

# BRIDGING *TAFSĪR* TRADITION AND MODERNITY: ALI BULAÇ'S QUR'ĀN COMMENTARY IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY TÜRKIYE

Suleyman Sertkaya\* and Hakan Coruh\*\*

**Abstract:** Ali Bulaç (b. 1951), a prominent Turkish Islamist intellectual and sociologist, has played a significant role in shaping contemporary debates on Islam, modernity, and religious thought in Türkiye. His seven-volume Qur'ānic commentary, *Kur'an Dersleri (Dirāsāt al-Qur'ān)*, represents the culmination of decades of intellectual engagement and offers a valuable window into modern Turkish *tafsīr* discourse. This article examines Bulaç's hermeneutical approach by analysing the intellectual and biographical conditions that prompted him to write a *tafsīr*, the methodological principles that structure his exegetical practice, and the broader scholarly tradition within which he situates himself. Building on this foundation, the study focuses on two representative case studies that illuminate the character of his interpretive project: (1) his engagement with the ongoing debate between contextualist and traditional approaches to Qur'ānic interpretation, and (2) his approach to women's veiling (*hijab*/headscarf) in the Qur'ān. Through these cases, the article demonstrates how Bulaç seeks to uphold classical hermeneutical principles while responding critically to the theological, socio-ethical and intellectual challenges of the modern world. His *tafsīr* exemplifies a distinctive attempt to bridge inherited exegetical methods with contemporary concerns, making the Qur'ān intellectually rigorous and contextually meaningful for modern Turkish readers. Regarding the two cases, the article argues that Bulaç rejects modernist/contextualist approaches to revelation, particularly criticising Fazlurrahman and Abdolkarim Soroush's interpretations. While the Qur'ān uses history as a narrative tool, not as a limiting context, the purpose of the Qur'ān's judgments is universal. Although he often critiques modernist and reformist perspectives, he occasionally aligns with them on certain points, such as Jesus' ascension and return. Finally, Bulaç believes in the universality of the Qur'ānic teaching for women's veiling (*hijab*/Ali Bulaç headscarf), and the obligation to wear the headscarf is still in force for Muslim women due to the Qur'ānic reason (*'illa*) of "identity."

**Keywords:** *Ali Bulaç, Kur'an Dersleri (Dirāsāt al-Qur'ān), tafsīr and Qur'ān studies in contemporary Türkiye, Islamism and modern*

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\* Suleyman Sertkaya is a Course Director and Senior Lecturer in Islamic Studies at the Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation at Charles Sturt University. His email is ssertkaya@csu.edu.au.

\*\* Hakan Coruh is a senior lecturer at the Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation at Charles Sturt University. His email is hcoruh@csu.edu.au.

*Türkiye, contextualist (historicist) vs. traditional approaches to the Qur'ân, women's veiling (hijab/headscarf)*

## **TAFSİR STUDIES IN REPUBLICAN TÜRKİYE: INTRODUCTION TO HISTORICAL AND INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT**

The emergence of Turkish Qur'anic translations (called *meals* in Türkiye) and exegetical works (*tafsirs*) in the Republican period can be situated against the backdrop of a profound institutional and epistemic rupture in Islamic studies following the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924. The closure of madrasas, the systematic marginalisation of formal religious education, and the early Republic's deep suspicion toward organised Islamic scholarship disrupted long-standing mechanisms for the transmission of Qur'anic sciences. This rupture produced not only a decline in advanced exegetical scholarship at the scholarly level but, more critically, a widening gap in public religious literacy, as access to the Qur'ân through traditional scholarly mediation became increasingly restricted.<sup>1</sup> Within this context, the question of rendering the Qur'ân accessible in Turkish acquired theological and socio-political urgency. The erosion of Arabic literacy, accelerated by language reform and broader secularisation policies, meant that large segments of society were becoming detached from the Qur'ân in its original language. At the same time, the absence of authoritative, methodologically grounded translations created fertile ground for linguistically inadequate and theologically unreliable renderings produced by unqualified individuals.<sup>2</sup> These conditions collectively generated strong impetus for Turkish *meals* and *tafsirs* capable of mediating between the Qur'anic text and a rapidly transforming society.

The earliest institutional response to this challenge emerged through the state-sponsored initiatives of the mid-1920s, most notably the commissioning of Mehmet Âkif's (ultimately unfinished) translation project and, more decisively, Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır's monumental *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili* (The Religion of the Truth, the Language of the Qur'ân). While often treated as a singular achievement, Elmalılı's work set a lasting precedent: Qur'anic interpretation in Republican Türkiye would be conducted primarily in Turkish and increasingly directed toward a non-specialist readership.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the single-party period and the years of strict secularist control proved largely sterile in terms of valuable

<sup>1</sup> Mustafa Öztürk, "Cumhuriyet Dönemi Telif Tefsirler" [Tafsir Works of the Turkish Republic Period], *Türkiye Araştırmaları Literatür Dergisi* 10, no. 19–20 (2012): 9.

<sup>2</sup> Sadrettin Gümüş, "Cumhuriyet Döneminde (1923–1960 Arası) Meâl Çalışmaları" [Translation Projects During the Republican Era (1923–1960)], *FSM İlmî Araştırmalar: İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Dergisi* 5 (2015): 290, 328; Düccane Cündioğlu, *Türkçe Kur'an ve Cumhuriyet İdeolojisi* [The Turkish Translation of the Qur'ân and the Ideology of the Republic] (Kitabevi, 1998), 27–28; Öztürk, "Cumhuriyet Dönemi Telif Tefsirler," 9–11.

<sup>3</sup> Hidayet Aydar, "Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türkçe Kur'an Tefsirleri (Turkish Commentaries on the Qur'ân from the Republican Era)," in *Kur'an ve Tefsirin Anlaşılmasına Doğru: Tefsir ve Toplum*, by Ömer Dumlu et al. (Ensar Neşriyat, 2012), 221–23; Öztürk, "Cumhuriyet Dönemi Telif Tefsirler," 9, 13, 31–32, 54.

exegetical production—a stagnation that scholars have aptly described as a missing link in the modern history of Turkish *tafsīr*.<sup>4</sup>

From the 1950s onward, and especially following the transition to multi-party politics, Turkish Qur'ānic scholarship began a gradual process of revitalisation. This period witnessed the emergence of diverse exegetical genres, including full Qur'ān-based commentaries, thematic and legal *tafsīrs*, sermon-oriented interpretive works, and hybrid *meal-tafsīr* forms.<sup>5</sup> Quantitative studies demonstrate a steady increase in the number and variety of *tafsīrs* during this period, with notable growth from the 1980s onward, reflecting the easing of institutional constraints on religious publishing and a growing public demand for Qur'ānic interpretation in Turkish.<sup>6</sup> A decisive development shaping late 20<sup>th</sup> century Turkish *tafsīr* literature was the rise of Qur'ān-centric interpretive discourses, often associated with *mealcilik* (Qur'ān-only or Qur'ān-prioritising approaches).<sup>7</sup> These trends encouraged direct engagement with the Qur'ānic text, frequently privileging semantic and conceptual analysis over classical exegetical mediation. While this trend contributed to renewed public interest in the Qur'ān, it also blurred the boundary between translation and interpretation, producing a growing corpus of works that oscillated between *meal* and *tafsīr* without clearly situating themselves within established exegetical methodologies.<sup>8</sup>

By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Turkish Qur'ānic literature entered a phase of unprecedented productivity.<sup>9</sup> Statistical surveys indicate that the Republican period produced 36 original Turkish *tafsīrs* comprising at least 285 volumes, alongside 72 translated works.<sup>10</sup> While the early decades were marked by stagnation, most conspicuously between 1940 and 1949, when no full *tafsīr* was published, more than half of all Republican-era *tafsīrs* appeared after 2001. This expansion was accompanied by increasing institutional involvement, most notably through Diyanet-sponsored projects such as *Kur'an Yolu* (Path of the Qur'ān), alongside a continued proliferation of independent scholarly, communal, and ideological exegetical initiatives. Methodologically, this expanding corpus displays pronounced diversification. The overwhelming majority of Turkish-authored *tafsīrs* adhere to the canonical Qur'ān order, with *revelation*-based chronological commentaries remaining exceptional. At the same time, *dirāya*-oriented (reason-based) approaches clearly dominate, far outnumbering *rivāya*

<sup>4</sup> Öztürk, “Cumhuriyet Dönemi Telif Tefsirler,” 13, 54; Gümüş, “Cumhuriyet Döneminde,” 328.

<sup>5</sup> Öztürk, “Cumhuriyet Dönemi Telif Tefsirler,” 14–17; Aydar, “Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türkçe Kur'an Tefsirleri,” 298.

<sup>6</sup> Hidayet Aydar, “Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türkçe Kur'an Tefsirleri Üzerine İstatistiksel Bir Değerlendirme” [A Statistical Analysis of Turkish Commentaries on the Qur'ān from the Republican Era], *Kilis 7 Aralık Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 2, no. 2 (2015): 18–25, 30–33; Öztürk, “Cumhuriyet Dönemi Telif Tefsirler,” 54.

<sup>7</sup> Öztürk, “Cumhuriyet Dönemi Telif Tefsirler,” 10–11, 16; Mustafa Öztürk, “İslâmî Kökenciliğin Bir Tezahürü: Mealcilik” [A Manifestation of Islamic Fundamentalism: The Translation-Centered Qur'ān], *İslâmiyât* 10, no. 1 (2007); Mehmet Akif Ersin, “İslâmî Kökenciliğin Bir Tezahürü: Mealcilik (mi?)” [A Manifestation of Islamic Fundamentalism: The Translation-Centered Qur'ān-only-ism?], *İslâmiyât* 10, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Aydar, “Kur'an Tefsirleri Üzerine İstatistiksel Bir Değerlendirme,” 15; Aydar, “Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türkçe Kur'an Tefsirleri,” 298–99.

<sup>9</sup> Öztürk, “Cumhuriyet Dönemi Telif Tefsirler,” 17–21.

<sup>10</sup> Aydar, “Kur'an Tefsirleri Üzerine İstatistiksel Bir Değerlendirme,” 17–20, 31.

(tradition/narration based), *aḥkām* (legal based), or strictly thematic models, signalling a modern exegetical preference for analytical, contextual, and conceptually driven interpretation.<sup>11</sup> The wide variation in scale, from concise *meal-tafsīr* hybrids to encyclopaedic multi-volume works, further illustrates the pluralisation of exegetical form in modern Türkiye, as authors negotiate between classical interpretive conventions, contemporary intellectual concerns, and the expectations of a Turkish-speaking Muslim readership.

Within this intellectually vibrant, methodologically plural, and socially contested exegetical landscape, Ali Bulaç's *Kur'an Dersleri* (completed in 2016) must be situated. His *tafsīr* emerges neither as an isolated endeavour nor as a simple continuation of *mealcilik* trend, but as a self-consciously methodical intervention that seeks to re-anchor Qur'ānic interpretation in classical *usūl* (methodology) while addressing the theological, epistemological, ethical, and socio-political questions that define the late Republican and post-2000 Turkish context.

## INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY OF ALI BULAÇ

Ali Bulaç (b. 1951) is a prominent Turkish Islamist,<sup>12</sup> intellectual, publisher, and columnist whose career spans more than five decades. After receiving a traditional Islamic education in his early years, he later pursued formal studies in theology and sociology—an intellectual combination that helped shape the substance and style of his thought. On one hand, his major works examine the structural challenges confronting contemporary Islam through historical, sociological, and conceptual analyses, seeking to diagnose the epistemic and civilisational crises of the modern Muslim world. On the other hand, his writings on Islamic belief and practice grapple with questions of scriptural interpretation, religious normativity, and the dynamics of everyday piety.<sup>13</sup> As Kösebalan observes, Bulaç's intellectual trajectory is marked by continuity and change; the evolution of his ideas mirrors,

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 23–26.

<sup>12</sup> Şerif Mardin defines Islamism as a set of 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectual and political searches that coalesced around the theory of an “Islamic order” (*İslâm nizamı*). Mardin examined Islamism in two periods. In the Ottoman Empire, Islamism, from the 1870s onwards, was an ideological movement that was becoming increasingly strong at the centre of the Empire. The current of Islamism has at least two axes. The first consists of the ideas of the educated and intellectuals who present Islamism as a worldview and a guide for life. Muhammad Abduh (1845–1905), the Egyptian mufti, is an example of this group. The second is a quest trying to establish an Islamic Order. The Pakistani Mawlana Mawdudī represents this group. Şerif Mardin, *Türkiye'de Din ve Siyaset* [Religion and Politics in Türkiye] (İletişim Yayınları, 1991), 9; Kadir Canatan, “Şerif Mardin'in İslam Hakkındaki Eserlerinin Eleştirel Değerlendirmesi” [A Critical Evaluation of Şerif Mardin's Works on Islam], *Çekmece İzu Social Sciences Journal* 6, no. 12 (2018).

<sup>13</sup> Michael E. Meeker, “Türkiye Cumhuriyetinin Yeni Müslüman Aydınları” [The New Muslim Intellectuals of the Republic of Türkiye], *Bilgi ve Hikmet* 1 (1993): 158, 168; Seven Erdoğan, “Müslüman ve İslamcı Bir Aydın: Ali Bulaç” [A Muslim and Islamist Intellectual: Ali Bulaç], *TYB Akademi* 3, no. 7 (2013): 31–33.

in many respects, the broader transformation of Turkish Islamist thought from the 1970s onward.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1970s and early 1980s, Bulaç emerged as one of the leading voices of a radical and universalist Islamic discourse. His writings in the journal *Düşünce* (Thought) insisted on the universality of Islam and reflected a mode of Salafi-inspired rationalism that was simultaneously gaining momentum across the Middle East. This approach signalled one of the earliest significant departures of Islamist intellectuals from the dominant currents of Turkish nationalism and the Türkiye-centred Şūfī orders and communal structures that had long shaped religious life. During this period, Bulaç was also deeply engaged in translating major Islamist thinkers, most notably Sayyid Quṭb and ‘Alī Sharī‘atī, thus contributing to the circulation of global Islamist discourses within Türkiye. His works from this era, such as *Çağdaş Kavramlar ve Düzenler* (Contemporary Concepts and Systems, 1976), offered trenchant critiques of Western ideological formations, including capitalism, socialism, and liberalism, while presenting Islam as a comprehensive socio-political system capable of addressing the totality of human life.<sup>15</sup> He also questioned what he regarded as the political and economic underpinnings of traditional folk Islam, calling for a more authentic return to Islam’s foundational texts. This theme was further developed in *İslamın Anlaşılması Üzerine* (On Understanding Islam, 1980), in which he argued that meaningful renewal required constant engagement with the Qur’ān and the Prophetic tradition. His later publication of a modern Turkish translation of the Qur’ān represented a practical extension of this methodological commitment.<sup>16</sup>

Although the 1980 military coup created a period of profound disruption and repression for Islamist circles, the political climate shifted markedly by the mid-1980s with the rise of Turgut Özal. The more liberal environment of the Özal era facilitated new modes of Islamic intellectual expression, and Bulaç’s writings from the late 1980s and early 1990s reflect this broader transformation.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to his earlier works, produced during a time of sharp ideological polarisation, his post-1980 output adopted a tone more attuned to cultural and religious plurality, aligning with the liberalising ethos of the period. Bulaç’s publications in the 1990s increasingly gravitated toward a pluralistic legal theory grounded in his interpretation of the Charter of Medina—the foundational agreement concluded between Muslims, polytheists and Jews under Prophet Muhammad’s leadership.<sup>18</sup> He argued that the

<sup>14</sup> Hasan Kosebalaban, “Bulaç, Ali,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford University Press, 2009), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195305135.001.0001/acref-9780195305135-e-0884>.

<sup>15</sup> Michelangelo Guida, “Ali Bulaç: Political Ideas of a Leading Turkish Islamist,” *Oriente Moderno* 24 (85) (2005): 485–86.

<sup>16</sup> Ali Bulaç, *Kur’ân-ı Kerîm ve Türkçe Anlamı: Meal ve Sözlük* [The Turkish Translation of the Noble Qur’ān: Meaning and Glossary] (Pınar Yayınları, 1983). This is one of the most widely circulated Qur’ān translations in Türkiye and as of 2024 it has reached its 61<sup>st</sup> edition.

<sup>17</sup> Guida, “Ali Bulaç,” 483, 486–88.

<sup>18</sup> Ali Bulaç, “The Medina Document,” in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, by Charles Kurzman (Oxford University Press, 2022), accessed December 18, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195116212.001.0001/acref-9780195116212-chapter-19>; Guida, “Ali Bulaç,” 489–90, 493–96. For a more detail of his views on the Charter, as well as the critiques and responses it generated, see his

Charter articulated an Islamic model of ethnic and religious pluralism whose normative principles could be meaningfully applied to contemporary political systems.<sup>19</sup> In a Turkish cultural context that historically privileged political and cultural homogeneity over diversity, these claims provoked significant criticism from secular nationalist circles. His approach was also challenged by liberal secularists, who objected to his emphasis on differentiated communal identities, seeing it as incompatible with the notion of a universal and indivisible Turkish citizenship.<sup>20</sup> According to Kösebalan, Bulaç's writings from this period "reflected a reversal of his earlier ideas on Islam as a political system,"<sup>21</sup> as he increasingly contended that the notion of an Islamic state was paradoxical:<sup>22</sup> God's will, he argued, could not be embodied or represented by any earthly authority. This reorientation is evident in *Islam and Democracy* (1993), where Bulaç maintains that Islam neither endorses theocracy nor aligns with totalitarian tendencies; rather, it establishes moral and legal principles that, in his view, surpass even the pluralistic aspirations of modern democratic theory.

Beyond these theoretical interventions, Bulaç is widely recognised for his extensive research and engagement with the contemporary Islamic world, particularly regarding intellectual crises, social change, and the challenges of modernisation. Over a span of five decades, he contributed regular columns to several major newspapers, addressing themes such as Islamic thought, Middle Eastern politics, domestic and international affairs, non-Western models of modernisation, the crisis of modernity, and the profound socio-political transitions through which Muslim societies continue to pass. In the most recent decade of his career, despite the constraining impact of the prevailing political climate on his intellectual activities, Bulaç's contributions to Qur'ānic exegesis and his deep engagement with the Charter of Medina remain the most significant pillars of his scholarly oeuvre.

## BULAÇ'S WORKS AND INTEREST IN THE QUR'ĀN AND *TAFSİR*

Ali Bulaç's engagement with Qur'ānic studies, first through translation (*meal*) and later through a thorough exegetical work, emerged neither from a long-held plan nor from a predetermined scholarly trajectory, but from a confluence of historical contingencies, intellectual restlessness, and a deepening sense of religious responsibility. His initial foray

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substantial standalone volume Ali Bulaç, *Medine Sözleşmesi* [The Charter of Medina] (Çıra Yayınları, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Ali Bulaç, "The Medina Charter," *Atlas Think*, accessed December 4, 2025, <https://atlasthink.org/the-medina-charter-introduction/>.

<sup>20</sup> Kosebalaban, "Bulaç, Ali."

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> The cohort of Islamist intellectuals that emerged in the aftermath of the 12 September 1980 military coup and subsequent "February 28 process" found it necessary to address the fundamental questions, reconceptualise their ideological positions to cultivate broader public support, and move beyond their previously stringent critiques of democratic governance. Hayrettin Karaman and Bulaç exemplify this generational shift and the corresponding effort to reexamine liberal democracy through an Islamic lens. Bulaç stands as the pioneering public intellectual within this movement to recognise the opportunities presented by mass media platforms and the imperative for Islamist thinkers to acknowledge and engage with the significant sociopolitical transformations occurring within Turkish society. Regarding Bulaç's type of Islamism, see Michelangelo Guida, "The New Islamists' Understanding of Democracy in Turkey: The Examples of Ali Bulaç and Hayreddin Karaman," *Turkish Studies* 11, no. 3 (2010).

into Qur'ān translation arose in the aftermath of the 12 September 1980 military coup, when the closure of his publishing house and journal, his subsequent detention and imprisonment, and the loss of his professional position created an unexpected space for ongoing textual work. During this period, a publication company approached him with the suggestion of preparing a Turkish translation of the Qur'ān. Despite initial hesitation, Bulaç undertook the task with conscious reliance on God, completing within three years the volume that would later circulate widely under the title *Kur'an-ı Kerim'in Türkçe Anlamı: Meal ve Sözlük* [The Turkish Translation of the Noble Qur'ān: Meaning and Glossary].<sup>23</sup>

Bulaç's later turn toward writing a *tafsīr* followed a similarly unplanned yet increasingly internalised trajectory. In 1991, compelled to leave Türkiye due to security concerns, he spent several months in the Netherlands, where a prominent member of his community encouraged—and promised support for—him to embark on a Qur'ānic commentary. Although Bulaç lacked the material and scholarly infrastructure at the time, this encounter crystallised an aspiration that lingered for years. Even after returning to Istanbul and resuming professional life, the idea of *tafsīr* persisted in his intellectual imagination: he continued to write widely for newspapers and publish books, yet he remained unable to initiate the exegetical project, describing this hesitation as akin to one who longs to enter the sea but paces repeatedly along its edge, unable to plunge in.

A further catalyst in the development of Bulaç's exegetical orientation emerged in 1991, when the BBC aired a debate on the role of women in Islam, during which priests, theologians, and Muslim guests engaged in a vigorous and often contentious exchange. Unable to provide sufficiently grounded responses to the questions raised, the program's participants sought insights from scholars worldwide regarding Qur'ān 2:282, the verse addressing women's testimony in Islamic law. Bulaç devoted three months to an intensive study of this verse, and through this process—shaped in part by his lifelong fascination with the etymology and semantic evolution of Qur'ānic vocabulary—became increasingly convinced that he possessed the scholarly capacity to contribute meaningfully to the field of *tafsīr*. Emphasising that exegetical writing is, at its core, an endeavour aimed at deepening the understanding of the Qur'ān, he affirmed that the production of *tafsīr* is an ongoing necessity in every age, as each generation must engage revelation anew within its intellectual and social context.<sup>24</sup>

Bulaç's intellectual engagement with Qur'ānic studies is further reflected in his interesting and at times contested work *Kadını Kim Örttü?* (Who Veiled Women?, 2014), in which he interrogates the complex interplay between scriptural principles, inherited interpretive traditions, and the socio-political transformations of the modern period. In this book, he treats *tasattur* (*hijab*, women's veil) neither as a fixed juridical mandate nor as a purely cultural

<sup>23</sup> Ali Bulaç, *Kur'an Dersleri (Dirâsâtü'l-Kur'ân)* [Lessons from the Qur'ān] (Çıra Yayınları, 2016), vol. I, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Ali Bulaç, "Ali Bulaç 10 Yıl Süren Tefsir Çalışmasını Tamamladı" [Ali Bulaç has Completed his 10-Year-Long Exegesis Project], *T24*, June 10, 2016, accessed February 17, 2025, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/ali-bulac-10-yil-suren-tefsir-calismasini-tamamladi,344638>.

construct; rather, he conceptualises it as a dynamic notion whose meaning has been refracted through evolving cultural codes, patriarchal norms, and the epistemic shifts ushered in by modernity. He critiques, on the one hand, rigid traditionalist perspectives that confine women within narrowly delineated social roles, and, on the other, secular modernist discourses that dismiss religious norms as impediments to liberation. By situating these debates within broader discussions on modernisation, feminist theory, and state-driven ideological projects, particularly the Turkish Republic's regulation of dress, symbolic visibility, and the public presence of women, Bulaç contends that the central challenge lies not in the Qur'ān's guidance per se but in the interpretive frameworks through which Muslims have historically mediated that guidance. As an early and significant contribution to contemporary Islamic debates on gender, pluralism, and hermeneutics, the book exemplifies Bulaç's broader endeavour to reassess foundational Islamic concepts through sociological, philosophical, and theological lenses, thereby deepening and expanding his engagement with the Qur'ān.

Over time, his desire matured into a compelling scholarly imperative. By late 2005, Bulaç resolved to begin and commenced with *Sūrah al-Fātiḥa*, completing its commentary in February 2006. His progress, however, was marked by intermittent pauses, self-critique, and moments of withdrawal, echoing, in his words, Mehmet Âkif's well-known reluctance in similar endeavours, as he questioned whether he had adequately understood each cluster of verses.<sup>25</sup> Throughout this process, Bulaç emphasised the ethical weight of exegetical responsibility, repeatedly praying that he be protected from causing harm to Islamic creed or sound theological understanding. Ultimately, on 23 March 2016, he completed his seven-volume *tafsīr*, *Kur'an Dersleri/Dirāsāt al-Qur'ān* (Lessons from the Qur'ān), the product of a decade of careful intellectual labour. His journey into Qur'ānic commentary thus reflects not merely scholarly ambition, but the interplay of personal trial, spiritual deliberation, and a gradual crystallisation of hermeneutical commitment. It is against this biographical and intellectual backdrop that Bulaç's contributions to the contemporary *tafsīr* discipline can be better understood.

Bulaç's exegetical reflections also gesture toward the future trajectory of his Qur'ānic scholarship. He describes his completed *tafsīr* as a "secure and tranquil refuge" during a time of profound personal difficulty,<sup>26</sup> and affirms that, together with his widely circulated Qur'ān translation, it stands as the most valuable intellectual achievement of his life. Bulaç describes his work on *tafsīr* as "the most significant, meaningful, and responsibility-driven undertaking of my life."<sup>27</sup> This deep affective and scholarly investment in the Qur'ān has led him to envision a subsequent major project. He plans, if granted the opportunity, to produce a five-volume work titled *The Language of the Qur'ān (Lisān al-Qur'ān)*, conceived partly as a thematic *tafsīr (mawḍū'ī)* and partly as a Qur'ānic encyclopedia.<sup>28</sup> This project reflects the maturation of his exegetical commitments and his aspiration to synthesise thematic, linguistic, and encyclopedic approaches within a unified hermeneutical framework—thereby

<sup>25</sup> Bulaç, *Kur'an Dersleri*, vol. I, 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

extending his contribution to contemporary Qur'ānic studies beyond conventional commentary into broader modes of intellectual engagement with revelation.

Bulaç's deepening engagement with the Qur'ān in the most recent stages of his career is further evident in *Vahiy Nedir? (What is Revelation?)*,<sup>29</sup> one of his foundational treatments of revelation as the primary epistemic and ontological source in Islamic thought. In this work, he argues that *wahy* cannot be subsumed under rational, historical, or experiential categories; rather, it constitutes a unique, transcendent mode of knowledge that grounds human understanding and moral order. Critiquing modern epistemologies—particularly rationalism, secularism, and historicism—for marginalising revelation and thereby exacerbating the intellectual and spiritual crises of the contemporary Muslim world, Bulaç re-centres the Qur'ān as Divine speech and the Prophet as its indispensable mediator. His discussion engages long-standing debates among Orientalists, theologians, and modern Islamic intellectuals concerning historicism and hermeneutics, framing these not merely as methodological questions but as challenges that touch the core of Islamic epistemology. For Bulaç, revelation is the axis around which the entire Islamic worldview turns; were it to be compromised, the entire system would collapse.<sup>30</sup> This conviction also shapes his forthcoming project, a planned three-volume study titled *Kur'ani Okuma Bicimleri (Modes of Reading the Qur'ān)*, in which he aims to address, within the broadest possible framework, the competing theories of interpretation that have emerged in Western and Muslim intellectual circles. In signalling this future work, he also distances himself from contemporary attempts, inspired in part by figures such as Fazlur Rahman and Abdolkarim Soroush, to recast revelation in anthropological or humanistic terms that, in his view, erode its theological integrity. His work *Vahiy Nedir?* and the envisioned multi-volume project reveal the trajectory of Bulaç's ongoing commitment to articulating an Islamic epistemology capable of responding critically and constructively to the interpretive challenges of modernity.

## WHY HE WROTE THIS *TAFSİR*

Bulaç explains the impetus for his exegetical project as stemming from what he identifies as a deep intellectual and civilisational crisis confronting the contemporary Muslim world. In his view, Muslims are living through a state of chaos precipitated by the postmodern fragmentation of truth and the disruptive interventions of external powers that have destabilised Muslim societies intellectually, culturally, socially, and politically.<sup>31</sup> In such a context, he argues, Muslims have all but lost their *qibla*—their cognitive and social compass. The Qur'ān, as Divine communication and revealed knowledge, thus represents the only viable point of reference through which the community can regain its grounding/orientation.<sup>32</sup> *Tafsīr*, for Bulaç, is not merely a scholarly exercise but an intentional attempt to

<sup>29</sup> Ali Bulaç, *Vahiy Nedir? [What is Revelation?]* (Ekin Yayınları, 2024).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Bulaç, *Kur'an Dersleri*, vol. I, 34.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

cultivate the sound understanding of the Divine guidance and the intellectual roadmap it offers for human flourishing. His commentary is conceived as a contribution to the construction of a renewed Islamic consciousness—one grounded in knowledge and oriented toward wisdom, animated by reflective thought and directed toward the transcendent.

Bulaç articulates his primary aim as constructing a meaningful bridge between the Qur’ān and contemporary life, between the formative past and complex present, while remaining firmly within the parameters of *uṣūl*, the established principles of Qur’ānic hermeneutics.<sup>33</sup> He argues that the Muslim world cannot overcome its current state of fragmentation and crisis unless it returns to the Qur’ān as its foundational source for understanding existence, forming its worldview, and reordering socio-economic and political life. For him, the Qur’ān’s universal ideals, i.e. freedom, morality, justice, rights, fairness, and unity, must be placed at the centre of global Muslim consciousness. Because Muslims today have, metaphorically, “lost their *qibla*,” Bulaç maintains that authentic renewal must begin with a return to the Qur’ān as Divine knowledge and guidance.<sup>34</sup> The task of *tafsīr*, therefore, is to secure correct understanding of revealed knowledge, clarify the meanings it conveys, and illuminate the roadmap it provides for action. His *tafsīr* is offered as a contribution to this broader effort to rebuild Islamic consciousness—drawing on the insights of earlier exegetes while seeking *ḥikmah* (wisdom) and promoting reflective, transformative understanding. In essence, it is a knowledge-based project oriented toward cultivating intellectual and spiritual awareness.

In articulating this vision, Bulaç rejects a *heyet* (collective and/or institutional) *tafsīr* model and what is often described as “academic *tafsīr*.” Although academic methods ultimately rely on scientific methodologies, he insists that the principles of Qur’ānic exegesis and the epistemological assumptions of modern scientific enquiry rest on fundamentally different premises. For this reason, *tafsīr* cannot legitimately be subsumed under a scientific method that is contingent, historically bounded, and subject to obsolescence. The Qur’ān, he argues, is not an object of scientific investigation; while an Orientalist may approach it as such, a Muslim’s relationship with the text centres on correctly discerning the Divine intent (*murād-i ilāhī*) and the higher purposes of legislation (*maqāṣid al-shar‘iyya*), and acting on them while communicating them to others.<sup>35</sup> He further questions how a scholar attempting an “academic *tafsīr*” could possibly maintain the subject–object dichotomy that scientific enquiry presupposes—an epistemic posture incompatible with the believer’s stance before revelation.

Bulaç also cautions against the expectation that every *tafsīr* must introduce radical innovations and insights to distinguish itself from prior commentaries. While interpretive differences naturally emerge through renewed engagement with the text, he maintains that, in principle, an exegete must remain within the bounds of sound method and within the semantic range that the Qur’ānic wording can legitimately bear. If a commentary opens a

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 35.

horizon of truth within these parameters, it has fulfilled its purpose.<sup>36</sup> Many *batinī* and *ishārī* (mystical) commentaries, he notes, fall into error by advancing allegorical interpretations that exceed the linguistic tolerance of the text. For example, interpreting the verses in Sūra al-A‘lā (87:4–5) concerning verdure (vegetation) that dries into blackened stubble as a reference to coal deposits. Such departures from accepted method risk transforming the Qur’ān into a tool for validating a preconceived doctrine or, worse, into an arena for projecting personal desire—an act he describes as a grave sin. He argues that many modernist or reformist attempts at *tafsīr* aim, explicitly or implicitly, at semantic distortion by stretching wording and meaning beyond legitimate limits. For Bulaç, *tafsīrs* written in any era inevitably bear the interpretive priorities of their time, and this diversity is not problematic in itself; when undertaken with sound methodology, it enriches the history of Qur’ānic interpretation.

### METHODOLOGY AND MAJOR THEMES IN HIS *TAFSİR*

Bulaç’s deep engagement with the Qur’ān eventually crystallised into a coherent methodological framework that shaped his seven-volume *tafsīr*, *Kur’an Dersleri (Dirāsāt al-Qur’ān)*. His approach is firmly rooted in the classical exegetical tradition. When interpreting any verse or cluster of verses, he begins with *al-Qur’ān bi’l-Qur’ān*—that is, by examining the intertextual web of passages within the Qur’ān. He then turns to authenticated and reliable Prophetic reports, followed by the understandings of the first recipients of revelation, namely the Companions. Next, he considers the perspectives of the Tābi‘ūn (Successors), and then surveys the major exegetical, lexical, theological, and juristic authorities whose commentaries have shaped the classical and modern *tafsīr* heritage.<sup>37</sup> Only after engaging this layered tradition does he advance his interpretations, offering them to readers as a means of deepening their understanding of the Divine message and embodying its guidance in their lives.

Bulaç openly acknowledges his intellectual indebtedness to earlier exegetes, describing Rāzī, Qurtubī, Sayyid Quṭb, Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır, and several others as his “teachers/masters.” Reflecting on his exegetical practice, he explains that, while working through a verse, he imagined himself as a student seated in their scholarly circles as a student. Rather than studying under a single master, he viewed himself learning from all of them simultaneously,<sup>38</sup> and it was this pedagogical self-conception that ultimately led him to title his work *Kur’an Dersleri* (Lessons from the Qur’ān). He notes that he deliberately chose this title to signal that the commentary represents a distilled synthesis of what he has learned through long-standing engagement with the exegetes he names—scholars whose writings have shaped his understanding of the Qur’ān, a sacred text that has consistently occupied the centre of his intellectual life. Collectively, he regards these *mufasssirs* as the teachers who have shaped his mind, enriched his scholarly repertoire, and formed his interpretive

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>38</sup> Bulaç, “Ali Bulaç 10 Yıl Süren Tefsir.”

horizon.<sup>39</sup> The commentary thus stands as the cumulative harvest of their guidance as mediated through his engagement with the Qur'ān.

In his *tafsīr*, Bulaç draws on a wide and representative range of classical and modern sources. Among the prominent exegetes who inform his reading are Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır, Ibn 'Abbās, Qurtubī, Bayḍāwī, Nasafī, Ibn Kathīr, the authors of *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, Sayyid Quṭb, Ali Rıza Sağman, Celal Yıldırım, and Süleyman Ateş. His lexical and semantic analyses rely heavily on the works of Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, H. Muḥammad Makhlūf, and Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī, whose philological contributions anchor his close attention to Qur'ānic vocabulary. Bulaç notes that he has not neglected the major and authoritative exegetical traditions; he regularly consults the interpretations of scholars representing distinct doctrinal and methodological orientations. The theological insights of Rāzī and the juridical emphases of Qurtubī, together with the foundational works of Ṭabarī, Bayḍāwī, Muqātil, Zamakhsharī, Ibn Kathīr, and Shawkānī, are essential reference points. In addition, he engages with the *tafsīrs* of Imām al-Māturīdī, Abū al-Su'ūd Efendī, Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī Bursawī, Qushayrī, Ṭabātabā'ī, Saïd Nursī, Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā, Mawḍūdī, Ṭāhir ibn 'Āshūr, 'Izzat Darwazah, the *Kur'ān Yolu* commentary of the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, Saïd Şimşek, and Wahbah Zuhaylī. When necessary, he also consults the major works on *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) by Wāḥidī, al-Suyūṭī, 'Abd al-Fattāh al-Qāḍī, and M. Ṭaḥsīn Emiroğlu, as well as a range of dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference sources listed in the bibliography. Bulaç emphasises that he cites each scholar directly within the commentary on the relevant verse and sees no need for additional citation apparatus, as the exegetes' positions are fully incorporated into the interpretive discussion.

For Bulaç, *tafsīr* is not a closed discipline but an ever-unfolding intellectual and spiritual endeavour. He characterises it as “a sentence composed in order to understand the Qur'ān—a sentence that will never reach its final punctuation until the Day of Judgment.”<sup>40</sup> This metaphor captures his conviction that every exegete participates in a continuous chain of interpretation that began with Ṭabarī, was extended by Qurtubī, and refined by figures such as Rāzī and Bayḍāwī. Each generation, he maintains, approaches the Qur'ān from within its socio-historical conditions, seeking to comprehend the text and illuminate the realities of its time through the lens of revelation. In this sense, Bulaç situates his work not as a departure from the tradition but as a conscious continuation of a centuries-long enterprise of understanding, explicating, and living the Qur'ān.

Building on this methodological foundation, Bulaç repeatedly stresses that methodology (*usūl*) is the indispensable core of any sound *tafsīr*. Trained in the Islamic sciences and sociology, he is attentive to the interpretive insights that the social sciences can offer. Yet he firmly rejects the notion of producing a *tafsīr* grounded exclusively in sociological analysis, arguing that such an approach would be fundamentally flawed. In his view, adherence to the established principles of *tafsīr* remains paramount. Nevertheless, when interpreting a verse or a cluster of verses, he allows the horizons of knowledge to open toward contributive

<sup>39</sup> Bulaç, *Kur'an Dersleri*, vol. I, 8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 9; Bulaç, “Ali Bulaç 10 Yıl Süren Tefsir.”

disciplines—sociology, political science, anthropology, economics, philosophy, law, logic, and even economic theory. Anthropology, he notes, is indispensable, “because the Qur’ān is also a book that speaks to these dimensions of human existence.”<sup>41</sup> His method thus reflects a dual fidelity: steadfast commitment to classical exegetical principles coupled with an informed openness to interdisciplinary perspectives.

Central to Bulaç’s hermeneutical worldview is his conviction that many of the crises confronting contemporary Muslim societies arise from failure to engage the Qur’ān in a profound, contemplative, and transformative manner. While Muslims may read the text, he argues, they often do so without internalising its meaning. This superficial engagement, he contends, lies at the root of moral decline, persistent economic inequality, structural injustice, widespread oppression, and political fragmentation across the Muslim world. For him, there can be no meaningful exit from this condition unless the Muslim world returns to the Qur’ān in a substantive sense—reconfiguring its conception of existence, worldview, and socio-economic and political order in accordance with Qur’ānic guidance, and foregrounding, at a global level, the Qur’ān’s vision of freedom, morality, justice, rights, equity, and the ideal of unity (*wahdah*). Only through comprehensive reorientation, he maintains, can the present crisis be overcome.<sup>42</sup> “Wars and conflicts continue,” he notes, “Muslims kill one another mercilessly, freedom is absent, justice is not established, and unity is lacking. At the root of all these problems is our failure to truly understand the Qur’ān.”<sup>43</sup> Knowledge of the text, in his view, is insufficient unless accompanied by deep spiritual engagement; reading the Qur’ān merely as an academic or through an Orientalist lens yields no transformative power.

Given his longstanding position as one of Türkiye’s most prominent Islamist intellectuals and his deep involvement in debates surrounding Islamic thought for several decades, Bulaç’s commentary constitutes a valuable entry point into contemporary Islamic discourse. His *tafsīr* serves as a repository and reflection of ongoing modern discussions among Islamist thinkers, approached through the dual lenses of his Islamic scholarly training and sociological expertise.

Scholarly assessments of Bulaç’s *tafsīr* reflect a mixed yet nuanced reception. Kızılsöker characterises *Kur’ân Dersleri* as an attempt to address several contested hermeneutical issues, such as the non-historicity of the Qur’ān, the Divine origin of its wording (*lafz*) and meaning (*ma’nā*), the scope and limits of the Qur’ān’s relationship with science, and the question of abrogation (*naskh*) from within Bulaç’s intellectual framework. He describes the work as one of the notable contemporary contributions to Qur’ānic commentary. According to his evaluation, the *tafsīr* demonstrates a consistent commitment to classical interpretive principles while simultaneously exhibiting, at certain points, an inclination toward modernist approaches, even aligning with them on a limited number of issues.<sup>44</sup> Kızılsöker further

<sup>41</sup> Bulaç, “Ali Bulaç 10 Yıl Süren Tefsir.”

<sup>42</sup> Bulaç, *Kur’ân Dersleri*, vol. I, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Bulaç, “Ali Bulaç 10 Yıl Süren Tefsir.”

<sup>44</sup> Abdurrahim Kızılsöker, *Yerleşik Usûl ile Modernist Anlayışlar Arasında Kur’ân Dersleri Tefsiri* [Commentary ‘Qur’ân Lessons’ Between the Established Method and Modernist Understandings] (Sonçağ Yayınları, 2021), 1.

observes that classical *uṣūl* and modernist hermeneutics represent two distinct interpretive orientations: the former privileges the explanatory traditions that have enjoyed broad acceptance throughout Islamic intellectual history, whereas the latter tends to reinterpret religious texts in line with contemporary rational and cultural sensibilities. In today's scholarly climate, where traditional readings are often marginalised and modernist interpretations foregrounded, Bulaç's *tafsīr*, he argues, attempts to navigate between these two perspectives. While firmly rooted in inherited exegetical frameworks, it remains attentive to contemporary intellectual concerns, producing a hybrid interpretive posture that neither entirely abandons the classical tradition nor uncritically embraces modernist assumptions.<sup>45</sup>

A defining feature of Ali Bulaç's exegetical work is the breadth of thematic terrain he traverses, reflecting his grounding in the classical tradition and his sustained engagement with the intellectual, social, and political challenges of the contemporary Muslim world. His *tafsīr* systematically integrates classical hermeneutical tools with modern analytical concerns, producing a multilayered interpretive framework. On the classical side, Bulaç draws extensively on *riwāyāt* (transmitted exegetical reports) and accords considerable weight to etymology and semantic analysis as foundational components of Qur'ānic interpretation. He examines the doctrine of *naskh* (abrogation) and *shafā'a* (intercession), and contributes to discussions on *i'jāz al-Qur'ān* (the inimitability of the Qur'ān), while also engaging the traditional discourse distinguishing between *muḥkam* (clear) and *mutashābih* (ambiguous) verses. He additionally explores several contested legal-ethical questions like *irtidād* (apostasy), *rajm* (stoning), the punishment for *zinā* (illicit sexual relations/adultery), and the penalties for theft, offering detailed examinations of how these debates have unfolded within contemporary Qur'ānic discourse. His treatment of *nuzūl 'Īsā*, the eschatological question of the Second Coming of Jesus, stands out as one of the most elaborated and consequential sections of his *tafsīr*, demonstrating his attentiveness to scriptural evidence and the broader theological implications of such beliefs. Because Bulaç occasionally gives weight to modernist arguments when the subject matter warrants, some scholars have interpreted his position as aligning with modernist, or even, in matters of creed, "revisionist" tendencies regarding the question of Jesus' ascension and return. According to this reading, the Qur'ān contains no explicit verse affirming the descent of Jesus, and the reports that clearly address the matter fall into the category of *khabar al-wāḥid* (solitary *ḥadīth*).<sup>46</sup> On this basis, Bulaç maintains that belief in Jesus' return is not decisively established, and accepting or rejecting the notion of his descent remains a theologically permissible stance.<sup>47</sup>

Alongside these classical and theological engagements, Bulaç situates his commentary within the intellectual horizons of the present, addressing contemporary debates surrounding scientific exegesis (including miracles, cosmology, and evolutionary theory), women and women's rights, environmental ethics, and the socio-political dimensions of Qur'ānic discourse. In this regard, he devotes attention to Islamic political theory, the nature of the

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> See, Louay Fatoohi, "The End of Jesus' Life on Earth in the Qur'ān," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2023): 19.

<sup>47</sup> Kızıışeker, *Yerleşik Usûl*, 58, 101.

state, and the conceptual and semantic significance of *al-dīn* (religion), *millah* (religious community/nation), and *ummah* (the collective community of believers) as categories of religious and political belonging. Collectively, these thematic engagements illustrate Bulaç's effort to position the Qur'ān simultaneously within its classical exegetical heritage and the pressing intellectual concerns of the modern world. His *tafsīr* thus functions as a bridge between tradition and contemporary enquiry, demonstrating how a modern commentator can remain deeply anchored in inherited scholarly methods while responding meaningfully to the questions of his age.

To illustrate the breadth and texture of Bulaç's exegetical method, this article focuses on two representative case studies: (1) his engagement with the debate between contextualist and traditional approaches to Qur'ānic interpretation, and (2) his reading of verses pertaining to women. The latter constitutes one of the most thoroughly developed thematic areas in his commentary. Bulaç offers systematic analyses of questions such as the respective positions of men and women, women's testimony, inheritance rights, polygyny, women's right to divorce, veiling (*hijab*, *tasattur*), and adoption. These discussions are notable not only for their exegetical depth but also for the way they navigate between classical interpretive commitments and the ethical, legal, and social concerns of contemporary Muslim societies. Examining these cases affords a clearer understanding of how Bulaç positions himself within the broader tradition of Qur'ānic exegesis while simultaneously responding to the intellectual and moral challenges of the modern world. As the second case study, this article will analyse his approach to women's veiling (*hijab*/headscarf) in the Qur'ān.

## **CASE STUDY 1: CONTEXTUALIST (HISTORICIST) AND TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO QUR'ĀNIC INTERPRETATION**

In the modern era, an alternative, contextualist approach is beginning to gain more prominence in contrast to the traditional approach. In their attempt to understand the Qur'ān's meanings, proponents of this approach argue that textual study must be accompanied by knowledge of the social, cultural and political conditions of the time of revelation. Contextualists (such as Fazlur Rahman) engage not only in linguistic analysis, but also adopt approaches from alternative fields such as hermeneutics and literary theory. Thus, in keeping with the history of continuously evolving Qur'ānic exegesis, many modern contextualists develop new ways of approaching the Qur'ān.<sup>48</sup> In the Turkish context, this approach is named as historicism (*tarihselcilik*), a concept that has been extensively debated across academic and public forums over several decades. Bulaç has actively participated in these ongoing discussions through multiple discursive platforms, including newspaper columns, public lectures, and scholarly conferences.

First, Bulaç is critical of the contextualist (historicist) approach and questions it in the context of Islam's foundational concept of revelation. In his sustained examination of this subject, Bulaç emphasises that revelation constitutes Islam's foundational principle. Every

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<sup>48</sup> Abdullah Saeed, *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (Routledge 2008), 220.

religious edifice rests on a fundamental conceptual cornerstone, and religions are constructed on these foundational elements. Judaism, for instance, is predicated on the doctrine of the “chosen people,” while Christianity’s cornerstone comprises the Trinitarian conception of “Father–Son–Holy Spirit.” The removal of these foundational stones precipitates the collapse of their respective religious structures. For Islam, revelation is this irreducible foundation. Any compromise of revelation, particularly if scepticism regarding its authenticity achieves widespread acceptance, effectively dislodges this lowest stone. These foundational principles remain inviolable across all religious traditions.<sup>49</sup>

In his work *Vahiy Nedir?*, Bulaç makes critical approaches to the ideas of Fazlur Rahman and Abdolkarim Soroush on the concept of revelation.<sup>50</sup> He challenges Fazlur Rahman’s five-part conceptualisation of Gabriel, which he contends diminishes the angel’s transcendent ontological status, arguing that this interpretation fundamentally undermines the metaphysical foundations of revelation. Central to Bulaç’s counterargument is his conception of human hermeneutical capacity: he maintains that humans possess the ability to transcend their historical and social contingencies, comprehending Divine judgments through engagement with nature, society, and history as active agents rather than passive recipients of circumstance. In this framework, the Qur’ān deploys history as a pedagogical and narrative instrument rather than as a determinative contextual constraint. Also, Bulaç contests reformist scholars who propose that, while the meaning of the Qur’ān originates from God, its wording is attributed to the Prophet. Bulaç disagrees, asserting that there is no basis for this claim. In that case, there would be no distinction between Qur’ānic verses (*āyāt*) and prophetic traditions (*hadīth*). Bulaç invokes Qur’ān 75:18: “Then when We recite it, follow its recitation,” which he interprets as unambiguous affirmation that revelation is Divine in meaning and wording.<sup>51</sup>

Second, Bulaç articulates a dynamic conception of human agency and revelation that challenges deterministic frameworks. He contends that humans possess the capacity to transcend historical and social constraints, apprehending Divine judgments through their engagement with nature, society, and history as active agents rather than passive subjects. This understanding fundamentally shapes his hermeneutical approach to the Qur’ān, which he positions as employing history narratively rather than as a circumscribing context. Central to his argument is the distinction between Arabic as a vehicle of revelation and Arabic as a mere cultural artifact. He maintains that revelation operates transformatively on language, actively intervening in and reconfiguring linguistic structures rather than conforming to established cultural expressions. Qur’ānic Arabic, in his analysis, diverges significantly from the contemporary Arabic of its historical moment precisely because revelation introduces semantic innovation, imbuing existing lexemes such as *hidāya* (guidance) and *ḍalāla* (misguidance) with novel significations. This interventionist model positions revelation not

<sup>49</sup> Ali Bulaç, “Tarihselcilik Üzerine” [On Historicism], *Haksöz Dergisi* 339/340 (2019), <https://www.haksozhaber.net/okul/tarihselcilik-uzerine-8158yy.htm>.

<sup>50</sup> Bulaç, *Vahiy Nedir?*

<sup>51</sup> Kızılsöğüt, *Yerleşik Usûl*, 31–39.

as passively adopting pre-existing definitions but as generatively reshaping the semantic field, thereby demonstrating revelation's active agency in cultural and linguistic transformation.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, Bulaç points out that social environmental factors did not play a “determining role” in the revelation and proclamation of the Qur’ān; however, they played an “influential role” in the sequential descent of the words and the formation of the words according to objects. Thus, Bulaç delineates a nuanced relationship between revelation and socio-historical context, distinguishing between determinative and influential factors. While social environmental conditions did not exercise a “determining role” in the Qur’ān’s revelation and proclamation, they exerted an “influential role” in shaping the sequential descent of verses and the correlation between linguistic forms and their referents. This influence is a crucial pedagogical function: rendering the Divine message accessible and comprehensible to human cognition and practical life. His interpretive approach is exemplified through Qur’ānic verse 88:17: “Do they not look at how the camel was created?” Here, Bulaç argues that the revelatory significance lies not in the camel as a culturally specific referent, but in the Divine power and wisdom manifested through its creation.<sup>53</sup> This distinction preserves revelation’s transcendent content while acknowledging its accommodation to human epistemological and experiential frameworks, thereby resolving the tension between Divine universality and historical particularity. In his response to Soroush, who argues that Qur’ānic punishments would have differed if revealed in a different location or society, Bulaç points out that many punishments predate Islam and have been practiced since ancient times. Also, Prophet Muhammad followed Mosaic law before receiving new revelations. Besides, some Qur’ānic punishments were not part of pre-Islamic Arabian customs.<sup>54</sup>

In addition, Bulaç highlights that, while observing the mental transformation of the first recipients of the Qur’ān, the context between verses gives an idea of the mental and social environment in which the inherent ruling in the wording was revealed. Although the reason for revelation plays an important role in understanding, it is also important to understand the broader context of the ruling (*vasat-ı hüküm*). Here, Bulaç articulates a sophisticated hermeneutical framework for navigating the text–context relationship in Qur’ānic interpretation, centred on the methodological category of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation). He emphasises that understanding the “context of ruling” (*wasat al-ḥukm*) proves essential, as the intertextual relationships among verses illuminate the mental and social milieu in which the Divine ruling embedded within the textual formulation was disclosed. While *asbāb al-nuzūl* remain methodologically significant for comprehension, Bulaç cautions against reductionist interpretations that confine verses exclusively to their immediate occasioning contexts. This limitation produces a problematic double isolation: vertically severing the historical environment from broader historical continuity, and horizontally detaching the social environment from contemporary reality. This hermeneutical error

<sup>52</sup> Bulaç, “Tarihseleçilik Üzerine.”

<sup>53</sup> Bulaç, *Kur'an Dersleri*, vol. I, 17.

<sup>54</sup> Kızılsöker, *Yerleşik Usûl*, 37; Bulaç, *Vahiy Nedir?*, 82–83.

transforms the 7<sup>th</sup> century Meccans and Medinans who persisted in denial into mere historical scapegoats, thereby constraining revelation's universal and transhistorical message within culturally and temporally delimited parameters. Bulaç insists the polytheists (*mushrikūn*) and hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*) addressed in the Qur'ān constitute universal rather than historically bounded categories. Therefore, what happened yesterday in Mecca and Medina is happening today right next to us and throughout the world. The polytheists and hypocrites addressed in the Qur'ān are not a historical category, but a universal one.<sup>55</sup>

Also, Bulaç compares/contrasts contextualist (historicist) and traditional approaches, indicating some major differences. The most fundamental difference between them is that the reference of judgment is revelation. Revelation is not a production of Prophet Muhammad. The second point is supra-historical intervention. The third point is that the principle of "If the cause (*'illa*) change, the ruling (*ḥukm*) changes," which seems to be similar between two approaches. However, the traditional approach differs from the contextualist approach as a result because historicists/contextualists claim that the ruling ceases forever with the change of historical circumstances, because, according to the prevailing philosophy of history, each stage is more advanced than the previous, and there is no going back in history. But, in the traditional approach, if the cause (*'illa*) return, the ruling (*ḥukm*) may return back too.<sup>56</sup> Here, Bulaç demonstrates some similarities and differences between the two approaches. He seems to maintain that the traditional method provides avenues to embrace change, and Muslims may not need to apply a contextualist (historicist) method.

Finally, Bulaç interestingly makes some differences between Fazlur Rahman and later historicist intellectuals. In his view, those who came after Fazlur Rahman left him far behind in this regard. His concern was to understand and solve the problem correctly. He went back 1,400 years and tried to research how the relevant problem or a similar one was solved there. From there, he attempted to say something about today.<sup>57</sup> In fact, this was, in a way, another method of analogy, a more modernised version. Bulaç believes the historicism that is currently being promoted is completely different from this. They hold the view that "his ruling emerged in history and belongs to history. It is no longer possible for us to bring it into the present day."<sup>58</sup>

## CASE STUDY 2: WOMEN'S VEILING (*HIJAB*/HEADSCARF) IN THE QUR'ĀN

Bulaç actively engages with contemporary religious discussions in the modern Turkish context and within the Muslim world regarding women's veiling (*hijab*/headscarf) in the Qur'ān, its nature, and whether it is obligatory for Muslim women. This has been a popular

<sup>55</sup> Bulaç, *Kur'an Dersleri*, vol. I, 30.

<sup>56</sup> Bulaç, "Tarihselcilik Üzerine."

<sup>57</sup> See, Hayba Abouzeid, "Islamic Pluralism and the Muslim Voice: Western Attitudes that Define Islamic Identity in the West." *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 9, no. 1 (2024): 92 and 97.

<sup>58</sup> Bulaç, "Tarihselcilik Üzerine."

topic in the Western world as women's veiling, *burqa*, face covering etc. sometimes appear in Western media. According to the most recent edition of the *Islamophobia in Australia* report, Muslim women and girls remain the overwhelming victims of Islamophobic incidents.<sup>59</sup>

Bulaç states that, in 1994, a prominent jurist in Türkiye claimed the ruling on the headscarf had been cancelled. According to him, the reason for the verse on headscarves was that women were persecuted. Today, no woman is persecuted for not wearing a headscarf; it has become a custom. Therefore, he argued that the ruling had changed. However, Bulaç argues against this view, emphasising that the reason for the ruling continued since the Qur'ān shows two reasons (*'illa*) for this (Q. 33:59). One is a reference to the fact that veiled women are not persecuted, and the other is that it expresses "identity" in the sense of "so that they can distinguish you from other women." According to a historicist, the obligation to wear the headscarf has disappeared, but according to a person who uses the correct methodology, the obligation to wear the headscarf is still in force.<sup>60</sup> Here, Bulaç relies on a traditional *uṣūlī* principle that as the verse in question (Q. 33:59) indicates "identity" as effective cause (*'illa*), its application is universal.

In the interpretation of Q. 33:59, Bulaç interprets Q. 24:31 as introducing the legislative ruling on head coverings through the term *khimār*, which, in conjunction with 33:59, commands women who already covered their heads to extend this covering to their necks, shoulders, and chests by draping their headscarves. He maintains that this directive applies universally across all contexts. Bulaç explicitly rejects interpretations that would classify this ruling as temporal and local, asserting instead that it addresses all believing women (*mu'mināt*) transhistorically.<sup>61</sup>

Bulaç indicates that the Qur'ān offers two reasons (*'illa*) for this (Q. 33:59). One is a reference to the fact that veiled women are not persecuted, and the other is that it expresses "identity." In the social behaviour patterns of societies, identities are mostly expressed and perpetuated through symbols. For Muslim women living alongside others (Christians, Jews, Buddhists, deists, atheists etc.) in a society, the most important and visible aspect of their identity is the headscarf. This is not a symbol with political or other connotations, but a direct expression of religious obligation. With this characteristic, the headscarf is a distinctive symbol that distinguishes Muslim women from non-Muslims. Therefore, since the Qur'ān establishes a close and indispensable link between identity and symbol, the cause (*'illa*) continues eternally and is necessarily bound and dependent on the ruling. He states the headscarf is a religious obligation and an expression of freedom of expression, i.e., the manifestation of a symbol. Whether she suffers oppression because of her femininity, a

<sup>59</sup> Susan Carland et al., *Islamophobia in Australia Report V* (Islamophobia Register Australia 2025), 23. See also Derya Iner, ed., *Islamophobia in Australia-II (2016-2017)* (Charles Sturt University and ISRA, 2019), [https://humanrights.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0025/25459/Islamophobia-in-Australia-II-2016-2017.pdf](https://humanrights.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/25459/Islamophobia-in-Australia-II-2016-2017.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> Bulaç, "Tarihselcilik Üzerine."

<sup>61</sup> Bulaç, *Kur'an Dersleri*, vol. V, 480.

woman covers her head because she is a Muslim and goes out in public wearing outer garments that do not reveal the contours of her body from head to toe.<sup>62</sup>

Another important point in Bulaç's discussions on women's veiling is that he examines the topic focusing mainly on the headscarf and outer garment.<sup>63</sup> He does not seem to analyse face covering (*burqa*) as part of women's veiling, which is the most discussed issue in the West, with some Western states banning it. This shows that he mainly analysed it in the Turkish context as Turkish people mostly follow the Ḥanafī juristic school, which excludes hands, face and feet as part of women's obligatory veiling.

## CONCLUSION

This article examined the intellectual and biographical circumstances that motivated Bulaç's composition of a *tafsīr*. Ali Bulaç's *Kur'an Dersleri* should be placed within the dynamic, methodologically diverse, and socially contentious exegetical context; attempting to address the theological, epistemological, ethical, and socio-political questions that define the late Republican and post-2000 Turkish context. Moreover, the article analysed the reasoning behind this work and the methodological principles governing his exegetical practice. Bulaç believed a return to the Qur'ān as Divine knowledge and direction is the first step towards genuine renewal. Therefore, the purpose of *tafsīr* is to ensure that revealed information is correctly understood, to make clear the meanings it transmits, and to shed light on the action plan it offers. For Bulaç, *tafsīr* is consequently a purposeful attempt to develop a solid knowledge of Divine guidance and the intellectual roadmap it provides for human flourishing, rather than just an academic exercise. Critically speaking, Muhammad 'Abduh's guidance-based approach to *tafsīr* can be seen in Bulaç's understanding of *tafsīr*.

He follows a coherent methodological framework that shaped his *tafsīr*, and his approach is firmly rooted in the classical exegetical tradition. His acknowledgment of intellectual debt to previous commentators, where he characterises Rāzī, Qurṭubī, Sayyid Quṭb, Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır, and various other scholars as his "teachers/masters," exemplifies this point while relying on a wide and representative range of classical and modern sources. His commentary thus stands as the cumulative harvest of their guidance as mediated by his personal interaction with the Qur'ān. Besides unwavering adherence to traditional hermeneutical frameworks, Bulaç allows insights from diverse disciplinary fields such as sociology and anthropology. In addition, the article analysed two case studies in Bulaç's *tafsīr*. His approach is more in line with the traditional approach against modernist/contextualist approaches.

While rooted in traditional *tafsīr* scholarship, Bulaç's background in sociology and his extensive media presence allows him to critically engage with the challenges posed by modernity. Although he often critiques modernist and reformist perspectives, he occasionally aligns with them on certain points. A distinctive aspect of his *tafsīr* is its capacity to bridge

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., vol. V, 483.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., vol. V, 124.

classical Islamic scholarship with the realities of contemporary life, connecting the past to the present. Through his approach, Bulaç successfully makes the Qur'ān relevant and accessible to modern Turkish readers. Bulaç's approach represents a sophisticated form of intellectual mediation between tradition and modernity. This allows him to claim authenticity (through classical lineage) while asserting relevance (through contemporary application).

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