

The Dynamics of the Development of Qur'an Interpretation from Narration to Understanding and Modern Exegesis

Baari'atussa'diyah^{1*}, Kusnadi², Pathur Rahman³

^{1,2,3} Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang, Indonesia

Email: baari'atussa'diyah_25052250014@radenfatah.ac.id¹, kusnadi_uin@radenfatah.ac.id², pathurrahman_uin@radenfatah.ac.id³

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Abstract:

The study of Qur'an exegesis is a discipline that continues to develop along with changes in society, culture, intellect, and the needs of the people over time. These developments show that the tradition of interpreting the Qur'an is dynamic and closely linked to the socio-historical context surrounding it. This article aims to examine the dynamics of Qur'an interpretation from the era of the companions to the modern era, as well as to identify the characteristics of each period. This study uses a literature review method (library research) with a descriptive-qualitative approach. Data were obtained from various literature related to the history of tafsir development, including books, publications, and scholarly articles. The results of the study show that tafsir during the era of the companions and the Tabi'in was dominated by the riwayat approach, which refers to the Qur'an, hadiths, atsar, and the sayings of the companions. During the classical period, tradition developed through a process of codification as well as the emergence of a dirayah approach that used ijtihad and rational analysis. Meanwhile, modern interpretation has evolved to be more contextual, multidisciplinary, and aims to be responsive to various evolving issues. Thus, the development of interpretation shows a methodological dynamic that reflects how interpretation can adapt to the times without detaching from the core principles of Islamic law.

Keywords: *Dynamics of Interpretation, Narrational Tafsir, Rational Tafsir, Modern Tafsir, Development of Tafsir*

Abstrak:

Kajian Tafsir Al-Qur'an merupakan sebuah disiplin ilmu yang terus mengalami perkembangan seiring dengan perkembangan sosial, budaya, intelektual, dan kebutuhan umat di sepanjang zaman. Perkembangan tersebut menunjukkan bahwa tradisi penafsiran Al-Qur'an bersifat dinamis dan tidak terlepas dari konteks sosio-historis yang melingkupinya. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji dinamika perkembangan tafsir Al-Qur'an di era sahabat hingga era modern, serta mengidentifikasi karakteristik masing-masing periodenya. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kajian kepustakaan (*library research*) dengan pendekatan deskriptif-kualitatif. data diperoleh dari berbagai literatur yang berkaitan dengan tema Sejarah perkembangan tafsir, baik berupa kitab, buku, maupun artikel karya

ilmiah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tafsir pada masa sahabat dan tabi'in di dominasi oleh pendekatan *riwayah* yang merujuk kepada Al-Qur'an, hadits, atsar dan qawl sahabat. Pada masa klasik, tradisi berkembang melalui proses kodifikasi serta munculnya pendekatan *dirayah* yang menggunakan ijtihad dan analisis rasional. Sementara, tafsir masa modern berkembang menjadi lebih kontekstual, multidipliner, dan berupaya untuk responsive terhadap beragam persoalan yang terus berkembang. Dengan demikian, perkembangan tafsir menunjukkan adanya dinamika metodologis yang mencerminkan tafsir mampu beradaptasi dengan perkembangan zaman tanpa melepaskan diri dari pijakan utama syariat Islam.

Kata kunci: Dinamika Tafsir, Tafsir Riwayah, tafsir Dirayah, Tafsir Modern, Perkembangan Tafsir

INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an is the main source of Islamic teachings and serves as a guide for the lives of all human beings. The position of the Qur'an is very central, both in aspects of faith, law, and morals, making understanding it a basic necessity for every Muslim. (RI, 2005) It contains some verses that are quite clear when explaining something, but there are also verses that cannot be easily understood directly. These verses require interpretation and further explanation to clearly grasp the messages of the Qur'an. (Manaf, 2021)

Tafsir in language means to explain and reveal. (Hamid, 2016) It comes from the word *fassara-yufassiru tafsiran*, which means explanation and clarification (*al-idhāh wa at-tabyīn*). Tafsir also means *kasyfu al-murād 'an al-lafzh al-musykil* (uncovering the meaning of difficult words). Meanwhile, according to Abu Hayyān, tafsir in terms of terminology is the knowledge that discusses how the words of the Qur'an are pronounced and about the meaning and significance of those words, both word by word and in the full sentence, along with the elements that complement them. (Ilyas, 2014) According to Az-Zarkasyi, tafsir is the science used to understand and explain the meanings of Allah's book revealed to the Prophet as well as its wise contents. (Manaf, 2021)

The history of interpreting the Qur'an began during the time of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, when the companions would directly ask him about certain verses that were difficult to understand. Then the Prophet would interpret those verses using other Qur'anic verses. Interpretation continued to develop after the death of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, carried out by the companions through ijtihad because there was concern that the Qur'an might get mixed with hadiths. (Hidayat, 2020) The Prophet's interpretations, peace be upon him, varied and could take the form of practical sunnah, verbal sunnah, or tacit approval. (Arifin, 2018)

After the period of the companions, the baton of interpretation was continued by the *tābi'in*, *tabi'i at-tābi'in*, *atba'ut tābi'in*, *salafus ṣālihīn*, and scholars up to the present day. Qur'anic exegesis continues to develop in line with various dynamics and interpretative innovations that also keep evolving in understanding the Qur'an. (Hidayat, 2020) In addition, what drives the continuous development of interpretation is the increasingly diverse challenges of the times and societal issues, which then evolve into patterns of Qur'anic interpretation.

(Affani, 2019) Meanwhile, according to Abdul Muin Salim, in its development, tafsir is divided into two prevailing approaches (manhaj), namely the riwayat approach, which uses the Qur'an, hadith/sunnah, and the companions' reports, and the dirayah approach, which, in addition to using reports, also utilizes other data beyond those reports. (Faqih, 2024)

The history of Quranic interpretation is an important part of Quranic studies, because through history, Muslims can understand and grasp the message of the Quran well in various contexts of time and place. The history of Quranic interpretation has developed since the early days of Islam and will continue to evolve dynamically along with changes in the social, political, cultural, and intellectual conditions of Muslims (Maksum, 2025). Tafsir has developed from the riwayat style, which was dominant during the time of the companions and the tabi'in, to the dirayah approach in the classical period, and eventually to various modern tafsir styles and methods that are more contextual. Based on this description, this article is written to discuss the dynamics of Quranic tafsir development from the era of the companions to the modern era while also explaining the characteristics of each period.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a library research method that focuses on collecting and analyzing data from various literature relevant to the topic of the History of the Development of Tafsir. The main sources of data in this research are classical and contemporary books discussing the sciences of Qur'anic interpretation history, scientific articles, and reliable references that can support the discussion. The data analysis technique is descriptive-qualitative, aimed at explaining (Drajat, 2017) and systematically elaborating the content of each related discussion, whether from conceptual, terminological, or practical aspects. All data is examined reflectively and contextually to assess its relevance within the framework of contemporary thought.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Periodization of Tafsir Development

Quranic interpretation experts divide the periods of Quranic exegesis into three phases, namely 1) the mutaqaaddimun period (1st-4th century Hijri), 2) the mutaakhirin period (4th-12th century Hijri), and 3) the modern period (12th century to the present). (Abdul Manaf) Meanwhile, Muhammad Husayn al-Dzahabi (1915-1977 AD) divides the development of tafsir into four phases, namely:

1. The first phase (al-marhalah al-ūla), the time of the Prophet and the companions.
2. The second phase (al-marhalah al-tsāniyah), the time of the Tabi'in.
3. The third phase (al-marhalah al-šālitsah), the era of documentation (ʿushūr al-tadwīn) which started at the end of the Umayyad dynasty and the early Abbasid dynasty.
4. The al-khātimah phase, which is the modern era. Al-Dzahabi refers to this period as the age of the modern scientific revival.

Meanwhile, Abdullah Saeed divides the periodization of Qur'an exegesis into two eras by combining the orientation of each tafsir, namely:

1. The Classical Era In this period, various tafsirs developed, including Sunni tafsir, Shia tafsir, Kharijite tafsir, theological tafsir, legal tafsir, Sufi tafsir, and philosophical tafsir.
2. The Modern Era This period is also called modernist tafsir. Among the tafsirs that emerged are scientific tafsir, socio-political tafsir, thematic tafsir, and contextual tafsir (Affani, 2019).

Based on this periodization, the development of tafsir in the early days of Islam began during the time of the companions and the tabi'in. Qur'an interpretation at this time was still largely dominated by narration from the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.

Commentary from the Era of the Companions and the Successors

1. Friendship Days

After Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, passed away, the process of interpreting the Qur'an continued with the generation of his companions. In interpreting the verses of the Qur'an, the companions used both transmitted reports and ijtihad, because not all Qur'anic verses were explained to them directly by Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. The companion who first interpreted the Qur'an shortly after the Prophet's passing was Abdullah bin Abbas, may Allah be pleased with him. He was the Prophet's cousin and was given several nicknames, namely Bahr al-'Ulum (ocean of knowledge), Habr al-Ummat (scholar of the nation), and Turjuman al-Qur'an (interpreter of the Qur'an). (Faqih, 2024)

An example of the companions' interpretation is seen in ath-Thabari's commentary, which reports Ibn 'Abbas' opinion when interpreting QS. Al-Baqarah verse 59: "Then We sent down punishment from the sky upon those wrongdoers, because they were always sinful." Ibn 'Abbas stated that the word rijz in this verse means adzab (punishment). Tafsir during the time of the companions continued to develop along with the increasing need of the community for explanations of Qur'anic verses. When interpreting the Qur'an, the companions referred to several things as follows:

First, the source from the Qur'an: The companions in interpreting the Qur'an with the Qur'an as they had learned together with the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him. Although very limited, the companions still exerted all their effort (ijtihad) in interpreting the Qur'an with the Qur'an itself for which there were no reports from Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. For example, the interpretation done by Caliph Umar bin al-Khattab on the words of Allah in Surah At-Takwir, verse 7:

وَإِذَا النُّفُوسُ رُجِّتْ

"when souls are reunited (with the body),"

Umar interprets the word "Zuwwijāt" in this verse as close friends/peers by referring to QS. As-Saffat verse 22;

أَحْشَرُوا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا وَأَرْوَاجَهُمْ وَمَا كَانُوا يَعْبُدُونَ

(Then, it was commanded to the angels,) 'Gather the wrongdoers along with their peers and what they used to worship.'

Colleagues in this verse means that wrongdoers will be gathered with people who are similar to their wrongdoing, meaning each person will be paired with someone similar to them in goodness or badness. (At-Thābārī, 2007)

Second, referring to the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him, the companions in interpreting the Qur'an also relied on narrating the Prophet's hadith related to the interpretation of Qur'anic verses if they could not find it in the Qur'an.

Third, the Arabic of the Qur'an was revealed by Allah SWT in Arabic, which is the language used by the companions of Prophet Muhammad SAW. Therefore, they understood the divine words very well. For example, Abdullah bin Abbas ra interpreted the word 'adzinat' 2223322 in QS. Al Insyiqaq to mean 'heard,' as in the sky hears its Lord.

Fourth, Understanding and Ijtihad The companions agreed that when exercising ijtihad in interpretation, it must be built on knowledge, because it is impossible to say anything about the Qur'an without a foundation of knowledge.

Fifth, the People of the Book are considered part of the interpretative steps taken by the companions because some of the content of the Qur'an aligns with the Torah and the Gospel on certain issues, like the stories of the prophets and past peoples. However, the Qur'an uses a different method than the approach of the Torah and the Gospel.

The famous mufassir (Qur'an commentator) from the time of the companions, according to Imam Suyuthi in his book al-Itqan fi Ulūm Al-Qur'an, includes ten companions: the four Rightly Guided Caliphs (Abu Bakr As-Siddiq, Umar bin Khattab, Uthman bin Affan, Ali bin Abi Talib), Abdullah bin Mas'ud, Abdullah bin 'Abbas, Ubay bin Ka'ab, Zaid bin Thabit, Abu Musa Al-Ash'ari, and Abdullah bin Zubair. (Rokim, 2020) The Rightly Guided Caliphs mostly narrated directly from Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, while the other companions received it from the Caliphs.

Tafsir during this period had certain characteristics, including a universal (ijmali) style of interpretation and not yet forming a complete tafsir. Differences in understanding the Qur'an were still limited because the companions were still relying on the Prophet's narrations, and the issues they faced were not as complex as those today. At that time, the companions also restricted interpretation to the basic meanings of the language, and no distinct style of tafsir had emerged yet. Tafsir had not been compiled into books, as the compilation of tafsir began after the 11th century AH. The style of interpretation back then was essentially an extension of hadith. (Manaf, 2021)

The interpretation method used by the companions often referred to the data on the reasons for the revelation of verses, because they witnessed the verses being revealed themselves. At that time, they also hadn't used the rules of interpretation called nahwu, sharf, balaghah, and others, because these rules hadn't been compiled yet (Faqih, 2024). Later, the tradition of interpretation formed during the companions' time was passed down to the next generation of tabi'in.

2. The Tabi'in Era

The next period is the development of tafsir during the era of the Tabi'in,

which began after the end of the companions' era of tafsir. Tafsir from the companions' period is considered to have ended with the passing of the companion mufasssirs who used to be teachers to the Tabi'in and was then continued by the Tabi'in's tafsir. One of the main factors behind the development and spread of tafsir during the Tabi'in period was the expansion of the Islamic territories, which encouraged the companions to move to different regions, each bringing their knowledge with them.

In this new region as well, many Qur'an interpretation experts among the companions established tafsir schools. From there, the study of Qur'an interpretation started to develop very rapidly among the generation after the companions, namely the tabi'in. The schools founded by the companions then spread to other regions. The way the companions interpreted the Qur'an was through talaqqi (direct teaching), similar to learning hadith. (Hidayat, 2020) The sources of interpretation used by the tabi'in in interpreting the Qur'an were: 1) the Qur'an itself; 2) the Prophet's Hadith; 3) the companions' views; 4) the People of the Book; and 5) ijihad or the power of reasoning.

Characteristics of the Tabi'in's Tafsir During this period, the style of tafsir bir-riwayah (narrative-based interpretation) was still dominant, because the Tabi'in conveyed tafsir from the companions just as the companions received reports from Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. Even though personal reasoning (ra'yu) had started to appear in interpreting the Qur'an, transmission remained the more dominant element. At this time, tafsir had not yet been codified separately, and the tradition of tafsir was still based on memorization and transmission. Tafsir began to include Isra'iliyyat stories, due to some Tabi'in's desire to seek detailed explanations of the stories and news in the Qur'an. Differences of opinion between the Tabi'in's interpretations and those of the companions also began to appear. Their tafsir was always influenced by studies and reports according to the specific traditions of where they received their education. During the time of the Tabi'in, controversies and disagreements started to arise around the interpretation of verses related to matters of faith.

Interpretation during the tabi'in era was divided into three groups: the Mecca School, the Medina School, and the Iraq School. Famous figures in Mecca included Mujahid bin Jabir, Atha' Ibn Abi Rabbah, Ikrimah, Sa'id bin Jubair, and Taus bin Kaisan. They were students of Abdullah bin 'Abbas. The mufasssir figures in Medina were Zaid bin Aslam, Abu al 'Aliyah, and Muhammad bin Ka'ab al-Qurzhi. They were students of Ubai bin Ka'ab, while the mufasssir figures in Iraq were Al-Qamah bin Qais, Masruq, al-Aswad bin Yazid, Amr Asy-Syatibi, Hassan Al-Basri, and Qatadah. (Manaf, 2021) Developments during the tabi'in era then laid the foundation for the emergence of the classical era's tradition of codifying/recording interpretations. At this time, Islamic knowledge began to be systematically documented, giving rise to various approaches and styles of interpretation.

Classical Tafsir (Narration and Understanding)

Exegesis in the classical period was an important phase in the history of Qur'anic interpretation. During this stage, the tradition of interpretation began to

be systematically codified. The development of other Islamic sciences such as grammar, theology, jurisprudence, and philosophy also contributed to shaping the style of Qur'anic interpretation. As a result, various approaches to exegesis emerged. Abdullah Saeed divides Qur'anic interpretation into four approaches: from a linguistic perspective, a logical perspective, a Sufi perspective, and a narrative perspective. Meanwhile, others only divide it into two approaches: the narrative approach and the rational/ minded approach.

1. *The Tafsir Bir Riwayah Approach*

The word 'riwayah' etymologically comes from the word 'rawā - yarwī', which means story, narrative, or recounting of events. Muhammad Ali As-Shabuni defines Tafsir bil riwayat (bil ma'tsur) as exegesis based on authentic reports in an orderly manner, as outlined in the conditions for a mufassir, including interpreting the Qur'an with the Qur'an, interpreting the Qur'an with the Sunnah, or using reports received from the companions, along with the reports of prominent tabi'in (Augusty, n.d.).

Tafsir bi al-riwayah, often also called Tafsir bi al-ma'tsur, is the oldest form of interpretation and the first to appear in the intellectual tradition of Qur'an exegesis. This type of tafsir has been around since the time of the Prophet Muhammad's companions. You can find it in many classical tafsir books like Tafsir al-Thabari, Tafsir Ibn Katsir, Tafsir Ibn 'Athiyyah, and others. The companions received and narrated the tafsir from the Prophet ﷺ orally (from mouth to mouth), and this continued with the next generation until the time of tadwin (compilation) of Islamic sciences, including tafsir, around the 3rd century AH. This method of interpretation is what eventually became known as tafsir bi al-riwayat or bi al-ma'tsur. Narrations from the Prophet ﷺ play an important role in explaining the overall meaning of the Qur'an, specifying general matters, and limiting what is absolute. History also serves as a source of information about the specific conditions behind the revelation of Qur'an verses (asbab al-nuzul), which is important for understanding the context.

Among the tafsir books based on narrations or tafsir bil riwayat are; Jamiul Bayan by Ibn Jarir Ath-Thabari, Bustan by Abu Laits Samarqandiyi, Ma'alimut Tanzil by Al-Baghawiy, Al-Quran al-Adzim by Imam Ibn Katsir. One example of interpretation is Imam at-Thabari on QS. Al-Baqarah verse 255 (His throne extends over the heavens and the earth), which he understood more in terms of knowledge ('ilm), also based on one narration from Ibn 'Abbas radhiyallahu 'anhu. (Rifa'i et al., 2023)

2. *Bid Dirayah Interpretation Approach*

The word 'dirayah' comes from the words 'dara yadri dirayatan,' which means to know and understand. The word 'dirayah' is synonymous with 'ra'yun,' which comes from 'ra'a yara ra'yan-ru'yatan,' meaning to see, understand, assume, or guess (Augusty, 2022). Hence, Tafsir bid Dirayah is also known as Tafsir bil ra'yi. This type of interpretation relies on the power of reason and logic, so a mufassir uses all of his thinking effort (ijtihad), especially when dealing with Qur'anic terms that have many possible meanings. Among these various meanings, he tries to choose the most accurate one to understand the verse. This approach is often linked to science to explain mystical things that cannot be reasoned in certain ways. For example, Muhammad Abduh interpreted the stones

made of 'sijil' carried by the Ababil birds in QS. Al-Fil as microbes or disease-carrying viruses.

This method of interpretation heavily relies on the *ijtihad* and reasoning of a *mufassir* in interpreting the Qur'an, rather than on reports taken from the companions or the *tabi'in*. Among the *mufassir* who use this approach in their *tafsir* are Muhammad al-Razi (*Mafatih al-Ghaib/ Tafsir al-Kabir*), Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli and Jalal al-Din Abd al-Rahman al-Suyuthi (*Tafsir al-Jalalain*), Sheikh Abu Ja'far Muhammad bil al-Hasan al-Thusi (*Al-Tibyan fi Tafsir Al-Quran*) (Rifa'i et al., 2023). Considering that the sources for *tafsir dirayah* emphasize the strength of language and the reasoning of the *mufassir*, scholars classify *tafsir dirayah* into two types: *tafsir dirayah al-mahmudah* (praiseworthy) and *tafsir dirayah al-mazmumah* (blameworthy). *Tafsir dirayah* is acceptable as long as the *mufassir* pays attention to the following factors:

- a. Not forcing oneself to know the meaning intended by Allah in a verse, while not meeting the requirements for it.
 - b. Not trying to interpret verses whose meanings are only known by Allah.
 - c. Not interpreting the Quran based on personal desires and judging things according to one's own perception.
 - d. Not interpreting verses to support a particular group, by making that understanding the foundation.
 - e. Not forcing an interpretation without any supporting evidence.
- (Augusty, 2022)

The approaches of *riwayah* and *dirayah* interpretation keep evolving along with the ongoing changes in social, political, and cultural aspects, advances in science, and the increasing complexity of issues in society. This development has then encouraged the emergence of various approaches and patterns of interpretation that are more contextual in addressing contemporary challenges, making *tafsir* more flexible to understand and to practice. (Firdausiyah, 2020)

Modern Interpretation

Modern interpretation is the result of 19th-century Muslim reformist thought that promoted reformist ideas in an effort to respond to the challenges of modernity and catch up with the West. The Islamic reformist movement developed in various countries and was pioneered by several figures such as Jamaluddin al-Afgani and his student Muhammad Abduh, as well as Rashid Rida in Egypt, and Ahmad Khan in India and Pakistan. In addition, there was Thantawi Jauhari, the author of the book *Tafsir al-Jawhari*, Sheikh Jamaluddin al-Qashimi, the author of the book *Mahasin at-Ta'wil*, and Sayyid Qutub, the author of the book *Tafsir Fii Zilalil Qur'an*. (Faqih, 2024)

Modern *tafsir* is an interpretation developed from the perspective of modern Islamic civilization. This *tafsir* is often known as *tafsir modernization*, which is seen as a response to the tide of globalization, aiming to align Islamic law with contemporary life today by reviewing interpretations to remain in line with the scope of social science knowledge. The *tafsir* methodology that has formed is an implication of the scientific paradigm of Islamic studies in the 19th century, shifting from an ideological-exclusive interpretation to a contextual-inclusive one.

In short, interpretation in the modern era doesn't just stick entirely to the classical framework; it also opens the door for contributions from new approaches that are more relevant to various contemporary issues. So, the contextual method used in modern interpretation covers three dimensions: 1) It functions as a solution for interpretation adjusted to actual and urgent situations. 2) The text plays a role across time, considering its historical meaning in the past, practical function in the present, and projected relevance for the future. 3) It emphasizes the position of the Qur'an as the moral center while its application forms the outer circle that supports it.

The next characteristic of modern exegesis is that it tends to be free from Israiliyyat and Nashraniyyat stories, does not quote false hadiths, focuses on language aspects using a linguistic approach, integrates the Qur'an with other sciences (interdisciplinary) such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, natural sciences, and so on, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding and diverse styles. Examples include laun al-'Ilmi, al-Madzhabi, al-Ilhadi, Adab Al-Ijtima'i, and philosophical. The sources of interpretation are a mix of bi al-Ma'tsur and bi al-Ra'yi concepts using ijmalī, tahlīlī, muqarran, maudhu'i, and contextual methods (Firdausiyah, 2020). In this way, modern exegesis shows dynamics and renewal within the tradition of Qur'an interpretation. This development shows that exegesis continuously adapts to changes in the times without losing its foundation in the main sources of Islam, namely the Qur'an and Sunnah.

CONCLUSION

The interpretation of the Qur'an has gone through a long development from the time of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, up to the modern era. During the companions' period, Qur'anic interpretation mostly drew from the Qur'an itself, the Prophet's hadiths, understanding of the Arabic language, and ijtihad that was still based on knowledge. Moving into the Tabi'in period, tafsir studies expanded through tafsir schools established in various Islamic regions, leading to the spread and development of understanding of the Qur'an. Later, in the classical period, various tafsir works were written down and developed in diverse styles and approaches. In the modern era, tafsir has further developed to respond to contemporary challenges by using various methods and more contextual approaches.

Over time, the interpretation of the Qur'an generally uses two main approaches, namely tafsir bi al-riwayah and tafsir bi al-dirayah. Tafsir bi al-riwayah interprets the Qur'an based on the Qur'an itself, hadith, and the accounts of trusted companions and tabi'in. Meanwhile, tafsir bi al-dirayah emphasizes the use of reason, ijtihad, and scientific analysis in understanding the meanings of the verses, while still adhering to proper guidelines. Both approaches play important roles and complement each other in understanding the Qur'an more comprehensively according to the needs of people in every era.

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