

Quranic *Naẓm* (Coherence): The Case of Farāhī and Iṣlāhī

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Abstract

This paper critically assesses the *naẓm* (coherence) thesis as developed by Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Farāhī and Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī, situating their contributions within a broader taxonomy of Quranic thematic and semantic units (āyah, intra-āyah, sūrah, intra-sūrah, inter-sūrah, and inter-nuṣūṣ themes). Drawing on classical precedents and a careful distinction between *ẓahr* (manifest) and *baṭn* (hidden) meanings, the study acknowledges useful methodological insights in Farāhī's and Iṣlāhī's inductive attention to sūrah "amūd" while arguing that their theory is epistemically overdetermined and methodologically inconsistent. Key criticisms include their treatment of *naẓm* as *qaṭ'ī*, restrictive rules on sūrah pairing, selective deployment of *asbāb al-nuzūl* and prophetic material, and a striking neglect of āyāt with legal import. The paper proposes a more nuanced, layered approach to coherence that preserves the independent intelligibility of Quranic units, respects classical tools of *tafsīr*, and establishes clearer epistemic criteria for identifying themes and deeper meanings.

Keywords

naẓm; *tadabbur*; al-Farāhī; Iṣlāhī; sūrah theme; *ẓahr*–*baṭn*; coherence in Qur'ān; *tafsīr* methodology

Question:

Would it be ok to reference and quote Farahi and Islahi? What works would you recommend regarding coherence of the Quran?¹

<https://amin-ahsan-islahi.org/tadabbur-i-quran-an-outline-of-its-pattern-of-nazm/>

<https://hamid-uddin-farahi.org/>

Brief Answer:

Al-Farāhī and Iṣlāhī are often noted for their emphasis on *nazm*, which they define through *tartīb* (order), *tanāsub* (relation), and *waḥdāniyyah* (unity). Iṣlāhī, in particular, expands these ideas in his *Tadabbur-e Qur'ān*. Their interest in coherence, especially in light of orientalist critiques of the Quran's structure, has drawn attention. Although useful points may be found in their approach, several critical issues arise upon closer examination.

They treat *nazm* as *qaṭ'ī* (decisive) for basic Quranic understanding. Yet, they differ with one another in its application. If *nazm* were truly *qaṭ'ī*, there should be no room for disagreement. Further, if understanding the Quran depends entirely on *nazm*, that would render individual *āyahs*—and even *sūrahs*—unintelligible on their own. This is a deeply problematic view, both epistemically and historically.

Their framework also imposes restrictions that the Quran itself does not: limiting *sūrah* connections to those adjacent, and insisting on a single theme per *sūrah*. Such conditions do not remain faithful to the Quran's layered and multidimensional structure, as well as to known prophetic examples. Further, while they acknowledge the value of prophetic context and *asbāb al-nuzūl*, their use of it is often selective and methodologically unclear. Most significantly, they show little concern for *āyahs* with legal implications—an absence that reveals a major gap in their *tafsīr*.

In the end, while there are moments of insight, their overall theory lacks *coherence*, consistency, and depth.

¹ Questions are reproduced verbatim and have not been edited from their original form of submission.

Detailed Answer:

Introduction²

Harmony and coherence lexically share the idea of an aesthetically consistent relationship of parts, emphasizing their contribution to a unified whole rather than focusing on individual parts. In other words, there is a greater focus on relational structure than on parts in isolation. While such a level of internal unity is important, in language, one should also consider harmony at a deeper level, as in the relation between words and meaning. Harmony, in this sense, is not only the unity of structure, but the careful selection of words—each resonating with sound and meaning—to evoke layered, subtle truths. From this basic level, one can begin to consider more complex forms of coherence, such as the careful weaving of words into sentences, and sentences into sections, gradually building toward the coherence of an entire literary work.

When attempting to understand the nature of coherence in the Quran, one should consider all layers of literary coherence. This is because the Quran describes itself as possessing absolute coherence. Take the following *āyāt* (signs, verses) as an example:

“Falsehood cannot come at it from before it or behind it. [It is] a revelation from the Wise (*al-Ḥakīm*), the Praiseworthy (*al-Ḥamīd*).”³

“Do they not reflect upon the Quran? If it were from other than Allah, they would surely find therein many differences (*ikhtilāf kathīr*).”⁴

Here, the Quran indicates its harmony in an unrestricted sense. This is done by drawing attention to its being an expression of the All-Wise, while also emphatically negating any form of falsehood, deficiency, and inconsistency from itself. As such, the Quran encourages one to do “*tadbbur*” (reflect, literally, by bringing a thing to its underlying end) to uncover its harmony. In this way, one should account for coherence at each literary level: word-meaning relations and word-to-word ones, such as phrases and sentences. While analyzing these units through

² Acknowledgement: The structure and conceptual framing of this paper benefited from a series of lectures and discussions with Dr. Issam Eido, which were instrumental in sharpening several of its fundamental guiding questions.

³ Fuṣṣilat, 41:42.

⁴ al-Nisā’, 4:82.

grammatical and hermeneutical (*uṣūlī*) rubrics, attention should be given to rhetorical (*balāghah*) features as well. In addition to these units of language, there are also Quran-specific units to consider.

The Quran is uniquely characterized by its unit of *sūrah* (chapter) that is composed of smaller Quran-specific units referred to as *āyah*. While many have sought to reorder the Quran based on various considerations, such approaches overshadow the unique method through which the Quran seeks to present itself through this peculiar *sūrah-āyah* structure.

Āyah refers to a “manifest sign”.⁵ In the Quran, *āyāh* is equally used to refer to revelation as it is used for cosmological harmony as an indicator of Allah’s presence and wisdom.⁶ This indicates how the term “*āyah*” captures the concept of coherence and harmony. One can further appreciate this when considering that the underlying meaning of *āyah* is “gathering (*jam*)” and “separation (*inqiṭā*)”⁷. This is because an *āyah*, more precisely, refers to something that becomes distinct after it significantly gathers meaning within itself.⁸ As such, it is “manifest” due to the meaning it possesses while being a “sign” since it indicates meaning and its source. In this manner, *āyah* refers to that which independently carries intrinsic meaning. Considering this underlying lexical meaning, the Quran describes its revelatory *āyah*: “a Book whose *āyahs* have been perfected (*uḥkimat*)...”⁹

This is also seen in the term “*sūrah*”. Lexically, it refers to a particular type of elevated encompassment, “like that of city walls”.¹⁰ Unlike other scriptures that are more narrative-based, the term “*sūrah*” more broadly alludes to an overarching meaning that binds it together. Due to the meaningful nature of this unit, one finds the Quran similarly describes the *sūrah* with perfection and decisiveness.¹¹ Now, as the Quran claims absolute coherence, some binding wisdom for these Quranic units must make them meaningful. This binding idea can be referred to as a “theme”.

Before delving into the taxonomy of Quranic themes, one should appreciate the peculiarity of the Quranic unit. What makes these units distinct is not simply self-affirmation. It is not as though the Quran simply gives new names to preexisting units. To the contrary, one will

⁵ Ibn al-Fāris, *Maqāyīs al-lughah*. Dār al-Fikr, 1:167.

⁶ See, for example, *Sūrah Yūnus*, 10:1, and *Āl ‘Imrān*, 3:190.

⁷ al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Baḥr al-Tafsīr*. Dār al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyyah Istanbul. 152.

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ al-Hūd, 11:1.

¹⁰ Ibn al-Fāris, *Maqāyīs al-lughah*. Dār al-Fikr, 4:110. al-Aṣḥānī, *Mufradāt li al-fāz al-Qur’ān*. Dār al-Qalam, 1994. 580.

¹¹ See for example, *Muḥammad*, 47:20.

find that the Quranic unit is genuinely unique in that it does not align with literary units. That is to say, while literary units are meant to soundly convey meaning, the most basic Quranic unit, the āyah, almost always gathers multiple standard literary units—sentences—within itself.¹² The Quran, being the speech of the All-Wise, binds these literary units in a particular way for meaningful (*ma'nawī*) and audible aesthetic purposes. In this way, in addition to being unique from grammatical literary units, the Quran does not fully rely on normative poetic or prosaic conventions of Arabic. Simply put, while the grammatical unit is meant to correctly convey meaning and rhetorical conventions are meant to eloquently convey that meaning, the Quranic unit—the sūrah, and the āyah, with which it is composed—is meant to convey *various* meanings that are *bound by an underlying purposeful idea*.

Quranic Theme Taxonomy¹³

With the above in mind, below is a brief outline of the principal types of themes in the Quran. It begins with the āyah and then builds into larger thematic forms, as in the sūrah.

Āyah:

1. Āyah Theme

This refers to the meaning that binds the sentences within an āyah.

2. Intra-Āyah Theme

In some instances, one may find multiple themes within an āyah. In such cases, the intra-āyah theme would refer to the immediate binding idea that a specific portion relates to before connecting to the broader, overarching theme of the entire āyah.

Sūrah:

1. Sūrah Theme

This refers to the meaning that binds the āyahs within it in a distinct manner.

2. Inter-Sūrah Theme

¹² This aspect of “binding” and “gathering” is another aspect which is captured within the lexical meaning of āyah. See Ibn al-Fāris, *Maqāyīs al-lughah*. Dār al-Fikr, 1:167.

¹³ While some of the sources of this taxonomy will be discussed below, the taxonomy layed out here primarily derives from the method of Shaykh Muhammad Amin Kholwadia, student of Qārī Muḥammad Tayyib and Shaykh Muḥammad Mīrān, and graduate of Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband.

In addition to the theme of an entire sūrah, one can also find a relational meaning that spans multiple sūrahs, thereby grouping them under one broad theme.

3. Intra-Sūrah Theme

In the case of a short sūrah, for example, one can potentially connect each verse directly back to the sūrah theme. However, in longer sūrahs, one often finds that groups of verses first bind together under one theme, which then connects to the sūrah theme. This can be referred to as an intra-sūrah theme.

Inter-Nuṣūṣ Theme

Across suraahs, one may find particular terms or discussions that are not sūrah-specific, like the concept of prophethood, for example. Within the Quranic discussion of the duties of prophethood, and that of the Prophet Muhammad specifically, Allah says,

“And We have not revealed upon you the Book except that you may clarify to them that in which they differ, and as a guidance and mercy for people who believe.”¹⁴

This verse tells of the complementary role of the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad and the latter’s responsibility in elaborating the meanings of the former. Given this relationship and the fundamental role of the Prophet Muhammad in understanding the Quran and divine intent, one must, on some level, account for Prophetic teachings. To not account for this is to inaccurately represent the Quran.

The Inter-Nuṣūṣ Theme, then, refers to an understanding of the Quranic and Prophetic teaching of a matter. As such, this theme overlaps with semantics in understanding specific words and concepts.

Quranic Meaning Taxonomy

¹⁴ al-Naḥal, 16:64.

The Prophet Muhammad, whom the Quran designates as its clarifier, describes the Quran as having various layers. He is reported to have said: “Each āyah has a *ẓahr* and *baṭn*.”¹⁵ “*Ẓahr*”, lexically, refers to what is “established and manifest”, while “*baṭn*” means “the inner [nature] of something.”¹⁶ As such, it can be said that the *ẓahr* is that meaning which is clearly understood from a Quranic expression, while “*baṭn*” refers to that meaning which is not immediately grasped. With this simple taxonomy of meaning, one should consider its relation to the previous thematic taxonomy.

While each thematic layer may add greater levels of clarity, it is not as though one can understand the most basic meaning of the Quran only after contextualizing it within broader Quranic themes. The entire Quran is not unclear, such that one requires external evidence to clarify it.¹⁷ Rather, the Quran describes itself as conveying basic meaning in a manner that man can grasp.¹⁸ As such, one should appreciate the basic meaning—the *ẓahr*—while allowing for deeper meanings—the *baṭn*—that may be extracted. These deeper meanings can be uncovered through considering various themes and Prophetic teaching, which can provide great clarity to the basic meaning.¹⁹ In either case, one must be rooted in their investigation.

The basic meaning requires one to grasp the Arabic language along with its literary conventions. This is because the Quran is an Arabic book. By further understanding the Arabic of seventh-century CE Arabia (i.e., the *Jāhilī*, pre-Islamic period), one will be able to more deeply appreciate the subtle, yet significant, shifts the Quran impresses upon the mind of its initial addressees. One can only understand the initial intent of the Quran, however, by relying upon what has been transmitted regarding that. Such reports provide clarity as to the circumstances at the moment of revelation and initial address.

Once again, the use of these methods in coming closer to the *initial* intent of the Quran should not be confused with understanding the *basic* meaning of it. As discussed previously, the Quran’s basic meaning—the *ẓahr*—is independently comprehensible through understanding Arabic. What these additional methods provide is further clarity and enhanced understanding. That is to say, the *ẓahr* is definitive and can be aided by these tools—but it does not rely upon them.

¹⁵ al-Baghawī, *Sharh al-sunnah*, al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1:263. al-Nasafī, *al-Taysīr fī al-tafsīr*, Dār al-Lubāb 2019, 1:8.

¹⁶ Ibn al-Fāris, *Maqāyīs al-lughah*. Dār al-Fikr. 3:471, 1:259.

¹⁷ That is to say that it is not “*mujmal*”, to use a term of Ḥanafī jurists.

¹⁸ Sūrah Yūsuf, 12:2: “Verily, We have sent down an *Arabic Quran that you may understand*.”

¹⁹ This gradation in clarity is what Ḥanafīs have categorized as *ẓāhir* and *naṣṣ*.

The requirement for extracting sound, deeper meanings of the Quran—the *batn*—is that it be a meaning that is in harmony with the rest of the Quran’s message, beginning with the *zahr*. As discussed in the introduction, the Quran describes itself as being composed of complete harmony. This would imply that a marker of a genuine deeper meaning is that it maintains coherence with the rest of the Quran. Maintaining coherence of meaning at such a multilayered and grand scale requires one to develop a cohesive set of systematic and nuanced principles of inquiry. Otherwise, in addition to yielding incohesive results, it would be unpredictable and characterized by conjecture, not remaining faithful to the harmony which the Quran asserts.

A sound system must account for the nature of language and its clarity (*dalālah*), as well as the nature of authority (*hujjiyyah*). This is because in instances where language is unclear in its indication, for example, one should have some method in making sense of that unclarity. This is important in considering a particular word whose meaning is completely unclear.²⁰ In such a case, one sound tool of resolve would be to seek clarity from Prophetic teaching, given his relation to the Quran discussed previously.

Additionally, this extends to the taxonomy of Quranic themes. In each case, one will have to assess the epistemic nature of that theme. If it is a theme based on decisive indication (*qaṭ’ī al-dalālah*), it can be considered definitive (*qaṭ’ī*). However, if its indication is not as such, it will not be definitive, but likely (*zannī*) at most. This means that while one can posit the presence of a particular theme, in the absence of definitive explication in the Quran, one cannot certainly designate it as a theme. This is not to dismiss the importance of a theme, but to say that using a probable theme to override a decisive *zahr* meaning would be to conflate the role of the former while being unfaithful to the independent clarity of the latter. Generally, however, an accurate reading will show that themes provide greater clarity by bringing to light underlying meanings. This is by contextualizing the immediate literary meaning within its surroundings.

Now, if one does not develop a holistic system that accounts for such nuance, he will not be faithful in his Quranic *batn* inquiry. This is because he has not developed the requisite tools for maintaining the harmony that the Quran claims, and proves to, possess. In this case, any such idea that is brought up regarding the Quran would be coincidental rather than a genuine Quranic inquiry.

²⁰ As in what the Ḥanafīs designate as “mujmal”.

Early and Classical Precedent

It is important to note that attention to the Quranic taxonomy of themes and meanings is not a modern phenomenon. As seen in the case of meaning taxonomy, the Prophet himself alluded to such layered truths of the Quran. It is significant in how he had chosen the words *ẓahr* and *baṭn*, as opposed to words that latter grammarians and rhetoricians would employ, such as “*ḥaqīqah*” (literal meaning) and “*majāz*” (figurative meaning). *Ḥaqīqah*, literally meaning “real”, and *majāz*, which refers to the separation of something, possess a different relation than *ẓahr* and *baṭn*.²¹ While the *ḥaqīqah-majāz* relation focuses on what is real, the *ẓahr-baṭn* relation gives attention to what is apparent—in this case—of the meaning to the addressee. This shows that the *baṭn* is as related to the Quran as the *ẓahr*, so long as the requites tools are employed; the difference between the two is based on the addressee's cognition. This is seen in the narration of the Noble Prophet wherein he equally attributes both the *ẓahr* and *baṭn* to the Quran.

Similar to this, one finds early considerations of Quranic themes. Not only does one find cases of the Noble Prophet reciting *sūrahs* based on their Quranic order—which would imply some thematic relation between *sūrahs* placed next to each other—but there are other cases where the Noble Prophet would pair *sūrahs* outside of their Quranic order. So just as he would recite al-A’lā (87) and then al-Ghāshiyah (88), he was known to pair al-Insān (76) with al-Sajdah (32), for example.²² This shows that while there is a meaningfulness to the ordering of the Quran, each Quranic unit—in this case, the *sūrah*—is still independently meaningful, such that one may draw parallels with other Quranic units even if they are not neighbouring each other. Therefore, just as sequential *sūrahs* share some thematic relation—as in how al-A’lā and al-Ghāshiyah present different aspects of the shared theme of the nature and function of this world and the next, as well as the prophetic role of *tadhkīr* (reminding)—similarly, one can find shared themes between remote *sūrahs*, as in how al-Insān and al-Sajdah discuss distinct facets of man, his nature, and its consequences.

The nature of clarity that neighboring and remote thematic relations afford is similar to the additional clarity provided by understanding the context of the moment of revelation in that it does not take away from the basic acontextual meaning of an *āyah*: one can understand that *āyah* in isolation, such that he may draw cross-Quranic parallels in addition to its particular placement within a *sūrah*. In this way, while one may grasp certain thematic relations between neighboring *sūrahs* based on their Quranic placement, inter-*sūrah* themes are not restricted to Quranic order.

²¹ Ibn al-Fāris, *Maqāyīs al-lughah*. Dār al-Fikr. 1:494.

²² al-Bukhārī, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*. ‘Aṭā’āt al-‘Ilm. 1:552. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*. Dār al-Ṭabā‘ah al-‘Āmirah. 3:16. Ibn Abī al-Shaybah, *al-Muṣannaḥ*. Dār Kunūz Ishbīliyah. 4:163.

Simply put, just as an āyah theme is not restricted by its Quranic placement, sūrah themes are also not restricted in this manner.

That this prophetic consideration for Quranic themes was not an isolated endeavor can be seen by the multiple Companions (*ṣaḥābah*) who keenly observed this prophetic practice and took interest in gathering such situations.²³ Further, it is not as though there was an interest in only one thematic layer, but one will find early and classical treatments of each layer of thematic taxonomy, as in the semantic discussions of Ibn ‘Abbas, for example.²⁴ The general attitude of Muslim scholarship from its genesis can be said to be captured within the statement of the Companion, Abū al-Dardā‘: “You will not have gained *faqāhah* (deep understanding)—a complete *faqāhah*—until you see many *wujūh* (shades or angles of meaning) of the Quran.”²⁵ In this statement, Abū al-Dardā‘ considers the ability to uncover various layers of the Quran’s meaning indicative of profound understanding.

The above narrations indicate that a sophisticated method was developed, such that subtle thematic relations could be drawn. This was seen in the prophetic relation between al-Sajdah and al-Insān, for example. As such, it would be unsound to conflate what has been transmitted from them with what was understood by them. In addition to considering the conclusions and thematic relations of early and classical scholarship, one should, therefore, more deeply reflect on their method that led them to their conclusions. Not only will this yield a more holistic understanding of the academic treatment of this topic, but it will also allow one to apply those principles at a more universal level.

The Arabic words for coherence that were classically used, such as *munāsabah* and *rabṭ*, underscore a strong semblance between two things, generally.²⁶ As such, they may be more apt than coherence since these Arabic words speak to a broad relation between two things without placing particular importance on a specific type of relation, as in the word “coherence”. Although one may find specific usages for *naẓm* by classical scholars, based on this lexical meaning, and when considering the broader treatment of relation within the early and classical tradition, one will find a holistic method for each level of Quranic thematic taxonomy, such that they consider beginning and end relations of sūrah and between sūrahs, for example.

Below are some useful resources for each given thematic level.

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Nuzḥah al-A‘yun*. Mu‘assisah al-Risālah. 83.

²⁵ Abū Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, Dār al-Mishkāt, 212.

²⁶ Ibn al-Fāris, *Maqāyīs al-lughah*. Dār al-Fikr. 1:494

- 1) al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 320 AH/932 CE), *Taḥṣīl Naḏā'ir al-Qur'ān*.

This, along with the following work, focuses on internuṣūṣ themes, giving particular attention to the variety of shades of meaning a singular word may have in the Quran. While al-Ḥiyārī's work focuses on expanding this genre, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī uniquely grounds it in strong theoretical foundations. This is achieved by his characterizing a word's relation to its shades of meaning as one of *aṣl-far'*. That is, they are not disconnected or unrelated: a core meaning is preserved in each usage.

- 2) 'AbdurRaḥmān al-Ḥiyārī (d. 431/1040), *Wujūh al-Qur'ān*.

- 3) Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 604/1209), *Maḥāṭib al-Ghayb*.

While alluding to the many subtleties (*laṭā'if*) that may be found in the Quran, one will find al-Rāzī implicitly address internuṣūṣ, sūrah, intrasūrah, and āyah themes.

- 4) Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Gharnāṭī (d. 708/1310), *al-Burhān fī Tanāsub Suwar al-Qur'ān*.

As indicated by the title, this work gives attention primarily to sūrah and intersūrah themes.

- 5) Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Muhā'imī (d. 835/1432), *Tabṣīr al-Mannān*.

One of the earlier *tafsīr* (exegesis) works fully dedicated to *naẓm*, al-Muhā'imī focuses especially on inter-āyah and intra-sūrah themes.

- 6) Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā'ī (d. 885/1480), *Naẓm al-Durar*.

Similar to al-Muhā'imī, al-Biqā'ī devotes attention primarily to inter-āyah connections and intra-sūrah, sūrah, and inter-sūrah themes.

- 7) al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1503)

al-Itqān

Focused on systematizing many aspects of the *tafsīr* genre, al-Suyūṭī dedicates a section of this work to discuss the theoretical nature of *munāsabah* and the genre in the written form. Beyond theory, however, he provides helpful tools to uncover coherence, generally.

Tanāsuq al-Durar fī tanāsub al-Suwar

Similar to al-Gharnāṭī, this work of al-Suyūṭī focuses on sūrah and inter-sūrah themes.

8) Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz al-Dehlawī (d. 1239/1824), *Fath al- ‘Azīz*.

This pioneering tafsīr brings to light the principles and teachings of his father, Shāh Wali Allāh of Delhi (d. 1176/1762), the great sufi-polymath. Here, one will find many levels of thematic taxonomy of great subtle expressed eloquently, especially sūrah and inter-sūrah themes.

9) Abū al-Thanā’ al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854), *Rūḥ al-Ma ‘ānī*.

Similar to al-Rāzī, al-Ālūsī especially addresses internuṣūṣ, sūrah, intrasūrah, and āyah themes.

10) Mawlānā Ashraf ‘Alī al-Tahānwī (d.1362/1943),

Bayān al-Qur ‘ān (Urdu)

In this dense tafsīr, one will find particular attention given to inter-āyah connections, as well as internuṣūṣ, sūrah, and intrasūrah themes.

Sabq al-Ghāyāt fi Nasq al-Āyāt.

As opposed to the previous work, which is a complete tafsīr, this work focuses specifically on various levels of Quranic themes and connections. Addressing the impetus for composition, Mawlānā speaks to the growing interest within this study of coherence.

11) Mawlana Aḥmad ‘Ali al-Lāhorī (d. 1381/1962), *Tafsīr Lāhorī*. (Urdu)

Mawlana gives special attention to various levels of thematic taxonomy—both as it relates to Quranic units (āyah and sūrah), as well as Quranic conventions (*rukū’*, for example) which aid in recitation and comprehension.

12) Shaykh Muhammad Amin Kholwadia, *Sunday Tafsīr*. (English)

An example of the centuries-old institution of oral tafsīr, this tafsīr provides a window into the possibilities of a rooted and holistic methodology of tafsīr in the modern period. One can find examples of nearly all levels of Quranic coherence addressed.

al-Farāhī and Iṣlāhī

The unique contribution of Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Farāhī (d. 1348/1930) and Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī (d. 1418/1997) is often considered to be their treatment of *naẓm*, which they characterize with *tartīb* (order), *tanāsub* (relation), and *waḥdāniyyah* (unity).²⁷ Iṣlāhī refined and elaborated the principles laid down by al-Farāhī in his acclaimed *Tadabbur-e Qur'ān*. Their keen interest in theorizing and applying *naẓm* in the written form has attracted much attention and praise. Further significance is found in their attempt to explain *naẓm* given the contemporaneous orientalist objections to Quranic coherence. As such, one may find certain useful points of both *naẓm* and *tafsīr* from the works of al-Farāhī and Iṣlāhī. However, certain inconsistencies come to light when more critically considering their theory.

Epistemically, both al-Farāhī and Iṣlāhī consider *naẓm* to be a *qaṭ'ī* (decisive) principle for understanding basic Quranic interpretation.²⁸ This would imply that one must grasp *naẓm* to understand anything of the Quran. Given that al-Farāhī and Iṣlāhī claim that classical scholars were unable to fully grasp *naẓm*, this would imply that they—and the remaining Muslims that followed them—were not able to arrive at the basic meaning of the Quran—it is only made clear by the investigation of al-Farāhī and Iṣlāhī.²⁹ Further, if *naẓm* truly is *qaṭ'ī*, that would mean there must be complete agreement regarding it—there cannot be any difference of opinion. Yet, in numerous cases, al-Farāhī and Iṣlāhī differ amongst themselves regarding *naẓm*.³⁰ This would imply that *naẓm* is not actually *qaṭ'ī*—which would nullify this principle of theirs—or it would mean that *naẓm* is *qaṭ'ī*, however, both al-Farāhī and Iṣlāhī have not yet uncovered it and, therefore, have not yet understood the basic meaning of the Quran themselves. This shows the feeble nature of a basic, yet foundational, point in their theory. As discussed previously, while some themes may be clear in indication, many are not. Therefore, a generalized characterization of decisiveness can only yield such an inconsistent result.

Further, this principle highlights the excessive weight which al-Farāhī and Iṣlāhī seek to afford to *naẓm* such that smaller Quranic units become irrelevant. This is because if one can only understand the Quran after considering *naẓm*, this would mean that individual āyahs are incomprehensible on their own—both at their time of revelation, as well as today.

²⁷ al-Farāhī, *Dalā'il al-Niẓām*. al-Dā'irah al-Ḥamīdiyyah. 76.

²⁸ al-Farāhī, *Majmū'ah Tafāsīr Farāhī*. Anjuman Khuddām al-Qur'ān. 35-39. And Iṣlāhī, *Tadabbur-e Qur'ān*. Dār al-Ishā'at al-Islāmiyyah. 1:i-ii, xvi.

²⁹ al-Farāhī, *Dalā'il al-Niẓām*. al-Dā'irah al-Ḥamīdiyyah. 23. And Iṣlāhī *Tadabbur-e Qur'ān*. Dār al-Ishā'at al-Islāmiyyah. 176-178. 1:v.

³⁰ al-Farāhī, *Majmū'ah Tafāsīr Farāhī*. Anjuman Khuddām al-Qur'ān. 223. And Iṣlāhī *Tadabbur-e Qur'ān*. Dār al-Ishā'at al-Islāmiyyah. 8:123.

This extends to sūrah pairs which Iṣlāḥī also views as essential to understanding the Quran.³¹ If understanding pairs is truly essential, this would mean that individual sūrahs are not completely independently meaningful. A claim which contradicts the very premise of Iṣlāḥī's concept of sūrah nazm. In this manner, Iṣlāḥī diminishes the meaningful nature of āyahs and sūrahs as independent Quranic units.

Along with this, al-Farāhī and Iṣlāḥī add self-imposed conditions to nazm. They hold, for example, that there must only be one theme to a sūrah.³² Further, a sūrah may only be related to a sūrah immediately before *or* after it.³³ Meaning a sūrah theme cannot be bidirectionally related, nor can sūrahs be related if they are not immediately next to one another.

The incoherence of this condition can be seen when considering the prophetic example of frequently reciting sūrahs al-Sajdah and al-Insān together. As discussed previously, this example indicates a subtle cross-Quranic thematic relation drawn by the Noble Prophet. Since, according to al-Farāhī and Iṣlāḥī, there can be only a neighbouring thematic connection, this would imply that such a cross-Quranic relation was not justified—thematically, at least. This is aside from how Iṣlāḥī himself is unable to maintain the condition of one-directional immediate sūrah relation. In certain cases, he draws bidirectional sūrah relations, while in others, sūrahs are stand-alone, being left unaccounted for.³⁴ This would mean that either Iṣlāḥī has not grasped the basic meaning of the sūrah, given the qat'ī nature of nazm according to him, or that the condition of one-directional immediate sūrah relation is unfounded.

Although al-Farāhī and Iṣlāḥī introduce these conditions to promote Quranic coherence, the Quran itself offers no indication of such limits—ironically, their framework ends up constraining the very coherence they seek to establish.

The role of the Prophet is yet another unclear aspect of al-Farāhī's and Iṣlāḥī's theory. While they do clarify the epistemic status of *matawātir* (continuous-mass transmission) and the role of *sabab al-nuzūl* (reason for revelation), they do not provide a sophisticated method of understanding the initial moment and meaning of revelation.³⁵ Rather, contextual details

³¹ Iṣlāḥī *Tadabbur-e Qur'ān*. Dār al-Ishā'at al-Islāmiyyah. 1:i-ii, xiv.

³² al-Farāhī, *Majmū'ah Tafāsīr Farāhī*. Anjuman Khuddām al-Qur'ān. 51.

³³ Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Quran*. American Trust Publication. 79.

³⁴ Iṣlāḥī *Tadabbur-e Qur'ān*. Dār al-Ishā'at al-Islāmiyyah. 6:337, 387, 431; 7:143, 191.

³⁵ al-Farāhī, *Majmū'ah Tafāsīr Farāhī*. Anjuman Khuddām al-Qur'ān. 35-39. And Iṣlāḥī, *Tadabbur-e Qur'ān*. Dār al-Ishā'at al-Islāmiyyah. 1:i-ii, xvi.

regarding the initial moment of revelation and prophetic teachings are often brought selectively when substantiating points made by these writers.³⁶

Lastly, there is the lack of depth. For all al-Farāhī's and Iṣlāhī's interest in *nazm*, they completely neglect āyahs of legal implication. Given the importance of legal matters in Quranic discourse, al-Farāhī's and Iṣlāhī's lack of developing a sophisticated method for such a foundational issue highlights another aspect of its incomprehensiveness.

Although the venture of al-Farāhī and Iṣlāhī to uncover a genuine feature of Quranic subtlety led to some insightful moments, as in the inductive method of grasping the underlying *sūrah* theme—or “*amūd*” as they call it—they were unable to develop a comprehensive and consistent methodology. Fundamental questions of epistemology and authority were left incoherent and unclear, while self-imposed conditions added further layers of dissonance, diminishing the role of lower layers of *nazm*. This is all while fundamental matters, such as law, remain unaddressed. Despite these limitations, rather than accounting for early and classical scholarship, which provides detailed examples and methodological insights regarding Quranic harmony, al-Farāhī and Iṣlāhī selectively engaged with this tradition—quite often exclusively when it aligned with their viewpoint. As such, while many orientalist outright rejected Quranic coherence within that period, al-Farāhī and Iṣlāhī developed such a specific concept of Quranic coherence that it no longer fully aligned with the Quran's presentation of its harmony. This being the case, one may chance upon some benefit from isolated points of al-Farāhī and Iṣlāhī, however, the same cannot be said regarding their theoretical foundations.

³⁶ See for example Iṣlāhī, *Tadabbur-e Qur'ān*. Dār al-Ishā'at al-Islāmiyyah. 1:xii-xiii, 3:546-547, 622-624; 7:479; 8:629-630.

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