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Reinterpreting Surah Al-Fatihah through Mohamed Arkoun's Deconstructive Hermeneutics: A Historical-Critical and Linguistic-Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract: The application of deconstructive hermeneutics to the Qur'an remains methodologically and epistemologically contested, particularly when applied to Surah Al-Fatihah, one of the Qur'an's most central liturgical and theological texts. Previous studies have primarily described Mohamed Arkoun's hermeneutical thought without critically examining the internal consistency of his interpretive method or evaluating its relevance and limitations for contemporary Qur'anic studies. This study addresses three questions: why Arkoun selected Surah Al-Fatihah as the object of his analysis, how he operationalized deconstructive hermeneutics in interpreting the surah, and how far this approach is relevant and where its limitations lie for contemporary exegetical scholarship. Employing qualitative library research, the study integrates historical-critical and linguistic-semiotic approaches through a systematic analytical procedure. The findings demonstrate that Arkoun broadens the horizon of Qur'anic interpretation by integrating historical inquiry, linguistic analysis, and critical reflection. Nevertheless, his interpretation relies more heavily on linguistic description than on a systematic semiotic procedure, resulting in methodological inconsistencies and insufficient support for several claims concerning interpretive plurality and the normative authority of the Qur'anic text. The study concludes that Arkoun's hermeneutics offers a valuable critical framework for contemporary Qur'anic studies, provided that its application is accompanied by explicit methodological procedures and normative safeguards to preserve analytical rigor without collapsing into interpretive relativism.

Keywords: *Mohamed Arkoun; Surah Al-Fatihah; Deconstructive Hermeneutics; Historical-Critical Approach; Linguistic-Semiotic Analysis.*

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Introduction

Surah Al-Fatihah occupies a central place in the Qur'an, serving at once as a normative source and as a fixture of Muslim devotional life. Across the intellectual history of Islam, exegetes have read this surah through a wide range of methodological approaches. Within contemporary Islamic thought, Mohamed Arkoun proposes an alternative: a deconstructive hermeneutics that insists on a critical, historical, and contextual reading of religious texts.[1]

[1] Misnawati Misnawati, Samsul Bahri, and Muhammad Nuzul Abraar, "Pemikiran Mohammed Arkoun Dalam Penafsiran Kontemporer," *Jurnal Mudarrisuna: Media Kajian Pendidikan Agama Islam* 12, no. 2 (2022), https://doi.org/10.22373/jm.v12i2.13292.

Earlier studies have examined Arkoun's thought, particularly his critique of Islamic reason and of the traditional approaches to Qur'anic exegesis. Most of them, however, remain descriptive: they have not adequately pursued the evaluative question of how deconstructive hermeneutics actually performs when applied to Qur'anic verses, and to Surah Al-Fatihah in particular. Nor has the way Arkoun weaves together the historical-critical and the linguistic-semiotic been examined in any real depth.

Mapping the recent literature clarifies exactly where this gap lies. Faizah[2] sets out the linguistic steps of Arkoun's reading of Al-Fatihah, while Putra and colleagues[3] map his exegetical procedure more broadly; both, however, remain at the level of descriptive exposition, neither testing the method's internal consistency nor, in the latter case, returning to Al-Fatihah specifically. Felsenthal and Agbaria[4] draw pedagogical lessons from Arkoun for religious education rather than offering an exegetical evaluation. At the opposite pole, the critique of Arkoun's linguistic analysis of Surah al-Fatihah[5] does identify methodological and exegetical weaknesses, yet it argues from a defense of traditional tafsir and puts no integrative framework in its place. Epistemological studies such as "Navigating Contemporary Islamic Reason,"[6] meanwhile, examine Arkoun's Islamic reason at the macro level, apart from the text of Al-Fatihah itself. In short, no study has at once (a) tested the internal consistency of Arkoun's integration of the historical-critical and the linguistic-semiotic on Al-Fatihah, (b) placed it in comparative dialogue with other modern hermeneutics, and (c) translated its epistemological implications into a working model of analysis. It is precisely this gap that the present article enters.

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[2] Nur Faizah, "Nurfaizah Surat Al-Fatihah Dalam Bingkai Pembacaan Mohammed Arkoun," *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan Islam* 16, no. 1 (2018): 95–108, https://garuda.kemdiktisaintek.go.id/documents/detail/1412268.

[3] Aryandi Eka Putra, Tasya Salsabila, and Laila Sari Masyhur, "Hermeneutika Dalam Penafsiran Al-Qur'an: Analisis Metode Tafsir Muhammad Arkoun," *Jurnal Tafsere* 13, no. 1 (June 30, 2025): 73–98, https://doi.org/10.24252/jt.v13i1.57461.

[4] Iddo Felsenthal and Ayman Agbaria, "How to Read the Quran in Religious Islamic Education: What Educators Can Learn from the Work of Mohammed Arkoun," *Religions* 14, no. 1 (2023): 129.

[5] Humaira Ahmad, "Mapping Neo-Modern and Postmodern Qur'ānic Reformist Discourse in the Intellectual Legacy of Fazlur Rahman and Mohammed Arkoun," *Religions* 14, no. 5 (May 1, 2023): 595, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050595.

[6] Taufik Hidayatulloh, "Navigating Contemporary Islamic Reason: An Epistemological Analysis of Mohammed Arkoun," *Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 4, no. 1 (June 30, 2024): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.22373/jpi.v4i1.23080.

Starting from this gap, the article sets out not merely to describe but to analyze and evaluate the interpretation of Surah Al-Fatihah through the lens of Mohamed Arkoun's deconstructive hermeneutics. It pursues three questions in particular: (1) why Arkoun chose Surah Al-Fatihah as his object of study; (2) how the deconstructive-hermeneutic approach is operationalized in his reading; and (3) how far that approach is relevant, and where its limits lie, for contemporary exegetical scholarship.

Arkoun's approach matters because it offers an interdisciplinary reading that brings the historical, the linguistic, and the anthropological to bear on the sacred text at once. That same approach, however, has provoked debate, above all over what it implies for exegetical authority and for the limits of interpretation within the Islamic tradition.[7] A critical examination of the approach is therefore warranted, so that its contribution to contemporary Qur'anic studies can be weighed in proper proportion. The article thus aims to contribute not only an exposition of Arkoun's thought but a critical evaluation of it one that enriches the wider discourse on Qur'anic hermeneutics within modern Islamic studies.

This study is a qualitative-critical work of library research designed as textual analysis, integrating a historical-critical approach with a linguistic-semiotic reading of Al-Fatihah. Its object is Mohamed Arkoun's reading of Surah Al-Fatihah (Q 1:1–7): the material object is that reading itself, and the formal object is the internal consistency and epistemological implications of the method he brings to it. Because the study is library-based rather than field-based, it has no human informants or respondents; its primary data are Arkoun's own writings that set out his method and his reading of the Qur'an, The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought,[8] while its secondary data are scholarly studies of and responses to Arkoun, both sympathetic and critical, gathered to build a two-way dialogue rather than a monologue. Analysis reconstructs Arkoun's interpretive procedure before critically evaluating it through a systematic analytical process. The analysis first examines the linguistic features of Surah Al-Fatihah (determiners, pronouns, verbs, and syntax) as interpreted by Arkoun. It then evaluates whether his semiotic claims are supported by an explicit semiotic procedure rather than by linguistic description alone.

[7] Felsenthal and Agbaria, "How to Read the Quran in Religious Islamic Education: What Educators Can Learn from the Work of Mohammed Arkoun," 2023.

[8] Mohammed Arkoun, The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought (Saqi Books London, 2002).

Subsequently, Arkoun's interpretation is placed in comparative dialogue with modern hermeneutics (Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur) and contemporary Qur'anic thinkers (Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and Abdolkarim Soroush) to assess its originality and theoretical position.

Discussion

Arkoun in Dialogue with Modern Hermeneutics

Mohamed Arkoun (1928–2010) was among the contemporary Muslim thinkers best known for a critical, interdisciplinary approach to the study of Islam. Formed intellectually in Algeria and France above all through his philosophical training at the Sorbonne, he carried that background deep into the structure of his thought.[9] European philosophical traditions such as phenomenology and hermeneutics became an important foundation for his effort to reread religious texts contextually and historically.[10]Unlike the largely normative cast of traditional exegesis, Arkoun developed an approach that opened a dialogue between Islamic and Western thought. This is evident in his attempt to bring modern hermeneutics Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur in particular[11] into Qur'anic studies. On this view the religious text is read not merely as a theological document but as a dynamic product of history and culture.[12]

Arkoun's experience in a postcolonial setting also shaped his critical sensitivity to the workings of power in the production of religious knowledge. This perspective enriched his analysis of how text and interpretation alike are conditioned by particular social, political, and ideological structures.[13] The influence of Ibn Khaldun is likewise visible in his emphasis on the historical and sociological dimensions of how Islamic thought develops. To weigh Arkoun's originality fairly, his reading must be set in dialogue with other currents of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics. Scholars note a shared shift away from ontological-theological inquiry toward an epistemological exploration of the text.[14] Fazlur Rahman, through his theory of the "double movement," treats the historical context as a bridge for recovering the Qur'an's moral objectivity,

[9] Ursula Günther, "Mohammed Arkoun," in *Contemporary Qurʾānic Hermeneutics*, ed. Georges Tamer (De Gruyter, 2025), 65–82, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111320069-004.

[10] Georges Tamer, *Contemporary Qurʾānic Hermeneutics* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2025), 68.

[11] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (TCU press, 1976).

[12] Carool Kersten, *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World: Trends, Themes, and Issues* (Routledge, 2019), 81.

[13] Felsenthal and Agbaria, "How to Read the Quran in Religious Islamic Education: What Educators Can Learn from the Work of Mohammed Arkoun," 2023.

[14] Humaira Ahmad, "Mapping Neo-Modern and Postmodern Qur'ānic Reformist Discourse in the Intellectual Legacy of Fazlur Rahman and Mohammed Arkoun," *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 595.

so that the normativity of the text is preserved.[15] Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, in Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ, insists that the Qur'an is a *naṣṣ lughawī* a culturally embedded linguistic text yet his analysis still moves within a renewed framework of *ʿulūm al-Qur'an*.[16]

Abdolkarim Soroush, through his thesis of the "contraction and expansion of religious knowledge," opens the door to a plurality of interpretations as a consequence of developments in knowledge outside religion, while still separating the essence of religion from interpretations of it.[17] Of the three, Arkoun is the most epistemologically radical: he does not merely historicize the text or expand and contract its interpretation but dismantles the very "regime of truth" that underwrites Islamic reason, fusing the historicism of the Annales school, structuralist and poststructuralist semiotics, and Foucauldian archival analysis into an "applied Islamology." Here lies both his originality and his point of vulnerability: what sets Arkoun apart is not his object but how far he is willing to strip away the normative boundary.

This position quickly invites objections. Some scholars contend that importing Western poststructuralism rests on metaphysical commitments foreign to Islamic reason, so that the claimed universality of modern epistemology is itself open to question. A second objection is more technical: Arkoun's linguistic analysis of al-Fatihah is judged shallow and methodologically reductive. Neither objection is brushed aside here; on the contrary, both serve as benchmarks for evaluating the internal consistency and epistemological implications of Arkoun's reading in the sections that follow.

The Choice of Surah Al-Fatihah

Arkoun's choice of Surah Al-Fatihah is inseparable from its central place in the Islamic tradition, both as the opening of the Qur'an and as an integral part of everyday worship. Its status as the *umm al-kitāb* gives the surah a powerful symbolic and theological authority, so that any attempt to reinterpret it carries wide implications for how Muslims understand their faith. Within the framework of deconstructive hermeneutics, the choice of this object reflects Arkoun's epistemological strategy: to reexamine the basic assumptions of traditional exegesis through the most established text, the one most frequently reproduced in religious practice.[18] Al-Fatihah is understood not as a static text but as a space in which linguistic structure and historical consciousness interact dynamically. In other words, Al-Fatihah is chosen not only for its centrality

[15] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 7.

[16] Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Mafhūm Al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsah Fī ʿUlūm Al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: l-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 1996), 22.

[17] Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

[18] Fahruddin Faiz and Ali Usman, *Hermeneutika Al Quran: Teori, Kritik Dan Implementasinya* (Yogyakarta: Dialektika, 2019).

but for its potential as a "locus of critique" against an exegetical orthodoxy that tends to be normative and ahistorical.[19]

This approach allows Arkoun to explore the several layers of meaning in Surah Al-Fatihah linguistic, theological, and historical alike. Through deconstructive hermeneutics, key concepts such as rahmah, hidayah, and yawm al-dīn are no longer read as single, fixed notions but as constructions of meaning open to a range of interpretive possibilities. Here Arkoun's approach seeks to shift the understanding of the text from something final toward something more dialogical and contextual.[20] Beyond this, the historical-critical approach shows how Surah Al-Fatihah functions not only as a spiritual text but as a historical product subject to a dynamic process of meaning-making. Religious truth is often frozen by institutions of power into an unassailable orthodoxy, and the task of deconstruction is to break open that freezing. Arkoun traces how the surah has been understood across varied social and political contexts, demonstrating that interpretation is never wholly free of the influence of power and social structure.[21]

Arkoun's choice and reading of Surah Al-Fatihah, however, raises a number of problems of its own. Training deconstruction on so heavily normative a text can generate tension between the critical impulse and the theological sensitivities of the community. Moreover, the inclination to open up a plurality of meanings may slide into a relativization that blurs the boundary between academic interpretation and normative belief. Arkoun's selection of Surah Al-Fatihah thus reflects not only its theological significance but also its usefulness as an arena for an epistemological critique of the exegetical tradition. On one side this enriches the methods available to Qur'anic studies; on the other it demands care in holding the balance between critical reading and the normative framework of Islam.

Interpretive Approaches in Arkoun's Deconstructive Hermeneutics

The Historical-Anthropological Approach

Within Arkoun's deconstructive hermeneutics, the historical-anthropological approach is not merely a tool for reconstructing the textual background; it is a critical strategy for exposing the relation among text, social context, and religious practice.[22] On this approach the Qur'an is understood not only as a normative text but as a discursive product that interacted with the social and cultural realities of the moment it emerged.

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[19] Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (Saqi Books London, 2002).

[20] Putra, Salsabila, and Masyhur, "Hermeneutika Dalam Penafsiran Al-Qur'an: Analisis Metode Tafsir Muhammad Arkoun."

[21] Tamer, *Contemporary Qur'ānic Hermeneutics,* 75.

[22] Faiz and Usman, *Hermeneutika Al Quran: Teori, Kritik Dan Implementasinya*., 119.

Applied to Surah Al-Fatihah, this approach leads Arkoun to trace how the text was understood within early Arab society—its social structures, its systems of belief, and the religious practices of the day. The analysis shows that the meaning of Al-Fatihah was never singular but took shape through a complex interplay of revelation, tradition, and socio-political dynamics.[23] Pushed further, this approach allows Arkoun to identify how interpretive authority is formed and reproduced across Islamic history. By situating exegesis within a historical-anthropological frame, he shows that what is often taken to be "fixed meaning" is in fact a historical construction shaped by particular interestspower and religious institutions among them.

Reading the Qur'an this way, however, has drawn criticism. A strong emphasis on the historical and the social risks reducing the transcendent dimension of the sacred text to a merely cultural phenomenon. The approach can also encourage a relativism that places all interpretations on an equal footing, with no clear normative criteria to choose among them.

Even granting these tendencies in Arkoun's reading, his historical-anthropological approach still makes an important contribution by opening space for a more critical analysis of the exegetical tradition. It helps not only to grasp the context in which the text emerged but also to expose the dynamics of meaning-production across Islamic history, making a more reflective and contextual reading of the Qur'an possible.

The Linguistic-Semiotic Approach

Grasping the meaning and the linguistic features of the Qur'anic verses, Surah Al-Fatihah among them, matters greatly to anyone who believes in the Book of God. A deep understanding of the sacred text can strengthen faith, deepen concentration in prayer, and encourage righteous action. A close attachment to the Qur'an is thereby sustained, allowing the believer to find peace of soul amid life's many trials.[24]

Within Arkoun's deconstructive hermeneutics, the linguistic-semiotic approach analyzes the Qur'an as a complex sign system in which meaning is not singular but is generated through the relations among linguistic elements and their contexts of use. Unlike traditional exegesis, which tends to foreground normative meaning, Arkoun treats the language of the Qur'an as an open, dynamic site for the production of meaning.[25]

Applied to Surah Al-Fatihah, the approach attends to linguistic structures syntax, pronominal relations, and lexical choices that build the construction of meaning in the text. The analysis shows that these linguistic elements do more than grammatical work: they carry a

[23] Tamer, *Contemporary Qurʾānic Hermeneutics,* 80.

[24] Iddo Felsenthal and Ayman Agbaria, "How to Read the Quran in Religious Islamic Education: What Educators Can Learn from the Work of Mohammed Arkoun," *Religions* 14, no. 1 (January 16, 2023): 129, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010129.

[25] Faizah, "Nurfaizah Surat Al-Fatihah Dalam Bingkai Pembacaan Mohammed Arkoun."

semiotic dimension that represents theological relations, such as that between humanity and God. Meaning, then, is understood not as something fixed but as the outcome of interaction among text, reader, and interpretive context.[26]

Further, the semiotic approach lets Arkoun read key concepts in Surah Al-Fatihah such as *rahmah*, *ʿibādah*, and *hidayah* as signs laden with historical and cultural content. This opens the possibility of reinterpreting these concepts beyond their settled traditional meanings, and shows that religious language carries a symbolic dimension whose meaning is continually renegotiated.[27] Semantic analysis of Qur'anic vocabulary yields a deeper understanding of the moral and ethical values the text carries. Such study highlights not only the linguistic sense of a word but also the conceptual and social meanings that shape how the sacred text is understood across different historical and cultural settings. Semantic analysis thus becomes one important method for interpreting the Qur'an more comprehensively and contextually.[28]

Arkoun's linguistic-semiotic approach is not, however, fully consistent in carrying the semiotic analysis through. His heavier emphasis on linguistic features—syntactic and semantic structure—suggests that the semiotic dimension often serves as a supplement rather than the principal analytic frame. And the impulse to open a plurality of meanings through the analysis of signs again risks a relativization of interpretation that can weaken the normative limits of understanding the sacred text. Even so, the approach contributes importantly by widening the horizon of Qur'anic interpretation. By treating language as a dynamic sign system, Arkoun encourages a more reflective and critical reading of the text and challenges the assumption that the Qur'an's meaning is single and final. For all its limits, the approach enriches the methodology of contemporary exegetical scholarship.

Arkoun draws on the linguistic turn in his study by laying out the discourse modalizers at the outset of his analysis, following the classical exegetes. This approach involves the discussion of determiners (articles, adjectives, and demonstratives), the various pronouns (personal pronouns), and the various verbs, nouns, and nominalizations. Beyond this, Arkoun also attends to the syntactic arrangement and the prosody (rhyme and assonance) of the Qur'anic text in order to grasp deeper meaning and message.[29] The following sets this out:

Determiners

[26] Kersten, *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World: Trends, Themes, and Issues,* 64.

[27] Nur Zainatul Nadra Zainol, Latifah Abdul Majid, and Mohd Faizulamri Md Saad, "An Overview on Hermeneutics Method Application to the Quran by Muslim Thinkers," *International Journal of Engineering & Technology* 7, no. 4.9 (October 2018): 167–70, https://doi.org/10.14419/ijet.v7i4.9.20643.

[28] Mohammad Rizal Nur Rochim, Kharis Nugroho, and Andri Nirwana, "The Meaning of the Word 'Wazir' in the Qur'an: A Semantic Analysis," *Jurnal Ilmiah Al-Mu'ashirah* 20, no. 2 (October 24, 2023): 385, https://doi.org/10.22373/jim.v20i2.20205.

[29] Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*.

In his analysis of Surah Al-Fatihah, Arkoun draws on the linguistic approach by highlighting the function of determiners as an important element in the construction of meaning. He identifies the use of definite forms (*ism maʿrifah*) such as *al-ḥamd*, *al-ṣirāṭ*, *al-maghḍūb*, and *al-ḍāllīn* as referential markers that are not merely grammatical but also carry a theological and conceptual dimension.[30] The determiner al- in *al-ḥamd*, for instance, Arkoun understands as a marker of the universality of meaning, affirming that every form of praise is absolutely directed to God. In the construction *al-ḥamd li Allāh rabb al-ʿālamīn*, the relation between *rabb* and *al-ʿālamīn* indicates not only a relation of creation but also the existential dependence of all reality upon God.[31] The analysis of determiners here thus serves to reveal the relational structure between language and theological concepts.

One can also note the limited use of verbal forms that refer explicitly to God, as in the word *anʿamta*, which points to a discursive strategy in the text that places God at the center of meaning without always being stated explicitly as the grammatical subject. This shows that the language structure of the Qur'an works implicitly to construct theological authority. Arkoun's analysis of determiners, however, tends to stop at linguistic description and is not fully developed into a broader interpretive framework. His emphasis on the universality of meaning is not critically connected to the possibility of interpretive variation across different social and historical contexts. In other words, although his linguistic analysis opens space for meaning, Arkoun does not fully explore the hermeneutic implications of those findings.[32]

On the other hand, this approach still makes an important contribution by showing that seemingly simple linguistic elements, such as determiners, play a significant role in shaping the structure of meaning in the Qur'anic text. The analysis thus strengthens the argument that understanding the sacred text requires attention not only to content but also to the linguistic form that constructs it.

Pronouns

Arkoun's analysis of the pronouns in Surah Al-Fatihah shows how language structure works to form the theological relation between humanity and God. The use of the pronoun *iyyāka* (You) in the phrase *iyyāka naʿbudu wa iyyāka nastaʿīn* affirms the exclusivity of that relation, in which the object of worship and supplication is directed firmly to God alone. The repetition of this form serves not only as rhetorical emphasis but also as a linguistic construction that reinforces the principle of *tawḥīd* at the discursive level.[33] Beyond this, the appearance of verbal forms such

[30] Arkoun, 102.

[31] Arkoun, 104.

[32] Ahmad, "Mapping Neo-Modern and Postmodern Qur'ānic Reformist Discourse in the Intellectual Legacy of Fazlur Rahman and Mohammed Arkoun," May 1, 2023.

[33] Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

as *anʿamta* and *ihdinā* shows how the divine is made present both implicitly and explicitly in the language structure. Here Arkoun shows that God's presence as subject is not always stated directly yet still dominates the structure of meaning through grammatical markers. This indicates a linguistic strategy that builds theological authority indirectly.

The use of the pronoun *nā* (we) in *naʿbudu*, *nastaʿīn*, and *ihdinā* also carries an important implication. Arkoun reads this form as a representation of collectivity, showing that the relation with God is not purely individual but also communal. The ambiguity of *nā*, however which may refer to an inclusive or an exclusive "we"—opens the possibility of interpretive variation regarding the speaking subject in the text.[34] Even so, Arkoun's analysis of the pronouns tends to remain confined to the linguistic dimension and is not fully developed toward a broader social analysis. The potential for collectivity in the use of *nā* could be explored further to understand the communal dimension of Islamic religious practice. This approach thus leaves room for a more contextual and interdisciplinary development of the analysis.

Verbs (fiʿil)

In his analysis of the verbal structure of Surah Al-Fatihah, Arkoun emphasizes the dominance of verbs over nouns as an indication of the dynamic relation between humanity and God. The use of the *fiʿil muḍāriʿ* (imperfect) forms such as *naʿbudu* (we worship) and *nastaʿīn* (we seek help) signals a dimension of continuity in the action, reflecting an ongoing relation between the servant and God. The repetition of the form *iyyāka* before the two verbs reinforces the structure of object-exclusivity while affirming that all acts of worship and supplication center on God. The form *ihdinā* (guide us), meanwhile, Arkoun understands not as a command but as an expression of supplication arising from the human existential awareness of one's own limitation.[35]

From a linguistic-semiotic perspective, this verbal structure does not merely convey action but also forms a framework of meaning that depicts humanity's relation of dependence on God. The verbs in Surah Al-Fatihah thus function as a medium connecting the theological dimension with human existential experience.[36] Even so, Arkoun's emphasis on the structural aspect of language in his analysis of the verbs tends to overlook a broader pragmatic reading, such as how the text is actualized in ritual practice. Moreover, the interpretation of the *fiʿil* form as an expression of existential awareness remains assumptive and is not supported by an explicit theoretical framework.In any case, this approach still makes an important contribution by showing

[34] Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*.
[35] Arkoun, 107.
[36] Ahmad Nabil Amir, "Fazlur Rahman Dan Interpretasi Teks Al-Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies* 10, no. 2 (December 2021): 245–55, https://doi.org/10.15408/quhas.v10i2.19799.

that the verbal structure in the Qur'an is not merely grammatical but is also laden with a complex dimension of meaning open to a range of interpretations.

Syntactic Arrangement

Arkoun's syntactic analysis of Surah Al-Fatihah reflects an effort to understand the text as a whole, organized structure of discourse rather than a mere collection of separate lexical units. By dividing the text into lexical and predicate units, Arkoun seeks to uncover the relational patterns that form the coherence of meaning in the surah. This approach shows that the syntactic structure of Al-Fatihah is not random but builds a flow of meaning moving from theological acknowledgment (*al-ḥamd li Allāh*) toward the existential relation between humanity and God (*iyyāka naʿbudu wa iyyāka nastaʿīn*), and on to ethical supplication (*ihdinā al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*). Syntax thus functions not only as grammatical structure but also as a narrative framework representing the human spiritual journey.

At a deeper level, the use of five interpretive codes—linguistic, religious, symbolic, cultural, and anagogical—shows that Arkoun reads the text across several layers of meaning simultaneously. Through this approach, the verses of Surah Al-Fatihah are understood not only within a theological frame but also as a symbolic representation of human experience encompassing the ethical, the historical, and the spiritual.[37]

As an example, the closing of the surah (*ghair al-maghḍūb ʿalaihim wa lā al-ḍāllīn*) is read by Arkoun as a symbolic construction representing a typology of humanity in spiritual history.[38] This reading shows that the Qur'anic text not only conveys norms but also builds categories of meaning that are anthropological and cultural in nature.[39] That said, Arkoun's syntactic approach, combined with the various interpretive codes, tends to produce a broad classification of meaning but shows little clear methodological boundary. The use of categories such as ontology, eschatology, and ethics in mapping meaning is not fully grounded conceptually in a systematic way. This risks making the interpretation eclectic and difficult to verify methodologically.

Even so, this approach makes an important contribution by showing that the syntactic structure of the Qur'an has a complex, layered dimension of meaning. By reading the text as an integrated system, Arkoun opens the possibility of developing a more holistic model of analysis

[37] Ahmad, "Mapping Neo-Modern and Postmodern Qur'ānic Reformist Discourse in the Intellectual Legacy of Fazlur Rahman and Mohammed Arkoun," May 1, 2023.

[38] Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*.

[39] Tamer, *Contemporary Qurʾānic Hermeneutics,* 77.

in contemporary tafsir studies. The linguistic analysis above answers only "what" Arkoun does to the text; this section sets out "why" that matters epistemologically. The shift Arkoun introduces is not merely a reading technique but a change in the basic assumptions about revelation, truth, history, language, and interpretive authority. The following table maps that shift together with the risks that accompany it.[40]

Table 1. Epistemic Shifts in Arkoun's Reading of Surah Al-Fatihah

Epistemic Dimension	Assumption of Traditional Tafsir	Shift Introduced by Arkoun	Implication / Risk
Revelation	Divine text whose wording and meaning are preserved	Distinguishes the "*fait coranique*" (linguistic event) from its theological status	Opens historical critique but risks blurring the ontological status of revelation
Truth	Fixed, single, and final	A historically constituted "regime of truth"	Exposes the power behind orthodoxy but is prone to relativism
History	A context that supplements meaning	History as constitutive of the formation of meaning	Enables a critique of the ideology of tafsir
Language	A vessel that conveys meaning	A sign-system that produces meaning	Enriches the analysis, but semiotic claims often exceed the evidence
Reader / Subject	A recipient of ready-made meaning	An active subject who co-constructs meaning	Legitimizes a plurality of readings
Interpretive Authority	Resting on the scholars and *ijmāʿ*	An effect of power–knowledge relations	Democratizes tafsir but weakens its normative basis

Source: Author's synthesis based on Mohamed Arkoun's concepts

This mapping reveals the central diagnosis of this article: Arkoun's strength on the descriptive-critical axis is directly proportional to his weakness on the normative axis. Each shift opens a new analytical door while raising a risk that, if left unmanaged, ends in the relativization of meaning. Arkoun's contribution lies in opening a critical space, not in providing normative criteria for assessing the validity of a reading. This is precisely the gap that the conceptual model proposed in the following section seeks to bridge.

As a methodological contribution, this article proposes a conceptual model that preserves Arkoun's strengths—historicity and linguistic sensitivity—while closing the two gaps identified above: the absence of an explicit semiotic procedure and the absence of a node of normative evaluation. The model unfolds across six interlocking stages: the first, historical-anthropological,

[40] "Navigating Contemporary Islamic Reason."

asks in what social context the text signifies, safeguarded by verified historical sources; the second, linguistic, asks how linguistic forms work, safeguarded by explicit grammatical analysis; the third, semiotic, asks which sign-relations produce meaning, safeguarded by treating semiotics as an actual procedure rather than mere description; the fourth, deconstructive, asks what is silenced by the text or its interpretation, safeguarded by limiting claims to what the data supports; the fifth, the plurality of meaning, asks what possibilities of meaning are opened, safeguarded by bounding that plurality by context rather than by the interpreter's free will; and the sixth, epistemological-normative evaluation, asks which reading is valid for the interpretive community, safeguarded by explicit normative criteria the node that Arkoun's own framework leaves absent.

The difference between this model and Arkoun's framework lies in the third and sixth stages: at the third, semiotics is positioned as a procedure, not an ornament, so that the claim of "text as a sign-system" must be demonstrated through actual sign-relations; at the sixth, an evaluative node is added that restrains the plurality of meaning from collapsing into relativism, testing each interpretive possibility against normative criteria that are declared openly. With these two safeguards, deconstruction remains a tool of critique without having to dissolve the normative authority of the text precisely at the point that has long been the principal objection to Arkoun.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Mohamed Arkoun's deconstructive hermeneutics significantly expands the methodological horizon of Qur'anic interpretation by integrating historical-anthropological inquiry with linguistic analysis in reading Surah Al-Fatihah. Nevertheless, the analysis shows that Arkoun's interpretation remains methodologically inconsistent because its semiotic claims are not supported by a fully operational semiotic procedure. Instead, the interpretation relies predominantly on linguistic description, while its epistemological conclusions concerning interpretive plurality and the normative authority of the Qur'anic text extend beyond the analytical evidence presented. The principal finding of this study, therefore, is that the main limitation of Arkoun's hermeneutics lies not in its historical-critical orientation itself, but in the gap between its epistemological ambitions and its methodological implementation.

The contribution of this research is twofold. Theoretically, it provides a systematic evaluation of Arkoun's interpretive method by positioning it in dialogue with contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics represented by Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and Abdolkarim Soroush, thereby clarifying both its originality and its methodological limitations. Methodologically, the study proposes a six-stage conceptual

model that preserves Arkoun's historical and linguistic insights while introducing two essential safeguards: an explicit semiotic procedure and a normative evaluative stage. This model enables deconstructive hermeneutics to function as a rigorous analytical framework without reducing the normative authority of the Qur'anic text to interpretive relativism.

This study is limited by its exclusive reliance on textual and library-based analysis of Arkoun's writings and by its focus on a single Qur'anic chapter, Surah Al-Fatihah. Consequently, the proposed conceptual model has not yet been empirically examined across different categories of Qur'anic discourse or within actual interpretive communities. Future research should therefore apply the model to other Qur'anic genres, particularly legal and narrative passages, investigate its reception among contemporary Qur'anic scholars and practitioners, and further refine its normative evaluative stage through dialogue with uṣūl al-fiqh, maqāṣid al-sharīʿah, and broader theories of Islamic hermeneutics.

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