

Western Challenges and Muslim Hermeneutical Responses: Post-colonial Interpretations of the Qur'an in the Middle East

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Abstract: As the result of western colonial impact on the modern Islamic world, new methodologies and western values became the major concerns for the interpretations of the Qur'an. Two main Muslims intellectual groups has responded this colonial challenges with different hermenutical instruments. The first is appointed by western-educated intellectuals who have adapted western methods as the new hermeneutical models for the understanding the Qur'an. Having stressed the dynamism, flexibility, and adaptability of Islam, the second is performed by who tends to revise traditional Islamic instruments. Both attempt to re-interpret Islam to meet the changing circumstances of post-colonial life but with different solutions. Whereas the former intellectuals are in the mood of adaptationists from the West, the latter are seeking the solution from inside. This study focuses on the views of these two circles of Middle Eastern Muslim scholars, with special reference to their main representatives, their works and use of methodologies for responding the western impact.

Keywords: Western impact, Middle East, Interpretation, Reform, Revival.

Batının Meydan Okumaları ve Müslümanların Yorum Bilimsel Cevapları: Ortadoğu'da Sömürgecilik Sonrası Kur'an Yorumları

Öz: Günümüz İslam dünyası üzerinde Batı sömürgeciliğnin etkisi sonucu, yeni metot ve batılı değerler Kur'an yorumlarının temel ilgi alanları haline geldi. İki önemli entellektüel müslüman gurub batının bu sömürgeci meydan okumalarına farklı hermenutik araçlar kullanarak cevap vermektedir. Birincisi Kur'anın anlaşılmasında batılı metotları hermenutik modeller olarak adapte eden batılı eğitimden geçmiş entellektüeller tarafından uygulanmıştır. İslamın dinamik, uygulanabilir ve uyarlanabilir yapısına vurgu yapan ikincisi ise İslamın geleneksel araçlarını revize etmeye yakın kişiler tarafından icra edilmiştir. Her iki gurup da sömürgecilik sonrası değişen durumlarla İslam'ı bir araya getirmek için yeniden yorumlamışlarsa da farklı çözümler kullanmışlardır. Birinci gruptakiler Batıdan adaptasyon

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yapma eğilimli iken, ikinciler ise çözümü içeriden bulmaya çalışmaktadırlar. Bu çalışma, Ortadoğu müslüman bilimadamlarından oluşan bu iki grubu önemli temsilcileri, eserleri ve batı etkisine karşı verilen cevap için kullanılan yöntemlerden kısaca bahsederek ele almaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Batı Etkisi, Ortadoğu, Tefsir, Reform, Yenilenme

İktibas / Citation: Necmettin GÖKKIR, “Western Challenges and Muslim Hermeneutical Responses: Post-colonial Interpretations of the Qur’an in the Middle East”, *Usûl*, 22 (2014/2), 63 - 86.

Introduction

The term “middle-east” is used in English-language academic and political venues for describing the culture and society in the huge regions including Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Gulf etc. However, there is no agreement concerning the boundaries of the area and even the cultures and societies. Some definitions include, hence, all the territory from Morocco across the Arab North Africa through western Pakistan up to the borders of India and from Turkey on the Black Sea southwards through the Ethiopia and the Sudan which is seemingly covers the global Muslim territory except the Balkans in the western Europe. Indeed, the term -as a projection from outside, not emerging from inside- first used by western world in the age of European discoveries and explorations that began in the fifteenth century to find new routes to the East, China and India. The area being farthest away from Europe came to be called the Far East, while the lands on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean that lay in between Europe and the East became to be called “Middle East”. However, “Middle East” has its own label from within, perceived by its own peoples and cultures. It is called the “Arab World”, a geographic label which is Arab nationalist perspective preferring the Arab Nation. It is called also the “Islamic/Muslim World”, a larger circle which is more acceptable for a pan-Islamist perspective. However, a new perspective began to use the term away from the British geographical label but a new political and social entity which includes not only Arabs and

Muslims but also non-Arabs and Non-Muslims, like Iranians, Turks and Jews.¹

Despite the varieties in social and ethnic structure, the “middle east” has a common history indeed. In ancient times, Egyptian, Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian civilizations flourished in the region. Judaism, Christianity and Islam were born and spread around the world from there. The region was a part of Persian, Roman, Umayyad, Abbasid, Mamluk, and Ottoman Empires, each contributing to a new synthesis of culture and civilization there.

The Western world has interested in the “Middle East” firstly since the Crusade wars in medieval era attempting to seize Quds (Jerusalem), the Holy Land for three religions. The strategic value of the Middle East was recognized finally by the West in nineteenth century and it resulted to be colonized by European countries.² The modern Middle East began after World War I, when the Ottoman Empire, which was on the losing side was divided first into its two major language areas, the Turkish speaking areas in the North and the Arabic-speaking areas in the south, then Arabic-speaking areas were divided into states according to interest of British and France and local proxies. In fact, when the Ottoman Empire was defeated in 1918, The British and French governments made a secret treaty “the Sykes-Picot Agreement” for the partition of the Middle East between them and, additionally, the British promised via the “Balfour Declaration” the international Zionist movement their support in creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine. When the Ottomans departed, the Arabs proclaimed an independent state in Damascus, but they were too weak, militarily and economically, to resist the European powers for long, and Britain and France soon established control and re-arranged the Middle East to suit their colonial desires.

¹ For more information see, Hasan Hanafi, “The Middle East, in whose world?” *The Middle East in a Globalized World* ed. by Bjorn Olav Utvik and Knut S. Vikor, 2007 pp. 1-9

² For further information about the relationship between the West and the Middle East before First World War see: Don Peretz, *The Middle East Today*, pp.77 -99

Western colonialism and its affect on the Middle East have so crucial social and political outcomes. The Colonial Europe claims that they offer a new civilization to the society in the Middle East. Thus, to receive and integrate European values, norms and ways of life are accepted as natural process of civilization and modernization. Europe persists even today in looking at the Islamic world in this colonial framework and imposes his own values into the Muslim world. Middle Eastern societies have adopted various and different socio-political trends.

In this period Muslims in the Middle East have experienced significant transformations indeed. Muslim countries, on the one hand, followed a path of westernization and secularization as it increasingly adapted Western norms and models in politics, law and education. In the light of Western values e.g. democracy, social justice, freedom, gender and race equality, tolerance, human rights etc, the political and social spheres, Muslims on the other hand, rethink and reconstruct the social and political systems. Muslim scholars started to revise traditional Islamic life.

It is important to keep in mind that changes have happened throughout Middle East is not only a matter of colonial influence. It must be seen as a global phenomenon as well. In the economic sphere, change is seen in terms of industrialization and consequent economic growth, the formation of large capital sums, the growth of science and the emergence of new classes of people and social mobility. In the political area, it is the growth of political parties, unions and youth groups. In the social dimension, the change in relations between genders, mass communications, individualization, urbanization and mobility; in the intellectual realm, the prominence of the idea of progress, the emergence of secularization, rationalization are especially marked.³ European society has responded to this situation from the beginning of the age of industrialization. However, when the Middle Eastern society encountered it in the modern period, they should learn from colonial, imperialist, missionary, Western invasion. As a result of the aspiration to modernize, transformations

³ Andrew Rippin, *Muslims : Their Religious Beliefs and Practices : The Contemporary Period*, Volume 2. London, GBR: Routledge, 1993. p 12

of Islamic societies in particular in the 19th and early 20th centuries show a predominant “western” influence.⁴

Having individually adapted western values to underpin modernization and reformation in modern societies, Muslims also encountered the West in a different condition. Instead of colonial situation and hidden agenda of Islami- zation, the West became a role model for Muslims, in that time. As the sub- stantial policy, Westernization in some Muslim countries has leded funda- mental changes in behaviour and belief about economics, politics, social organization and intellectual discourse and secularization and rationalization in religion. As a result, Western ideologies and perspectives have largely been transferred to institutes of the Muslim world.⁵

Modernisation process which stresses the aspect of the Western impact on the Middle East can be critically reviewed whether such a practice is still a valuable for today's Arabs. This process has been criticized because of that it offensively neglects the intellectual roots of Middle Eastern societies as well as the global dynamics in the World and of that the West has been portrayed as having a total presence in any individual and collective attempt by stressing the one-dimensionality of the Western cultural impact on “Islamic civiliza- tion” in the Middle East. This process may be useful as it is for the theoretical discussion of cultural change in the 19th century, but not being applicable to phenomena of transformations that occurred in the second half of the 20th century. The issue of cultural transformation should also be related to local structures and the developments after the World-War II.

Middle Eastern Muslims who persistently encounter the western values in post-colonial time have been changed. It is, therefore, of interest to study on Islam in Contemporary Middle East and on the outcomes of this transition on the interpretation of the Qur'an. Indeed, last two centuries of Islam in the Middle East observed a definite break with the traditional style of the interpre-

⁴ Rippin, *Ibid*: 14.

⁵ For further information see: W. M. Watt, “Islam and the West” in *Islam in the Modern World* ed. By Denis Mac Eoin and Ahmed al-Shahi, London and Conber- ra: Croom Helm, 1983 p. 4-5.

tation. They are mostly inspired by the Western intellectual developments. A number of scholars in the Muslim world began to interpret and read the Qur'an, the foremost source of Islam through the Western perspective (i.e. rationalism, liberalism, pluralism, feminism etc.) and methodologies (i.e. anthropology, historical criticism, textual criticism, hermeneutics etc.).

In this research, I will argue that the contemporary Islam has been persistently affected and influenced by Middle Eastern context because of being politically and culturally interwoven with post-colonial issues. This is, of course, inevitable, because every context presents problems, questions, and dilemmas of its own, which demand timely, suitable, and practical answers. This research, thus, has underlined how a *Middle Eastern Muslim* and his *interpretation of the Qur'an* are linked to, or generated by, postcolonial discourses and debates. Thus, it is crucial to refer to the context of colonialism and the needs of the contemporary Middle Eastern society when analyzing the literatures of interpretation.

The modern exegesis of the Qur'an began, not due to academic problems, but to postcolonial world affairs. This has not just been a matter of diverse approaches and contents, but also of fundamental differences about what the Qur'an is, what the authority of classical Islamic sources in interpretation is, and which questions and issues within the interpretation are to be given priority. For this purpose, social and intellectual responses to the challenges of modernity and western colonialism by the Muslims in the Middle East may be various. As the part of this problem, the modern Muslim intellectuals mainly have taken their roles in two faces. Firstly, under western influence, they followed a path of westernisation and secularisation they increasingly adapted western models to enable cope with the contemporary issues, namely **Islamic Modernism**. Secondly, there is also a revivalist response to challenging western values, **Islamic Revivalism**. In this study these two responses will be investigated respectively

Modernist Response

The term "modernity" can have more than just one meaning indeed. It was discussed across the academic disciplines, and each discipline had a different

definition and explanation of “modernity”. Modernity means the technological development as the material culture, including the means of production, categories of working forces, circulation of money and consumer goods.⁶ However in the Cultural Studies, Architecture, Aesthetics, Social Sciences and Humanities, it has own version of definition. That is to say that Modernity as the cultural terms (ideas, ideologies, faith, doctrines, values, and ethics) touches the field of epistemology, hermeneutics and science. As a matter of fact, Modernity implies a cultural project that aims at the change of perception of time, at challenging the authority of the past; at secularizing society by making the social, political and economic sphere distinct from the religious sphere; and it may contain the process of westernization (i.e. the dominance of the West over other because of its economic and military strength).⁷

Modernism, at the beginning of 19th century was the dominant trend in the Middle East. 19th century for Muslims is, indeed, a period of crisis for every element of the social and political system as they encountered with the enlightened and more or less secularized Europe. The Modernist Islam pioneered the reformation of Islam in social, political and intellectual aspects for liberalization and decolonization from the superiority of the West.⁸ As the foremost solution, modernist Muslims suggest urgently adopt European military and technical organizations, and also their political ideas, concepts, and values.

In parallel to colonial policy on the Middle East, Islamic intellectualism has systematically attempted to reinterpret the Islam in ways which reflect the realities of modern society and politics. Indeed, this challenge that the Muslim

⁶ See for definitions in material culture: C. E. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernity*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966, p. 7; Dankwart A. Rustow, *A World of Nations: Problems of Political Modernization*, Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1967, p. 3; Marion J. Levy, *Modernisation and the Structure of Societies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966, p. 35.

⁷ See: Mark Elvin, “A Working Definition of “Modernity”, *Past and Present* (1986), v. 113/1, pp. 209-213

⁸ See: Charles Curzman (ed.), *Modernist Islam 1840-1940 A Sourcebook*, Oxford University Press 2002, p. 4.

society has encountered at the level of institutions is not because of the fact that the Muslim institutions in the past have been wrong or irrational but of the fact that there has been a social system at all which now needs to be modified, adjusted and integrated to the colonial counterpart. The colonial period in the Middle East is indeed a crisis for every element of the social and political systems as they encountered with the enlightened and more or less secularized Europe.

In terms of the character of modernity, we can clearly observe a general paradigm shift from the traditional Islam, in particularly in the style of interpretation of the Qur'an, the definition of the revelation, values and moral lives. A number of scholars in Europe and in the Muslim world began to reconstruct Islam through modern/western perspectives. These scholars are similar to and apparently inspired by western counterparts. These scholars have adapted western ways of thought and have called re-interpretation of the Islamic sources for new political and social spheres, relying on the assumption that Islamic values are compatible with modern values. In the light of western values, for example democracy, social justice, liberalism, liberation and freedom, gender and race equality, tolerance, human rights etc., they have criticized existing institutions, values and mentalities. As the result of this western impact on Islam, the notion of absolute equality of all humanity, human rights, women rights and their emancipations, the place of women in Islam, modern gender roles in Islam and Islamic feminism became the major concerns for new interpretations of the Qur'an. Because of this influence, liberal Muslims are often critical of traditional Islamic legal interpretations which allow polygamy for men, as well as the traditional Islamic law of inheritance under which daughters receive less than sons. It is also accepted by most contemporary Muslims that a woman may lead the state, contrary to traditional argument. The idea of modern secular and liberal democracy, and thus oppose Islam as a political movement, eventually became another theme for new interpretations of the Qur'an.

As a part of the academic and intellectual interaction with the West a new kind of intellectual group in the Middle East has emerged. These scholars who are similar to and probably inspired by their Western counterparts have adap-

ted *critical theories* and *methods* as new hermeneutical models of understanding the Qur'an. Parallel to the efforts by Muslim and non-Muslim textual scholars in the other part of the academic world who establish the critical reading of the Qur'an, Middle Eastern intellectuals such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Mohammed Talbi, Mohamed 'Abid al-Jabiri, Muhammed Miftah, Hasan Hanafi etc. in this regard, employs Western critical approaches. Such western-educated intellectuals are in the mood of adaptationists from the "West" applying western methods as the new hermeneutical models for the understanding the Qur'an. Their aim is to re-read the Qur'an in the light of modern western textual and philosophical disciplines, such as literary criticism, epistemology, and hermeneutics. The definition of the Qur'an has been changed and defined as a "text" by these Modern readers. The text is not seen as separable from the author, of course. However, in terms of the Qur'an, the author is not human author but society, pre-Islamic Arabian society. Their language, social and individual character, family structure, local social systems, narratives etc. all affect the meaning of the text. Yet, a problem then will arise dealing with the Qur'an because of giving priority to human or social factors in the production of the sacred texts and having a direct impact on the issue of religious authority. This priority refers to that the Qur'an must be treated like any other literature. That is offensive from the Islamic theological point of view to say that the Qur'an is no divine in origin but a product of a human author or a social environment in a certain historical time.⁹ Nevertheless, regarding the textuality of the Qur'an, Modern scholars does not mean that it is a human text but that the Qur'an is one of the revelations and manifestations of God's words at a specific time and place, it should follow as contextual that what was revealed to Muhammad in Arabic in the 7th century is a historical text.

To take the Qur'an as literature is to take it on the same level as all other literary productions. Therefore, Muslim scholars approached to the Qur'an

⁹ The same debate has been the subject of the Bible. See: Moises Silva, (1994) "Contemporary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation" in *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* by Walter C. Kaiser at. al. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, p. 236.

with acceptance of its divinity first and then carried out their textual analysis on the Qur'an. However according to the literary critical scholars, Muslim or non-Muslims, the Qur'an can be likely to any textual approach.

The first Middle Eastern scholar to employ a literary method in analyzing the Qur'an was Amin al-Khuli (1895-1966). Khuli was a literary critic who taught *ilm al-bayan* and *tafsir* at the Faculty of Arts at Fuad I University. Contrary to Muhammed Abduh and his followers who see the Qur'an as a book of hidayah (guidance), al-Khuli focuses on the literary study of the Qur'an. Literary study of the Qur'an does not primarily look at the text from theological point of view nor does it seek guidance from the text. For al-Khuli, literary study of the Qur'an consists of two steps:¹⁰

- 1- *Dirasat ma hawla al-Qur'an*: Extrinsic approach to the Qur'an
- 2- *Dirasat ma fi al-Qur'an*: Intrinsic approach to the Qur'an.¹¹

From these two aspects –external and internal- it seems that al-Khuli does not approach the Qur'an from literary perspective only. He also gives a priority to the historical context of the Qur'an to understand it. The external study of the Qur'an, for al-Khuli, includes a study of the background of the text, the circumstances and occasions of its revelation, its compilation and its variant readings etc. all are known as the sciences of the Qur'an (*ulum al-Qur'an*). The second aspect of the literary approach, according to al-Khuli, is to study the Qur'anic text itself, starting with the meanings of the words and their etymology (*ishtiqaq*).¹² Additionally, the Qur'an should be analysed in its textual composition and in rhetoric structure (*balagha*). And finally the terms and the subject which scattered in different places should be collected and put on the chronological order. That can only yield a more understanding the Qur'an which is called by al-Khuli himself as "*Tafsir al-adabi*".

¹⁰ Amin al-Khuli, *Manhaj Tajdid fi al-Nahw wa al-Balagha wa al-Tafsir wa al-Adab*, Cairo 1995, p. 233.

¹¹ Al-Khuli seems to used the terminology of Wellek and Warren. See their work: *Theory of Literature*, New York 1956, p.71

¹² al-Khuli, *Manhaj*, p.237-241.

Al-Khuli's method influenced many scholars in Egypt, among them Muhammed Ahmad Khalaf Allah (1916-1998), Aisha Abdurrahman bint al-Shati (1913-1998), Shukri Muhammed Ayyad (1921-1999) and finally Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (2010). Khalaf Allah was the first of al-Khuli's students to write a dissertation applying this method to the Qur'an in his "*al-Fann al-Qasasi fi al-Qur'an al-Karim*".¹³ Khalaf Allah simply suggests that the Qur'anic presentation of the historical events (*qasas*) belongs to the former type of literary exposition and therefore, that the intention of the Qur'anic narratives is not to deliver a historical evidence but rather a way of expression.¹⁴

Another student of al-Khuli who applied his method was Shukri Muhammed Ayyad. Ayyad is a well-known literary critic in the Arab World. During his study at Cairo University he was influenced by Khuli and wrote his M.A thesis under his direction in 1947. The title of the Thesis was *Min Wasf al-Qur'an: Yawm al-Hisab wa al-Din*. This work published under the title of *Dirasat Qur'aniyya: Yawm al-din wa al-hisab* after three decades later in 1980. The reason for the delay may be related to what happened to Khalafallah's dissertation.

Bint al-Shati was Khuli's wife and was motivated by his method despite studied not in the field of the Qur'an interpretation but on the works of Abu al-Ala al-Maarri, entitled *Risalat al-Ghufran* under the direction of Taha Husayn. Besides her interest in Arabic literature and women issues in the Arab world, Bint al-Shati wrote later on the Qur'anic interpretation and the best known of her books are *al-Tafsir al-Bayani fi al-Qur'an*¹⁵, and *al-I'jaz al-Bayani li al-Qur'an*.¹⁶ Following in the footsteps of al-Khuli, al-Shati sought to study the Qur'an as a literary text (*nass adabi*) and to apply a literary approach

¹³ This dissertation was not accepted by the committee by accusing it was not suit to be defended. This case is very important to show how literary approach can be applied to a divine book and how the Islamist responded to this method, since the same case will be repeated again in Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's application.

¹⁴ See for more details about the method: Khalaf Allah, *al-Fann al-Qasasi fi al-Qur'an al-Karim*, (third edition) Cairo and Beirut 1999.

¹⁵ Published in Cairo 1962, vol 1 and 1968 vol 2.

¹⁶ Published in Cairo 1987.

to the Qur'an. She criticizes the traditional tafsirs by claiming that their authors were influenced by sectarian, political and historical concerns, polemics and judaistic (*israiliyyat*) materials. In order to avoid these mistakes, for her, interpretation has to be returned to literary nature of the Qur'an without having recourse to any external source.¹⁷

Like al-Khuli, She believes that the purpose of interpreting the Qur'an is to reach the original meaning or intended meaning. To discover this original meaning, al-Shati proposes steps. The first step in thematic treatment is to collect all Qur'anic verses related to the subject. It is a method which is totally different from traditional interpreting the Qur'an chapter by chapter and verse by verse that neglects the specific and general context. This method has not applied only on the themes and also on the short chapters as well, believing that these chapters have a thematic unity (*wahdat al-mawdui*). The second step is to arrange all these verses chronologically based on place (*Makka-Madina*) and the time of revelation. And the third step is to study on the social and political circumstances of seventh century Arabia which are often reported in the *asbab al-nuzul* materials. The fourth and the fifth steps consist in studying the linguistic meaning of the words and their usage in the Qur'an respectively.

In 1980s, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd revived literary approach to the Qur'an. He did not study directly under the supervision of Amin al-Khuli. But he consistently asserted that he belongs to his school.¹⁸ It is correct because both claim that the Qur'an is a literary text and should be treated as a text. In his book *Mafhum al-Nass* he states that the Qur'an is a linguistic text (*Nass lughawii*) related a specific culture or context.¹⁹ Because he asserts this view, Abu Zayd does not see the need for a "sacred" approach to the Qur'an. On the contrary, he insists that as a "text" the Qur'an can be interpreted by any modern critical approach. However, this view was harshly condemned by many scholars, especially the Islamists since that the Qur'an, according to them, is

¹⁷ See: *al-Tafsir al-Bayani*, v.1 p. 9.

¹⁸ For instance see: Abu Zayd, *Mafhum al-Nass: Dirasa fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, Bayrut 1998, p. 10, 19.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 9, 10, 18, 19.

superior to all other texts being unique and thus to be studied in its divine nature. This assumption is mainly based on the idea of *I'jaz* of the Qur'an. In his *Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini*, Abu Zayd suggests that scriptures are linguistic texts, indeed, and their divine origin does mean that they need a specific method suited to their divine nature. Otherwise, for him, it would imply that scriptures are beyond human understanding.

Besides the textual approach, the contextual approach is also used by Middle Eastern Scholars. The term "Contextual approach" is generally used to refer to certain methodology used by certain scholars, thinkers and activists in the Middle East. These scholars belong to a broad trend rather than a single movement, and include a range of voices that represent Muslim liberals, modernists and feminists. It is very difficult to generalize about Contextualists but it is possible to identify some common themes in their work. For instance, most Contextualists are aligned with movements which today emphasize social justice and equality, human rights, democracy, and interfaith relations. They further argue that these practices need to be reconsidered in light of modern circumstances if they are to be relevant to Muslims today. Most Contextualists argue that solutions to social problems will vary according to time and place and that there is no single, all-encompassing solution that can be derived from Islam's primary sources. As such, their principal aim is not to implement rigid rules, but to establish societies based on justice (*adl*), as well as goodness and beauty (*ihsan*).²⁰ Many strive towards a "universal notion of justice in which no single community's prosperity, righteousness, and dignity comes at the expense of another".²¹ This approach is not only a response to the demands of the modern world, but is also, in part, a response to the conservative and at times authoritarian approach espoused by much of today's traditionalist Islamic religious establishment.

The defenders of this approach accept that the Qur'an had a kind of on-going/ progressive revelation system which regulated to needs of a constantly changing society during the prophet time. The traditional

²⁰ Omid Safi, *Progressive Muslims on Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, Oxford: One-world, 2003, p. 1.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 3.

concept of *naskh* (abrogation), for example, explains this progressive mechanism of revelation because it substitutes one legal rule with another in order to accommodate social change and to make it possible for society to integrate into the new situation. Whenever a situation, condition or question arose for which divine guidance was needed, Allah revealed a verse or a surah to provide a solution.

This model can be considered as one of the most useful tools for relating the Qur'an to changing needs and circumstances in the Middle East because of that this interpretative model, contrary to the textual critical one, allows different receptions of the Qur'an. Understanding the Qur'an in accordance with different receptions is described as a kind of creative reading the Qur'an, that is to say, this reading uses a kind of language which enables modern readers to understand the historical text by contextualizing the meaning for them.

Mohammed Talbi, from Tunisia represents one of the best scholars who has applied this method to the study of the Qur'an.²² Mohamed Talbi has four major works in re-thinking the Qur'an. These works are: *Iyal Allah* (1992), *Ummat al-Wasat, Réflexions sur le Coran*, (1989) and *L'universalité du Coran* (2002). The method proposed by M. Talbi relates to two major attitudes:

- a) The Text of the Qur'an
- b) The interpretation of major themes in the Qur'an.

With regard to the former, the issue does not seem to provide any problematic to him. The Qur'an, according to Talbi, has to be considered as the divine message which was fully revealed upon the Prophet Muhammad. However, this perception of the text did not very much fit to Talbi's critical

²² For further information see: Ronald Nettler, "Muhammed Talbi on understanding the Qur'an" in Suha Taji- Farouki, *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, pp. 225- 240

analysis of the major themes of the Qur'an. He assumes that the Qur'an is an open book; its meaning is open to interpretations.²³

Revivalist Response

The terms renewal and revival assert modernization (revival, renew, reconstruction, reconfiguration etc.) without westernization in response to the Colonial influence in Islamic societies. The Islamic revival is a foremost reaction to the failure of modernization in Middle East countries indeed.²⁴ The starting point was the colonial era which created a number of artificial nation states whose leaders embraced Western-oriented secular ideologies and pan-Arabism to forge a national identity and legitimize their grip on power.

For the sake of Islamic cultural identity, revivalist response to colonial power generally assume that it is essential to revive its heritage and recover its divine ontology and epistemology with a fresh reading of the Qur'an and the Sunnah in the modern context. This is also corroborated by a critical and objective reassessment of the Muslim culture and intellectual heritage and with a valid methodology that will enable the reconstruction of the Modern Muslim mind along lines that will ensure the recovery of its originality and creative potential.²⁵

There is a continuing tradition of revitalization of Islamic thinking that is named as *Tajdid* which is usually translated as renewal or revival.²⁶ Revivalist or Renewal scholars generally blame the internal decline of Muslim societies, their loss of power and backwardness, and their unquestioned clinging to the

²³ See for the discussion: Moncef Ben Abdeljelil, "Reflections on The Critical Methods in the study of the Qur'an in Contemporary Arab Scholarship" *Proceedings of the Workshop Corpus Coranicum*, Berlin, 7-9 October, 2005.

²⁴ Milton-Edwards, B., *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1996, p. 4ff

²⁵ Mona Abul Fadl, *Where East Meets West: Appropriating the Islamic Encounter for a Spiritual-Cultural Revival*, London: The International Institute of Islamic Thought 2010, p. 4-5.

²⁶ See for further information about the terms: John O. Voll "Renewal and Reform in Islamic History: Tajdid and Islah" in *Voices of Resurgent Islam* ed. By John L. Esposito New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1983, pp. 32-47

past (*taqlîd*). They also attempt to re-interpret Islam to meet the changing circumstances of modern life and modern problems of Muslim life but with staying within the Islamic not Western hermeneutical instruments. Legal, educational, and social revision are aimed at rescuing Muslim society from their downward spiral and demonstrating the compatibility of Islam with modern thought and values. They call for internal reform through a process of re-interpretation, “*ijtihâd*”. Their themes are usually as the same in previous diagnose, namely the religious, political, social and economic life of modern Muslims.

Revivalist and Renewalist thinkers have accepted this approach and has sought to preserve Islam as the valid religion, attempting to answer all accusations and purify Islam from all error or human contamination. Revivalists, on the other hand, has sought to find out what the causes of decline are. All writers agree that it is not Islam that is the cause of the retardation, but Muslims themselves and what they have practiced in place of pure Islam. In relation to the Qur’anic exegesis this trend has lead to the ignoring of a great wealth of textual and linguistic studies of the Qur’an; instead of all efforts have concentrated on the understanding of the unique perception of the Qur’an and its validity for all time.²⁷

Indeed, Muslims have experienced a kind of religious revivalism from the first centuries of Islam. A number of scholars have engaged in re-articulating Islamic discourses (*tajdid*) in various contexts. They have systematically revised classical methods of approaching the Qur’an by stressing the dynamism, flexibility, and adaptability of Islam. Therefore, Modern Muslim, in general, as they encounter the problems of colonial affects of the west, are tends to solve them first with their own tools, the heritage of Islamic *usul al-fiqh* and *usul al-tafsir* which were specifically developed to deal with these kinds of challenges. Since the Muslim believes that there will be no more revelation to guide society after the death of the Prophet, they developed some systems to respond to change and to extend and apply the rules which are

²⁷ See: Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *Contemporary Islam and the Challenge of History*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982, p. 13-15.

derived through legal reasoning. One of these dynamic methodological systems is formulated within the concept of *al-maqasid* (the intents). *Maqasid* literary refers to understand the meaning of the Qur'an not only in its literal text but also in the intention of God/Allah and hence application to the divine guidance because of changing times and changing conditions in a society so that the Qur'an remains "dynamic and creative, always applicable and always invigorating society."²⁸

The modern literature of tafsir and fiqh that focus on the concept of *maqāsīd* a group of religious revivalists who span the late nineteenth century through the late twentieth century such as Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), Muhammad Rashīd Rida (d. 1935), Mahmud Shaltut (d. 1963), Muhammad al-Tāhir Ibn 'Āshūr (d. 1973), Muhammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1996), Wahba al-Zuhaylī, Yusuf al-Qaradāwī, Hasan al-Turābī and Tāhā Jābir al-'Alwānī. These Muslim scholars have contributed to renewal and revival in Muslim societies by highlighting the role of *maqasid* in legal theory and jurisprudence. The current literature on the subject mostly covers the *maqasid* thought of Shatibi. Despite the apparent differences in the details of their projects, all of them treated the *maqasid* as foundational principles for legal understanding and interpretation. Following Shatibi's methodology, they view the *sharī'a* as encompassing two major parts. The first part represents the laws that regulate ritual practices (*'ibādāt*) and the second part represents the laws that regulate social relations and economic transactions (*mu'āmalāt*). The first part has to be fixed. It is not developing, and no new laws are acceptable. As for the *mu'āmalāt*, the revivalist define these laws as intended by Allah to serve the utility and interest (*maslaha*) of Muslims in all times and places. Rules that are explicitly stated in the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions are, by nature, based on the consideration of utility, interest, and the public good. *Maslaha*, therefore, is presented by the reformers as one of the greatest legal aims of the *sharī'a*. Thus, modern Muslim revivalists argue, should take this fact into consideration when interpreting and applying any legal rule of the *sharī'a*, whether

²⁸ Michael Mumisa, *Islamic Law Theory and Interpretation*, Maryland: Amana Publications, 2002, p. 15.

found in the sacred texts or reached through the legal reasoning of Muslim jurists. There is a consensus among the modern proponents of the concept of *maqasid* coming from their Sunni Islamic background that it played a significant role in the legal interpretation of the early Muslim community. Thus, according to modern scholars, the concept of *maqasid* is rooted in classical legal theory and the practical legal opinions of several medieval jurists.

Maqasid is the plural form of *maqasid*, as term refers to intentions and as a terminology in Islamic legal theory (usul al-fiqh) refers to the aims of the *shari'a* (Islamic law), the intentions of Allah. The ultimate intent and purpose of Islamic law is to promote and protect the well-being or public interest (*maslaha*). The theory of *maslaha* which is produced by Maliki school of Islam has been used in recent times to justify the new fatwas (legal rules). The root of the term, *istislah* means to seek what is good. The authority of Islam has to consider protecting five essentials (*daruriyyat*) for the sake of public welfare. These are:

- 1- Religion (*din*)
- 2- Life (*nafs*)
- 3- Reason and Intellect (*aql*)
- 4- Progeny (*nasl*)
- 5- Property (*mal*).²⁹

The concept of *maqāid al-sharī'a* in the theoretical formulations of medieval jurists is not clear to be considered by any school of jurisprudence as a distinguished legal source similar to *qiyās*, *istihsān* or *al-maslaha al-mursala*. It should be noted that not all modern scholars of Islamic law view the medieval reference to the *maqāsid* as a call for using the legal aims as guiding principles in applying the *sharī'a*. As for Shatibi's writings on the *maqasid*, while some contemporary writers, such as Muhammad Khalid Masud, view them as

²⁹ For further information on the theory see: Michael Mumisa, *Islamic Law Theory and Interpretation*, Maryland: Amana Publications 2002.

a response to a rigid literalism in applying the *sharī'a*³⁰, Wael Hallaq, in contrast, sees this interest of Shatibi in the *maqasid* as a call to encourage the literal application of the *sharī'a*.³¹ In the modern context, however, the revivalists who are the subjects of this study have appropriated Shatibi's terminology to express their vision of reform. Therefore, the modern call for the primacy of *maqasid* as the foundational principle of interpretation has to be understood in the light of this shift in terminology. It remains necessary, however, to determine whether the revivalist' understanding of *maqasid* represents a continuation of Shatibi's thought. Viewing the projects of revival as based on the consideration of *maqasid* would clarify their dialectic relationship with the Qur'an.

Revivalism has swept through Middle East and has long influenced scholars of contemporary Islam. Revivalism (*Nahda, Islah, Tajdid*) as a political and cultural movement originating in Syria and flowering in Egypt seeks through translation the great achievements of modern Europe civilization while reviving the classical Arab/Islamic culture that antedates the centuries of decadence and foreign domination. As a reaction against the inferiority of the Muslim world, revivalism usually emerged in the time of colonization by European world since the conditions of Muslims concerning the question of the decline are an awareness of weakness before the power of the challenge of the West indeed. There has also been a great deal of speculation over the causes of apparent decline of the Middle Eastern societies. Some authors raise internal reasons like degeneration and separation from the true path of Islam. They ask the possibility of seeking the ascendancy of complete and fully adequate way of Islam on western models.

It is notable to say that contrary to Tunisia and Algeria, the North Africa, Egypt and Syria are the pioneers in the revivalism. While Tunisia and Algeria has been colonized by French and rudely changed their language and culture, and at the end they adopt the western system in every stage of the transition,

³⁰ See Muhammad Khalid Masud, *Islamic Legal Philosophy: A Study of Abu Ishāq Al-Shātibī's Life and Thought*, Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1977, p. 35

³¹ See: Wael Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunnī Usul al-Fiqh*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 162-3

Egypt and Syria has been resisted the transition on that way. There are reasons for these structural differences between those countries. It is firstly because of that both countries has not been changed the language and saved their links with their cultural and intellectual traditions. British occupation in both areas may let the language and culture to continue at least unlikely in French occupied area. Secondly, historically and culturally rich religious institutions, like *al-Azhar* in Cairo have affected the way of transition. That means that scholars and intellectuals have had not only one source in transition which is the west, but they have had internal sources which let them challenge to the western models with Islamic alternatives. Additionally, the traditional Islamic institutions and its *ulama* (traditional scholars) resists against these new things in the field.

In sum up, this response of Middle Eastern Muslims, staying within this frame, is revising a classical tool of Islamic interpretative traditions for responding the challenges of Modernity. They still blame the internal decline of Muslim societies, their loss of power and backwardness, and their unquestioned clinging to the past (*taqlid*). They also attempt to re-interpret Islam to meet the changing circumstances of modern life but with staying within the traditional tools. Legal, educational, and social revisions are aimed at rescuing Muslim society from their downward spiral and demonstrating the compatibility of Islam with modern, western thought and values. They call for internal reform through a process of re-interpretation, "*ijtihad*". Their themes are usually as the same in previous diagnose, namely the religious, political, social and economic life of modern Muslims. Whereas the former intellectuals are in the mood of adaptationists from the "West", the later are seeking solutions/alternatives from inside of Islamic civilization. Revivalist Response emphasis on "Islamic" methods and tools of change and development saying that Islam is able to modernize, but should not do it by westernization. As a matter of fact they assert modernization (revival, reconstruction, reconfiguration etc.) without westernization in response to the Western influence in Islamic societies that is to the results or impact of the European project of modernity. The

Islamic revival is a foremost reaction to the failure of modernisation in Middle East countries indeed.³²

Conclusion

The study stands critical on the Euro-centric colonial framework on Middle Eastern societies. The study does not mainly look at socio-political context from euro-centric outlook that imposes his own values into the Muslim world but indeed offensively neglects the intellectual roots of Middle Eastern societies as well as the global dynamics in the World. In the euro-centric outlook, the West has been portrayed as having a total presence in any individual and collective attempt by stressing the one-dimensionality of the Western cultural impact on “society” and “politics” in the Middle East. This point of view may be useful as it is for the theoretical discussion of cultural change in the colonial time, but not being applicable to phenomena of transformations that occurred in the second half of the 20th century. The issue of socio-political context should also be related to local structures and the developments after the World-War II. Therefore, the study discusses also ideologies adapted or nurtured and then set for what was perceived to be the local concerns.

In relation to challenges of European colonial framework that is the main contextual basis, the study, consequently, classifies Middle Eastern Muslim Hermeneutical responses within two main categories. Firstly, under the western influence, Middle Eastern Muslims followed a path of westernisation and secularisation they increasingly adapted western models to enable cope with the contemporary issues, namely Islamic Modernism. Secondly, there is also a revivalist response to challenging western values, Islamic Revivalism. Having given detailed analysis on the context in the first response, the study have focused specifically on the new intellectual groups in the Middle East. These scholars who are similar to and probably inspired by their Western counterparts have adapted western-originated interpretative approaches to the Qur'an. Such western-minded intellectuals are in the mood of adaptationists from the “*West*”. During the study it is observed that they aimed to re-read the

³² Milton-Edwards, B., *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1996, p. 4ff

Qur'an in the light of western textual and philosophical disciplines, such as literary criticism, and to re-read the Qur'an with asking the question, not only what the Qur'an means, but also mostly how the Qur'an can be understood and what means for the modern people. Parallel to the efforts by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars in the West, Middle Eastern intellectuals such as Amin al-Khuli, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Mohammed Talbi employs these Western approaches. Research has found also that not only the methodology of the Tafsir but also have the definition of the Qur'an been changed by these scholars. They generally defined the Qur'an as a "text" instead of "divine words of God" This definition refers to that the Qur'an must be treated like any other literary text. Additionally, they also look at the Qur'an as an historical production and finally the idea of historicity of Qur'an commonly used by these scholars. These challenges to the divinity and the authority of the Qur'an become later subject to critical readings in two main ways by the Middle Eastern western-oriented scholars:

- 1- Textual Approaches
- 2- Contextual Approaches

Research also found that the textual approach provide the objective meaning. However, in the contextual approach the presuppositions and experiences of the interpreter can be reflected and thus completely objective interpretation of the Qur'anic text became impossible. This is because of the hermeneutical fact that the interpreter chooses a certain viewpoint, which in turn means that he or she is open principally to the questions arising from his/her viewpoints. In the research the outcomes of the fact that the meaning is relative and context-bound have been shown and exemplified by certain Middle Eastern figures, like Muhammed Talbi, a Tunisian scholar.

The study found that in the second response, the revivalist scholars also attempt to re-interpret the Qur'an to meet the changing circumstances of post-colonial life and problems of Middle Eastern Muslim life but with staying within the Islamic not Western hermeneutical instruments as in the first response.

The study found that revivalism has swept through the Middle East and has influenced scholars of contemporary Islam in all over the world. However, the

study outstandingly noticed that contrary to Tunisia and Algeria in the North Africa, Egypt is the pioneers in the revivalism. While Tunisia and Algeria has been colonized by French and rudely changed their language and culture, and at the end they adopt systematically the western approaches, Egypt (and Syria) has been resisted the transition on this way. It is also because of that Middle Eastern (Egypt, Syria etc.) countries has not been changed the language and saved their links with their own cultural and intellectual traditions. British occupation in the area may let the language and culture to continue at least unlikely in French occupied area in the North Africa (still in the Middle East and Arabian World). The study also takes the institutions into the account, since historically and culturally rich religious institutions, like *al-Azhar* in Cairo have affected the way of responses. That means that scholars and intellectuals have had not only western sources in transition, but they have had internal sources which let them challenge to the western models. Additionally, the traditional Islamic institutions and *ulama* (traditional scholars) in these institutions resist against these foreign external ideas in the area. Because of all reasons, research concluded that revivalist approach has been easily and widely applied in the Middle East.

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