī Ma'rifah, *Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufasssīrūn Fī Thaubihī al-Qashīb* (al-Jāmi'ah al-Raḍiwiyyah li al-'Ulūm al-Islāmiyyah, 1997).

33 Muhammad 'Alī al-Riḍā'ī al-Iṣfahānī, *Durūs Fī Al-Manāhij Wa al-Ittijāhāt al-Tafsīriyyah Li al-Qur'ān* (Markaz al-Muṣṭafā al-'Alamī, 1969).

*tafsīr* historiography, featuring four books by al-Khūlī, Ibn 'Ashūr, al-Dhahabī, and Khalīfah,. Of the four works, the legacy of al-Dhahabī's work is more prominent than the others. On one hand, al-Dhahabī's work has been deeply influential in directing the study of *tafsīr* history, in the Arab world,<sup>34</sup> and in Indonesia.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, claims around the salafī orientation of this work, which have been echoed by modern scholars such as Walid Saleh, could pose a serious threat to its popularity, notably in Muslim countries where there is hostility toward anything associated with Salafism. This article explores these two sides of al-Dhahabī's work. First, I will seek to clarify the broader context of al-Dhahabī's salafī outlook through a study of the geopolitical conditions of Egypt at the time when *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn* was composed, as well as through a study of al-Dhahabī's other writings. Second, I will examine the popularity of *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn* in the curriculum of *tafsīr* departments, especially in Indonesian Islamic tertiary educational institutes.

Serving as an Al-Azhar scholar and once the minister of religious endowments in Egypt,<sup>36</sup> Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabī opposed the radical jihadist movement that had broken off from the Muslim Brotherhood. He was taken captive in July 1977 by the extremist organization al-Takfīr wa al-Hijrah, which held him hostage in exchange for the release of their imprisoned compatriots. They executed al-Dhahabī after their demands were not met. Following his murder, Anwar Sadat's administration repressed extremist Islamic groups harshly.<sup>37</sup>

Al-Takfīr wa al-Hijrah was founded by Shukrī Muṣṭafā in the early 1970s.<sup>38</sup> As the name suggests, the organisation's main mission was not to take over the Egyptian government, but to cut off all kinds of ties with the Egyptian people in order to migrate to another location where they could live in solitude.<sup>39</sup> Timani identifies

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34 Saleh, 'Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of Tafsīr in Arabic', 7.

35 This topic will be discussed in detail at the end of this article, along with the formulation of an alternative history that is more suited to improving the academic climate regarding the history of *tafsīr* in Indonesia.

36 These two positions are not surprising because during al-Dhahabī's time, Al-Azhar's relationship with the Egyptian government was cordial. Note that 1961 was a time when the Egyptian government succeeded in bringing Al-Azhar under its control. Institutionally, Al-Azhar received support from the government for expansion and development, and in return an executive council was formed with the government as a direct advisor. The selection of the sheikh of Al-Azhar has also since rested with the Egyptian president. Nathan J. Brown, 'Post-Revolutionary al-Azhar' (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), 6–9.

37 John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 67.

38 There is a disagreement as to when the organisation was officially formed, whether it was while Mustafa was imprisoned (between 1965 and 1971), or after he was released from prison. See for example: Rif'at Sayyid Ahmad, *Al-Harakah al-Islāmiyyah Fī Miṣr Wa Īrān* (Cairo: Sina, 1989), 103; J.J.G. Jansen, *The Dual Nature of Islamic Fundamentalism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 75.

39 Hussam S. Timani, 'The Khawarij in Modern Islamic Historiography' (Master Thesis, Montreal,

at least three causes for the emergence of Islamic fundamentalist movements, like al-Takfir wa al-Hijrah. The first factor is historical, namely their displeasure with the mobilisation of Islamic concepts to support the secular government that Egypt adopted after the 1952 revolution. Second was their opposition to the liberal economic policies of Anwar Sadat (ruled 1970-1981),<sup>40</sup> which exacerbated Egypt's social class divide and made it more difficult for Egyptians to buy locally-produced goods.<sup>41</sup> Third, ideologically, the concept of *hākimiyyah* promoted by Abū al-A'lā al-Maudūdī (1903-1979)<sup>42</sup> and Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966) inspired the organization to oppose human authority and idealize the adoption of divine text as the supreme law. Based on this, Timani refers to al-Takfir wa al-Hijrah as a modern *Khawārij* (extremist) organisation,<sup>43</sup> while for Jansen, they are nothing more than anti-civilization criminals.<sup>44</sup>

The concept of *Hākimiyyah* on which the organisation was based, emboldened them to question the authority of the Azharī scholars and accuse them of forcibly positioning themselves in the place of God over the believers. Perhaps the roots of their animosity toward Al-Azhar can be traced to when the university issued a *fatwa* in favour of President Sadat's peace tour to Israel.<sup>45</sup> This mistrust of the Azharī scholars was amply demonstrated at the trial of the organization's leader, Shukrī Muṣṭafā, for the murder of al-Dhahabī. When the judge inquired about al-Dhahabī, the defendant replied that he was an infidel. For Mustafa, anything that emerged after the revelation of the Qur'ān and *hadith*, such as the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence, cannot serve as source of religious knowledge. Mustafa told the court that Islam had regressed when Muslims no longer referred directly to the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* (sayings and traditions of the Prophet) but to the opinions of men who declared themselves imams.<sup>46</sup> The dispute between al-Dhahabī, as part of al-Azhar, and the group identified by Timani as the Modern *Khawārij* is a crucial variable in order to understand the Sunni-Salafī tendencies accommodated by

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McGill University, 2002), 191.

40 Ahmad, *Al-Harakah al-Islāmiyyah Fī Miṣr Wa Irān*, 85.

41 Throughout history, the unequal distribution of wealth and the prominence of one societal class over another has always been an important factor in why the *Khawārij* chose to stand in opposition to the rulers. See: Ali Jaffal, *Al-Khawārij* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1990), 24.

42 Maudūdī assumes that Muslim societies that do not apply God's authority (*al-Hākimiyyah al-Ilāhiyyah*) are societies that lack knowledge. See: *Abū al-A'lā al-Maudūdī, Al-Mafhūm al-Haqīqī Li-Kalimh al-Muslim* (Cairo: al-Salām, 1980), 7.

43 Timani, 'The *Khawārij* in Modern Islamic Historiography', 192–94.

44 Jansen, *The Dual Nature of Islamic Fundamentalism*, 82.

45 Timani, 'The *Khawārij* in Modern Islamic Historiography', 207; Throughout the history of Al-Azhar's leadership, Saadat was known for his political alliances with Western countries, including Israel. A. Chanfi Ahmed, 'Islamic Mission in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Perspectives of Some "Ulama" Associated to the Al-Azhar University (1960-1970)', *Die Welt Des Islams* by Brill 41, no. 3 (2001): 353.

46 Timani, 'The *Khawārij* in Modern Islamic Historiography', 208.

al-Dhahabī's scholarship. Being moderate, such as adhering to Ash'arism, is an ineffective means of fending off extremism. On the contrary, extremism will find a worthy counterpart in an opposing form of extremism.

Another important factor worthy of attention is the modern reformist movement in Egypt – the origins of which can be linked to Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) and Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) – that criticised the mixing of Sunnism with Sufism and Ash'arism and its affiliation with traditional Islamic law schools.<sup>47</sup> During 'Abduh's time, Salafism was a movement of the elite to integrate themselves into the colonial administration and utilise colonial educational institutions to reform Islam. Unfortunately, 'Abduh's Salafist jargon was not warmly welcomed as it was displaced by the more marketable ideas of nationalism, liberalism and socialism.<sup>48</sup> His spirit of reform was later embraced by Egyptian Muslim thinkers.

In 'Abduh's mind, the Salaf were important progenitors of the rich and lively world of Islamic thought, from the Prophet to al-Ghazālī (1058-1111).<sup>49</sup> 'Abduh's student, Rashīd Riḍā, had his own views. For him, the Salaf were the earliest generation of Muslims who knew Muhammad. Riḍā, not 'Abduh, was the figure who later influenced the direction of Egyptian Salafī groups, such as the Anṣār al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah.<sup>50</sup> Riḍā's version of Salafism openly resisted the influence of Ash'arism, where Ash'ari books were still part of the main curriculum taught in the madrasas, including Al-Azhar, until the mid-20th century. The adherents of Ash'arism were usually committed to one of the four Madhhabs, with the exception of the Hanbalī. As some Muslim countries began to be colonised by European powers, the dominance of Ash'arism came under threat from at least two recent developments: First, the rise of Wahhabism in 1157/1744 which strengthened and revitalised the influence of key intellectual figures from the Hanbalī *madhhab*,

47 Frank Griffel, 'What Do We Mean by "Salafī"? Connecting Muhammad 'Abduh with Egypt's Nūr Party in Islam's Contemporary Intellectual History', *Die Welt Des Islams* by Brill 55 (2015): 186–220.

48 Reinhard Schulze, *A Modern History of the Muslim World* (New York: New York university Press, 2000), 90.

49 It was the Salafiyah bookstore, active between 1909 and mid-1930, that continued 'Abduh's principle of salafī scholarship by publishing not only the works of conservative writers such as al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) but also rationalist writers such as al-Fārābī (d. 339/950-1) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037). Griffel, 'What Do We Mean by "Salafī"? Connecting Muhammad 'Abduh with Egypt's Nūr Party in Islam's Contemporary Intellectual History', 201; 'Abduh's acknowledgement of the prominence of al-Ghazālī may have come as a surprise to many during his time because he was known for his support for Islamic form, one of the agendas of which was to oppose Sufism. But Scharbrodt's study shows that the thinker, in his youth, had experienced a critical phase that brought him closer to Sufism, a phase of life that al-Ghazālī had also experienced. See: Oliver Scharbrodt, 'The Salafiyah and Sufism: Muhammad 'Abduh and His Risālāh al-Wāridah (Treatise on Mystical Inspirations)', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London 70, no. 1 (2007): 89–115.

50 Griffel, 'What Do We Mean by "Salafī"? Connecting Muhammad 'Abduh with Egypt's Nūr Party in Islam's Contemporary Intellectual History', 198.

among them Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728-1328). Second, the development of the anti-*taqlīd* theology (known through the term *lā madhhabiyyah*)<sup>51</sup> which reached its peak in the thinking of Muhammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1834).<sup>52</sup> The common thread among these three reform movements ('Abduh, Salafī-Wahhābīs and Shawkānī) was that they all attributed the loss of Islamic civilization to the Ash'arī doctrine, which dominated the madrasahs, and contrasting it with the glory days the Salaf had achieved centuries before.<sup>53</sup>

Al-Dhahabī was right at the centre of this power struggle between the Salafism, Ash'arism and Khawārijism. Al-Azhar, where he was teaching, had served as the intellectual capital of Sunnī thinkers, ever since its foundation in 969.<sup>54</sup> The source of Al-Azhar's authority for the Egyptian government and citizens lay in its role as the guardian of religious traditions that were being seriously challenged by Islamists on the one hand (in terms of authority)<sup>55</sup> and by Islamic reformers on the other (in terms of the approach to tradition). Given that there is not always a direct correlation between a salafī-minded person and membership in a specific organization, it is no surprise that al-Dhahabī has never been identified as a member of any specific Egyptian Salafī group. This fluid climate also permeated Al-Azhar. Although many key figures at the university are vehemently opposed to extreme expressions of Salafism, many students and some professors at the university are affiliated with the Salafī movement, either overtly or not.<sup>56</sup>

### **Sunnī-Salafism's Victory in the Historiography of *Tafsīr* Through *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn***

The Salafī intellectual movement began in 1936 in Damascus with the publication of Ibn Taymiyyah's *Muqaddimah fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*. The book set the bar for legitimate Qur'ānic interpretation. The main aim of this movement was to reclaim the Qur'ān from the Sunnī-Ash'arī scholastic tradition by replacing the three Qur'ānic commentaries that had dominated the curriculum of Sunni madrasahs (Bayḍāwī-Zamakhsharī-Rāzī) with those of Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr and Baghawī.<sup>57</sup> Ṭabarī's *Jāmi'*

51 See for instance: Emad Hamdeh, 'Qur'ān and Sunna or the "Madhhabs"?: A Salafi Polemic Against Islamic Legal Tradition', *Islamic Law and Society*, Brill 24, no. 3 (2017): 211–53.

52 Griffel, 'What Do We Mean by "Salafī"? Connecting Muhammad 'Abduh with Egypt's Nūr Party in Islam's Contemporary Intellectual History', 204–5.

53 Griffel, 215.

54 Rachel M. Scott, 'What Might the Muslim Brotherhood Do With Al-Azhar? Religious Authority in Egypt', *Die Welt Des Islams* by Brill 52, no. 2 (2012): 134.

55 Scott, 143–44.

56 Jonathan Brown, 'Salafis and Sufis in Egypt' (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), 6.

57 Saleh, 'Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of Tafsīr in Arabic', 10.

*al-Bayān* was first published for mass consumption in 1905. His reliance on *hadith* was a breath of fresh air for the modern Salafis. However, the encyclopaedic characteristics of Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* did not fully reflect the radical hermeneutic that Ibn Taymiyyah wanted.<sup>58</sup> Ibn Kathīr's *tafsīr* (first published for mass consumption in 1924) became the first *tafsīr* work to adopt Ibn Taymiyyah's method.<sup>59</sup> The aspirations of these two scholars were then synthesized systematically by Suyūṭī. He was the first *mufassir* to standardise the term *bi al-ma'thūr* and used it as the title of his *tafsīr* book, *al-Durr al-Manthūr fī al-Tafsīr bi al-Ma'thūr*.<sup>60</sup> However, the Salafī movement faced a serious challenge: only a handful of the hundreds of *tafsīrs* written throughout Islamic history fit the radical hermeneutic paradigm, including that of Ibn Kathīr and Suyūṭī.<sup>61</sup>

In developing a historiography, a historian must tell a story. While history is merely factual events, historiography is the assembly of those facts into sequences.<sup>62</sup> A historiographer must assign meaning to this story, either objectively or apologetically. It is no surprise that Muslim historians consistently use two different methods in articulating historical narratives. In one approach, they will adhere to the revealed historical facts. In another, they create a story for specific reasons, such as to prove something or establish a point. For example, in the historiography of the Prophet Muhammad, there is an awareness of the need to present him a chosen leader, who was free from sin and possessed enormous potential.<sup>63</sup> In the case of the historiography of *tafsīr*, some historians have a propensity to assert what *tafsīr* can and cannot do, resulting in a historiography that provides both information about *tafsīr* and guidance on choosing *tafsīr* books. Both motives are apparent in *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufassirūn*. To my knowledge, Walid Saleh was the first to explicitly discuss the strong salafī leanings in *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufassirūn*. Despite the impression that the book is comprehensive,<sup>64</sup> Saleh calls it more of a catalogue and a survey than a historiographical book, as the author does not make clear links between the various methods of *tafsīr* that he mentions. Al-Dhahabī is

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58 Saleh, 24.

59 Saleh menyebut tafsir Ibn Kathīr sebagai "corner stone" bagi gerakan ini. Saleh, 14, 32.

60 Saleh, 24, 32.

61 Saleh, 15.

62 In simple terms, history asks what happened, while interpretation of history seeks to uncover why something happened. J.T. Shotwell, 'The Interpretation of History', *The American Historical Review* 18, no. 4 (1913): 692.

63 See for example Rahnamaei's conclusion in his comparison of the biographies of Muhammad by two major authors: a Sunni, Husayn Haikal (1888-1959), and a Shi'a, Sayyid Ja'far Murtadha al-'Amili (1944-2019). Timani, 208.

64 Saleh also praised al-Dhahabī's work for its comprehensiveness, including the massive and serious effort made by al-Dhahabī to collect *tafsīr* books in published and manuscript form. According to Saleh, the completeness of the data in al-Dhahabī's book remains unmatched in the field. Saleh, 9-10.

merely continuing the kind of tafsir historiography that was developed earlier by al-Zarkashī (745-94/ 1344-92)<sup>65</sup> and al-Suyūṭī (849-911/1445-1505)<sup>66</sup> in their 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān works.

Sunnī *mufasssirs* have long attempted to strike a balance between philology and the radical hermeneutic in interpreting the Qur'ān. This reconciliation took the form of the scholastic tradition, which favours incorporating philology into traditions, rather than discarding it from them. Even so, those who relied completely on the traditions of the Prophet, the Companions and the Tabi'īn never really disappeared. They were merely relegated to the margins and morphed into a minor opposition movement,<sup>67</sup> whom Ibn Taymiyyah later glorified. This meant that the seeds of radicalism (in the method of interpretation) were embedded within Sunni hermeneutics itself.<sup>68</sup>

The term *al-Tafsīr bi al-Ma'thūr* has historically referred to two phenomena: (1) the radical hermeneutic that claims that the triad of the Prophet, the Companions and the Successors are the sole reliable interpretive authorities of Islam, and (2) the mainstream Sunni exegetical practices that do not recognise such rigid limitations. In the case of the former phenomenon, the defence of early traditions manifested as a method of interpretation (Sunnī-Salafī). The latter phenomenon, meanwhile, became a flexible ideology (Sunnī-Ash'arī).<sup>69</sup> Later, between 1936 and 1940, an Azharī, Muhammad 'Abd al-'Azīm al-Zurqānī wrote a book on 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān entitled *Manāhil al-'Irfān*. It was in this book that the term *al-Tafsīr bi al-Ma'thūr* was used as an analytical term to refer to the radical hermeneutic phenomenon. By the time al-Dhahabī completed his dissertation (around 1946), this had become an important analytical term in defining *tafsīr*. According to Saleh, al-Dhahabī reworked Zurqānī's work into a more radical version, which was more clearly inclined towards Ibn Taymiyyah's thought.<sup>70</sup>

Al-Dhahabī's categorisation of *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* and *bi al-ra'y* has, according to Saleh, no analytical value except to reinforce the Salafī preference for the *bi al-ma'thūr* tradition.<sup>71</sup> Al-Dhahabī's work fails to demonstrate the significance of

65 Abū Muḥammad Ibn-'Abdallāh al-Zarkashī. *al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (al-Qāhira: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2006).

66 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān Fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: al-Risālah, 2008).

67 Reflecting this model of interpretation are the works of Ibn Abī Hātim (d. 327-938), Ibn Mardawayh (d. 410/1019) and Abū al-Shaykh (d. 369-979). Saleh, 'Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of Tafsīr in Arabic', 29.

68 Tafsīr Ṭabarī was a kind of *bi al-Ma'thūr tafsīr* in the second meaning of the term, not the first. Saleh, 25.

69 As far as we know, the majority of Sunnī commentaries in the medieval era operated the *bi al-Ma'thūr* model in this broad definition. Saleh, 25.

70 Saleh, 35.

71 The eight *mufasssirs* identified by al-Dhahabī belong to this genre: al-Ṭabarī (d. 311/ 923), al-Samarqandī (d. 375/985), al-Tha'labī (d. 427/ 1035), al-Baghawī (d. 516/ 1122), Ibn 'Aṭīyyah (d. 542/

*tafsīr* as a genre in its own right. Most importantly, he fails to connect the various paradigms of *tafsīr* with the competing theological agendas of Islamic history.<sup>72</sup> Intentionally, Saleh says, al-Dhahabī exhibits his salafī tendencies<sup>73</sup>, especially when he characterises certain *mufasssirs* as deviant, such as the sunnī and shī'ī *mufasssirs* who exhibit *mu'tazilī* (rational) features, namely al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/ 1025), al-Sharīf al-Murtazā (d. 436/ 1044) and al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/ 1144). Saleh emphasizes that the *tafsīr* of Zamakhsharī, who formerly topped the list of subjects taught in Sunni madrasahs, was the target of an intellectual assault launched by al-Dhahabī. The description of al-Dhahabī's history as a salafī interpretation of *tafsīr* history is, therefore, not hyperbole.<sup>74</sup>

### Reading al-Dhahabī's Salafī Orientation from His Other Works

At this point, we can see that the *tafsīr* history presented in al-Dhahabī's *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn* is closer to Ibn Taymiyyah's worldview, mainly as a result of its revitalisation of the concept of *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr*. Still, questions remain, such as the extent to which similar charges can be brought against al-Dhahabī's other works. How systematic is al-Dhahabī's thinking on *tafsīr*, and is it perfectly illustrated in his approach in *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*? To answer these questions, we must examine several of al-Dhahabī's other books related to discussions on *tafsīr*, including (1) *al-Wahy wa al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*,<sup>75</sup> (2) *al-Isrā'īliyyat fī al-Tafsīr wa al-Hadīth*,<sup>76</sup> (3) *al-Ittijāhāt al-Munharifah fī al-Tafsīr*,<sup>77</sup> and (4) *Tafsīr Ibn 'Arabī*.<sup>78</sup>

In *al-Wahy wa al-Qur'ān*, there is a discussion of the sources of interpretation and the knowledge required by a *mufasssīr* (*Maṣādir al-Tafsīr wa al-'Ulūm al-Latī Yahtājuhā al-Mufasssīr*). The five sources of *tafsīr* detailed by al-Dhahabī are: (1) the Qur'ān, (2) the Prophet Muhammad, (3) the Companions of the Prophet, (4) the Arabic language, and (5) acceptable reasoning about the context of the verse. What is interesting is that al-Dhahabī, in his description of the five sources of *tafsīr*, does

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1148), Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/ 1372), al-Tha'ālibī (d. 875/ 1470), and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/ 1505) (as author of *al-Durr al-Manthūr*).

72 Saleh, 'Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of Tafsīr in Arabic', 10.

73 Saleh said: "Dhahabī's work has no qualms about its staunchly salafī outlook". Saleh, 7.

74 Saleh, 7-8.

75 Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabī, *Al-Wahy Wa al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 1986).

76 Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabī, *Al-Isrā'īliyyāt Fī al-Tafsīr Wa al-Hadīth* (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, n.d.).

77 Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabī, *Al-Ittijāhāt al-Munharifah Fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm: Dawāfi'uhā Wa Daf'uhā* (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 1986).

78 Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabī, *Tafsīr Ibn 'Arabī Li Al-Qur'ān*, Haqīqatuhu Wa Khaṭuruhu (Dār al-Muslim, n.d.).

not mention nouns, but verbs. Such that, gradually, the activities that he believes can be a valid source of interpretation are as follows:

1. Returning to the Qur'ān (*al-rujū' ilā al-Qur'ān nafsihi*)
2. Taking from the Prophet while excluding weak and false statements (*al-Naql 'an al-Rasūl ma'a al-ihtirāz 'an al-ḍa'if wa al-Mawḍū'*)
3. Taking the *Ṣahīh* (proven) statements of the Companions with regard to interpretation (*al-akhdh bi-mā Ṣahha 'an al-Ṣahābah fī al-tafsīr*)
4. Taking what the language suggests (*al-akhdh bi muṭlaq al-lughah*)
5. Interpreting the meaning of speech and the essence of legal force (*al-Tafsīr bi al-Muqtaḍā min ma'nā al-kalām wa al-Muqtaḍab min quwwah al-shar'*)<sup>79</sup>

In Ibn Taymiyyah's *Muqaddimah fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, there is a similar discussion to al-Dhahabī's, but with a different approach. Ibn Taymiyyah begins by asking: 'what is the best method of interpretation?' (*mā ahsan ṭuruq al-tafsīr?*). The answer is to interpret the Qur'ān with (1) the Qur'ān, and if that is not sufficient, then with (2) the *Sunnah*, then (3) the statements of the Companions,<sup>80</sup> then (4) the sayings of the Successors to the Prophet.<sup>81</sup> This graduation of sources from the Prophet to the Successors is what Walid Saleh refers to as a radical hermeneutic. In this regard, al-Dhahabī's way of categorising the five sources of *tafsīr* is heavily influenced by al-Suyūṭī, whose book of *tafsīr*, *al-Durr al-Manthūr fī al-Tafsīr bi al-Ma'thūr*, perfectly replicates Ibn Taymiyyah's radical hermeneutic. In *al-Itqān*, after a lengthy discussion of the central position of the Qur'ān, the *Sunnah*, the opinions of the Companions, and the opinions of the Successors, supplemented by some direct quotes from Ibn Taymiyyah's book,<sup>82</sup> Suyūṭī mentions four sources of *tafsīr* (*ma'ākhdh al-tafsīr*), minus the Qur'ān, in exactly the same terms that al-Dhahabī articulates.<sup>83</sup>

The mention of language and knowledge of the context of the Qur'ānic text as a source of interpretation in al-Suyūṭī's and al-Dhahabī's books provides space for open interpretation with a broader scope of interpretive material than what Ibn Taymiyyah envisaged. It makes sense then as to why al-Dhahabī divides *tafsīr bi al-ra'y* into two: that which is accepted and that which is not. The requirement for a *tafsīr bi al-ra'y* to be accepted, according to al-Dhahabī, is the *mufassir's* perfect

79 al-Dhahabī, *Al-Wahy Wa al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, 140–41.

80 Taqīyuddīn Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah, *Muqaddimah Fī Uṣūl Al-Tafsīr*, ed. 'Adnān Zarzūr, n.d., 92-97.

81 Ibn Taymiyyah, 102.

82 al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān Fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 763–67.

83 al-Suyūṭī, 767–69.

mastery of the Arabic language. Then when the *mufassir* reads the Qur'ān, he must be able to set aside his desires and assumptions, so as not to try to alter the Qur'ān to fit what he believes.<sup>84</sup> In a pessimistic tone, Saleh doubts the effectivity of al-Dhahabī's method for sorting *tafsīr bi al-ra'y*, which is, according to Saleh, just camouflage to obscure his pro-Ibn Taymiyyah leanings. If a *tafsīr* appears to accommodate Ibn Taymiyyah's radical hermeneutics, then it is permitted (*al-Tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-Jā'iz*).<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, if it is too concerned with philology, it is classified as a deviant commentary (*al-tafsīr bi al-ra'y al-madhmūm/Tafsīr al-Firāq al-Mubtadi'ah*).

Saleh's doubts can be justified by al-Dhahabī's eagerness to strengthen the standing of *sanad* (original text) in *tafsīr*. In another book, al-Dhahabī divides the phases of *tafsīr* into several stages. The initial phase is the era of narration, where the Prophet serves as the main figure. Al-Dhahabī then mentions two differences of opinion regarding the number of the Prophet's explanations of the Qur'ān. The first opinion, attributed to Ibn Taymiyyah, states that the Prophet's commentaries were numerous, while the second opinion, attributed to al-Khūbī, holds the opposite view. As one might expect, al-Dhahabī is inclined towards supporting the first opinion. Although they are numerous, the Prophet's commentaries do not cover the entirety of the Qur'ān, as there are many Qur'ānic words that can be easily understood by Arabs.<sup>86</sup> Al-Dhahabī emphasises that the period of narration, which includes the time of the Companions and the Successors, stands in the light of the Prophet's interpretation to the Qur'ān,<sup>87</sup> with less significant additions from the Companions and the Successors.<sup>88</sup>

The second phase is the era of codification, which can be divided into four stages: (1) the codification of *hadith*; (2) the separation of *tafsīr* material from *hadith* material; (3) the beginning of writing *tafsīr* complete with its *sanad*; and (4) the period which saw the emergence of many schools of thought in Islam and the beginnings

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84 al-Dhahabī, *Al-Wahy Wa al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, 152.

85 Including Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (w. 604/ 1207), al-Bayḍāwī (w. 791/ 1388), al-Nasafī (w. 710/1310), al-Khāzin (w. 725/1324), Abū Hayyān al-Gharnāṭī (w. 745/ 1344), al-Naysābūrī (w. 728/1328), al-Suyūṭī (w. 911/1505) (sebagai pengarang *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*), al-Khaṭīb al-Sharbinī (w. 977/1569), Abū al-Su'ūd (w. 982/1574) dan al-Alūsī (w. 1270/ 1854).

86 Al-Dhahabī cites four classifications of *tafsīr* mentioned by Ṭabarī: that which can be easily understood by Arabs, that which can be understood by intelligent people, that which can be understood by scholars, and that which can only be known by Allah. al-Dhahabī, *Al-Ittijāhāt al-Munharifah Fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm: Dawāfī'uhā Wa Daf'uhā*, 11.

87 Compare this with Ibn Taymiyyah's claim that the Companions learnt the Qur'ān simultaneously with its *tafsīr*. Saleh, 'Ibn Taymiyyah and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of An Introduction to the Foundations of Qur'ānic Exegesis', 130.

88 al-Dhahabī, *Al-Ittijāhāt al-Munharifah Fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm: Dawāfī'uhā Wa Daf'uhā*, 12–13.

of writing *tafsīr* in accordance with the scientific specifications and tendencies of each *mufasssir*.<sup>89</sup> This last phase also marks the beginning of writing *tafsīr* without including the full *sanad* of the quoted saying or statement. This stage, according to al-Dhahabī, has opened the door to great evil for Muslims (*fataha 'alā al-mu'minīn bāb sharr 'aẓīm*). The loss of the *sanad*, which serves as a filter to screen *tafsīr* materials, led to the accommodation of false *hadiths* and *Isrā'īliyyāt* narratives<sup>90</sup> by *mufasssirs* who had a fervent commitment to a particular political or ideological *madhhab*. In hyperbolic terms, al-Dhahabī calls this loss of *sanad* the 'beginning of Muslim blindness to everything'. At the end of his argument, al-Dhahabī glorifies Ṭabarī who, he believes, is the last bastion for the ideal model of interpretation that is subjected to clear *sanad* criteria.<sup>91</sup> In this way, al-Dhahabī reduces the model of Ṭabarī's *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr*, which is actually an open methodological concept, to focusing on the completeness of the *sanad* only, a point we have touched on earlier.

Al-Dhahabī then identifies two other reasons for the emergence of deviations in *tafsīr*, in addition to the loss of the sacredness of the *sanad*, namely: (1) the attempt of the *mufasssirs* to alter the meaning of the Qur'ān according to their will; and (2) their focus on the meaning of the Qur'ānic language that they can understand directly, without first examining the intention of the speaker of the Qur'ān, the person to whom the Qur'ān was revealed and the people to whom it was conveyed.<sup>92</sup> If we look at al-Dhahabī's *al-ittijāhāt* in its entirety, we will find that he considers almost all styles of *tafsīr*, apart from *tafsīr bi al-Ma'thūr*, to be potentially deviant. There, he identifies various categories of deviations: from the linguistic, Mu'tazilah, Shī'ah, Khawārij, Ṣūfī, to scientific (*'ilmī*) commentaries. These criticisms were clearly illustrated in *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssirūn* in the way it describes, simplifies and trivialises each of these interpretative approaches. Al-Dhahabī was well known for his brutal attacks on *tafsīr* that exist beyond *bi al-ma'thūr*. In his introduction to Hādī Ma'rifah's *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssirūn*, the editor expressed his disappointment with al-Dhahabī's attitude, by saying:<sup>93</sup>

وهو الكتاب الوحيد الذي تبسّط في مباحث حول التفسير والمفسرون. بيد أنه  
مني أيضا بمثالب فاضحة، إذ إنه غفل عن كثير من الكتب التي صنفها قبله في التفسير،  
ووهم في تعريف المفسرين وكتبهم لاعتماده علي مصادر ضعيفة. والأنكي من ذلك  
كله أنّ مؤلفه عبّر عن بغضه و إجحافه بحق بعض المذاهب الإسلاميّة و تفاسيرها مما  
قلل من قيمة الكتاب كثيرا.

89 al-Dhahabī, 13–17.

90 In particular, al-Dhahabī describes the *Isrā'īliyyāt* in a negative tone and regards it as something that brings danger when included in books of *tafsīr*. al-Dhahabī, *Al-Isrā'īliyyāt Fī al-Tafsīr Wa al-Hadīth*.

91 al-Dhahabī, 18-19.

92 al-Dhahabī, 20.

93 Ma'rifah, *Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufasssirūn Fī Thaubihī al-Qashīb*, 4.

““This is the only book that explains at length the topic of *tafsīr* and the *mufasssirs*... However, it also suffers from a terrible flaw in that it ignores many previously published books of *tafsīr*, and it also makes mistakes in defining some *mufasssirs* and their books because it relies on weak sources. And most important of all is that the author expresses his hatred and prejudice against some schools of Islamic thought and their commentaries, which greatly reduces the value of the book”.

The editor of Hādī Ma'rifah's book was not alone in holding this view. Later historiographers agreed that al-Dhahabī's book was sentimental and unduly passionate. This impression becomes even sharper when reading one of al-Dhahabī's other works on Ibn 'Arabī's *tafsīr*. Through the title of the book, al-Dhahabī labelled 'Arabī's *tafsīr* as dangerous (*lahu khaṭar*). In his introduction, al-Dhahabī expressed regret that publishers in Egypt at that time were competing to publish Ibn 'Arabī's *tafsīr* (whose authenticity was unclear) in order to spin a profit. In fact, he believes this *tafsīr* brought nothing but malice and harm.<sup>94</sup> As a representative of Al-Azhar, al-Dhahabī felt the need to write his own book in order to expose what he believed to be flawed in this *tafsīr*.

## Conclusion

It is widely believed that *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssirūn* has evolved into a normative textbook for the study of the history of *tafsīr* throughout the Islamic world.<sup>95</sup> In Indonesia, however, the popularity of al-Dhahabī's work is a little more complex than in Middle Eastern countries. I will start with a survey I conducted a year ago, covering articles published in the journal *Nun*, which is run by the Association of al-Qur'ān and *Tafsīr* Scholars in Indonesia (AIAT). My survey showed that the study of the history of classical and medieval *tafsīr* was the least popular subject when compared to other issues such as contemporary *tafsīr* methodology, the living Qur'ān, and the thinking of Indonesian *mufasssirs*. One explanation for this is the difficulty of conducting these academic studies, because researchers must have sufficient Arabic language skills to read the overwhelming number of Arabic texts.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, not all students in the IAT department are able to master Arabic. So, to say that al-Dhahabī's scholarship has directly influenced the direction of the study of the history of classical *tafsīr* in Indonesia is not entirely accurate, because

<sup>94</sup> al-Dhahabī, *Tafsīr Ibn 'Arabī Li Al-Qur'ān, Haqīqatuhu Wa Khaṭuruhu*, 4.

<sup>95</sup> Hādī Ma'rifah's statement makes this clear. This was also the main motivation for the publisher to publish a counter-narrative through Ma'rifah's work. See: *Ma'rifah, Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Mufasssirūn Fī Thaubihī al-Qashīb*, 4.

<sup>96</sup> Mu'ammarr Zayn Qadafy, 'Jurnal Nun Dan Matinya Kajian Tafsir Klasik: A Preliminary Research', *Studitafsir.Com* (blog), 2 July 2021, <https://studitafsir.com/2021/07/02/jurnal-nun-dan-matinya-kajian-tafsir-klasik-a-preliminary-survey/>.

his works are not easily accessible.

But this does not mean that al-Dhahabī has no influence in Indonesia. I would argue that there are several reasons why his works still hold influence here. First, there are intermediary scholars acting as discourse brokers for al-Dhahabī's scholarship, such as Mannā' al-Qaṭṭān, who is extremely popular in modern pesantren (Islamic boarding schools). Qaṭṭān's book, which is much more concise than al-Dhahabī's, has been translated into Indonesian and used as a compulsory reference text in several Islamic universities. The models of *tafsīr* discourse developed by veteran Indonesian historian, Nasruddin Baidan, also seem to accommodate Dhahabī's tendency to categorize *tafsīr* into the *bi al-Ma'thūr* and *bi al-ra'y* types.<sup>97</sup>

Second, for as long as there are no other *tafsīr* historiography books being used as references in works on *tafsīr* in Indonesia, we can still assume that al-Dhahabī's works remain dominant. For the sake of this research, I managed to find a book that accurately captures the absence of other *tafsīr* historiographies, entitled *Studi Kitab Tafsir (A Study of Books of Tafsīr)*.<sup>98</sup> This book was written by *tafsīr* lecturers at UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta and consists of studies of nine books of *tafsīr* (classical, medieval and modern). Skimming through the initial references they use, the names that recur frequently are al-Dhahabī, Ṣubhī Ṣālih, and Mannā' Qaṭṭān. As we might expect, other figures of *tafsīr* historiography do not appear in this book.

This article has discussed Dhahabī's systematic approach to the historiography of *tafsīr*. While *al-Wahy wa al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, *al-Isrā'īliyat fī al-Tafsīr wa al-Hadīth*, and *al-Ittijāhāt al-Munharifah fī al-Tafsīr* provide theoretical considerations of what constitutes a good Qur'ānic commentary, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, and *Tafsīr Ibn 'Arabī* are where he applies these theories into concrete judgements and classifications of these *tafsīr*. Besides Dhahabī's revitalization of the problematic division between *Tafsīr bi al-Ma'thūr* and *Bi al-Ra'y*, several new key markers of his salafī outlook can be seen throughout his works, particularly in his effort to reinforce the value of the *isnād* system and his blatant attacks on commentaries that are not based on inherited interpretive materials. With regards to academic discourses on *tafsīr* historiography in Indonesia, we see a clear relationship between the dominance of al-Dhahabī's work and fading enthusiasm among Indonesian students to study the history of *tafsīr*. At this point, Saleh's claim that the division of *tafsīr* into *bi al-Ma'thūr* and *bi al-Ra'y* has no analytical value finds its justification in the monotonous study of *tafsīr* history in Indonesia. This should serve as key motivation to study other books of *tafsīr* historiography besides *al-tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, even if Indonesia academics are not concerned by the salafī outlook of al-Dhahabī's work.

<sup>97</sup> See for instance: Nasruddin Baidan, *Wawasan Baru Ilmu Tafsir* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2005).

<sup>98</sup> Muhammad Yusuf, ed., *Studi Kitab Tafsir: Menyuarakan Teks Yang Bisu* (Yogyakarta: Teras, 2004).

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