

VOLUME 10 ISSUE 3 2025

Zuleyha Keskin and Mehmet Ozalp
Editors-in-Chief

Suleyman Sertkaya
Managing Editor

Carol Mroue
Assistant Editor

AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL
OF ISLAMIC STUDIES



Published online: 12 December 2025



[Submit](#) your article to this journal



[View](#) related and/or other articles in this issue

Book Review: Modern Approaches to Sīrah Genre: Fethullah Gülen’s Contribution

Sotiris S. Livas

To cite this article:

Livas, Sotiris S. Review of *Modern Approaches to Sīrah Genre: Fethullah Gülen’s Contribution*, by Suleyman Sertkaya. *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 10, no. 3 (2025): e100. <https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v10i3.1065>.

BOOK REVIEW: MODERN APPROACHES TO SĪRAH GENRE: FETHULLAH GÜLEN'S CONTRIBUTION

Sotiris S. Livas*

Suleyman Sertkaya. *Modern Approaches to Sīrah Genre: Fethullah
Gülen's Contribution*. Springer, 2025. pp. 232, AUD 229.00. ISBN:
978-981-96-2459-1.

Keywords: *Fethullah Gülen, sīrah, biography, kalām, Sonsuz Nur*

Fethullah Gülen, the late Turkish Islamic scholar and activist, best known for his contribution to the renewal of Islam in Turkey and connection to the international *Hizmet* network of education, interfaith dialogue and welfare activities, has bequeathed us a legacy that is far broader than what is usually acknowledged. Scholars tend to focus on parts of this legacy: his empowerment of Anatolian Muslim “Black” Turks, his effort to combine Western education with Islamic moral principles, his vision of a peaceful future where all religions and faiths have a place, his outright condemnation of “Islamist” extremism and violence, and – inevitably – his clash with Turkish President Erdoğan. While it is certain that all the above are extremely important, scholarship, on the whole, overlooks other aspects of Gülen’s life, thought and work. As John Pahl notes in his biography, *Fethullah Gülen – A Life of Hizmet*,¹ Gülen has many different lives.

One of these aspects that has so far evaded thorough examination is his Islamic erudition and contributions to Islamic sciences, and more explicitly to *ḥadīth* (oral stories of the words, actions and silent approvals of Prophet Muḥammad), *tafsir* (Qur’an exegesis), *kalam* (scholastic, speculative or rational study of Islamic theology) and *fiqh* (Islamic legislation). One could argue that all of Fethullah Gülen’s biographers² highlight his deep knowledge of Islamic sources and ability not only to cite detailed sections of Islamic text whether spiritual,

* Sotirios S. Livas is a Professor of international law, international relations, and Turkish–Middle Eastern relations at the Ionian University, Corfu/Greece, where he was also the President of the Department of Translation, Interpretation and Foreign Languages and is currently a member of the Board of Directors. He has published extensively on the geopolitics of the Middle East, Islam and democracy, Islamic extremism, migration, and Turkey’s regional role. He is the author of six books (one about Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet movement), has translated and edited several volumes (five about Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet movement), and regularly contributes to international academic journals. He has also been a national representative of Greece at the Committee of Experts of the Council of Europe for Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Legislation.

¹ John Pahl, *Fethullah Gülen – A Life of Hizmet. Why a Muslim Scholar in Pennsylvania Matters to the World* (Blue Dome Press, 2019).

² Among others, and in addition to Pahl’s book: Ori Soltes, *Between Thought and Action – An Intellectual Biography of Fethullah Gülen* (Blue Dome Press, 2022); Anwar Alam, *For the Sake of Allah: The Origin, Development and Discourse of the Gülen Movement* (Blue Dome Press, 2019); Yüksel Çayıroğlu, *Bir Fikir ve Aksiyon İnsanı Olarak Fethullah Gülen [A Man of Ideas and Action: Fethullah Gülen]* (Süreyya Yayınları, 2020).

linguistic, theological, exegetical, or juridical, but also to critically examine theories from Islamic and Western philosophies, combining his thorough knowledge and understanding of both with unique critical astuteness. While this observation is accurate, existing scholarship has largely emphasised his role in interfaith dialogue or the broader orientation of the movement he inspired, often framed through political or social-science perspectives. Even in relation to the educational “chapter” of Gülen’s life, greater attention has been given to the ways in which Gülen’s theological expertise and intellectual breadth have shaped a pedagogical method that encourages students to interrogate their certainties, cultivate critical doubt, and integrate diverse and even seemingly contradictory genres and schools of thought.

In reality, one can persuasively claim that all the various particles or elements are united as a whole in Gülen: his knowledge and respect of and for the Islamic tradition, his knowledge of the Western philosophical corpus, the embracing of Western technology and science, his tendency to function as a bridge between apparently contradicting ideologies and mentalities, his sentimental approach of preaching, and his tendency to connect universes.

The author, Suleyman Sertkaya, a *sīrah* scholar, deeply appreciates Gülen’s different and interconnecting faces. He chooses, thus, to emphasise the Muslim scholar’s unique approach to a particular genre of Islamic studies: *sīrah* literature (literature that deals independently with the biography of Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh)).

Dr. Sertkaya’s innovative and groundbreaking view starts at the beginning – at the point where *sīrah* (a genre so far considered part of literature) is ingrained in *ilm al-kalām*, or Islamic theology,³ and where it is proved that Gülen stressed the need for a *kalāmisation* of *sīrah*, which is a new theological approach to the genre that could eradicate the symbolization and false interpretation of parts of the Prophet’s life.⁴

This is not the only original point of Sertkaya’s important work. What is equally interesting is the contextualisation of the *sīrah* genre in modern times not only in relation to Gülen’s scholarly work, but also in relation to Islamic theology (*kalām*) in general. The author chooses to emphasise the *sīrah* genre, starting with a historical overview of the genre’s evolution.

The first part of the book (“Understanding *Sīrah* Literature and Its Evolution from the Classical to Modern Period”)⁵ presents this evolution, from its beginnings to the classical period and then to modern Muslim scholarship, concluding with Fethullah Gülen’s contribution (especially via his magnum opus, *Sonsuz Nur*⁶). The author dedicates a subchapter (1.4) to Western (especially during the medieval period) impressions of the relevant literature– which is important to comprehend European misinterpretations of the Prophet’s life.⁷In the second

³ Suleyman Sertkaya, *Modern Approaches to Sīrah Genre: Fethullah Gülen’s Contribution* (Springer, 2025), 42-46.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-31.

⁶ Fethullah Gülen, *Sonsuz Nur [Infinite Light]* (Süreyya Yayınları, 2021).

⁷ Sertkaya, *Modern Approaches to Sīrah Genre*, 12-21.

part of his book (“Prophethood in Islamic Thought and the Interconnectedness of Kalām and the Sīrah Genre”),⁸ Dr. Sertkaya connects the Prophet’s biographical genre to Islamic theology.

He highlights the importance and pivotal role of the Prophetic mission (*nubuwwah*) in relation to the discipline of *sīrah*, while at the same time emphasising the intrinsic interconnectedness between *sīrah* and *kalām*⁹ – a relationship that has increasingly come to be recognised as a defining characteristic of modern Islamic scholarship, particularly within the works of Islamic modernist thinkers and the proponents of the new *‘ilm al-kalām* movement.

The author concludes by introducing Gülen’s stance as a prelude to the third part of the book, “Prophethood in Gülen’s Thought.”¹⁰ In this section, Sertkaya examines the various dimensions of prophethood in Gülen’s thought – for instance, the meaning and purpose of the prophetic mission, its relationship with God, the cosmos, and humanity, the human nature of prophets, and the rationale behind Muḥammad’s designation as the Seal of Prophethood. These themes are carefully situated within Gülen’s broader intellectual framework and spiritual vision, thereby highlighting the coherence of his theological reflections with his wider spiritual guidance.

In the next chapter (chapter 4), the author analyses Gülen’s *Sonsuz Nur* to present the groundbreaking way in which Gülen, as part of his overall *kalām* philosophy, used episodes of the Prophet’s life to highlight the required response to the challenges of modernity and everyday life. This dynamic approach, reminiscent of Gülen’s holistic mentality, his educative style and his explicit way of using books, theories and examples to elucidate not only other books and theories, but also our stance in relation to modernity, somehow signifies a break with the scholarly tradition of addressing the genre. This break is further analysed in chapter 5 of the book (“Kalāmisation of Sīrah Through Prophetic Attributes”)¹¹ – where the prophetic attributes (truthfulness, trustworthiness, communication abilities, infallibility, intellectual prowess, freedom from moral, mental, intellectual and physical defects) are connected, through examples taken from Gülen’s work to the challenges that the community of the faithful faces every day.

The author then turns to a pivotal episode in the Prophet’s life: the signing of the Treaty of Hudaibiyya, an incident widely recognized as a decisive turning point in *sīrah*. Gülen’s interpretation of this event – examined in relation to *kalām* and, as the author terms it, through the lens of a “*sīrah* philosophy” – draws on classical Islamic sources to situate the treaty within its historical context and contemporary resonance. By framing and interpreting the episode in this way, Gülen not only illuminates its theological, historical and philosophical dimensions but also demonstrates how the Prophet’s conduct provides enduring lessons for leadership in addressing the challenges and complexities of modern times.

⁸ Ibid., 31-57.

⁹ Ibid., 42-50.

¹⁰ Ibid., 57-82.

¹¹ Ibid., 137-186.

All in all, Sertkaya's work opens new pathways in relation to *sīrah* studies and Islamic theology, as well as to the broader understanding of Gülen's thought – pathways that are briefly revisited in the concluding chapter (chapter 7).¹² By connecting the past with the present, Dr. Sertkaya draws applicable lessons from Gülen's *sīrah* philosophy for contemporary challenges that Muslims face. One of its notable merits lies in its accessibility: it is a rigorous academic and scholarly work yet written in a manner that engages the reader without undue difficulty. Beyond its stated scope, however, the book achieves something greater: it illuminates a dimension of Islamic thought, embodied in the intellectual and spiritual legacy of Fethullah Gülen, that is profoundly relevant and much needed in the contemporary world.

¹² Ibid., 223-232.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alam, Anwar. *For the Sake of Allah: The Origin, Development and Discourse of the Gülen Movement*. Blue Dome Press, 2019.
- Çayıroğlu, Yüksel. *Bir Fikir ve Aksiyon İnsanı Olarak Fethullah Gülen [A Man of Ideas and Action: Fethullah Gülen]*. Süreyya Yayınları, 2020.
- Gülen, Fethullah. *Sonsuz Nur [Infinite Light]*. Süreyya Yayınları, 2021.
- Pahl, John. *Fethullah Gülen – A Life of Hizmet. Why a Muslim Scholar in Pennsylvania Matters to the World*. Blue Dome Press, 2019.
- Sertkaya, Suleyman. *Modern Approaches to Sīrah Genre: Fethullah Gülen’s Contribution*. Springer, 2025.
- Soltes, Ori. *Between Thought and Action – An Intellectual Biography of Fethullah Gülen*. Blue Dome Press, 2022.