

**MUSLIM QUR'ĀNIC  
INTERPRETATION TODAY**

**MEDIA, GENEALOGIES  
AND INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES**

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## PROLOGUE: THE CONTESTED QUR'ĀN

In 2005, Muḥammad Sayf al-Dīn Ṭāhā, an Egyptian accountant working in a Gulf state, submitted a six-volume Qur'ānic commentary, or *tafsīr*, to the Islamic Research Council of al-Azhar, the highest Sunni institution of Egypt, in order to obtain approval for publication. He had taken approximately twenty years to write it. The result consisted of 28,000 lines of verse because it was a *tafsīr* in poetry – a format for which, Sayf al-Dīn believed, the time was ripe. The following is one of the only two short samples that became known to the public because an Egyptian magazine reported on the case of this *tafsīr* in 2009.<sup>1</sup> It is the commentary on Q. 9:93:

إِنَّمَا السَّبِيلُ عَلَى الَّذِينَ يَسْتَأْذِنُونَكَ وَهُمْ أَغْنِيَاءُ رَضُوا بِأَنْ يَكُونُوا مَعَ الْخَوَالِفِ وَطَبَعَ اللَّهُ عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ (٩٣)

(93) The ones open to blame are those who asked you for exemption despite their wealth, and who preferred to be with those who stay behind. God has sealed their hearts; they do not understand.

On this verse, Sayf al-Dīn Ṭāhā wrote:

على من كانوا قوماً موسرينا	ولكن الحساب وكل وقت
فياويل لهم من خائرنا	أتوا يستأذنونك فى قعود
لهم خسئوا وصاروا مدمرينا	أرادوا مع النساء يطول مكث
فما كانوا لخير قابلينا	على قلب لهم إنا طبعنا
من التنزيل يوماً مبصرينا	وما كانوا لأضواء ونور

God's judgment comes down on those with might  
who, despite all their riches, refuse to fight.  
Coming to you, for exemption they plead.  
Woe unto them, they are weaklings indeed!  
A long life they wanted and with the women to stay,  
but their lives were destroyed; they were chased away.  
Their hearts we have tightly sealed,  
the good tidings remain from them concealed.  
And revelation with its light  
is forever hidden from their sight.<sup>2</sup>

It took the Islamic Research Council four years to come to a decision which, after some initial dissent, was negative and upheld by a court. After that, the author seems to have made no further attempt to publish this work or any other. The reasons the Council members gave for rejecting the book varied, but none of the *'ulamā'*, or religious scholars, involved ever claimed that the content of the *tafsīr* was theologically problematic, let alone heretical. Rather, they criticised the bad style of poetry which uses a traditional Arabic metre.<sup>3</sup> The concluding report used that fact to accuse the author of transforming the Qur'ān's meaning into a superficial and formalistic pattern of metre and rhyme without any artistic value. As such, it deforms and defaces the Qur'ān which amounts to an insult of God. Besides, the reports said, the book does not constitute a work of *tafsīr* and should therefore not be called that because it does not contribute anything to the understanding of the Qur'ān's meaning.<sup>4</sup> This assessment is slightly surprising in view of the fact that even a translation adds to understanding the Qur'ān's meaning and is therefore called *tafsīr* in many non-Arabic contexts, for example in Southeast Asia.

In 2016, the well-established Egyptian journalist Muḥammad al-Bāz took up the case as the twenty-first episode of his Ramadan series *The Qur'ān in Egypt*. The series was published in the print and online newspaper *al-Bawāba*, for which he served as editor-in-chief, and shortly thereafter all thirty episodes were printed as a book under the same title.<sup>5</sup> All in all, the series strove to write a comprehensive story of the modern and contemporary interpretation of the Qur'ān in Egypt. Some of its components are surprising and unusual, such as the chapters on the interpretation of the Qur'ān through music and film. What is striking about this book, though, is not only the unconventional, but extremely plausible attempt to situate the Qur'ān in the specific context of a modern nation state, but also the eminently political character of the narrative. Al-Bāz is clearly not in love with the Muslim Brotherhood, but writing at a time at which the Muslim Brotherhood was completely banned in Egypt, he is much more concerned with al-Azhar. Already in the title of the third episode, he asks: 'Why are the Azhar shaykhs afraid of a contemporary interpretation of the Qur'ān?'

Indeed, Sayf al-Dīn Ṭāhā's case raises many questions that point to the importance of notions of authority and legitimacy in writing about the Qur'ān. Would the work have been deemed acceptable if it had been written in masterful poetry? Would it have been approved if the author had belonged to the *'ulamā'* or would they have excluded him from their ranks? Would he have fared better if he had not called his work *tafsīr*? What, then, are the boundaries of *tafsīr*? What conditions do a work and its author have to fulfil in order to be allowed to carry that title? And, finally, how would

any of this have been different if it had happened in another country with different structures of religious authority?

In the case of the failed poet-exegete, al-Bāz surmises that there are several underlying reasons for the opposition of the shaykhs, other than a disapproval of bad poetry: a general fear of innovation; an attempt to prevent anyone from outside the field of the *'ulamā'* to encroach upon their territory, especially in unconventional ways that might raise attention; and also the fear that the Qur'ān and poetry could in any way be associated with each other while the Qur'ān clearly states that it is not the word of a poet (Q. 36:69, 69:41). That fear is indeed a powerful motive. It had similar consequences for an Indonesian Qur'ān translator whose verse-by-verse typesetting choices were deemed too close to poetry by the religious establishment.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, rhymed Qur'ān translations are published and sold in Turkey.<sup>7</sup> This has much to do with the fact that their authors come from religious groups that are outside the field of Sunni orthodoxy anyway. They also skilfully deploy the powerful Turkish-nationalist discourse as a legitimising factor.

The case of Sayf al-Dīn, the thwarted poet, and al-Bāz's portrayal of the Qur'ān in Egypt clearly show the importance of local power structures to the interpretation of the Qur'ān and to the dissemination of such interpretations. Sometimes, even transnational power structures are invoked when the legitimacy of an interpretive approach is contested. Thus, in 2012, two Saudi-Salafi websites erroneously reported that the rhymed *tafsīr* was finally going to be printed – with money from Saudi Arabia's Shi'i arch-enemy, Iran.<sup>8</sup>

The *'ulamā'* are still a powerful status group. But they can only exert that power if the state or the society they live in grant them the right to do so; if their pronouncements carry some weight and are considered authoritative expressions of Islam either by the government or by substantial segments of the population. Even when that is the case, though – and it most certainly is in Egypt – it is becoming harder for any type of religious establishment to control the plurality of approaches to the Qur'ān. The field is globalising, and if one country does not offer the liberty to write certain things about the Qur'ān, others will do so. It is increasingly difficult for governments to bar access to such ideas, not least because of the internet. Thus, pluralisation is happening, often because of external pressures. Certain topics, such as global human rights discourses, might be dominant enough to exert pressure to seek justification for Qur'ānic statements that do not seem to conform to them; and specific groups exert pressure in order to achieve such conformity. It is this complex web of power structures and tensions, local as well as global, that this book seeks to elucidate.



## NOTES

1. Al-Sibā'ī, 'Qaṣā'id shi'r'.
2. Al-Sibā'ī, 'Qaṣā'id shi'r'; Bāz, *Al-Qur'ān fī Miṣr*, 190.
3. The excerpt follows the model of a classical Arabic *qaṣīda* where each verse consists of two halves, the second of which carries the rhyme. The metre used is *wāfīr*.
4. Al-Bāz, *Al-Qur'ān fī Miṣr*, 191–193.
5. Al-Bāz, *Al-Qur'ān fī Miṣr*.
6. Rahman, 'The Controversy around H. B. Jassin'.
7. See page 202, 'Negotiating the boundaries of Islamicness through the Qur'ān: Ali Adil Atalay 'Vaktidolu' (b. 1936, Turkey) on Q. 2:21'.
8. Al-Barbarī, 'Īrān takhtariq al-Azhar al-sharīf'; al-'Anqā', 'Īrān takhtariq al-Azhar al-sharīf'.