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The Development of Thematic Interpretation of the Qur'an in Indonesia: From History to the Shift in Authority

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Abstract

Indonesia has witnessed significant transformations in how scholars approach thematic Qur'anic interpretation, a methodology that has gained widespread acceptance in contemporary Islamic studies. This research investigates these evolutionary changes by examining interpretative practices beyond traditional academic boundaries, addressing a notable scholarly oversight regarding non-university applications of this exegetical approach. The investigation employs critical analytical techniques to explore how interpretative authority and methodological frameworks have transformed across various institutional contexts—governmental bodies, pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), higher education institutions, and individual scholars. The analysis reveals three fundamental transformations reshaping thematic Qur'anic exegesis in Indonesia. A significant expansion in interpretative authority has occurred, with Qur'anic commentary no longer remaining the exclusive domain of traditional religious scholars (mufassir). Contemporary Indonesian exegesis now incorporates perspectives from academics specializing in secular disciplines, democratizing the interpretative landscape. Methodological transformations manifest through multiple dimensions: editorial approaches to framing interpretations have evolved, there has been a strategic reduction in the scope of Qur'anic verses selected for primary analysis, and distinctive interpretative patterns have emerged across different sectors. These changes reflect broader shifts in how scholars engage with sacred texts. The research identifies a fundamental paradigm transformation in conceptualizing the relationship between Qur'anic scripture and contemporary social circumstances. Two contrasting approaches have emerged: one initiated with Qur'anic texts to develop idealistic-normative frameworks, and another beginning with existing social realities to generate applicative-solutive interpretations. This study addresses a significant void in academic literature by documenting these comprehensive changes in thematic exegetical practices, providing a valuable understanding of evolving methodological approaches and their significance for addressing modern Indonesian social challenges.

Keywords: Qur'anic Studies, Contemporary Indonesian Exegesis, Thematic Exegesis.

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INTRODUCTION

The thematic exegetical approach represents a methodological framework for understanding the Qur'an through the compilation and examination of verses that share common subjects or

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topics, rather than following the traditional chronological arrangement found in the muṣḥaf. This interpretive strategy demands rigorous scholarly investigation and the establishment of connections between relevant passages to construct a coherent and organized theological framework. The fundamental purpose of this methodology is to achieve an unbiased interpretation of Qur'anic teachings while addressing contemporary societal challenges and questions (Manzhūr, 1994; Zakariyā, 1991).

Academic researchers across undergraduate (S1), graduate (S2), and doctoral (S3) degree programs have undertaken comprehensive investigations into thematic interpretation methodologies of Qur'anic texts. Their scholarly work encompasses diverse research topics, including studies on "Qur'anic Perspective on Social Justice Practices in Indonesia—Thematic Exegesis" (Manurung, 2023), explorations of "Laughter in al-Qur'an (A Thematic Study with Psychological Approach)" (Ihsan, 2014), and examinations of "Divine Decree in the Qur'anic Perspective: A Sociological Study with Thematic Exegesis Approach" (Hakim 2006), among other related subjects. These academic investigations are documented and accessible through the research repositories of Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia. Additional thematic interpretive frameworks incorporate diverse methodological perspectives, encompassing ecological, gender-based, feminist, and linguistic analytical approaches.

According to M. Nurdin Zuhdi's investigation entitled "The Dynamics of Qur'anic Studies and Exegesis in State Islamic Universities," an analysis of doctoral dissertations focusing on Qur'anic scholarship and interpretation at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, Yogyakarta, spanning from 1984 to 2013, revealed that the thematic approach to exegesis emerged as the predominant methodology. This thematic approach initially surfaced during the second phase of development and established its dominance throughout the third phase, beginning from the early foundational period (1983-1984). The prevalence of this thematic methodology is attributed to various contributing elements, particularly the conviction that it offers a comprehensive framework for addressing modern-day issues (Zuhdi, 2019).

In a separate investigation by Uun Yusufa, titled "Academic Qur'anic Exegesis in Indonesia," findings indicated that despite the existence of diverse methodological approaches within Qur'anic scholarship, the thematic interpretation method continues to maintain its popularity among academic researchers. Yusufa's work highlights the substantial impact of 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Farmāwī's contributions to thematic exegesis at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta, where academic scholars demonstrate varying responses by either adapting or endorsing his methodological framework. Conversely, the application of thematic exegesis at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, Yogyakarta, exhibits greater flexibility and predominance through models that diverge from al-Farmāwī's approach (Yusufa, 2016).

METHOD

This study addresses two interconnected research questions: (1) How has the practice of thematic Qur'anic interpretation (*tafsīr mauḍū'ī*) evolved and transformed within the Indonesian context beyond the boundaries of academic institutions? (2) To what extent have the foundational methodological principles of thematic exegesis, as established in the 1970s,

been maintained, modified, or reduced in contemporary Indonesian interpretive practice across governmental, pesantren, university, and individual scholarly contexts? The studies referenced earlier have primarily focused on examining interpretive practices within university environments, where thematic approaches to interpretation predominate. Nevertheless, Indonesia has not yet seen a comprehensive critical analysis of how thematic interpretation methodologies are actually applied in practice. Given that thematic interpretations are both produced and consumed by scholars and religious intellectuals working beyond university walls as well as those connected to governmental institutions, the scope of authorship extends well beyond Islamic academic institutions alone. From this vantage point, the present research illuminates how thematic exegetical approaches have evolved within the Indonesian context and investigates whether any modifications or diminishments have occurred in their practical application since these methods were first established in the 1970s. The study seeks to determine if there have been any transformations or reductions in how thematic exegetical methodologies are actually implemented.

This research employs a qualitative-historical approach combined with content analysis to examine the development and transformation of thematic Qur'anic interpretation in Indonesia. The primary data sources consist of published thematic exegetical works (*tafsīr mauḍū'ī*) produced across four institutional contexts: governmental bodies (notably the Ministry of Religious Affairs and its Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur'an), Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), Islamic higher education institutions (PTAI), and individual scholars working independently or through digital platforms. Secondary data sources include academic dissertations and theses catalogued in university repositories, scholarly articles in peer-reviewed Islamic studies journals, and existing meta-analytical studies on Indonesian Qur'anic scholarship—such as the works of Zuhdi (2019), Kaltsum et al. (2021), and Azizy et al. (2021)—which provide systematic documentation of interpretive trends over time. The analysis proceeds through three stages: (1) a descriptive-historical mapping of the emergence and spread of thematic interpretation from its Middle Eastern origins to its Indonesian reception; (2) a comparative content analysis of selected representative works across institutional categories, examining dimensions such as authorial authority, verse selection scope, methodological framing, and thematic orientation; and (3) an interpretive synthesis that identifies patterns of methodological continuity and change against the normative standards established by foundational theorists such as al-Farmāwī, al-Saṭṭār, and Muṣṭafā Muslim. This multi-layered approach enables a systematic and verifiable assessment of how thematic exegetical practice has shifted in Indonesian Islamic scholarship.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Historical Perspectives of Thematic Interpretation: From the Middle East to Indonesia

The thematic exegetical approach was developed as a scholarly response to perceived limitations in traditional Qur'anic interpretation methodologies. Academic figures recognized that existing interpretive frameworks contained deficiencies requiring innovative alternatives to address these concerns. Within Sunni scholarly communities, Aḥmad al-Sayyid al-Kūmī is

frequently recognized as the trailblazer who introduced thematic exegetical practices at al-Azhar University in Cairo during the 1970s. Meanwhile, in Shia academic circles, especially those centered in Najaf (Wiley, 1992; Mallat, 2001), Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr is acknowledged as the foundational figure in developing thematic interpretive methods. Through his concluding lecture series, which encompassed roughly 14 sessions, al-Ṣadr examined and criticized the evolution of traditional exegetical works. His innovative proposal established a framework where the interpreter assumes an active, conversational relationship with the Qur'anic text, rather than maintaining a passive stance toward its verses (Al-Ṣadr, 1979).

According to this account, while formal recognition and application of the thematic approach to Qur'anic interpretation emerged among academics during the 1970s with established principles and methodologies, 'Abd Al-Sattār and fellow disciples of al-Kūmī argued that the foundational elements of thematic exegesis had existed much earlier, tracing back to the era of Prophet Muhammad himself. They identified five foundational components that served as precursors to thematic exegesis: initially, Prophet Muhammad's practice of connecting and interpreting relationships between Qur'anic verses (Sa'īd, 1991; al-Khālidi, 2012; al-Suyūṭī, 1974); subsequently, the companions' efforts to collect and reconcile verses that appeared to present contradictions (Ibn Khaldūn, n.d.); additionally, the systematic examination of the Arabic language; furthermore, the development of jurisprudential studies (Muslim, n.d.); and finally, the field of *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* that organized discussions around specific thematic subjects (al-Taimī, 1954; al-Harawī, n.d.; Muslim, n.d.; al-Khālidī, 2012; al-Dhahābī, n.d.).

As the 14th century H or 20th century AD unfolded, the proliferation of tafsir literature accelerated dramatically, yet this expansion paradoxically contributed to intellectual stagnation. Muhammad Abduh (d.1905) emerged as a pivotal reformer in the revival of Islamic intellectual discourse. According to Abduh's perspective, contemporary Qur'anic interpretation must transcend mere repetition of earlier exegetical traditions (*taqlīd*) and avoid simply recycling established commentary works. His campaign against rigid interpretive frameworks resonated strongly with contemporary audiences, as demonstrated by the widespread impact of *Tafsīr al-Manār*. The exegetical works developed by Abduh alongside his disciple Rasyid Ridha gained significant traction within society, particularly among modern communities seeking liberation from mythological constraints and irrational elements (Wardah et al., 2021).

Following in Abduh's reformist tradition, subsequent Muslim intellectuals pursued similar renewal efforts, notably Abdullah Dirraz (d. 1958AD). Dirraz advocated for an interpretive approach that synthesized naql (textual transmission and historical accounts) with *'aql* (rational inquiry) to decode Qur'anic meanings. He insisted that scriptural naṣ should be interpreted within the framework of contemporary lived experiences and social realities. Dirraz's central objective was to establish a methodology that bridged the authority of Islamic sacred texts with the evolving dynamics of societal circumstances, thereby creating a foundation for Qur'anic comprehension. In Dirraz's vision, the Qur'an resembled a flawless chain of interconnected jewels. He positioned the Qur'an as a perpetually applicable text—

practical, accessible, and capable of addressing all human challenges and dilemmas (Diraz, 1983).

The transformation of Islamic scholarship, particularly Qur'anic studies, found its next champion in Mahmud Shaltut (d. 1963 AD). Recognized as an educational innovator who sought to revitalize Islamic learning in Egypt through the encouragement of more logical and progressive approaches to religious scholarship, Shaltut produced his masterpiece *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (The first ten *Jūz*) as a significant contribution to Qur'anic commentary. His philosophy emphasized that Qur'anic interpretation should transcend mere traditional exposition and must engage meaningfully with contemporary social circumstances. This perspective was also acknowledged by Jansen, a Dutch scholar specializing in Qur'anic exegesis (Hidayat, 2022). The evolutionary development of Qur'anic scholarship was advanced further by al-Kūmī, a disciple of Shaltut, who pioneered an innovative interpretive approach that departed from the conventional sequence-based methodology following the Qur'anic arrangement (*tartīb muṣḥafī*). Instead, he advocated for an approach centered on thematic coherence, examining verses unified by common subjects across different *ṣūrah*s while prioritizing the interconnectedness of Qur'anic passages addressing related topics. This methodological innovation was presented as the thematic approach at al-Azhar University in Cairo during the 1970s. Subsequently, al-Kūmī's protégé, al-Farmāwī, was tasked with systematizing the mauḍū'ī methodology in his seminal text *al-Bidāyah fī al-Tafsīr al-Mauḍū'ī*. This scholarly work eventually established itself as a fundamental resource for thematic interpretation studies throughout the Islamic world, including interpretive scholarship in Indonesia.

Al-Farmāwī played a pivotal role in transforming how Qur'anic commentary was categorized and understood, particularly through his innovative classification system that predated the development of *mauḍū'ī* methodology. His scholarly work introduced terminology that had not previously existed within Qur'anic studies literature, establishing a framework for distinguishing different approaches to interpretation. His classification system designated *taḥlīlī* commentary as a category encompassing interpretive works that demonstrate two key features: adherence to the sequential arrangement found in the *muṣḥaf*, and reflection of the interpreter's particular academic expertise and ideological orientation. Concurrently, he established *ijmālī* commentary as a distinct category reserved for interpretive works that emphasize the overarching themes and meanings of Qur'anic passages rather than detailed analysis. Additionally, Al-Farmāwī introduced the *muqāran* classification to identify exegetical works characterized by diverse interpretive approaches, thereby encouraging comparative analysis among interpretation scholars. This comprehensive categorization system—encompassing taḥlīlī, ijmāli, and muqāran methodologies—ultimately served as the foundational framework that would later support the development and recognition of the *mauḍū'ī* interpretive method.

Building upon al-Farmāwī's foundational framework for al-Kumy's concepts, subsequent scholars expanded and refined these methodological approaches. While al-Farmāwī had originally outlined two categories of thematic interpretation—one centered on complete surahs and another focused on verses unified by a single theme—scholars like Musṭafā Muslim

from Syria and al-Khalidi developed a tripartite classification system. Their innovation involved incorporating a third category that emphasized word-based or terminological thematic interpretation within the Qur'an, representing a more linguistically-oriented approach (Muslim, n.d.). Al-Sattār took a different trajectory in promoting al-Kūmī's theoretical framework, organizing thematic interpretations according to their methodological presentation. His system included three distinct forms: *al-Tafsīr al-Mauḍū'ī al-Wājiz*, *al-Tafsīr al-Mauḍū'ī al-Wasiṭ*, *and al-Tafsīr al-Mauḍū'ī al-Basīṭ*. Subsequently, al-Daghāmīn contributed to this evolving discourse by developing a conceptual framework that positioned *mauḍū'ī* as prescriptive Qur'anic thematic interpretations suitable for practical life guidance (al-Daghāmīn, n.d.). His methodological approach emphasized establishing connections between Qur'anic text and contemporary social circumstances, characterized by the principle of *min al-naṣ ilā al-wāqi'*. Al-Daghāmīn's perspective on thematic interpretation advocated for an approach that begins with empirical reality assessment before engaging with Qur'anic principles—a methodology that al-Ṣadr had previously articulated using the terminology min al-wāqi'ilā al-naṣ (al-Ṣadr, 1979).

The impact of Al-Farmāwī extended beyond Middle Eastern scholarship to reach Indonesian intellectual circles. Similar to developments in the Middle East, the introduction of thematic methodology offered an interpretive approach that addressed contemporary social realities—a dimension absent from earlier exegetical frameworks. Indonesian commentary traditions encompass several notable works: the Malay-language *Tarjumān al-Mustafīd* by Acehnese scholar Abdur Rauf al-Sinkili, believed completed circa 1675 AD; A. Hassan's Indonesian-language *Tafsīr al-Furqān* from the 1930s, authored by a member of the Persis movement; Hasbi al-Shiddiqy's Indonesian *Tafsīr al-Nūr* from the 1950s; the Javanese "*Tafsir al-Ibriz*" by Bisri Mustofa in the 1960s; HAMKA's Indonesian *Tafsir al-Azhar* spanning 1967-1970 AD; Misbah Mustofa's Javanese *Tafsīr Faiḍ al-Raḥmān* from the 1990s; and M. Quraish Shihab's Indonesian *Tafsir al-Misbah* from the 2000s. These varied works created competing interpretive traditions within Indonesian Qur'anic scholarship, reflecting diverse methodological approaches, socio-cultural contexts, and theological orientations. Eventually, M. Quraish Shihab advanced his mentor al-Farmāwī's conceptual framework by establishing thematic methodology within Indonesian Qur'anic interpretation. His publication *Wawasan Al-Qur'an* successfully transformed the scholarly landscape, shifting research focus from traditional analytical examination of individual *sūrah*s or verses following the *muṣḥafī* sequence toward comprehensive thematic commentary (Djalal, 2018).

The reach of Quraish Shihab's thematic interpretation contributions has extended throughout higher education, encompassing both bachelor's and graduate-level scholarly work. Evidence of this widespread adoption can be found in multiple research investigations demonstrating that the *mauḍū'ī* approach has become the predominant methodology in university-level academic pursuits. Research conducted by Lilik Ummi Kaltsum and colleagues revealed that the majority of doctoral dissertations examining Qur'anic studies employ the thematic interpretation framework, with al-Farmāwī emerging as the most frequently referenced scholar. Similarly, M. Nurdin Zuhdi's investigation of dissertation trends at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, Yogyakarta, found that Qur'anic scholarship

continues to be dominated by thematic methodologies, although scholars are increasingly incorporating diverse analytical approaches (Kaltsum et al., 2021; Zuhdi, 2019; Azizy et al., 2021). Given that both scholarly and general audiences have recognized the value of thematic interpretation works, there exists a compelling need for the State to develop such interpretive resources that can be effectively accessed and utilized by society at large—a topic that will be addressed in the following section.

Methodological Steps in Thematic Interpretation

Defining and limiting the topic

To maintain scholarly focus and prevent deviation from the core subject matter, researchers must carefully define and constrain their chosen research themes from the outset through completion (Muslim, n.d.). The selection process requires scholars to draw exclusively from topics that appear explicitly within the Qur'anic text itself, such as examining Jihad through a Qur'anic lens or similar explicitly mentioned concepts. Following the methodological guidance established by al-Sattār and fellow disciples of al-Kūmī, academic inquiry must be restricted to terminology and concepts that have direct textual presence in the Qur'an. Consequently, contemporary concepts such as Democracy, pluralism, and family planning fall outside the boundaries of acceptable research topics, as these particular terms lack explicit mention within the Qur'anic corpus.

Al-Sattār argues that thematic interpretation should derive its focus from the original semantic content of Qur'anic terminology rather than adapting to contemporary linguistic evolution. He illustrates this principle by noting that *sharī'ah* as it appears in the Qur'an extends beyond mere Islamic legal theory to encompass all religious ordinances in their totality. Likewise, the Qur'anic usage of *fiqh* signifies a holistic religious comprehension that transcends the narrow confines of ritual worship (*'ibādah*) and commercial dealings (*mu'āmalah*). This thematic interpretive framework remains receptive to contemporary questions that lack explicit Qur'anic mention. The methodology involves identifying passages whose semantic implications either affirm or contradict elements associated with the chosen subject matter, then analyzing them systematically. To illustrate, when examining a concept such as "Democracy"—absent from direct Qur'anic reference—the investigative process would center on locating verses that address democratic components, particularly those concerning deliberative consultation (*shura*) aimed at building collective agreement (al-Sattār, 1991; al-Farmāwī, n.d.).

Exploration and compilation of verses from the Qur'an

When conducting thematic Qur'anic interpretation, scholars must gather every relevant verse connected to their subject matter, ensuring no passage is overlooked, as such omissions could significantly affect the final analysis. Building on this principle, al-Sattar establishes a threefold classification system for thematic interpretation: *al-Wajīz*, *al-Wasīṭ*, and *al-Baṣīṭ*. The *al-Wajīz* approach restricts its scope to verses containing explicit terminology that directly matches the selected theme—for instance, when examining *jihād*, it would overlook passages employing related concepts like qitāl and ḥarb. The *al-Wasīṭ* methodology takes a broader

approach by collecting relevant verses while still intentionally omitting certain passages that are implicitly connected through other verses. This category encompasses interpretations focused on single surahs or thematic studies confined to specific chapters. The *al-Baṣīṭ* method represents the most comprehensive approach, systematically identifying all verses bearing direct or indirect connections to the chosen subject matter. Al-Sattār designates the first two approaches as general thematic interpretation (*'am*), while characterizing the third as specific thematic interpretation (*khaṣṣ*). From this perspective, the specific thematic interpretation represents the authentic methodology for thematic Qur'anic exegesis (al-Khālidī, 2012).

Several scholars specializing in thematic Qur'anic interpretation advocate for the use of lexical references such as *Mu'jam* and comparable scholarly resources to aid in the systematic identification of relevant verses (al-Khālidī, 2012). When a thematic exegete possesses complete memorization of the Qur'anic text, they can effectively organize verses to meet interpretive requirements and achieve a comprehensive understanding of their significance (al-Farmāwī, n.d; al-Sattār, 1991). The practice of investigating both semantically related and contrasting terminology, combined with a thorough comprehension of their definitions, reveals that every term employed in the Qur'an carries distinct semantic ranges and contextual applications. The notion of synonymous terms (*mutarādif*) within the Qur'an should not be understood as representing identical semantic content and usage, but rather as indicating meanings that share close relationships (al-Khulī, 1961; al-Raḥmān, 1990).

Classification according to the chronology of revelation

In the third phase, verses are organized based on their chronological sequence of revelation, enabling scholars to identify whether a particular verse originated in Mecca (*Makkī*) or Medina (*Madanī*). Such chronological categorization becomes particularly crucial when examining Islamic jurisprudential matters, including the gradual prohibition of alcoholic beverages (*khamr*) and interest-based transactions (*ribā*). Scholars seeking this information can consult specialized works in Quranic sciences *('ulūm al-Qur'ān*), including al-Zarkashī's *al-Burhān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* and al-Suyūṭī's *al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, or alternatively reference Muḥammad 'Abd al-Bāqī's *Mu'jam al-Mufahras*, which uses the Arabic letter *kaf* to designate Meccan verses and *mīm* to indicate Medinan ones (al-Daghāmīn, n.d; al-Farmāwī, n.d.; Al-Khālidī, 2012).

Interpretation of the verses of the Qur'an

Despite their varying classification systems, these researchers share a fundamental consensus: any investigation fails to qualify as thematic interpretation (*tafsīr mauḍū'ī*) when it selectively examines only particular verses while ignoring other relevant passages on the same subject matter. Such selective methodology risks producing flawed interpretations or overly broad assumptions. Furthermore, experts in *mauḍū'ī* methodology advocate that scholars should reference multiple classical exegetical works (*tafsīr taḥlīlī*) to grasp the full meaning of verses, encompassing elements such as the principle of abrogation (*nāsikh-mansūkh*), thematic connections (*munāsabah*), historical circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), and additional interpretive considerations (al-Farmāwī, n.d.; al-Daghāmīn, n.d.; al-Sattār, 1991).

Systematic arrangement

After thoroughly comprehending and gaining expertise in the meaning and content of the verses, the researcher's subsequent task involves categorizing these verses into distinct components and organizing them in a structured manner. The scholar seeks to establish proper connections among the verses within the bounds of the pre-established theme while avoiding any forced interpretation of the verses (al-Sattār, 1991). Each verse is positioned deliberately to create a cohesive and methodical overarching framework. This approach is essential because thematic interpretation is intrinsically linked to the subject or heading that has been determined. Should there be uncertainty or error in initially choosing the title, the resulting comprehension, verse organization, and ultimate conceptual framework will likewise lack precision.

Central Figures and Various Formats of Individual Thematic Interpretation in Indonesia

When examining the origins of thematic commentary through the lens of identifying the pioneer who first employed this approach, the task becomes considerably difficult due to the inherent constraints of thematic exegetical methodology. Among the key scholars recognized for incorporating thematic elements, albeit in their most basic form, three prominent figures emerge: Mahmud Yunus with his work *Tafsīr Qur'ān Karīm* (initially released in 1950), Hasbi Ash-Shiddieqy through *Tafsīr al-Bayān* (first issued in 1966), and Ahmad Hassan via *Tafsīr al-Furqān* (originally published in 1956). These scholarly contributions are regarded as the foundational seeds of thematic commentary within Indonesian Islamic scholarship, as they pioneered the development of thematic verse categorization systems organized around particular subjects (Azizy, 2022).

When examining the pioneering force behind thematic interpretation in Indonesia, Quraish Shihab emerges as a pivotal figure, so influential that he has been characterized as the institutional embodiment of thematic interpretation within the country (Djalal, 2018). While he may not have been the inaugural author of thematic interpretation works, Shihab's recognition as the driving force behind this interpretive approach can be substantiated through three key factors. Initially, his masterwork, *Tafsīr Al-Miṣbāḥ*, achieved remarkable prominence within Indonesian society, establishing his unquestionable reputation as an interpretive authority (Arifin, 2020). Additionally, his educational background includes graduation from al-Azhar University, where he studied under the principal architect of thematic interpretation in Egypt (Nelawati, 2023). Finally, his extensive portfolio of thematic interpretive works has gained widespread recognition, particularly within academic circles.

Beyond Shihab, numerous other Indonesian scholars have employed thematic exegetical approaches in their Qur'anic studies. These include Dawam Rahardjo's comprehensive work *Ensiklopdi al-Qur'an* published between 1990-1995, Harifuddin Cawidu's theological investigation *Konsep Kufur dalam al-Qur'an: Suatu Kajian Teologis dengan Pendekatan Tafsir Tematik* from 1991, and Jalaluddin Rahman's 1992 thematic analysis *Konsep Perbuatan Manusia Menurut al-Qur'an: Suatu Kajian Tematik*. Additionally, M. Ghalib contributed *Ahl Kitab: Makna dan Cakupannya* in 1998, while Nasaruddin Umar explored

gender equality through his 1999 work *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender Perspektif al-Qur'an*. Following the turn of the millennium, an increasing number of scholars from diverse academic backgrounds have adopted thematic interpretive methodologies in their Qur'anic research.

The landscape of thematic interpretation scholarship exhibits remarkable variety in its forms of expression. Among these diverse manifestations, certain scholars have produced comprehensive book-length studies that explicitly identify themselves as thematic interpretations. Additionally, the academic sphere has witnessed contributions through scholarly articles, exemplified by the research of Dawam Rahardjo (Akbar, 2021). A more detailed examination of these article-based and research-oriented thematic works will be undertaken in the subsequent sub-chapter. Beyond traditional academic formats, the digital realm has become a significant platform for disseminating thematic interpretations, with websites like https://tafsiralquran.id/ and https://www.nu.or.id/ tafsir channel serving as notable examples. The reach of Qur'anic interpretation has expanded further through social media platforms, where accounts such as tafsiralquran.id and Qur'an review endeavor to present Qur'anic interpretations using modern vernacular and contemporary stylistic approaches (Mursalin, 2023).

These diverse manifestations give rise to two fundamental inquiries. Should popular content from websites and social media platforms be considered within the scope of thematic interpretation? This question will inevitably spark extensive scholarly discourse about the boundaries of thematic interpretation. The writer is inclined to adopt al-Sattār's categorization, which divides the thematic interpretation approach into three types: *al-Tafsīr al-Mauḍū'ī al-Wajīz*, *al-Tafsīr al-Mauḍū'ī al-Wasīṭ*, and *al-Tafsīr al-Mauḍū'ī al-Basīṭ*. Using this framework, popular content found on websites and social media platforms can be categorized as *al-Wajīz* thematic interpretations (Amin, 2022). This perspective is also supported by scholars who have extensively examined social media interpretation within the Indonesian context (Hosen, 2019; Romdhoni, 2021; Jannah, 2021).

The incorporation of popular writings into interpretive practices introduces a significant challenge regarding legitimacy and credentialing. Within conventional Islamic scholarship, the privilege of Qur'anic interpretation has traditionally been reserved for religious scholars who meet stringent qualifications, particularly those who have achieved mastery across multiple Islamic academic fields (Amin, 2022). Nevertheless, the advent of digital platforms and social networking has democratized commentary, enabling individuals from all walks of life to offer their interpretations of the Qur'an through various online channels. This transformation in scholarly authority becomes evident in modern Indonesian *mauḍū'ī* interpretation, where established religious hierarchy confronts the unrestricted nature of social media engagement by contributors possessing diverse educational backgrounds and varying levels of religious knowledge (Hosen, 2019). It is important to note that this authority transition extends beyond social media interpretations to encompass thematic interpretations more broadly. Numerous thematic interpretive works, particularly within Indonesia, have been authored by scholars lacking formal training in interpretive methodology or even lacking formal religious education altogether. A case in point is Dawam Rahardjo, whose professional background lies in economics and social analysis, yet who authored *Ensiklopedi Al-Qur'an*, representing one of

Indonesia's pioneering thematic interpretive publications (Munifah, 2017). Similarly, Agus Mustofa, despite his academic specialization in nuclear engineering, has produced several volumes rich in thematic interpretation within his contemporary Sufism collection, including titles such as *Ibrahim Pernah Atheis*, *Adam tak Diusir dari Surga*, *Ternyata Adam Dilahirkan*, and *Memahami Al-Qur'an dengan Metode Puzzle* (Asvia, 2018; Firdaus, 2020). These examples substantiate the transformation of interpretive authority facilitated by the evolution of thematic interpretation practices in Indonesia.

Revisiting Thematic Interpretation in Islamic Boarding Schools and Universities

Indonesian religious educational institutions, particularly pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) and Islamic universities, have been the primary drivers behind the advancement of Qur'anic interpretation studies in Indonesia. While both institutions contribute significantly, Pesantren holds the most pivotal position in cultivating mufassir (Qur'anic interpreters) (Fadal, 2018). Many prominent Indonesian scholars of interpretation first received their foundational education at various Pesantren before advancing to university-level studies. This foundational training proves crucial because Islamic universities typically assume their students already possess fundamental knowledge of Islamic sciences, making it essential for those who wish to excel in advanced university studies to have first established solid grounding in Islamic boarding school education.

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) pioneered the earliest instruction of Qur'anic interpretation in Indonesia from its inception. These institutions served as the primary hubs for teaching al-Qur'an exegesis prior to the establishment of Islamic higher education institutions (Asif, 2016). Subsequently, pesantren environments gave rise to numerous interpretative works, such as *Tafsir al-Ibrīz* authored by KH. Bisri Mustofa, *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'āni al-Tanzīl* and *Tāj al-Muslimīn* created by KH. Misbah Mustofa, *al-Maḥallī* composed by KH. Mujab Mahalli, among others (Latif, 2019). Nevertheless, among the extensive collection of interpretations originating from Islamic boarding schools, those employing thematic approaches include *Tafsīr 'Ibādah* by Abd Kholiq Hasan, *Tafsīr Maudhū'ī al-Muntahā* by Tim Sembilan, and *Tafsīr al-Maqāṣidī* by Abdul Mustaqim (Baidowi & Ma'rufah, n.d.). Yet, the scholarly output of pesantren scholars in producing tafsir literature remains lower compared to university academics. This phenomenon can be understood through at least two factors. Initially, scholars who authored tafsir works became more widely recognized for their university affiliations rather than their pesantren connections, despite simultaneously holding leadership positions within pesantren institutions. Additionally, individuals who pursue advanced education or professional careers at universities after obtaining foundational knowledge at pesantren tend to be identified more closely with their most recent institutional background.

Unlike the environment of Islamic boarding schools, Indonesian universities hold the most significant position in advancing thematic interpretation methods. Through his extensive academic career delivering lectures at various universities, Shihab has made substantial contributions to Indonesian society, especially within scholarly circles, by introducing an approach to Qur'anic studies that simplifies understanding and enables faster

comprehension of Qur'anic principles relevant to contemporary life challenges. This thematic exegetical approach has been systematically incorporated into required academic curricula across undergraduate (S1), graduate (S2), and doctoral (S3) degree programs throughout Indonesia's Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTAI). A clear example of this integration can be seen in the graduate program (S2) at the Faculty of Ushuluddin, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta, where thematic exegesis serves as a mandatory course across all academic concentrations, including for doctoral candidates from the 2003 enrollment cohort at the Graduate School of Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta.

The influence of thematic exegesis has profoundly transformed scholarly perspectives on Qur'anic interpretation methods that align with contemporary societal needs. This transformation is reflected in the steady proliferation of thematic exegetical scholarship within academic institutions, spanning from bachelor's degree research projects to advanced doctoral studies. A comprehensive investigation into the landscape of Qur'anic Studies within the graduate programs at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta and Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University Yogyakarta—undertaken by the author alongside two research collaborators—examined dissertation trends between 2005 and 2012. The findings reveal a growing scholarly preference for thematic exegetical approaches, with studies adopting diverse analytical frameworks that examine both the Qur'anic text directly and through the lens of particular interpretive traditions.

An investigation conducted by the research team examined doctoral dissertations at the Graduate School of Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta, analyzing 60 dissertations focused on Qur'anic scholarship. The findings showed that thematic exegesis constituted 35% of the research, while 26% examined Quranic verses through non-thematic approaches, 25% concentrated on *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* studies, and 14% explored exegetical scholars and their interpretive methods. Similarly, at the Graduate School of Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University Yogyakarta, the team's examination of 167 dissertations identified 19 works dedicated to Qur'anic studies. The distribution revealed that 41% employed thematic exegetical approaches, 18% analyzed Qur'anic verses without thematic frameworks, 9% engaged with *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* studies, and 32% investigated exegetical authorities and their methodological frameworks (Kaltsum et al., 2021). Additionally, research conducted by Jauhar Azizy and colleagues demonstrated that within the repository database of Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University Yogyakarta from 2019-2021, approximately 11% of undergraduate theses employed al-Farmāwī's thematic exegetical methodology (Azizy et al., 2021).

Academic investigations reveal that thematic interpretation has emerged as the predominant approach in scholarly research, demonstrating that organizing Qur'anic meanings according to specific themes has evolved into a prevailing interpretive methodology. This growing focus on thematic exegesis stems from its ability to facilitate readers' understanding by offering comprehensive insights into the Qur'an's teachings on particular subjects of interest. As a result, scholars expect that these thematically-organized exegetical studies will provide greater value and utility to the wider public.

Thematic Interpretation as Part of State Interpretation

In the contemporary Indonesian context, citizens characteristically pursue immediate answers to their concerns while avoiding complications from matters they perceive as non-essential or secondary, particularly when seeking to understand the meanings within Qur'anic texts. This observation was documented by Achmad Baiquni in his publication *Al-Qur'an: Ilmu Pengetahuan dan Teknologi* (Baiquni, 1995). The approach of thematic interpretation has emerged as a favored methodology among Indonesian communities. Government authorities, recognizing their obligation to serve the nation's citizens, have determined it necessary to develop thematic interpretations that will aid the population, particularly those of the Muslim faith, in grasping specific topics concerning life's challenges through the lens of al-Qur'an. In their introductory statement, the Directorate General of Islamic Community Guidance (Ditjen Bimas Islam) explained that governmental bodies, operating through the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, are actively engaged in examining Qur'an and its teachings through thematic interpretational approaches. The Ministry of Religious Affairs anticipates that these thematic interpretation initiatives will support public comprehension of Qur'an's teachings and offer fresh, more practical and adaptable perspectives for analyzing al-Qur'an while responding to the continuously changing dynamics of social circumstances.

From 2008 to the present day, Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs has overseen the development of thematic Qur'anic interpretations through its Committee for Qur'an Manuscript Revision (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur'an, LPMQ). This collaborative effort involves a multidisciplinary team of Qur'anic experts, religious scholars, and intellectuals from diverse academic backgrounds. With institutional backing from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, this scholarly group has successfully produced numerous thematic explorations of the Qur'an, including works on "Al-Qur'an and Empowerment of the Less Fortunate" (2008), "Ethics in Family, Society, and Politics" (2009), "Environmental Conservation" (2009), "Law, Justice, and Human Rights" (2010), "Al-Qur'an and Diversity" (2011), "Moderate Religious Interpretation" (2022), among others.

In his research, Mukhlis M. Hanafi reveals that the concept of collaborative thematic Qur'anic interpretation by multidisciplinary scholarly groups had been envisioned decades earlier by Sheikh M. Abdurrahman Bishar, who served as Secretary-General of al-Azhar's Islamic Research Institute (*Majma' al-Buḥūts al-Islāmiyyah*) during the 1970s. Hanafi cites Bishar's call for such work: "Honestly and with sincere hearts, we long for efforts by scholars and experts, both individually and collectively, to develop thematic exegesis, thus enriching the treasury of Qur'anic studies." This vision came to fruition in 2010 when scholars at Al-Qasimia University in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, produced a chapter-by-chapter thematic interpretation. This collaborative project involved 31 academic contributors under the leadership of Musṭafā Muslim, resulting in a comprehensive 10-volume work spanning approximately 575 pages. Hanafi observes that no similar collaborative thematic interpretation has yet received governmental backing, whether through financial support or other forms of institutional assistance (Hanafi, 2012). Such government-backed interpretive works are what the author characterizes as "State exegesis."

Discussing Changes and Shifts in Indonesia's Thematic Interpretation of the Qur'an

The evolution of thematic Qur'anic interpretation demonstrates that this approach continues to be valuable for communicating the Qur'an's teachings across both scholarly academic environments and informal educational contexts. Nevertheless, notable transformations have occurred when comparing earlier thematic interpretive works with contemporary ones. These variations encompass changes in authoritative sources and shifts in methodological approaches.

As outlined in the preceding section, Indonesia witnessed a notable transformation in interpretive authority that coincided with the emergence of thematic exegetical approaches. While earlier *taḥlīlī* commentaries were predominantly authored by religious scholars possessing comprehensive Islamic scholarly training, the advent of thematic interpretive works in Indonesia introduced contributors from diverse academic disciplines beyond traditional religious studies. Additionally, the development of collaborative thematic interpretations—exemplified by projects such as the *mauḍū'ī* al-Muntaha commentary and the Ministry of Religion's thematic exegesis—represents a significant transition from individual scholarly authorship to team-based interpretive endeavors. This evolution in interpretive authority becomes even more pronounced in the digital age, where Qur'anic interpretations are increasingly published across various online platforms, including dedicated websites and social media channels.

The evolution of authority and transformations in Qur'anic interpretation is deeply connected to how these interpretations are presented and who consumes them. While traditional scholars, recognized for meeting established mufassir qualifications, typically published their exegetical works through books or academic journals, modern scholars extend their interpretive efforts beyond these conventional formats to include online articles and accessible content on social media platforms. The varied structures and presentation styles of Qur'anic interpretations naturally attract different audiences. Consider the Instagram account "Qur'an review," which has amassed over 430,000 followers and regularly receives more than 10,000 likes on posts, primarily engaging young people who often lack specialized religious education backgrounds (Instagram, 2024). In contrast, while "tafsiralquran.id" also delivers accessible Qur'anic commentary through social media, its more academic tone and formal presentation style appeals to a distinctly different demographic than "Qur'an review's" audience. These distinctions become even more pronounced when compared to traditional commentary formats like scholarly books and journals.

When it comes to choosing subjects for study, established guidelines for thematic interpretation methods emphasize that this approach should concentrate on understanding what the Qur'an teaches about particular topics. These methodological frameworks suggest research titles like "Qur'anic Insights on Patience" (Miswar, 2010), or "Interfaith Relations" (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur'an, 2008), that clearly indicate a focus on the Qur'an's own viewpoints. Nevertheless, contemporary scholarly trends reveal that certain studies constrain their scope by concentrating on individual thinkers, making it easier to examine and follow specific scholars' perspectives. The evolution in how thematic studies are titled, exemplified by works such as "Concepts of Justice from the Perspective of Sayyid Qutb,"

demonstrates that the analytical focus has shifted toward understanding how particular scholars like Sayyid Qutb interpreted verses concerning justice. In such cases, researchers give precedence to examining the intellectual frameworks of these scholars rather than simply exploring the Qur'anic text itself. This particular model of thematic interpretation creates opportunities for commentators to incorporate interpretations that align with their own intellectual inclinations.

The practice of verse selection has undergone a methodological narrowing in its scope. Traditional scholarly works on thematic interpretation maintain that comprehensive thematic tafsir emerges through the systematic examination and synthesis of every Qur'anic verse connected to a chosen subject matter, ultimately establishing the Qur'anic viewpoint on that particular topic. Yet as scholarly expertise has developed over time, contemporary thematic interpretations have adopted more focused titles such as "The Concept of Caliphate from the Perspective of the Qur'an: A Study of Thematic Exegesis of Surah Al-Baqarah [2]: 30-35." The exclusion or elimination of relevant verses creates significant consequences for the ultimate conclusions drawn from thematic exegesis, except in cases where such verses have already been addressed in other sections or appear in duplicate form. This methodology mirrors the principles of sample and population selection found in research frameworks.

Third, varying interpretative approaches and trends emerge. For instance, scholarly works such as "The Concept of Ahlul Bait from the Perspective of the Qur'an" highlight the Qur'anic understanding of Ahlul Bait. Similarly, exegetical perspectives that prioritize scientific scholarship promoted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs frequently prevail in their academic foundations.

Fourth, addressing contemporary challenges through practical applications. This theoretical framework manifests through two distinct approaches: dynamic and static implementations. The static approach begins its interpretive process by establishing thematic parameters, subsequently engaging in verse-based analytical procedures. This methodology is characterized as "min al-naṣ ilā al-wāqi'" (from text to social reality). The outcome produces a compilation of Qur'anic principles that maintain an ideal-normative character and remain non-temporal in nature. Conversely, the dynamic approach maintains that the initial phase of thematic interpretation should not involve direct textual engagement with the Qur'an, but rather requires preliminary observation of contextual circumstances and identification of issues requiring resolution through thematic (*mauḍū'ī*) commentary. This methodology is designated as *min al-wāqi' ilā al-naṣṣ* (from social reality to text). The resulting exegetical work is characterized by its practical-solution orientation and temporal specificity, concentrating primarily on resolving particular situations.

Using the methodology of *min al-naṣṣ ilā al-wāqi'* (beginning with Qur'anic scripture and moving toward lived reality), scholars can develop thematic exegesis incorporating the aforementioned subject areas, thereby contributing valuable additions to Indonesia's collection of thematic interpretative works. This methodological framework has been championed by scholars including al-Kūmī, Muṣṭafā Muslim, al-Farmāwī, and M. Quraish Shihab, among others. Conversely, when scholars adopt the *min al-wāqi' ilā al-naṣṣ* methodology (beginning with lived reality and moving toward Qur'anic scripture), their

investigation commences with examining diverse social challenges concerning how communities comprehend, implement, distort, or misapply these thematic concepts. As a result, the thematic exegetical works produced through this approach transcend mere exposition of normative Qur'anic viewpoints, instead engaging directly with modern challenges, Indonesian cultural contexts, or other region-specific circumstances. This interpretative discourse finds support among scholars such as al-Ṣadr (1979), Hassan Hanafi (1996), and additional proponents.

Fifth, the promotion of cross-disciplinary methodologies stands as a key principle. An illustrative case can be found in research bearing titles such as "The Sea and Its Management in the Perspective of the Qur'an." The findings revealed that oceanic waters and their diverse resources represent divine blessings bestowed upon humanity by Allah. Such divine bestowal carries with it the understanding that human beings, functioning as Allah's trustees upon the Earth, possess both the authority to oversee marine environments through investigative activities that unlock their possibilities and simultaneously shoulder the obligation to preserve and sustain ecological equilibrium. These preservation initiatives serve a dual purpose: safeguarding marine ecosystems while securing human continuity, particularly for coming generations who hold rightful claim to these divine gifts. Consequently, this necessitates the implementation of suitable, harmonious, and measured exploration techniques that will prevent harm to oceanic environments and their biological systems (Thobroni, 2005).

CONCLUSION

This study reveals multiple transformations in how thematic interpretation is employed for understanding Qur'anic texts within Indonesia. The first significant change involves the expansion of who participates in thematic exegesis work. Where interpretation was once limited to traditional religious scholars, it now includes university researchers from various academic disciplines, along with formal Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren and Islamic universities, and even government bodies. The second major shift concerns both the sources of interpretive authority and the approaches used in thematic exegesis. Traditional authority structures have been disrupted, with digital platforms and social media creating new spaces for Qur'anic interpretation that allow for more open participation. This democratization of interpretive access has resulted in diverse presentation styles tailored to reach specific audiences and reader communities.

The field of Qur'anic interpretation has undergone significant transformations across multiple dimensions. Contemporary scholars now prioritize centering the Qur'an's own voice over individual scholarly opinions when crafting their work titles. This shift reflects a broader movement toward more targeted analysis, with interpreters concentrating on particular verses rather than sweeping overviews. The emergence of novel analytical frameworks and methodological approaches has further reshaped the landscape, while thematic commentary has developed stronger connections to present-day social and political realities. Additionally, cross-disciplinary integration has gained considerable traction among modern exegetes. Although traditionalists may critique these evolving practices—particularly regarding established scholarly credentials and methodological uniformity—such innovations have

successfully expanded both the reach and practical relevance of Qur'anic scholarship. The result is a more accessible and widely applicable interpretive tradition that speaks to diverse contemporary audiences.

Several avenues remain open for scholarly investigation in this field. The relationship between thematic analysis and contemporary socio-political issues presents an important area for deeper exploration, particularly in understanding how interpretive frameworks can more effectively engage with current societal challenges. The digital revolution has fundamentally altered the landscape of religious interpretation, creating new questions about who holds interpretive authority and how these shifts shape public understanding of Quranic texts - areas that warrant systematic examination. Another promising direction involves developing more robust analytical frameworks that can successfully integrate theoretical ideals with practical applications in thematic interpretation. This methodological challenge represents a key opportunity for advancing the field, as scholars seek to bridge the gap between normative principles and solution-oriented approaches in contemporary Quranic studies.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the geographical scope of the research is confined to specific Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, which means the findings may not fully represent the broader diversity of Qur'anic interpretive practices across other regions or institutional contexts. Second, the period examined in this study reflects a particular historical moment in the development of thematic exegesis in Indonesia; interpretive trends and methodological shifts occurring outside this timeframe may not be captured in the analysis. Third, the study focuses primarily on textual and methodological dimensions of tafsir maudhu'i, leaving aside other potentially relevant variables such as socioeconomic factors influencing scholarly output or the reception of interpretations among lay communities. These limitations notwithstanding, this research provides a meaningful foundation for future studies that may broaden the geographical scope, extend the temporal range, or integrate additional variables to deepen our understanding of the evolving landscape of Qur'anic interpretation in contemporary Indonesia.

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