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Epistemological Infiltration in Qur'anic Exegesis: Shahrur's Reading of Sab'al-Mathani Verse

*Infiltrasi Epistemologis dalam Tafsir Kontemporer: Pembacaan
Shahrur atas Ayat Sab'al-Mathani*

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Abstract

This article examines Muḥammad Shaḥrūr's interpretation of sab'al-mathānī (Q 15:87) in al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'aṣirah through the al-dakhīl wa al-aṣīl fī al-tafsīr framework. The classical tradition, supported by two Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī reports, identifies the expression with Sūrat al-Fātiḥah, whereas Shaḥrūr reads it as the seven groups of disjointed letters. Using qualitative library research with directed content analysis and comparative-critical reading, the study maps his premises, procedures and conclusions and evaluates them against explicit criteria of valid interpretation. The findings show that his reading rests on syntactic analysis and anti-synonymy, and constitutes al-dakhīl bi al-ra'y in an epistemological, not narrational, sense because it displaces an explicit prophetic explanation without evidence of equivalent rank. The article proposes a criteria-based model that extends al-dakhīl theory to methodological infiltration.

Keywords: Sab'al-Mathānī; Muḥammad Shaḥrūr; Al-Dakhīl wa al-Aṣīl; Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y; Qur'anic Hermeneutics

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji penafsiran Muḥammad Shaḥrūr atas sab'al-mathānī (Q 15:87) dalam al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'aṣirah melalui kerangka al-dakhīl wa al-aṣīl fī al-tafsīr. Tradisi klasik, yang didukung dua riwayat Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, mengidentifikasi ungkapan ini dengan Sūrat al-Fātiḥah, sedangkan Shaḥrūr membacanya sebagai tujuh kelompok huruf terpisah. Dengan riset kepustakaan kualitatif, analisis konten terarah, dan pembacaan komparatif-kritis, studi ini memetakan premis, prosedur, dan kesimpulan Shaḥrūr, lalu mengevaluasinya berdasarkan kriteria penafsiran yang valid. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pembacaannya bertumpu pada analisis sintaksis dan prinsip antisionimi, serta tergolong al-dakhīl bi al-ra'y secara epistemologis, bukan naratif, karena menggeser penjelasan kenabian yang eksplisit tanpa bukti sepadan. Artikel ini mengusulkan perluasan teori al-dakhīl pada infiltrasi metodologis melalui model berbasis kriteria.

Kata Kunci: Sab'al-Mathānī; Muḥammad Shaḥrūr; Al-Dakhīl wa al-Aṣīl; Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y; Hermeneutika Al-Qur'an



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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Qur'anic exegesis is marked by a visible shift in interpretive authority. Classical *tafsir* was produced by scholars trained in transmitted reports, Arabic philology and the sciences of the Qur'an, whereas modern interpretation increasingly draws on linguistics, philosophy, the natural sciences and hermeneutics.¹ Ali's review distinguishes textualist, contextualist, modernist, socio-political, scientific, thematic and feminist trends, which indicates that this diversification is now a structural feature of the field.² Saeed similarly contrasts textualist and semi-textualist approaches with a contextualist model that takes both the historical and the contemporary context of interpretation seriously.³ The diversification raises a methodological question that cannot be avoided: by what criteria can a new reading be recognised as valid interpretation rather than as an intrusion into the text? Answering it requires case studies in which a modern reading collides with a meaning already fixed by prophetic report and long scholarly acceptance.

Muḥammad Shaḥrūr is among the most debated figures in this landscape. Trained as a civil engineer rather than in the traditional religious sciences, he published *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'ashirah* in Damascus in 1990 and presented it as a contemporary reading of revelation.⁴ The book generated a wave of refutations, and Christmann shows how the responses constructed both a norm of scholarly authority and a category of deviancy.⁵ Central to Shaḥrūr's project is the rejection of synonymy, which leads him to redefine terms such as *al-kitāb*, *al-qur'ān*, *al-dhikr* and *al-furqān* as distinct concepts.⁶ Christmann's study of the book takes its title from the formulation that the form of the text is permanent while its content moves.⁷ Supriyanto adds that Shaḥrūr wanted the Qur'an to be read as if it had just been revealed, a stance that has attracted both appreciation and harsh criticism.⁸ One of the terms Shaḥrūr reconfigures is *sab' al-mathānī* in Q 15:87.

Existing scholarship on Shaḥrūr can be grouped into four clusters. The first maps his hermeneutic and linguistic project, including his differentiation of key Qur'anic terms and his

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- 1 Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Development, Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis: Genesis and Development* (London: Routledge, 2010).
 - 2 Amer Zulfikar Ali, "Brief Review of Classical and Modern Tafsir Trends and Role of Modern Tafasir in Contemporary Islamic Thought," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2018): 39–52, <https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v3i2.87>.
 - 3 Abdullah Saeed, "Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a contemporary approach," *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach*, 2005, 1–192, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203016770>.
 - 4 Peter Clark, "The Shahrur Phenomenon: A Liberal Islamic Voice from Syria," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7, no. 3 (1996): 337–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596419608721095>.
 - 5 Andreas Christmann, "'73 Proofs of dilettantism': The construction of norm and deviancy in the responses to Mohamad Shahrour's book *Al-Kitāb Wa'l-Qur'ān: Qirā'a Mu'āsira*," *Welt des Islams* 45, no. 1 (2005): 20–73, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1570060053628052>; Muhammad Shahrur, "The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason," *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason*, 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004171039.i-588>.
 - 6 Ahmad Fajar Rofiq, "Prinsip Diferensiasi Al Qur'an Perspektif Muhammad Shaḥrūr," *Qof* 4, no. 1 (2020): 107–24, <https://doi.org/10.30762/qof.v4i1.1902>; Mia Fitriah Elkarimah, "Kajian Asinonimitas Al-Kitāb Wal Al-Qur'an: Qirā'ah Muashirah," *LINGUA: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, dan Pengajarannya* 14, no. 2 (2017): 181–94, <https://doi.org/10.30957/lingua.v14i2.302>.
 - 7 Andreas Christmann, "'The form is permanent, but the content moves': The qur'anic text and its interpretation(s) in Mohamad Shahrour's *Al-kitāb wa 'Al-qur'ān*," *Welt des Islams* 43, no. 2 (2003): 143–72, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006003766956694>.
 - 8 John Supriyanto, "Pergeseran Paradigma Tafsir Ala Linguis (Studi atas Kitab 'Qira'ah Mu'ashirah' Karya Muhammad Syahrur)," *Jurnal Studi Agama* 2, no. 2 (2018): 71–86, <https://doi.org/10.19109/jsa.v2i2.3054>.

linguistic approach to the text.⁹ The second concerns law: Khusen argues that Shaḥrūr combines textual analysis with a theory of limits (*ḥudūd*) to treat legal verses as an open-ended process, and Rohman and Muafatun apply the theory to inheritance.¹⁰ The third concerns gender, where Marcotte examines his position on women and polygamy and Khasanah, Hamzani and Aravik discuss his hermeneutics of equality.¹¹ The fourth is critical evaluation: Fauzi finds that Shaḥrūr's remarks on *qirā'āt* rest on assumptions with insufficient evidence and overlook the strict chains of transmission that support the readings.¹² Across these clusters Shaḥrūr appears as a reformist, a controversial thinker and an object of critique, yet the literature has rarely tested one specific exegetical decision against an explicit framework of validity.

The theory of *al-dakhil wa al-aṣil fī al-tafsīr* provides such a framework. According to Hozaini and Sari, *al-aṣil* designates interpretation grounded in the Qur'an, the Sunnah and the statements of the Companions and Successors, while *al-dakhil* designates deviation from these foundations.¹³ Ulinnuha traces the concept, its genealogy, its divisions and its implications for interpretation, and later offers a method for detecting infiltration and contamination in exegetical works.¹⁴ Hamzani applies the theory to sources outside Islam and distinguishes *al-dakhil bi al-manqūl*, which covers *Isrā'iliyyāt* and fabricated hadith, from *al-dakhil bi al-ra'y*, which covers scientific data and personal opinions that contradict Qur'anic values.¹⁵ The theory has also been reviewed critically, as in Razi's study of the concepts of *al-aṣil* and *al-dakhil*, which invites careful reflection on how its criteria are applied.¹⁶ Most applications, however, concern narrations in classical commentaries; the possibility that infiltration operates at the level of modern methodology remains under-explored.

The interpretation of *sab' al-mathānī* is a suitable test case because the classical position is unusually well documented. Two reports in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* connect the expression in Q 15:87

- 9 Rofiq, "Prinsip Diferensiasi Al Qur'an Perspektif Muhammad Shaḥrūr"; Elkarimah, "Kajian Asinonimitas Al-Kitab Wal Al-Qur'an: Qirā'ah Muashirah"; Supriyanto, "PERGESERAN PARADIGMA TAFSIR ALA LINGUIS (Studi atas Kitab 'Qirā'ah Mu'ashirah' Karya Muhammad Syahrur)."
- 10 Moh Khusen, "From Shari'a 'Ayniyya to Shari'a Hududiyya: Shahrour's Interpretation on Quranic Legal Verses," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 50, no. 2 (2012): 431, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2012.502.431-459>; Moh Mujibur Rohman dan Siti Muafatun, "Hacking Muhammad Syahrūr's Hudūd Theory and Its Relevance to the Inheritance of Sangkolan Madurese People," *Jurnal Ilmiah Al-Syir'ah* 19, no. 2 (2021): 182–99, <https://doi.org/10.30984/jis.v19i2.1625>.
- 11 Nur Khasanah, Achmad Irwan Hamzani, dan Havis Aravik, "Hermeneutics of the Qur'an: a Study of Muhammad Syahrur's Thoughts on the Men and Women Equality," *Nurani: Jurnal Kajian Syari'ah dan Masyarakat* 20, no. 1 (2020): 25–36, <https://doi.org/10.19109/nurani.v20i1.5339>; Roxanne D. Marcotte, "Ṣahrūr, the status of women, and polygamy in Islam," *Oriente Moderno* 81, no. 2–3 (2001): 313–28, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22138617-0810203003>.
- 12 Ahmad Fauzi, "Problema Qirā'āt Dalam Al-Qur'an Perspektif Muḥammad Shaḥrūr," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Hadis* 20, no. 1 (2019): 81–104, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.2019.2001-05>.
- 13 M. Fahri Hozaini dan Mat Sari, "Tafsir Otentik dan Tafsir Infiltratif: Studi Kritis dalam Metodologi Tafsir," *REVELATIA Jurnal Ilmu al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* 4, no. 1 (2023): 55–66, <https://doi.org/10.19105/revelatia.v4i1.6736>.
- 14 Muhammad Ulinnuha, *Metode Kritik Ad-Dakhil fit Tafsir*, ed. oleh Aly Nur, 1 ed., vol. 1 (Jakarta Selatan: PT. Qaf Media Kreativa, 2019); Muhammad Ulinnuha, "Konsep Al-Ashil dan Al-Dakhil dalam Tafsir Al-Qur'an," *Madania* 21, no. 2 (2017): 127–44, <https://doi.org/10.29300/madania.v21i2.582>.
- 15 Yusri Hamzani, "Meninjau Kembali Sumber Luar Islam dalam Penafsiran Al-Qur'an," *El-Umdah* 3, no. 2 (2021): 201–16, <https://doi.org/10.20414/el-umdah.v3i2.2360>.
- 16 F Razi, "Tinjauan Kritis terhadap Konsep Al-Ashil dan Al-Dakhil," *JiQTA: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* 3, no. 2 (2024): 150–57, <https://doi.org/10.36769/jiqta.v3i2.483>.

with Sūrat al-Fātiḥah, and Ibn Kathīr adopts the identification after presenting rival opinions.¹⁷ Shaḥrūr departs from this view: for him the expression is a category distinct from *al-Qurʾan al-ʿaẓīm*, and his reading, as examined in this article, takes it to refer to the seven groups of disjoined letters that open surahs.¹⁸ The disjoined letters themselves remain one of the least settled questions in Qurʾanic studies; Massey proposed that they were scribal initials, and Sayoud notes the absence of a unanimous interpretation.¹⁹ The case therefore combines an explicit prophetic explanation, a contested textual phenomenon and a modern linguistic principle. Within the literature reviewed for this article, no study evaluates it through the *al-dakhil wa al-aṣil* framework.

This article therefore asks three questions. What is the structure of Shaḥrūr’s argument for separating *sabʿ al-mathānī* from Sūrat al-Fātiḥah? How does that argument compare with the classical interpretation grounded in prophetic exegesis? And can the reading be classified as *al-dakhil* when assessed against explicit criteria of valid interpretation? The article does not reject Shaḥrūr apologetically; it treats his reading as a test case for the explanatory reach of *al-dakhil* theory in the analysis of modern exegesis. Its contribution is twofold. Empirically, it maps the premises, procedures and conclusions of a single, well-defined interpretive decision. Theoretically, it proposes that infiltration can be identified at the level of epistemology, when the hierarchy of interpretive sources is altered, and it offers a criteria-based evaluation matrix. The discussion proceeds in four steps: the classical identification, Shaḥrūr’s argument, the *al-dakhil* evaluation, and the implications for interpretive authority.

Method

This study is a qualitative library research with a conceptual-analytical and comparative-critical design. The material object is Shaḥrūr’s interpretation of *sabʿ al-mathānī* in *al-Kitāb wa al-Qurʾan: Qirāʾah Muʿaṣirah*, especially his refusal to identify the expression with Sūrat al-Fātiḥah.²⁰ The formal object is the theory of *al-dakhil wa al-aṣil fī al-tafsīr*, used as an instrument for assessing the authenticity and possible infiltration of meaning.²¹ A qualitative design is appropriate because the data consist of interpretive texts, argumentative constructions and epistemological positions, not of measurable variables. The single-case focus follows the aim of examining one exegetical decision in depth rather than surveying the whole of Shaḥrūr’s thought, which has been treated elsewhere.²²

17 Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, “Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī” (Sunnah.com, n.d.), <https://sunnah.com/bukhari>; Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾan al-ʿAẓīm*, ed. oleh Sāmī ibn Muḥammad al-Salāmah, 2 ed. (Riyadh: Dār Ṭayyibah, 1999).

18 Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, *al-Kitāb wa al-Qurʾan: Qirāʾah Muʿaṣirah* (Damascus: al-Aḥālī li al-Ṭibāʾah wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzīʿ, 1990); Khusein, “From Shariʿa ʿAyniyya to Shariʿa Hududiyya: Shahrour’s Interpretation on Quranic Legal Verses.”

19 Keith Massey, “A New Investigation into the ‘Mystery Letters’ of the Quran,” *Arabica* 43, no. 3 (1996): 497–501; Halim Sayoud, “Investigation on the Mystery of the Qurʾan’s Disjoined Letters,” *Quranica* 5, no. 2 (2013): 1–14.

20 Shaḥrūr, *al-Kitāb wa al-Qurʾan: Qirāʾah Muʿaṣirah*.

21 Hozaini dan Sari, “Tafsir Otentik dan Tafsir Infiltratif: Studi Kritis dalam Metodologi Tafsir”; Muhammad Ulinnuha, *Metode Kritis Ad-Dakhil fī Tafsīr*.

22 Christmann, “‘The form is permanent, but the content moves’: The qurʾanic text and its interpretation(s) in Mohamad Shahrour’s ‘Al-kitāb wa ʾl qurʾān’”; Supriyanto, “Pergeseran Paradigma Tafsir Ala Linguis (Studi atas Kitab ‘Qirāʾah Muʿashirah’ Karya Muhammad Syahrur).”

Primary data comprise four groups of texts: Shaḥrūr's *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān* and Christmann's annotated translation of his writings;²³ Ibn Kathīr's commentary on Q 15:87;²⁴ the two reports of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* on the identity of *sab' al-mathānī*;²⁵ and al-Dhahabī's typology of exegesis, used to situate *tafsīr bi al-ru'y* within the classical discipline.²⁶ Secondary data are peer-reviewed articles and scholarly books on Shaḥrūr, on the disjoined letters, on contemporary exegetical trends and on *al-dakhīl* theory. Before inclusion, the bibliographic metadata of every secondary source, namely author, journal, volume, issue, pages and, where available, DOI, was checked against journal, publisher or library-catalogue records. Sources whose metadata could not be confirmed were excluded from the analysis.

Data were collected through documentation and organised in three thematic files: the meaning of *sab' al-mathānī* in Shaḥrūr's reading, its meaning in the classical tradition, and the criteria of *al-dakhīl wa al-aṣīl*. Each argument was then coded by the type of evidence on which it relies, namely Qur'anic evidence, prophetic report, Companion report, Arabic grammar and syntax, or rational and systemic reasoning. The coding followed the logic of directed content analysis, in which categories are derived from an existing theory and then applied to the text, with room for emergent categories.²⁷ This procedure allows the analysis to identify exactly where the interpretive source of legitimacy shifts from transmitted authority to internal terminological analysis.

Analysis proceeded in three steps. First, Shaḥrūr's argument was mapped into premise, method and conclusion. Second, the argument was compared with the classical interpretation, with particular attention to the hierarchy of sources. Third, the comparison was evaluated against four criteria: agreement with authentic prophetic reports and early exegesis;²⁸ absence of conflict with other verses and reports, and conformity with sound reasoning;²⁹ linguistic validity and contextual coherence;³⁰ and the absence of external assumptions that contradict Qur'anic values.³¹ Two limitations should be noted. The study concerns one verse, so its conclusions are analytical and not statistical generalisations, and Shaḥrūr's text is read alongside the secondary literature that has documented his method. Validity is strengthened through triangulation between primary texts, classical commentary and peer-reviewed scholarship.

23 Shaḥrūr, *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'aṣṣirah*; Muhammad Shahrur, *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, ed. oleh Andreas Christmann (Leiden: Brill, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004171039.i-588>.

24 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*.

25 Bukhārī, “Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī. no. 4474 dan no 4704”

26 Muḥammad Ḥusayn al- Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 2000).

27 Hsiu-Fang Hsieh dan Sarah E Shannon, “Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis,” *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 9 (2005): 1277–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>.

28 Hozaini dan Sari, “Tafsir Otentik dan Tafsir Infiltratif: Studi Kritis dalam Metodologi Tafsir.”

29 Muhammad Luthfi Dhulkifli, “To What Extent Can the Diversity of Qur'anic Tafsir Be Described as ‘Traditions of Reason,’” *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Hadis* 24, no. 1 (2023): 79–96, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.v24i1.4303>.

30 Ilyas Supena, “Epistemology of Tafsīr, Ta'wīl, and Hermeneutics: Towards an Integrative Approach,” *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 14, no. 1 (2024): 121–36, <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.141.08>.

31 Khasanah, Hamzani, dan Aravik, “Hermeneutics of the Qur'an: a Study of Muhammad Syahrur'S Thoughts on the Men and Women Equality.”

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Classical Identification of Sab‘al-mathānī with Sūrat al-Fātiḥah

The first result concerns the strength of the classical identification. Q 15:87 states that God gave the Prophet *sab‘an mina al-mathānī* and *al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm*. In the first report in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, the Prophet tells Abū Sa‘īd ibn al-Mu‘allā that he will teach him the greatest surah of the Qur’an, and identifies *al-ḥamdu lillāhi rabbi al-‘ālamīn* as the *sab‘al-mathānī* and the great Qur’an he has been given.³² The report is not incidental to the verse, since it explicitly names the referent of the expression. Its authority is that of prophetic exegesis, which occupies the highest rank in the hierarchy of sources that Hozaini and Sari associate with authentic interpretation.³³ For this reason, the identification does not depend on a lexical preference of later commentators but on a report attributed to the Prophet himself.

The second report, transmitted from Abū Hurayrah, is placed by al-Bukhārī in the chapter devoted to Q 15:87 itself and states that *Umm al-Qur’ān* is *al-sab‘al-mathānī* and *al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm*.³⁴ Two features of this wording matter for the later debate. The report connects the two expressions of the verse with a single referent, so that the conjunction is understood as joining two designations of one gift rather than two different entities. It also shows that the interpretive question was already answered within the tradition of transmitted exegesis before any modern syntactic analysis was offered. The two reports therefore do not merely support a preferred opinion; they supply an explicit interpretation of the verse’s terms, which any alternative reading must either accommodate or explain.

Ibn Kathīr’s commentary on Q 15:87 shows how the classical tradition weighed this evidence. He records that some early authorities took the expression to mean the seven long surahs, but he prefers the identification with Sūrat al-Fātiḥah because it is supported by the reports in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.³⁵ This preference is consistent with the method of *tafsīr bi al-ma‘thūr*, in which the Qur’an, the Sunnah and the statements of the Companions and Successors set the limits within which linguistic possibilities are admitted.³⁶ Ibn Kathīr does not present the other opinion as impossible; he ranks it below a report that speaks directly to the verse. The classical position is thus not an absence of debate but the outcome of a debate resolved by an explicit hierarchy of evidence, and it is this hierarchy that a modern alternative must engage.

The meaning of *mathānī* reinforces the classical identification with a second layer of legitimacy. The term is understood as “repeated”, and Sūrat al-Fātiḥah is recited repeatedly in the prayer, so the identification links a Qur’anic term with an observable liturgical practice.³⁷ The classical result is therefore double: prophetic legitimacy, because the report names the referent, and liturgical legitimacy, because the practice of repetition confirms the semantic value of the term. The alternative opinion of the seven long surahs is also explained by repetition, since those surahs contain repeated laws, stories and admonitions, which shows that the classical debate remained within the semantic field of the root.³⁸ What the tradition did not do was to move the

32 Bukhārī, “Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī.”

33 Hozaini dan Sari, “Tafsir Otentik dan Tafsir Infiltratif: Studi Kritis dalam Metodologi Tafsir.”

34 Bukhārī, “Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 4704”

35 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Aẓīm*.

36 Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*.

37 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Aẓīm*.

38 Ibn Kathīr.

referent outside the recited body of the Qur'an that the community repeats. This background makes visible what is at stake when the referent is relocated to the disjointed letters.

Shahṛūr's Textual Argument and the Seven Fawātiḥ al-Suwar

The second result concerns the place of *sab' al-mathānī* in Shahṛūr's own classification of the Qur'anic text. According to Khusen, Shahṛūr divides the ambiguous verses (*āyāt mutashābihāt*) into two groups, namely the glorious Qur'an (*al-Qur'ān al-‘aẓīm*) and the seven oft-repeated (*al-sab' al-mathānī*).³⁹ Khusen builds this scheme on his reading of Shahṛūr's text and on Christmann's analysis of it.⁴⁰ In this scheme the seven oft-repeated are not the name of a surah but one component of a classified corpus. The relocation of *sab' al-mathānī* therefore follows from the architecture of Shahṛūr's terminology rather than from an isolated exegetical opinion. This observation matters for evaluation: to assess the reading, one must assess the terminological system that generates it, and not only its conclusion on a single verse.

The textual argument that supports the separation is syntactic. Shahṛūr notes that Q 15:87 links *sab'an min al-mathānī* and *al-Qur'ān al-‘aẓīm* with a conjunction, and he concludes that the two expressions denote different entities.⁴¹ The conclusion follows from his principle of differentiation: because every term in the Qur'an is held to have its own semantic field, an expression that appears alongside another cannot be treated as its synonym or as a name for the same referent.⁴² Rofiq shows that this principle has consequences for several branches of the sciences of the Qur'an, including *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* and interpretive methodology.⁴³ The argument is therefore rigorous in its internal logic: if difference of term implies difference of referent, then the conjunction in Q 15:87 must separate the two. Its weakness, examined below, lies in the premise on which this implication depends.

The third result concerns the identification of *sab' al-mathānī* with the seven groups of disjointed letters. In the reading examined here, Shahṛūr reasons that the expression *min al-mathānī* points to a textual element that recurs or is duplicated in the structure of the codex, and that the letters standing at the opening of surahs meet this description better than a single surah does.⁴⁴ The move is intelligible against the background of a phenomenon that remains unresolved. Massey argued that the letters were the initials or monograms of scribes, and Sayoud describes the absence of a clear or unanimous explanation of their significance.⁴⁵ Because there is no settled meaning to contradict, Shahṛūr's proposal enters an open field. Yet an open field on the meaning of the letters does not make the field open on the meaning of *sab' al-mathānī*: for this expression the tradition possesses an explicit report, and the proposal supplies no equivalent evidence that the letters are what the verse calls *mathānī*.

The fourth result concerns the methodological character of the shift. As Christmann's study of the book indicates, Shahṛūr's approach places the internal analysis of the text ahead of inherited understanding, and Supriyanto adds that he conceives of reading the Qur'an as if it had just

39 Khusen, "From Shari'a 'Ayniyya to Shari'a Hududiyya: Shahrour's Interpretation on Quranic Legal Verses."

40 Christmann, "'The form is permanent, but the content moves': The qur'anic text and its interpretation(s) in Mohamad Shahrour's 'Al-kitāb wa 'l qur'ān.'"

41 Shahṛūr, *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'aṣirah*.

42 Rofiq, "Prinsip Diferensiasi Al Qur'an Perspektif Muhammad Shahṛūr."

43 Rofiq.

44 Shahṛūr, *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'aṣirah*.

45 Massey, "A New Investigation into the 'Mystery Letters' of the Quran."

been revealed.⁴⁶ In the terms used by Supena, the reading privileges a linguistic and systemic analysis of the text, while the classical case privileges a chain of transmitted explanation.⁴⁷ Saeed's contextualist approach also departs from strict reliance on inherited meanings, but it does so by attending explicitly to historical and contemporary context and by proposing criteria for doing so.⁴⁸ Shaḥrūr's argument on *sab' al-mathānī*, by contrast, relies on syntax and terminology alone. The shift is therefore best described as a change in the source of legitimacy, from transmitted authority to terminological coherence, rather than as a difference of opinion within a shared hierarchy of sources.

Evaluating Shaḥrūr's Reading through Al-Dakhīl wa al-Aṣīl

The third set of results concerns the classification of the reading within *al-dakhīl wa al-aṣīl*. The first finding is negative: the reading is not *al-dakhīl bi al-manqūl*. Shaḥrūr does not rely on *Isrā' ilīyyāt*, fabricated hadith or foreign narrations, which are the standard instances of infiltration through transmission in Hamzani's typology.⁴⁹ Ulinnuha's method for detecting infiltration and contamination would find no narrational contamination here.⁵⁰ A classification that stopped at this point would therefore declare the reading authentic. But *al-dakhīl* also has a second form, *al-dakhīl bi al-ra'y*, in which personal opinion or external assumption departs from the recognised foundations of interpretation.⁵¹ The relevant question is whether Shaḥrūr's reasoning departs from those foundations, and this can be answered only by testing the reading against explicit criteria.

Table 1 applies the four criteria set out in the method. On the first criterion the reading fails: it does not conform to the prophetic reports that name the referent of the expression, and it offers no report of equivalent rank in support of its own identification.⁵² On the second criterion, agreement with earlier exegesis, the reading finds no support in the opinions that Ibn Kathīr presents, which concern the seven long surahs and Sūrat al-Fāṭihah and do not include the disjoined letters.⁵³ On the third, the syntactic argument is not irrational, but it is not exclusive, since a conjunction can join two designations of one referent, as the wording of the prophetic report itself illustrates.⁵⁴ On the fourth, the reading is coherent within Shaḥrūr's terminological system, but coherence within a system does not establish correspondence to what the verse means.⁵⁵

46 Christmann, "The form is permanent, but the content moves: The qur'anic text and its interpretation(s) in Mohamad Shahrou's 'Al-kitāb wa 'l qur'ān.'"

47 Supena, "Epistemology of Tafsīr, Ta'wīl, and Hermeneutics: Towards an Integrative Approach."

48 Saeed, "Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a contemporary approach."

49 Hamzani, "Meninjau Kembali Sumber Luar Islam dalam Penafsiran Al-Qur'an."

50 Muhammad Ulinnuha, *Metode Kritik Ad-Dakhīl fī Tafsīr*.

51 Hamzani, "Meninjau Kembali Sumber Luar Islam dalam Penafsiran Al-Qur'an."

52 Bukhārī, "Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 4474 dan no. 4704."

53 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*.

54 Bukhārī, "Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 4704."

55 Dhulkifli, "To What Extent Can the Diversity of Qur'anic Tafsir Be Described as 'Traditions of Reason.'"

Table 1. Evaluation matrix of Shaḥrūr's reading of *sab' al-mathānī*

Criterion	Classical position (<i>al-aṣīl</i>)	Shaḥrūr's reading	Assessment
Prophetic report	Two reports in <i>Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī</i> name Sūrat al-Fātiḥah as <i>sab' al-mathānī</i>	Reports are not treated as decisive; Q 15:87 is read through its own syntax	Displaces an explicit report without a report of equivalent rank
Early exegesis	Opinions presented by Ibn Kathīr: seven long surahs; Sūrat al-Fātiḥah	Seven groups of disjointed letters	No support in the opinions presented by Ibn Kathīr
Linguistic validity	Conjunction may join two designations of one referent	Conjunction marks two distinct categories (anti-synonymy)	Plausible, but not exclusive
Contextual and systemic coherence	Repetition in prayer confirms the sense of <i>mathānī</i>	Coherent within his terminological system	Internal coherence does not establish correspondence to the verse

Source: author's analysis (2026)

A further finding is that the infiltrative element appears at three levels. At the level of premise, Shaḥrūr assumes that difference of term entails difference of substance, an assumption that Elkarimah's study shows to be contested, since scholars who reject synonymy often distinguish only the properties expressed by words while leaving the meaning unchanged.⁵⁶ At the level of procedure, syntax is given priority over a report that speaks directly to the verse, which inverts the ordering of sources that Hozaini and Sari describe as the mark of authentic interpretation.⁵⁷ At the level of conclusion, the disjointed letters replace Sūrat al-Fātiḥah without equivalent evidence. A comparable pattern appears in Fauzi's evaluation of Shaḥrūr on *qirā'āt*, where assumptions are advanced without sufficient scientific evidence and without engaging the chains of transmission.⁵⁸ The recurrence suggests that the problem lies in a method, not in an isolated opinion.

This classification must be qualified. First, it applies to the reading of a single expression and is not a verdict on Shaḥrūr's whole project. Khusen shows that in the field of law Shaḥrūr remains attached to textual analysis while pursuing compatibility with modern values, and Rohman and Muafatun find his theory of limits productive for reading inheritance practice.⁵⁹ Second, the concept of *al-dakhil* is itself open to critical reflection, as Razi's review indicates, and its criteria should be applied so that they discipline exegesis rather than freeze it.⁶⁰ Dhulkifli argues that reason-based interpretation can be accepted as a tradition of reason when it satisfies fundamental criteria, while cautioning that emphasis on reason may open the door to personal preference.⁶¹ Applying that standard, Shaḥrūr's reading is best described as epistemologically problematic *al-dakhil bi al-ra'y* in this case, and not as illegitimate merely because it is modern or rational.

56 Bukhārī, “Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī.”

57 Hozaini dan Sari, “Tafsir Otentik dan Tafsir Infiltratif: Studi Kritis dalam Metodologi Tafsir.”

58 Fauzi, “Problema Qirā'āt Dalam Al-Qur'an Perspektif Muḥammad Shaḥrūr.”

59 Khusen, “From Shari'a 'Ayniyya to Shari'a Hududiyya: Shahrour's Interpretation on Quranic Legal Verses.”

60 Razi, “Tinjauan Kritis terhadap Konsep Al-Ashil dan Al-Dakhil.”

61 Dhulkifli, “To What Extent Can the Diversity of Qur'anic Tafsir Be Described as ‘Traditions of Reason.’”

Implications for Interpretive Authority and for Al-Dakhil Theory

The fourth set of results concerns interpretive authority. The case shows a decentralisation in which the criterion of validity moves from scholarly transmission to the competence of the individual reader. Christmann's analysis of the reception of Shaḥrūr's book demonstrates that the controversy was as much about who may speak with authority about the Qur'an as about what he said.⁶² The tension is not unique to Shaḥrūr. Abu-Zayd's examination of the literary approach to the Qur'an shows that the relation between text-centred reading and inherited interpretation has been debated well beyond Shaḥrūr's case.⁶³ In the case of *sab' al-mathānī*, the tension is concrete: a meaning supported by a report in the most authoritative hadith collection is set aside by a theory of the structure of the text. The implication is that the question of authority cannot be left to declarations of novelty or tradition; it requires a shared account of what counts as evidence.

A second implication is the emergence of a model in which the coherence of an internal system outranks continuity with the exegetical tradition. The pattern is visible across Shaḥrūr's work. In law, the theory of limits reconstructs rulings as ranges between minimum and maximum bounds;⁶⁴ in gender, the same systemic logic produces new conclusions on the status of women and on polygamy;⁶⁵ in *qirā'āt*, the analysis leads to a critique of established readings.⁶⁶ The reading of *sab' al-mathānī* belongs to this family of moves. The benefit of such a model is intellectual openness and internal consistency; its cost is that consistency can become self-confirming when no external check, such as an explicit report or the practice of the community, is allowed to correct it. The *al-aṣīl* framework supplies precisely this external check.

The third implication concerns *al-dakhil* theory. Its application should be extended from the content of exegesis to the premises, procedures and hierarchy of sources that generate it. On the basis of this study, a three-layer evaluation model is proposed. The first layer tests agreement with authentic reports and the earliest exegetical opinions, following the grounds of *al-aṣīl* described by Hozaini and Sari.⁶⁷ The second layer examines linguistic validity and contextual coherence, in keeping with the classical distinction between commendable and blameworthy reason-based interpretation found in al-Dhahabī's typology and with the survey of exegetical schools by Abdul-Raof.⁶⁸ The third layer identifies the external assumptions, ideological or methodological, that operate behind an interpretation, which extends Ulinuha's method to modern hermeneutics.⁶⁹ Such a model allows modern readings to be appreciated as intellectual efforts while keeping them accountable to the discipline of validation.

62 Christmann, "73 Proofs of dilettantism": The construction of norm and deviancy in the responses to Mohamad Shahrour's book *Al-Kitāb Wa'l-Qur'ān: Qirā'a Mu'āsira*."

63 Nasr Abu-Zayd, "The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an," *Journal of Comparative Poetics* 23 (2003): 8–47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1350075>.

64 Khusen, "From Shari'a 'Ayniyya to Shari'a Hududiyya: Shahrour's Interpretation on Quranic Legal Verses"; Rohman dan Muafatun, "Hacking Muhammad Syahrūr's Hudūd Theory and Its Relevance to the Inheritance of Sangkolan Madurese People."

65 Marcotte, "Šahrūr, the status of women, and polygamy in Islam"; Khasanah, Hamzani, dan Aravik, "Hermeneutics of the Qur'an: a Study of Muhammad Syahrūr's Thoughts on the Men and Women Equality."

66 Fauzi, "Problema Qirā'āt Dalam Al-Qur'an Perspektif Muḥammad Shaḥrūr."

67 Hozaini dan Sari, "Tafsir Otentik dan Tafsir Infiltratif: Studi Kritis dalam Metodologi Tafsir."

68 Dhahabī, *al-Tafsir wa al-Mufasssirin*; Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Development, Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis: Genesis and Development*.

69 Muhammad Ulinuha, *Metode Kritis Ad-Dakhil fī Tafsir*.

The findings also indicate directions for further research. Other terms that Shaḥrūr reconfigures, such as *al-kitāb*, *al-dhikr*, *umm al-kitāb* and *al-furqān*, should be tested with the same criteria to determine whether *al-dakhil bi al-ra'y* is confined to *sab' al-mathānī* or characterises the structure of his terminology.⁷⁰ Comparative work on other modern exegetes who use linguistic and historical approaches would show whether the model travels beyond this case.⁷¹ Research on the disjoined letters will also remain relevant, because a future consensus on their function could change the evaluation of any reading that relies on them.⁷² Finally, specialists in Shaḥrūr's Arabic corpus should verify the analysis presented here against the full text of *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān*, since this article has relied on the primary text together with the secondary literature that documents it. These steps would move the study of contemporary exegesis from polemic toward operational criticism.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Shaḥrūr's reading of *sab' al-mathānī* marks an epistemological shift from authority-based interpretation to interpretation grounded in internal analysis of Qur'anic terms. The classical identification with Sūrat al-Fātiḥah rests on two reports in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* that name its referent, and on the preference of commentators such as Ibn Kathīr for a report that speaks directly to the verse. Shaḥrūr's identification with the seven groups of disjoined letters rests instead on the conjunction in Q 15:87 and on differentiation between terms, which lead him to treat the expression as separate from *al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm*. Assessed against four explicit criteria, the reading is classified as *al-dakhil bi al-ra'y* in an epistemological sense: it uses no foreign narrations, but displaces an explicit prophetic explanation without evidence of equivalent rank and places syntactic coherence above the hierarchy of sources.

The article's contribution lies in extending *al-dakhil* theory from the criticism of weak narrations to the criticism of methodological infiltration. Existing applications mostly examine *Isrā'iliyyat*, fabricated hadith and other transmitted material in classical commentaries, whereas this study shows that infiltration can also occur at the level of premise, procedure and conclusion, namely when the hierarchy of interpretive sources is altered. The article therefore offers a criteria-based evaluation matrix that tests a reading for agreement with prophetic reports and early exegesis, for linguistic validity, and for contextual and systemic coherence. The classification is nevertheless bounded. It concerns one interpretive decision, not a verdict on Shaḥrūr's whole project, and it does not deny the value of critical modern scholarship on the Qur'an. Modern readings remain welcome as intellectual efforts, provided they can be accounted for in relation to the sources that have historically limited interpretation.

Three limitations and recommendations follow. First, the analysis is restricted to a single verse and relies partly on secondary literature. Further work should therefore test other terms that Shaḥrūr reconfigures, such as *al-kitāb*, *al-dhikr*, *umm al-kitāb* and *al-furqān*, and verify the analysis against the full text of *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān* to determine whether *al-dakhil bi al-ra'y* is confined to *sab' al-mathānī* or characterises his terminology as a whole. Second, the debate about the disjoined letters remains open, and any change in scholarly understanding of their function would require the case to be re-evaluated. Third, the proposed evaluation model should be applied to other contemporary exegetes who use linguistic and historical approaches, so that its usefulness can be judged beyond this case. In this way, modern *tafsīr* can be examined critically, without apologetics and without dismissal.

70 Rofiq, "Prinsip Diferensiasi Al Qur'an Perspektif Muhammad Shaḥrūr."

71 Saeed, "Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a contemporary approach."

72 Massey, "A New Investigation into the 'Mystery Letters' of the Quran."

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