Salafi Tafsirs: Textualist and Authoritarian?

Izza Rohman[1]

Absract

This essay looks at some Salafi tafsirs to examine the extent to which their interpretation ignores or rejects both the socio-historical context of revelation and that of interpretation, and the extent to which their interpretation denies any possibility to understand the text differently. Taking the ḥijāb verses as a case study, the author shows similarities and differences between the three tafsirs under scrutiny in terms of their "textualism" and "authoritarianism".

Keywords: Salafi tafsir, textualism, authoritarianism, women's issues.

Introduction

In his works, Khaled Abou El Fadl has many times characterized contemporary Wahhabi-Salafis' reading of Islamic (legal) texts as "authoritarian" and "ahistorical" (as well as other attributes he also mentions).[2] His criticism, however, is based on a thorough analysis of the fatwas—many of which are related to the issue of women in Islam—issued by organizations and scholars representing the group—whose discourse to Abou El Fadl has been to a large extent prevalent in many contemporary Muslim societies, even among Muslims in America. The fatwas he examines themselves are far more often based on a certain understanding of hadith, rather than on a particular

---

[2] See his books, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001) and *And God Knows the Soldier: The Authoritative and Authoritarian in Islamic Discourse* (Maryland: University Press of America, 2001). He defines "authoritarianism" as "the act of 'locking' or captivating the Will of Divine or the will of the text into a specific determination, and then presenting this determination as inevitable, final and conclusive," (*Speaking in God's Name*, 93) or "a hermeneutical methodology that usurps and subjugates the mechanisms of producing meaning from a text to highly subjective and selective reading." (*Speaking in God's Name*, 5). Basically it is an act of closing an open text (the Qur'an), of presenting the text as having a single meaning.

interpretation of the Qur'an. Can thus Abou El Fadl's thesis be applied to Salafis' Qur'anic exegeses? Is an authoritarian and ahistorical kind of interpretation also reflected in their tafsirs?

With regard to Salafis' Qur'anic interpretation in particular, some scholars have come to similar conclusions but in varied terms. Abdullah Saeed has in a few words categorized them as clearly part of "textualism" or "literalism".[3] Following Saeed, but with a broader case of interpretation of Islamic texts, Adis Dudireja concluded that their *manhaj* (method) is "literalist" or at best "semi-contextualist".[4] Similarly, Quintan Wiktorowicz, a political analyst specializing in Wahhabism, characterizes Salafis' approach to the Qur'an as heavily reflecting an "opposition to rationalism"—demonstrated for instance in their interpretation of *āyāt al-ṣifāt* (verses on God's attributes) and *tawḥīd*-related verses.[5] However, while they commonly identify the Salafis as Wahhabis, none of these scholars have analyzed their approach to the Qur'an through a close look at (modern) Salafi tafsirs—which are absent in their bibliographies. To what extent then can Salafi tafsirs be categorized "textualist" or "literalist" and "opposing rationalism"?

This paper seeks to look at Salafis' (i.e. Wahhabis')[6] reading of Islamic

---

[3]See Abdullah Saeed *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 3. He identifies three broad approaches in relation to Qur'anic interpretation (particularly its ethico-legal content) in the modern world: textualist, semi-textualist and contextualist. In this regard he defines "textualism" as "interpretation that relies on text and tradition *and* at the same time approaches the question of interpretation strictly from a linguistic perspective," and "that ignores or rejects the socio-historical context of the Qur'an in interpretation." (*Interpreting the Qur'an*, 50).

[4]See Adis Dudireja, *Constructing a Religiously Ideal "Believer" and "Woman" in Islam: Neo-traditional Salafi and Progressive Muslims' Methods of Interpretation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 191-192.

[5]Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29 (2006), 207-239.

[6]While the term "Salafi" is not only used in variant meanings by scholars but also contested among those who call themselves Salafis, here the term would be used only to mean the Wahhabis (a term commonly used by non-Salafis or non-Wahhabis but they themselves rarely do so and mostly dislike to do so), particularly the "purists" (who does not form or involve in any local or transnational political movement). The word "salafi" is derived from the word "salaf" which means "predecessor". The term "al-salaf" is mostly used to denote the first Muslim generation (until the period of *tābi'ūn* or *tābi' al-tābi'īn*), and is often affixed by the word *ṣāliḥ*; *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, which literally means the "righteous predecessors". The term "Salafi" or "Salafiya" therefore means those who follow the path of *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* as model examples. The term "Salafi" is often used by contemporary scholars to only mean the Wahhabis [see for instance Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement"; Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*; and Dudireja, *Constructing a Religiously Ideal "Believer" and "Woman" in Islam*], but is also equally

texts through their Qur'anic exegeses written by three scholars from rather different generations—two of whom surely lived decades earlier than the Salafis to whom Abou El Fadl addresses his critiques. The three Salafi tafsirs involved here are: 1) *Taysīr al-Karīm al-Raḥmān* by 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Nāṣir al-Sa'dī (1889-1956),[7] 2) *Aḍwā' al-Bayān* by Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī (1907-1973),[8] and 3) *Aysar al-Tafāsīr* by Abū Bakr Jābir al-Jazā'irī (1921-).[9] These three tafsirs are arguably the most popular tafsirs written by (modern)

---

often used to include the Wahhabis and other variants of Salafism [see for instance Abou El Fadl, *And God Knows the Soldier* and *Speaking in God's Name*], and is sometimes used to refer to non-Wahhabi Salafism, either the modernists [see for instance Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007) and Massimo Campanini, *The Qur'an: The Basics*, translated by Oliver Leaman (London & New York: Routledge, 2007)] or to a much lesser extent the Ikhwanis or similar Islamists. It is important to note that one should not be confused by the term "Salafi" (or "Salafism") in its contemporary usage and the term "Salafiya" (sometimes simply "Salafi" or "Salafism") which is sometimes still used to refer to the earlier movement of the Muslim modernists like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad 'Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida. For a brief history (and anatomy) of Wahhabism, see for instance Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft*, 45-94; and Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement".

[7]Al-Sa'dī was the only Salafi exegete of Saudi origin among the three scholars discussed here. He was born and buried in 'Unayzah in the Qasim Province of Saudi Arabia. He was among the influential teachers of Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-'Uthaymin (1925-2001), one of the most influential Salafi scholars who reportedly delivered lectures in the Masjid al-Haram, Mecca, for over thirty five years. *Taysīr al-Karīm al-Raḥmān* is said to be the most famous among not less than a dozen of his works. For his brief biography, see his tafsir, *Taysīr al-Karīm al-Raḥmān fī Tafsīr Kalām al-Mannān* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2005), 11-13.

[8]Al-Shinqiti (not to be confused by another al-Shinqīṭī who was the teacher of al-Sa'dī or other equally prominent scholars named al-Shinqīṭī) was a Mauritanian scholar but later resided in Saudi after performing *ḥajj* in 1367 AH. He reportedly completed teaching tafsir in Masjid al-Nabawi twice. Initially a follower of Maliki madhhab, he was the teacher of some of the most influential Salafi figures like the former mufti of Saudi, 'Abd al-'Azīz Bin Bāz (1909-1999), and a radical figure, Ḥammūd al-'Uqlā al-Shu'aybī (1925-2002)—who was also said to be one of Abū Bakr al-Jazā'irī's teacher. See for instance Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", 236. In *Aḍwā' al-Bayān*, his masterpiece, al-Shinqīṭī himself does not interpret the whole of the Qur'an, but he finishes at al-Mujādalah [58]: 22. The rest included in the last two volumes was done by his disciple, 'Atiyah Muhammad Salim, with Bin Bāz's encouragement. For al-Shinqīṭī's short biography, see his tafsir, *Aḍwā' al-Bayān fī Iḍāḥ al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), vol. 1, 9-26.

[9]Al-Jazā'irī was an Algerian scholar who later resided in Saudi. A prolific scholar, al-Jaza'iri was initially well-known for his *Minhāj al-Muslim*, which has been translated into many languages—Urdu, French and Indonesian among others. *Aysar al-Tafāsīr* is among his latest works and the most voluminous.

Salafi scholars.[10] Their popularity among Salafis themselves is perhaps only exceeded by such tradition-based tafsirs as *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm* by Ibn Kathīr (which follows the principles and methods of tafsir outlined by his teacher, Ibn Taymīyah, a figure labeled as a "salafi par excellence")[11] and *Jāmi' al-Bayān* by Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (a tafsir Ibn Taymīyah recommends most).[12]

In addition to revealing some of the characteristics of Salafis' approach to the Qur'an embodied in these three tafsirs, I will—for the purpose of this study—take the case of the interpretation of Qur'anic ethico-legal verses related to women's issues, particularly two interrelated issues of the rule of gazing at "unrelated" women (*al-naẓar ilā al-ajnabīyah*) and the segregation (*'adam al-ikhtilāṭ*) between male adults and female adults. The choice to limit this to women's issues is partly because the so-called Wahhabis has often been regarded as imposing harsh restrictions on women, and also because Abou El Fadl and Dudireja have come to the conclusion this study wants to verify, that the   Salafi/Wahhabi   approach   is   largely   "authoritarian"   and "literalist/textualist", mainly based on an examination of the fatwas or Salafi scholars' views regarding women's issues. My choice to focus on the issues of gazing at the *ajnabīyah* and gender segregation is primarily due to the fact that these are among a number of issues where strict rules on them are very often ascribed to Salafis—though some of the traditionalists, another group which is also considered a proponent of textualism, might also advocate similarly rigid stances. While so-called traditionalists are considered to deal with the issues in a less rigid manner, Salafis—who are initially more distinctive in terms of their *'aqīdah* rather than in terms of their *fiqh*—are repeatedly said to insist on strict rulings on (seeing) women's *'awrah* (part of their body which should be covered which, according to Salafis, happens to be their whole body except for the eyes or even one of the eyes) and strict male-female segregation.[13]

Their standpoints on both issues are often justified by a certain

---

[10]There is another contemporary Salafi tafsir written by a popular figure, 'Ā'iḍ al-Qarnī entitled, *al-Tafsīr al-Muyassar* (Riyad: al-'Ubaykan, 2007) but this tafsir is too concise to be included in my analysis.

[11]See Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm* (Mu'assasah Qurṭubah, n.d.), 6-19.

[12]See Ibn Taymīyah, *Muqaddimah fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1997), 110.

[13]This assumption seemingly needs further clarification since strict gender segregation and rigid rules on female *'awrah* might extend Salafi and non-Salafi boundaries. See its indication for instance in Muḥammad 'Alī al-Ṣābūnī, *Tafsīr Āyāt al-Aḥkām min al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 1999), vol. 2, 109-112, 254. However, here it suffices to say that Salafis are among renowned advocates of strict legal rulings on these matters.

understanding of the "*āyāt al-ḥijāb wa al-naẓar*" (verses on partition and gazing), i.e. al-Nūr [24]: 30-31 and al-Aḥzāb [33]: 53 (sometimes also 59). Therefore, here I will focus (though not exclusively) on how these verses are interpreted in the three tafsirs under scrutiny. In analyzing their interpretation, I will mainly employ two criteria derived respectively from Saeed's definition of textualism and Abou El Fadl's definition of authoritarianism,[14] namely: 1) the extent to which an interpretation ignores or rejects both the socio-historical context of revelation and that of interpretation, and 2) the extent to which an interpretation "closes the open text", meaning that it denies any possibility to understand the text differently and implies that the text means only "Y" though it has been understood by others to mean "X" or "Z". This in some way means that here I will chiefly focus on the Salafi exegetes' treatment of the "textuality" of the Qur'an and their treatment of differences in interpretation.

By doing so, I am at risk of merely imposing an outsiders' perspective on Salafi tafsirs. Therefore, in an effort to be more balanced, I will seek to address the problem of ignorance/attentiveness of the context of the Qur'an and the problem of authoritarian/authoritative interpretation through what I consider as their relevant principles of interpretation so as to understand a certain way of thinking which might lie behind their textual/contextual and authoritarian/authoritative approach to the Qur'an. Accordingly, before discussing their interpretation on "*ḥijāb* verses", a methodological review of the three tafsirs will be outlined below to shed light on the nature of Salafi hermeneutics, particularly in connection with Salafis' views on the "context" of the Qur'an and the "plurality of interpretation".

Taysīr al-Karīm al-Raḥmān, *Aḍwā' al-Bayān*, *Aysar al-Tafāsīr* and Salafi Approaches to the Qur'an

It might have been often assumed that Salafis generally give preferentiality to the style of what so-called *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr/tafsīr bi al-riwāyah* ("tradition-based Qur'an exegesis")—mainly because it is presumably far from innovations (*bida'*), rather than that of *tafsīr bi al-ra'y/tafsīr bi al-dirāyah* ("reason based Qur'an exegesis"). However, this assumption seems to be not totally correct. Among the three Salafi tafsirs, only *Aḍwā' al-Bayān*, a six-volume tafsir,[15] can be undoubtedly classified a *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr*, especially one that generally follows the steps recommended by Ibn Taymīyah

---

[14]See the definitions in footnote 1 and 2.

[15]It is the edition printed by Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, Beirut. *Aḍwā'* was previously printed in nine volumes by Dār 'Ālam al-Fawā'id, Mecca.

and Ibn Kathīr.[16] Quite the opposite, *Taysīr al-Karīm al-Raḥmān*, a one thousand and more-page tafsir,[17] and *Aysar al-Tafāsīr*, a six-volume tafsir, are more similar to *tafsīr bi al-ra'y* in style, the former being comparable to *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī as well as two much shorter contemporary tafsirs, *al-Tafsīr al-Wajīz* by Wahbah al-Zuḥaylī and *al-Tafsīr al-Muyassar* by another Salafi author 'Ā'iḍ al-Qarnī, while the latter being to some extent comparable to *Tafsīr al-Marāghī* by Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī but shorter. Of course, Salafis are among Muslims who strongly insist on the need to avoid *ra'y* (baseless personal opinion) in interpreting the Qur'an, and even consider tafsir with pure *ra'y* illegitimate, but if one defines *tafsīr bi al-ra'y* as the one that does not display *riwāyāt* (narrations) in the interpretation, then both *Taysīr* and *Aysar* can be categorized so. Nonetheless, it is inaccurate to say that al-Sa'dī and al-Jazā'irī very much employ rational thinking in interpreting the Qur'an.

While al-Sa'dī's *Taysīr* is best described as a *tafsīr ijmālī* ("concise sequential commentary")[18] and al-Shinqīṭī's *Aḍwā'* is clearly a *tafsīr taḥlīlī* ("analytical sequential tafsir"), al-Jazā'irī's *Aysar* is somewhere in between. Therefore, *Taysīr* and *Aysar* to a lesser extent, seem to reflect more a premise Salafis hold that the messages of the Qur'an are clear enough, and that understanding the Qur'an is not really a complicated problem—which for one thing implies that there is no need for long-winded interpretation (*iṭnāb* or *taṭwīl*). Both tafsirs represent a broader modern trend of providing a "made-easy" and "made-simple" (*sahl muyassar*) tafsir.[19] This "selling-point" is implied in the titles of both and clearly stated in the introductions to each.[20] Given the way Salafis see the clarity of Qur'anic messages, some scholars like Wiktorowicz have even suggested that for Salafis, "there is really no such thing

---

[16]That is to find explanation (tafsir) firstly from the Qur'an, then from hadith, and then from the opinions of the companions of the Prophet and then from the opinions of the successors (*tābi'un*). See Ibn Taymīyah, *Muqaddimah fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, 84-109, his *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, n.d.), vol. 2, 231-244, and Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, 6-19.

[17]It is reported (in the introduction to the book) that it was once printed in five volumes.

[18]See for instance Fahd ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Rūmī, *Buḥūth fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr wa Manāhijihi* (Maktabat al-Tawbah, n.d.), 59-60.

[19]Other tafsirs within this trend include al-Qarnī's *al-Tafsīr al-Muyassar*, al-Zuḥaylī's *al-Tafsīr al-Wajīz* and 'Alī al-Ṣābūnī's *Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr*.

[20]See introductions to *Taysīr* by 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn 'Aqīl and Muḥammad al-Ṣāliḥ al-'Uthaymin in *Taysīr*, 5-7; and al-Jazā'irī's introduction to his *Aysar al-Tafāsīr li Kalām al-'Alīy al-Kabīr* (Medina: Maktabat al-'Ulūm wa al-Ḥikam, 2003), vol. 1, 4-6.

as interpretation".[21]

On the other hand, *Aḍwā'* is more similar to many of the voluminous classical tafsirs in which extended discussions on certain topics—as well as quotations of *sha'ā'ir* or *shawāhid 'arābīyah* (Arabic poems)—might sometimes interrupt the author's interpretation. Nevertheless, among the three, *Aḍwā'* is perhaps the best example of a Salafi tafsir built on the premise that the Qur'an is self-explanatory—a premise that Salafis also strongly hold. While it largely follows the tradition of interpretive methodology endorsed by Ibn Taymiyah, *Aḍwā'* is quite different from the tafsirs of Ibn Kathīr or Ibn Qayyim (two prominent disciples of Ibn Taymīyah) in that it is mostly based on an intensive application of the methodology of interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an itself, rather than heavily relying on hadith like Ibn Kathīr's tafsir. *Aḍwā'* is even arguably one of the most intensive tafsirs in terms of the application of cross-referential hermeneutics.[22]

The three Salafi authors, however, unanimously follow the spirit of Ibn Taymīyah's "anti-*ta'wīl*" when dealing with "ambiguous verses" (*āyāt mutashābihāt*).[23] Al-Jazā'irī states in his introduction to his tafsir that it follows *manhaj al-salaf* when interpreting verses related to *'aqīdah* and *asmā' wa al-ṣifāt*.[24] Muḥammad al-'Uthaymin says the same with regard to al-Sa'dī's tafsir.[25] Al-Shinqīṭī himself wrote a book arguing against the existence of *majāz* ("allegorical/metaphorical" expressions) in the Qur'an, *Man' Jawāz al-Majāz fī al-Munazzal li al-Ta'abbud wa al-I'jāz*, which is attached in the last volume of *Aḍwā'*.[26] This "anti-*ta'wīl*" attitude is reflected for instance in their interpretation (or rather: lack of interpretation) of *al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa'ah*

---

[21]Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy", 210. For a comparable statement see Dudireja, *Constructing a Religiously Ideal*, 191.

[22]My preliminary research comparing his tafsirs with other tafsirs known for their serious attention to *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān* reveal that *Aḍwā'* is the most focused in citing relevant verses in other parts of the Qur'an while interpreting a certain word, verse or group of verses. Taking the case of suras al-Fātiḥah and Qāf as samples, *Aḍwā'* cites on average 8.9 times on each page, while al-Rāzī's *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* cites 3.4 times/page, al-Qāsimī's *Maḥāsin al-Ta'wīl* cites 1.8 times/page, Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm* cites 1.7 times/page, and al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī's *al-Mīzān* cites 1.3 times/page.

[23]For the discussions on how al-Sa'dī and al-Shinqīṭī interpret *āyāt al-ṣifāt*, read Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mighrāwī, *al-Mufassirūn bayna al-Ta'wīl wa al-Ithbāt fī Āyāt al-Ṣifāt* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2000), 694-705.

[24]Al-Jazā'irī, *Aysar al-Tafāsīr*, vol. 1, 6.

[25]Al-Sa'dī, *Taysīr al-Karīm al-Raḥmān*, 7.

[26]See al-Shinqīṭī, *Aḍwā' al-Bayān*, vol 6, 389-410. The belief whether or not *majāz* exists in the Qur'an surely affect the way exegetes interpret *ṣifāt*-related verses.

(initial letters in the beginning of suras).[27]

While for Salafis following the *manhaj* is of utmost importance to avoiding any misunderstanding of what God means, for critics it would mean a blunt opposition to rationalism. They have argued that Salafis adhere to the text to a point where they consider the application of human intellect and logic (rationalism) to the Qur'an to be dangerous. "Any time humans attempt to apply their own logic or methods of reasoning … they open the way to human desire, distortion, and deviancy. Approaches that are guided by human logic will necessarily fall foul of human desire, which will lead to the selective and biased extrapolation of religious evidence to support human interests rather than religious truth."[28]

In addition to their similarities in their treatment of *'aqīdah* verses, to a certain degree the three tafsirs are equally concerned with *aḥkām* verses. Al-Shinqīṭī himself states that one of his objectives in *Aḍwā'* is to provide explanations of *āyāt al-aḥkām* in the Qur'an. A close look at *Taysīr* and *Aysar* will reveal a similar conclusion. With regard to *Aysar*, it is understandable that one of al-Jazā'irī's aims is for the readers to focus more on how to implement the Qur'an.[29]

Nevertheless, when addressing differences of opinion/interpretation, the three tafsirs have different attitudes. While *Aysar* and *Taysīr* consciously avoid mentioning *ikhtilāf* among exegetes, *Aḍwā'* frequently mentions different opinions, particularly with regard to *āyāt al-aḥkām*—though the author seems to always mention what he regards as the strongest of opinions. For the authors of *Aysar* and *Taysīr*, the intentional avoidance of mentioning differences in

---

[27]Al-Sa'dī simply mentions that the safest is "*al-sukūt*" (silencing) what it might mean and be sure that there exists a *ḥikmah* (wisdom) we do not know, or simply mentions that no one knows its meaning except for Allah, or simply makes no comments on those letters. Similarly, al-Jazā'irī simply suggests that such letters are a part of *mutashābih* of which only God who knows its meaning, or simply mentions that the *salaf's* school regarding such letters is to say, "God knows its intended meaning." In the case of *ṭāhā* (Ṭāhā [20]: 1), however, al-Jazā'irī—following al-Ṭabarī—says that it means "O man", an opinion that is disapproved by al-Shinqīṭī. Al-Shinqīṭī himself rarely gives any comment on those letters, but explains his preference while interpreting Hūd [11]: 1. Implementing the method of *istiqrā' al-Qur'ān*, he follows the conclusion of al-Rāzī, Ibn Kathīr and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah that such letters are an indication that the subsequent discussion in a sura, where those letters are mentioned, deals with the inimitability (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'an. See al-Shinqīṭī, *Aḍwā' al-Bayān*, vol. 2, 5-7. The function of these letters as a sign of *i'jāz* has been discussed in more detail by 'Ā'isha Bint al-Shāti' in her *al-I'jāz al-Bayānī li al-Qur'ān* and *al-Tafsīr al-Bayānī li al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*.

[28]Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy", 210.

[29]Al-Jaza'iri, *Aysar al-Tafāsīr*, vol. 1, 6.

interpretation (*ighfāl al-khilāfāt al-tafsīrīyah* in al-Jazā'irī's term or *tajannub dhikr al-khilāf* in al-'Uthaymīn's word while introducing al-Sa'dī's tafsir) is another "selling-point" of both tafsirs, and seems to have something to do with the perceived need for "uniting Muslims in a unified, correct and good Islamic thinking" (*jam' al-muslimīn 'alā fikr islāmī muwaḥḥid ṣā'ib salīm*).[30] For Salafis, what is considered "correct" when looking at differences of interpretation is usually the one that is exemplified by exegetes among the Companions or the Successors—whom they call *jumhūr al-mufassirīn min al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*. In the case of al-Jazā'irī, the "selected" opinion from existing different interpretations is usually, as he himself states, relied upon al-Ṭabarī's preference.[31]

It might often be argued that in terms of the truth one can achieve through interpretation, Salafis view that there is an objective meaning that we can take hold of, and there is only one legitimate religious interpretation. It has also been argued that for Salafis Islamic pluralism does not exist, and if it seems exist, it should be avoided.[32] In critics' words, Salafis approach the authoritative text to a point that they identify with and represent the text or the singular truth revealed by the text; they consider their understanding as the only "correct" one and reject any possible meaning other than their understanding. However, if one looks at al-Shinqīṭī's tafsir in particular, this perceived single legitimate, objective interpretation is achieved in a more argumentative manner. Al-Shinqīṭī heavily relies on what the Qur'an tells in other verses to determine what is intended by a certain word or phrase in a particular verse. His manner of interpretation is perhaps more "textualist" but less "authoritarian". Meanwhile in the case of al-Jazā'irī's tafsir, this "single legitimate" is achieved through reliance on a selected "authoritative" *salaf*. In the name of practicality and the unity of *umma*, he transforms what the critics would consider as an "un-authoritarian" way of interpretation into what they would consider as an "authoritarian" way of interpretation, a negligence of multiple understandings and the complexity of meaning. If his interpretation is to be considered "authoritarian", one can now learn how such an "authoritarian" reading is constructed through not only a historical leap, but also a selective manner—limiting to one among different *salaf*'s interpretations—which they regard mainly contain *ikhtilāf tanawwu'* (corresponding difference), and not *ikthilāf*

---

[30]Al-Jaza'iri, *Aysar al-Tafāsīr*, vol. 1, 6. Al-Sa'dī, *Taysīr al-Karīm al-Raḥmān*, 7.
[31]Al-Jaza'iri, *Aysar al-Tafāsīr*, vol. 1, 6.
[32]See for instance Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy", 207.

taḍāḍ (contradictory difference).[33]

Hermeneutics in the three tafsirs is largely "text-centered", rather than "reader-centered", and "language-oriented" rather than "discourse-oriented".[34] In their text-centered hermeneutics, remains a very limited attention to the socio-historical context of the Qur'an—as is the case with many tafsirs. Apart from mentioning *asbāb al-nuzūl*, there is hardly any reference both to the past and present contexts. This "textualist" tendency can to some extent be attributed to the principles tafsirs Salafis consider to be important in order not to misunderstand what the Qur'an means. Al-Sa'dī's method of interpretation itself is noticeably based on the principles—many of which deal with deriving "general" Qur'anic rulings with linguistic analysis—outlined by Ibn Qayyim which readers can read in the beginning, and is partly summarized at the end of al-Sa'dī's book.[35] A notable emphasis on the "generality/universality" of the text is also apparent in al-Shinqīṭī's tafsir—and that of al-Jazā'irī as well except that the latter is often satisfied with simply following the conclusion of al-Ṭabarī while al-Shinqīṭī focuses more on the application of his own interpretive methodology.

The Rulings on Gazing at Women and Male-Female Segregation in Salafi Tafsirs

The three tafsirs under discussions by and large come to the same conclusion regarding these two issues: 1) that gazing at any part of the *ajnabīyah's* body is forbidden, and 2) that there should be no free mixing (*ikhtilāṭ*) between male and female. Their argument principally is this: free mixing is prohibited since gazing at a woman (as well as talking to a woman face to face) is prohibited, and gazing at a woman is prohibited since all parts of her body (except for her eyes) are considered *'awrah* (private part/shame of sex) which should remain veiled; and gazing at *'awrah* is prohibited since gazing might results in "dirt heart/a dirty heart", "lust" (*shahwah*) and even "adultery" (*zinā*).[36]

---

[33]How Salafis see differences among *salafs* is very much influenced by this distinction made by Ibn Taymīyah between *ikhtilāf tanawwu'* and *ikhtilāf taḍāḍ*. See his *Muqaddimah fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, 36; *Iqtiḍā' al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jaḥīm* (al-Majd al-Tijārīyah, n.d.), 37-39; and *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, vol. 2, 196.

[34]For this distinction between "language" and "discourse" derived from the linguist and literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov, see Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 106-107.

[35]See al-Sa'dī, *Taysīr al-Karīm al-Raḥmān*, 14-20, 1043-1046.

[36]Both the conclusion and argument are not actually uncommon among Muslim exegetes. See some comparable conclusions and arguments (but sometimes with minor

Even though our focus here is on the way they interpret the *ḥijāb* verses, rather than on the conclusion they make itself, here one would pay attention to their steps to come to the conclusion while interpreting the verses. There are some terms or concepts in al-Nūr [24]: 30-31 and al-Aḥzāb [33]: 53 which are understood as implying that for a male adult (*mumayyiz*), seeing an "unrelated" woman (particularly whose *'awrah* is not totally masked) is forbidden, and that there should be a "veil/curtain" between male and female adults: 1) *ghaḍḍ al-baṣar* (lowering gaze/casting down eyes), 2) *ibdā' al-zīnah* (displaying/showing off adornments), and 3) *(mukhāṭabah) min warā' ḥijāb* (talking from behind a curtain/screen).

As it might be predicted, given their conciseness and tendency to consciously display only one interpretation, even when dealing with differences, *Taysīr* and *Aysar* are more straightforward in highlighting these "clear" instructions in the verses. The author of *Taysīr* understands the first instruction (*ghaḍḍ al-baṣar*) as casting down one's eyes from looking at the *'awrah* and "unrelated" men or women with lust or from similar forbidden looks.[37] He then proceeds with what is meant by *al-zīnah* which for him includes clothes, jewels and all parts of a woman's body, and by the exception in the verse (understood from the phrase *illā mā ẓahara minhā*) which means "their visible clothes". The understanding of *al-zīnah* as including all parts of a woman's body, to al-Sa'dī, is indicated by the sequential instruction of *iḍrāb al-khumūr 'alā al-juyūb* (drawing the veils/headcovers over the bosom). And with regard to talking to a woman *min warā' ḥijāb*, he understands it as implying that looking at a woman is forbidden (*mamnū'*) in any situation (*bi kull ḥāl*). He then explains that the *ḥikmah* of this instruction mentioned in the phrase *dhālikum aṭhar li qulūbikum wa qulūbihinna* (that is purer for your hearts and their hearts) indicates a principle of sharia that *jamī' wasā'il al-sharr wa asbābuhu wa muqadimmātuhu mamnū'ah* (any means, cause and preliminary of wrongdoing is prohibited).

In interpreting these verses, as is the case with the majority of Qur'anic verses, the author of *Taysīr* neither displays any linguistic analysis, mentions any hadith (*riwāyah*) to support his conclusion, quotes any other relevant verses, mentions a principle of *uṣūl al-fiqh* or *uṣūl al-tafsīr*, discusses different socio-cultural contexts, nor mentions any different opinions. This is also the case with the author of *Aysar*—except that he mentions the occasions of

---

difference in terms of the limits of *'awrah*) in Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Anṣārī al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2002), vol. 6, 513-519; 'Alī al-Ṣābūnī, *Tafsīr Āyāt al-Aḥkām*, vol. 2, 109-115, 254.

    [37]Al-Sa'dī, *Taysīr al-Karīm al-Raḥmān*, 615.

revelation (*asbāb nuzūl*) in interpreting 33: 53.[38]

Compared to al-Sa'dī, al-Jazā'irī however at one point has a different understanding of *ibdā' al-zīnah* which means to him revealing parts of a women's body which serve as places of jewelry (*mawāḍi' al-zīnah*), and of the exception, *illā mā ẓahara minhā,* as the one that could not surely be hidden like eyes, palms or clothes. While interpreting the *jilbāb* verse, 33: 59, he goes further to briefly mention that today there is even no need for not covering eyes, since a woman can use a thin layer (*qumāsh raqīq*) to veil her eyes and at the same time can still look at the street she is passing along.[39] In addition, he firmly stresses that 33: 53 in part explains that a man would have a certain degree of "wicked imagination" (*khawāṭir al-sū'*) when talking to and looking at a woman.[40]

On the other hand, the author of *Aḍwā'* does many of the things that the authors of *Taysīr* and *Aysar* do not do. He slightly discusses a linguistic problem by quoting classical exegetes like al-Zamakhsharī and al-Qurṭūbī, as well as quoting some relevant *shi'rs*. He discusses some seemingly contradictory hadiths relevant to understanding of the verses. He mentions many relevant verses useful to better understand the verse under discussion. He mentions some principles of *uṣūl al-tafsīr*. Above all, he mentions different interpretations and subsequently argues against some of the interpretations, but finally declares that *wa Allāh ta'ālā a'lam* (God the Exalted knows best).

While interpreting sura 24: 31,[41] al-Shinqīṭī sums up the different interpretations of *zīnah* into three viewpoints: 1) that it means parts of a woman's body, 2) that it means ornaments/jewels a woman uses for her beauty which do not necessarily require a part of her body to be revealed, 3) that it means ornaments a woman uses for her beauty which necessarily require a part of her body to be revealed.[42]

Al-Shinqīṭī then proceeds with quotations from Ibn Kathīr, al-Qurṭūbī, al-Zamakhsharī and al-Suyūṭī (who mention interpretations of earlier generations) before once again asserting that the differences among *salaf* can be summarized in those three categories, and that for him the second (that *zīnah*

---

[38] Al-Jaza'iri, *Aysar al-Tafāsīr*, vol. 4, 287, 291.

[39] Al-Jaza'iri, *Aysar al-Tafāsīr*, vol. 4, 292.

[40] Al-Jaza'iri, *Aysar al-Tafāsīr*, vol. 4, 289.

[41] Al-Shinqīṭī, *Aḍwā' al-Bayān*, vol. 4, 95-104.

[42] Al-Jazā'irī's position would fit the last, while al-Sa'dī's stance is more a combination between the first and the second. Al-Jazā'irī's position in this case is a bit different from al-Ṭabarī (the exegete he often relies on) who prefer the opinion that the exception of *zīnah* refers to the palms and the face. See Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 2005), vol. 9, 306.

means something outside her body [*khilqah*] which does not necessarily require a part of a woman's body be seen) which implies that *mā ẓahara minhā* means her clothes, is the clearest and most careful stand.[43]

Al-Shinqīṭī then mentions some principles of tafsir (he often uses in his tafsir) which support his argument, namely the identification of *qarīnah fī nafs al-āyah* (evidence in the same verse) and the identification of the most usual intended meaning of the word in the Qur'an (*al-murād min al-lafẓ fī al-ghālib*) to see whether an interpretation is appropriate—two principles that he also uses in interpreting the *ḥijāb* verse in al-Aḥzāb. Implementing both principles, al-Shinqīṭī argues that the first opinion is invalid. The choice is thus now only between the second and the third.

Al-Shinqīṭī then uses the principle of "carefulness" (*iḥtiyāṭ*) to weigh the second over the third. The second, he argues, is farther from the *'illah* (underlying reason) of the prohibition of gazing at a woman (i.e. *fitna* and *ṭuhūr al-qalb*) and thereby more preventive from any disallowed occurrence.

Moreover, again arguing against the first and the third opinions, al-Shinqīṭī asserts the poor quality of a hadith indicating that a woman's *'awrah* excludes her face and palm.

While interpreting 33: 53,[44] al-Shinqiti also uses the two abovementioned principles of tafsir to argue against those who consider that the instruction of talking *min warā' ḥijāb* only applies to the Prophet's wives. The reasoning (*ta'līl*) mentioned in the verse (*dhālikum aṭhar liqulūbihim wa qulūbihinna*) is universal/general and thereby the *ḥukm* (ruling) is also universal/general. He argues that this principle, that the generality of *'illah* means the generality of *ḥukm*, is already well-known in *uṣūl al-fiqh*.

Al-Shinqīṭī further supports his argument with other relevant Qur'anic verses (33: 59, 60 and 24: 31). He explains how these verses support his argument and argues against those who interpret these quoted verses differently. He supports the authoritativeness of his interpretation with that of exegetes among the Companions—who relate the verse with its *sabab nuzūl*—as well as linguistic argumentation.

---

[43]It should be noted that al-Shinqīṭī's stand on the meaning of *zīnah* is different from that of al-Qurṭūbī (an exegete from whom he quotes some narrations) and earlier narration-minded exegetes like al-Ṭabarī (as mentioned in the previous footnote). His view is also a bit different from, but closer to, that of al-Zamakhsharī. See al-Qurṭūbī, *al-Jāmi' li Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, vol. 6, 519; Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqā'iq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl wa 'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta'wīl* (Riyad: Maktabah al-'Ubaykān, 1998), vol. 4, 289-291.

[44]Al-Shinqīṭī, *Aḍwā' al-Bayān*, vol. 4, 287-297.

Again he asserts another similar principle of *uṣūl* which supports the generality of the *ḥijāb* instruction, namely that *khiṭāb al-wāḥid ya'ummu ḥukmuhu jamī' al-ummah, wa lā yakhtaṣṣu al-ḥukm bi dhālika al-mukhāṭab al-wāḥid*, and stresses the soundness of this principle.

He then argues against those who support the specificity of the *ḥijāb* instruction only to the Prophet's wives by employing a logic: if it was only for the Prophet's wives, they surely are good examples (*uswah*) for all Muslim women.[45]

Subsequently al-Shinqīṭī mentions and discusses some hadiths (and quotes their interpretations by Ibn Ḥajar) which support the generality of the instruction as well as supporting the interpretation of *iḍrāb al-khumūr 'alā al-juyūb* as veiling the face. He then feels the need to briefly assert the position of hadith as the *mubayyin* of the Qur'an by quoting a relevant verse. Next he expresses his amazement with those who say that there is neither Qur'anic verse nor hadith which show the obligation for women to veil their face in the presence of "unrelated" men (*ajānib*).

Later al-Shinqīṭī cites some hadiths, stating that a woman is *'awrah,* which support the obligation of *ḥijāb* and discusses some hadiths used by those who argue for the permissibility of women to unveil their face and palms in the presence of the *ajānib.* He shows the poor quality of these hadiths, or otherwise, clarifying that the hadiths seemingly indicating that women did not veil their face during the Prophet's time do not really point out that they unveil their face intentionally.

Finally, de-legitimizing other interpretations, al-Shinqīṭī concludes that God (*al-Shāri'*) prohibits women from unveiling their face before the *ajānib*, since the face is *aṣl al-jamāl* (the source of beauty) and looking at a young beautiful woman's face is a threshold into seduced human desire (*gharīzah bashariyah*) and might lead to unexpected occurrences. Al-Shinqīṭī goes further to briefly explain relevant topics—shaking hands with a woman and touching her body, both of which are not allowed.

Even though al-Shinqīṭī arrives at a dissimilar conclusion, just like al-Sa'dī and al-Jazā'irī, al-Shinqīṭī certainly shows his readers other ways of understanding the verses and provides them with a door to either support or criticize his interpretation.

---

[45]According to al-Shinqīṭī, the majority of Muslim scholars agree that the Prophet's wives had veiled their face even before the revelation of *ḥijāb* verse. Therefore this verse would be meaningless if one understands it as applying only to his wives.

Concluding Remarks

As far as the discussions on some of the issues around *ḥijāb* verses in the three Salafi tafsirs are concerned, one can arrive at a conclusion that these Salafi tafsirs are basically "textualist". Apart from a very limited discussion on *asbāb al-nuzūl* hadiths, they generally ignore the context of revelation and that of interpretation, and instead—in the case of al-Saʿdī's and al-Jazāʾirī's tafsirs—focus on what the verses "textually" or "literally" mean or—like in the case of al-Shinqīṭī's tafsir—focus on providing Qurʾan/hadith/*uṣūl*-based arguments to support this "literal" meaning. At best one could pay much attention to some of what Saeed calls as the "broad context" of the Qurʾan, which also includes the overall content of the Qurʾan,[46] in al-Shinqīṭī's *Aḍwāʾ*.

Nonetheless, though they essentially ignore the socio-historical contexts of the Qurʾan in interpretation, Saeed's complete definition of textualism cannot fully be applied to all of these tafsirs since "*Taysīr*'s and *Aysar*'s textualism" neither overtly reflect much reliance on hadith nor approach the question of interpretation strictly from a linguistic perspective. Their textualism might be better described by another of Saeed's distinctions between the two forms of literalism, namely "soft" literalism and "wooden" literalism,[47] assuming that the latter can aptly describe this kind of textualism.

Above all, this kind of textualism or ignorance of the contexts in Salafi tafsirs might be attributed to their emphasis on the "generality" of the text (*ʿumūmiyyat al-alfāẓ*)—which is very noticeable in the interpretation of *ḥijāb* verses in al-Shinqīṭī's *Aḍwāʾ*. For Salafis, the text is considered to have superiority over the context. As is the case with many textualists, they focus more on "direct meaning" than "indirect meaning",[48] and treat the Qurʾan more as "language" than as "discourse" (language in context).

While *Adwaʾ* might not be fittingly characterized "authoritarian" (at least "less authoritarian") as it shows the readers different interpretations of the text despite arriving at a dissimilar conclusion regarding the prohibition of gazing at an "unrelated" woman's body and the obligation of *ḥijāb*, *Taysīr* and *Aysar* seem to be more exposed to Abou El Fadl's "authoritarian/authoritative"

---

[46]See Saeed, *Interpreting the Qurʾan*, 105. His distinction between "broad context" and "narrow context" is fairly comparable to Bint al-Shati's distinction between *al-siyāq al-ʿāmm* (general context) and *al-siyāq al-khāṣṣ* (specific context).

[47]Saeed, *Interpreting the Qurʾan*, 113. "Soft" literalism emphasizes the literal meaning and makes it the basis for the exploration of the whole meaning of the text, while "wooden" literalism is "a rigid understanding of the literal meaning of the words without any regard to the complexities associated with meaning."

[48]For this distinction, see Saeed, *Interpreting the Qurʾan*, 105.

criticism. Both tafsirs do not allow the reader to know other possible understandings of the interpreted text. There is a high degree of what Saeed terms "rigidity"[49] in these two tafsirs as both attempt to limit the meaning of ethico-legal text to one. Though, this might also be said of *Aḍwā'*—as is also the case with many modern textualists—which still contains rigidity since it—to borrow Saeed's words—"argues against the legitimacy of other possible meanings of the same text."[50]

The "authoritarian" nature in at least some of Salafi tafsirs to some extent might be attributed to their stated aim to "unite" the umma under a single, correct (and "simple") interpretation. However, from the critics's viewpoint, this surely means an act of "locking" the Divine Will. *Wa Allāh a'lam*.[]

Bibliography

Abou El Fadl, Khaled. *And God Knows the Soldier: The Authoritative and Authoritarian in Islamic Discourse*. Maryland: University Press of America, 2001.

--------. *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2001.

--------. *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007.

Campanini, Massimo. *The Qur'an: The Basics*. Translated by Oliver Leaman. London & New York: Routledge, 2007.

Dudireja, Adis. *Constructing a Religiously Ideal "Believer" and "Woman" in Islam: Neo-traditional Salafi and Progressive Muslims' Methods of Interpretation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Ibn Kathīr. *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*. Mu'assasah Qurṭūbah, n.d.

Ibn Taymīyah. *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, n.d.

Ibn Taymīyah. *Iqtiḍā' al-Ṣirāṭ al-Mustaqīm Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jaḥīm*. al-Majd al-Tijārīyah, n.d.

Ibn Taymīyah. *Muqaddimah fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*. Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1997.

---

[49]Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 104.

[50]It might be important to stress that their rigidity is much higher from some exegetes whose tafsirs many Salafis would consider as parts of Salafi tradition, such as al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr. This difference is also apparent in the interpretation of al-Nūr [24]: 30-31. See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, vol. 9, 303-307; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, vol. 10, 212-225.

al-Jazā'irī, Abū Bakr Jābir. *Aysar al-Tafāsīr li Kalām al-'Alīy al-Kabīr*. Medina: Maktabat al-'Ulūm wa al-Ḥikam, 2003.

al-Qarnī, 'Ā'iḍ. *al-Tafsīr al-Muyassar*. Riyad: al-'Ubaykan, 2007.

al-Qurṭūbī, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Anṣārī. *al-Jāmi' li Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*. Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 2002.

al-Mighrāwī, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān. *al-Mufassirūn bayna al-Ta'wīl wa al-Ithbāt fī Āyāt al-Ṣifāt*. Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2000.

al-Rūmī, Fahd ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān. *Buḥūth fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr wa Manāhijihi*. Maktabah al-Tawbah, n.d.

al-Sa'dī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Nāṣir. *Taysīr al-Karīm al-Raḥmān fī Tafsīr Kalām al-Mannān*. Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2005.

al-Ṣābūnī, Muḥammad 'Alī. *Tafsīr Āyāt al-Aḥkām min al-Qur'ān*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 1999.

Saeed, Abdullah. *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach*. London & New York: Routledge, 2006.

al-Shinqīṭī, Muḥammad al-Amīn. *Adwā' al-Bayān fī Iḍāḥ al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān*. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.

al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Jarīr. *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 2005.

Wiktorowicz, Quintan. "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29 (2006): 207-239.

al-Zamakhsharī, Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd. *al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqā'iq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl wa 'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta'wīl*. Riyad: Maktabah al-'Ubaykān, 1998.