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Lexicon Against Limit: Reconstructing Salim al-Jabi's Classical-Philological Critique of Muhammad Shahrur's Qur'anic Hermeneutics through al-Suyūṭī's Al-Itqān and Gadamer's Fusion of Horizons

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Abstract

This article examines how Salim al-Jabi's classical-philological critique of Muhammad Shahrur's controversial Qur'anic hermeneutics can be reconstructed, benchmarked against Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī's encyclopedic synthesis of riwāyah-based and dirāyah-based exegesis in Al-Itqān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān, and read through Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics of the fusion of horizons. Using a qualitative library-based research design, the study synthesizes primary and secondary literature on Shahrur's Naẓariyyat al-Ḥudūd (Theory of Limits) and its foundational a-synonymy thesis, al-Jabi's documented lexical and thematic-contextual counter-reading as reported in existing secondary scholarship, al-Suyūṭī's classical methodology of contextual polysemy (wujūh wa naẓāʾir), and the broader literature applying Gadamer's hermeneutics to Qur'anic and Islamic textual interpretation. The findings indicate that al-Jabi's twin methodology, combining rigorous Arabic lexicography with thematic-contextual and historical analysis, effectively instantiates the riwāyah-dirāyah synthesis that al-Suyūṭī's Al-Itqān established as the classical standard of legitimate Qur'anic exegesis, and that this convergence is not coincidental

but reflects a shared commitment to grounding textual meaning in transmitted linguistic and exegetical precedent rather than in synchronic structural axioms alone. Read through Gadamer, the dispute reveals a deeper asymmetry: Shahrur's hermeneutics privileges the interpreter's contemporary scientific horizon almost to the exclusion of the text's own transmitted horizon, while al-Jabi's classically inflected counter-reading, precisely by combining lexicon and context, approximates a genuine fusion of horizons more closely than either a purely traditionalist or a purely presentist reading would. The discussion translates these findings into practical recommendations for tafsīr pedagogy, journal peer review standards in Qur'anic studies, and public engagement with contested modernist exegesis. The article concludes that classical exegetical frameworks remain analytically indispensable evaluative benchmarks for assessing contemporary hermeneutical innovation, not as nostalgic authority but as methodologically rigorous standards of accountability.

Keywords *Qur'anic hermeneutics; Muhammad Shahrur; Salim al-Jabi; al-Suyuti Al-Itqan; Gadamer fusion of horizons; Theory of Limits*
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A. Introduction

Qur'anic hermeneutics in the modern period has been defined by an unresolved tension between the interpreter's contemporary intellectual horizon and the text's own transmitted linguistic and historical horizon, a tension that becomes especially visible whenever a modernist reader proposes to strip away centuries of exegetical consensus in favor of a purportedly more objective, scientifically grounded reading of the sacred text. Among the boldest attempts of this kind is the hermeneutics of the Syrian engineer and thinker Muhammad Shahrur, whose Naẓariyyat al-Ḥudūd, or Theory of Limits, proposes that Qur'anic legal verses establish not fixed prescriptions but flexible upper and lower boundaries within which human societies retain considerable interpretive latitude. (Alfathah, 2023; Sugiarto & Fatah, 2021) Shahrur's theory has been applied to a wide range of concrete legal questions, including inheritance shares, the permissible scope of polygamy, and the boundaries of modest dress, generating both admiration for its methodological boldness and considerable controversy over its departure from classical uṣūl al-fiqh. (Saprudin et al., 2023; Sedayu, 2022; Rohman et al., 2021) Central to Shahrur's entire edifice is a linguistic axiom borrowed selectively from the classical grammarian Ibn Jinnī and the

rhetorician al-Jurjānī, and pressed into service through Shahrur's own reading of Ibn Fāris: the claim that true synonymy does not exist in the Arabic language, so that every Qur'anic term long treated as interchangeable with others, such as al-Kitāb, al-Qurʾān, al-Dhikr, and al-Furqān, must in fact carry a distinct, non-overlapping technical meaning. (Elkarimah, 2017; Yusuf, 2014)

This a-synonymy thesis did not emerge in a scholarly vacuum, nor is it as settled a linguistic matter as Shahrur's confident deployment of it suggests. The question of whether true synonymy exists in Arabic, and specifically within the Qur'an, has divided classical and modern linguists for centuries, with figures such as al-Rāzī, al-Zajjāj, and al-Fayrūzābādī affirming its existence and others, including Ibn Fāris himself, Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī, and al-Thaʿālibī, denying it in whole or in part. (Ahmadifar, 2022; Al Mughira et al., 2024) Comparative linguistic scholarship on English and Arabic further suggests that absolute synonymy is best understood as a rare limiting case rather than a pervasive feature of any natural language, with near-synonymy being the empirically dominant pattern even where surface usage suggests interchangeability. (Al-Omari et al., 2014) Shahrur's decision to elevate one strand of this genuinely contested debate into an unqualified methodological axiom, and then to build an entire reconstructive reading of core Qur'anic vocabulary upon it, is therefore a choice that itself demands critical scrutiny rather than acceptance at face value.

That scrutiny has, in fact, already been undertaken, though it remains comparatively underexamined in the international literature on contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics. Among the scholars who responded to Shahrur with sustained academic argument rather than polemical condemnation was the Syrian scholar Salim al-Jabi, whose three-volume study al-Qirāʾāt al-Muʿāṣirah li al-Duktūr Muḥammad Shaḥrūr: Mujarrad al-Tanjīm mounted a systematic counter-reading of Shahrur's central terminological claims. (al-Jabi, 1991, as cited in Wathani, 2018) As reconstructed in the only extended academic treatment of al-Jabi's argument available in the indexed literature, al-Jabi's method combined two complementary lines of analysis: a rigorous lexicographic examination of each disputed term against classical Arabic dictionaries, poetry, and

philologically oriented tafsīr, and a thematic-contextual reading that situated each term within the broader textual and historical context of the sūrah in which it occurs. (Wathani, 2018) Applying this twin method to Shahrur's treatment of muḥkam and mutashābih verses, of nubuwwah and risālah, and of the term al-Dhikr, al-Jabi concluded that Shahrur's redefinitions frequently rested on incomplete lexicographic research, in some cases relying on a single dictionary entry while ignoring the fuller semantic range attested elsewhere, and on an inattention to the immediate textual context of the verses under discussion. (Wathani, 2018)

What has not yet been systematically undertaken, and what constitutes the central contribution of the present study, is an explicit benchmarking of al-Jabi's twin methodology against the classical standard of exegetical legitimacy articulated nearly five centuries earlier by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī in his encyclopedic Al-Itqān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān. Al-Suyūṭī's work, compiled at the close of the classical exegetical tradition, is widely regarded as the most comprehensive synthesis of the entire Sunni scholarly apparatus for approaching the Qur'anic text, integrating transmitted knowledge (riwāyah) with linguistic and rational analysis (dirāyah) across dozens of specialized chapters. (Suyūṭī, 2011; Farihin, 2016) Of particular relevance to the present inquiry is al-Suyūṭī's thirty-ninth chapter on al-wujūh wa-l-naẓāʾir, which catalogues how single Qur'anic terms carry multiple context-dependent meanings validated through transmitted exegetical precedent rather than through synchronic lexical stipulation alone. (Zaripov, 2025) This classical framework offers a ready-made, historically authoritative benchmark against which both Shahrur's a-synonymy thesis and al-Jabi's counter-reading can be evaluated, yet no study identified in the available literature has explicitly performed this comparison.

A further layer of relevance, largely unremarked in existing scholarship on al-Jabi, concerns the philosophical register in which his critique operates. Wathani's reconstruction observes, almost as an aside, that al-Jabi's combined method of lexical and thematic-contextual analysis bears a notable structural resemblance to Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, particularly Gadamer's insistence that legitimate

understanding emerges only through a dialogical fusion of the text's historical horizon and the interpreter's own horizon, neither of which can be legitimately suppressed in favor of the other. (Wathani, 2018) This observation has considerable theoretical significance that Wathani's article does not fully develop: if correct, it suggests that al-Jabi's ostensibly traditionalist, lexicon-anchored critique may in fact instantiate a more philosophically defensible hermeneutic than Shahrur's own explicitly modernist and scientistic methodology, since Gadamer's framework, properly applied, is equally critical of naive presentism and naive traditionalism. This possibility has been explored for other Muslim reformist thinkers, including Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, whose engagements with Gadamer's philosophy have received sustained comparative attention, (Akbar, 2020) and Gadamer's hermeneutics has likewise been applied directly to Qur'anic and hadith interpretation in several Indonesian studies. (Hanif, 2018; Azhary et al., 2025) Yet no study has extended this comparative frame to the specific dispute between Shahrur and al-Jabi.

The broader stakes of this inquiry extend beyond a narrow philological dispute over a handful of Qur'anic terms. The proliferation of self-styled contemporary readings (qirāʾāt muʿāṣirah) of the Qur'an, launched with varying degrees of linguistic rigor and frequently amplified through popular and now digital channels, has made the question of what constitutes a methodologically accountable modernist hermeneutics an urgent one for the discipline of Qur'anic studies as a whole. (Mutmainnah, 2024) Classical scholars such as Muhammad Imarah have responded to this proliferation with wholesale rejection of hermeneutics as an illegitimate Western import, a position that forecloses any serious engagement with the genuine interpretive challenges that modernist reformers raise. (Mutmainnah, 2024) Al-Jabi's approach, by contrast, models a third path: neither wholesale rejection nor uncritical adoption, but disciplined philological and contextual accountability applied to a specific set of modernist claims. Understanding precisely how and why this third path succeeds where it succeeds, and identifying where it too falls short, requires

the kind of systematic classical benchmarking and philosophical framing that the present study undertakes.

Existing scholarship, in short, has treated three bodies of material largely in isolation from one another: a substantial descriptive literature on Shahrur's Theory of Limits and its legal applications; (Alfathah, 2023; Saprudin et al., 2023; Sedayu, 2022; Tidjani et al., 2026; Rohman et al., 2021; Arafah, 2023; Fatah, 2019) a single, valuable but analytically underdeveloped reconstruction of al-Jabi's counter-critique; (Wathani, 2018) and a separate, well-developed literature on al-Suyūṭī's Al-Itqān and on Gadamer's applicability to Islamic hermeneutics generally. (Suyūṭī, 2011; Zaripov, 2025; Ihsan et al., 2024; Akbar, 2020; Hanif, 2018) No study has yet drawn these three bodies of literature into a single, integrated analytical frame that uses classical exegetical methodology as an explicit evaluative benchmark for a specific contemporary hermeneutical dispute, nor has any study tested Wathani's passing observation about al-Jabi's Gadamerian affinities against a systematic reading of Gadamer's actual philosophical claims.

This article addresses that gap directly. Its specific objectives are threefold: first, to reconstruct al-Jabi's classical-philological critique of Shahrur's Theory of Limits in sufficient methodological detail to permit systematic comparison; second, to benchmark both Shahrur's a-synonymy thesis and al-Jabi's counter-reading against the riwāyah-dirāyah synthesis and the doctrine of contextual polysemy articulated in al-Suyūṭī's Al-Itqān; and third, to evaluate, through a close reading of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, whether al-Jabi's combined lexical and thematic-contextual method in fact approximates a defensible fusion of horizons more successfully than Shahrur's own explicitly presentist methodology, and to translate the resulting analysis into practical guidance for tafsīr pedagogy and the scholarly evaluation of future modernist Qur'anic hermeneutics.

The theoretical architecture of this study integrates three distinct but, as the analysis will show, mutually illuminating frameworks: al-Suyūṭī's classical taxonomy of legitimate exegetical method, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics of understanding, and a comparative-critical apparatus for evaluating modernist Qur'anic hermeneutics against both. These three layers

can be visualized as a triangular conceptual map, with al-Suyūṭī's classical standard and Gadamer's philosophical standard forming two anchoring vertices, and the specific dispute between Shahrur and al-Jabi occupying the third vertex as the object under evaluation, tested against each of the other two in turn.

The first framework, drawn from al-Suyūṭī's Al-Itqān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān, supplies the classical Islamic standard of exegetical legitimacy. Al-Suyūṭī's encyclopedic project explicitly aimed to synthesize the entire Sunni tradition of Qur'anic scholarship, integrating riwāyah, meaning knowledge transmitted through authenticated chains from the Prophet, the Companions, and the Successors, with dirāyah, meaning the rational and linguistic tools, including grammar, rhetoric, and lexicography, required to extract meaning responsibly from the transmitted text. (Suyūṭī, 2011; Ihsan et al., 2024) Of particular relevance here is al-Suyūṭī's chapter on al-wujūh wa-l-naẓāʾir, which catalogues Qur'anic vocabulary according to the number of distinct, contextually determined meanings a single term can carry, generally following Ibn Taymiyyah's and Ibn al-Qayyim's earlier formulations while organizing the material according to the sheer number of attested meanings rather than a strict formal typology. (Zaripov, 2025) What matters for the present study is not al-Suyūṭī's specific taxonomy of individual terms but the underlying methodological commitment it embodies: that a term's meaning in a given verse is established through the convergence of lexical possibility and transmitted exegetical precedent, not through an interpreter's a priori structural or scientific theory of how language in general must work. It is worth noting, in the interest of methodological honesty, that al-Suyūṭī's own scholarship is not beyond critical scrutiny on its own terms; a recent reassessment of his claim that all Qur'anic sūrah names are tawqīfī, meaning divinely sanctioned rather than humanly assigned, finds his own argumentation inconsistently applied against his stated evidentiary standard. (Nugraha et al., 2025) This finding is analytically useful rather than damaging to the present framework, since it establishes that al-Suyūṭī's standard functions here as a methodological benchmark rather than as an infallible authority, and that the same standard of internal consistency

applied to Shahrur and al-Jabi below is applied, in the literature, to al-Suyūṭī himself.

The second framework, drawn from Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as developed in Truth and Method, supplies a general theory of what legitimate textual understanding requires, independent of any particular religious tradition. Gadamer's central claim is that understanding a text is a dialogical event in which the historical horizon embedded in the text and the historical horizon of the interpreter's own present fuse into a new, jointly produced understanding, a process he terms the fusion of horizons. (Vorova, 2026; Sasaki, 2012) For Gadamer, the interpreter's fore-understanding, or inherited prejudice in the technical rather than pejorative sense, is not an obstacle to be eliminated but the very condition of possibility for understanding, provided it remains open to correction through sustained dialogue with the text. (Damanik, 2023) This framework has already been applied productively to Qur'anic and hadith interpretation, including studies that use Gadamer's fusion of horizons to reassess gender-sensitive hadith and studies that trace direct methodological parallels between Gadamer and specific Muslim reformist thinkers such as Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Abdolkarim Soroush, and Hassan Hanafi. (Azhary et al., 2025; Akbar, 2020) What Gadamer's framework contributes to the present study is a criterion independent of Islamic exegetical tradition for evaluating whether a given hermeneutical method achieves genuine understanding or merely projects the interpreter's own presuppositions onto the text: a method that entirely suppresses the text's transmitted historical horizon in favor of the interpreter's contemporary framework fails Gadamer's test as clearly as a method that entirely suppresses the interpreter's own horizon in favor of an unreflective repetition of inherited readings.

The third framework is the comparative-critical apparatus the present study itself constructs to bring the first two into productive contact with the specific dispute between Shahrur and al-Jabi. This apparatus operates through three sequential evaluative moves. The first move tests Shahrur's a-synonymy thesis and his associated redefinitions of al-Kitāb, al-Qurʾān, al-

Dhikr, and al-Furqān against al-Suyūṭī's wujūh-wa-naẓāʾir standard, asking whether Shahrur's proposed technical distinctions are grounded in transmitted exegetical precedent or derive instead from an unmediated application of a contested linguistic axiom. The second move tests al-Jabi's counter-reading against the same classical standard, asking whether his combined lexical and thematic-contextual method in fact reconstructs the riwāyah-dirāyah synthesis that al-Suyūṭī's Al-Itqān established as normative. The third move tests both Shahrur's and al-Jabi's methods against Gadamer's fusion-of-horizons criterion, asking which method more successfully holds the text's transmitted horizon and the interpreter's own horizon in genuine dialogical tension rather than collapsing the dispute in favor of one horizon alone. Researcher's working hypothesis, to be tested rather than assumed in the analysis that follows, is that al-Jabi's twin methodology, precisely because it combines philological rigor with contextual-historical attentiveness, satisfies both the classical al-Suyūṭī standard and the philosophical Gadamer standard more fully than Shahrur's explicitly presentist and scientistic method, though the discussion section will identify respects in which al-Jabi's own approach falls short of a fully realized fusion of horizons as well.

B. Method

This study adopts a qualitative library-based research design (penelitian kepustakaan), selected because its central questions concern the comparative structure of textual-interpretive arguments and their conformity to classical and philosophical standards of exegetical legitimacy, rather than any directly observable population or behavior. (Saefullah, 2024; Abdurrahman, 2024) The object of inquiry, namely the methodological adequacy of a specific hermeneutical dispute among three parties (Shahrur, al-Jabi, and the classical standard represented by al-Suyūṭī), exists entirely as a body of texts and argumentative claims, making systematic textual and comparative analysis the methodologically appropriate approach.

The worldview underlying this design is interpretivist: the study treats each party's textual and argumentative claims as internally coherent positions that must first be reconstructed on their own terms before they can be legitimately compared or evaluated against an external standard.

Methodologically, the study combines a textual-comparative approach, which places the three parties' claims about specific Qur'anic terms in direct dialogue, with a philosophical-hermeneutical approach, which applies Gadamer's theoretical criteria as an independent evaluative lens. (Bachtiar et al., 2026; Nasution, 2022)

A critical methodological limitation must be disclosed transparently at the outset rather than discovered by a reviewer, consistent with the principle that methodological departures from ideal procedure require explicit justification. The present study's access to Salim al-Jabi's primary text, al-Qirāʾāt al-Muʿāṣirah li al-Duktūr Muḥammad Shaḥrūr: Mujarrad al-Tanjīm (Damascus: AKAD, 1991), is entirely mediated through Syamsul Wathani's academic reconstruction (Wathani, 2018) and extensive direct quotation of that text, since the original three-volume Arabic work was not independently consulted for this study. This is a secondary-sourcing limitation rather than a primary-source analysis, and every claim attributed to al-Jabi in this article should be understood as al-Jabi's position as documented and translated by Wathani, (Wathani, 2018) not as an independent reading of al-Jabi's original Arabic. The justification for proceeding on this basis, rather than declining to address al-Jabi's critique at all, is that Wathani's reconstruction includes extensive direct quotation of al-Jabi's argument across each of the disputed terms discussed below, providing a methodologically defensible, if secondary, evidentiary basis; researchers with direct access to al-Jabi's original text are strongly encouraged to verify and extend the present analysis, a point elaborated further under Limitations.

Primary sources for the remaining two frameworks consist of al-Suyūṭī's Al-Itqān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān, consulted through its published English translation and through peer-reviewed secondary scholarship analyzing specific chapters relevant to this study, and Gadamer's Truth and Method, consulted through peer-reviewed secondary scholarship applying his framework to religious and Qur'anic hermeneutics specifically. Shahrur's own methodological claims are drawn from his published English-language presentation of his ideas and from peer-reviewed secondary literature that quotes and analyzes his Arabic-language al-Kitāb wa-l-Qurʾān: Qirāʾah

Muʿāṣirah directly. All secondary sources were selected according to four criteria: publication in a peer-reviewed academic journal or academic press; direct thematic relevance to Shahrur's hermeneutics, al-Jabi's critique, al-Suyūṭī's Al-Itqān, or Gadamer's applicability to Islamic textual interpretation; sufficient methodological transparency to permit accurate representation of the source's claims; and, where possible, availability through indexed, citable academic databases rather than anonymous or unauthoritative material.

Data analysis proceeded through structured comparative textual analysis across four stages. First, each party's position on the disputed terms, namely al-Kitāb, al-Qurʾān, al-Dhikr, al-Furqān, muḥkam, mutashābih, and nubuwwah, was reconstructed independently from the available sources. Second, each position was coded against al-Suyūṭī's riwāyah-dirāyah criterion, assessing whether the claimed meaning was grounded in transmitted exegetical precedent, in lexicographic evidence, in both, or in neither. Third, each position was coded against Gadamer's fusion-of-horizons criterion, assessing the degree to which the interpreter's contemporary horizon and the text's transmitted horizon were held in genuine dialogical tension rather than one being collapsed into the other. Fourth, the researcher synthesized these two coding passes into an integrated evaluative judgment for each party, a step treated in this study as the researcher's own original analytical contribution rather than as a claim requiring external citation. Trustworthiness was pursued through source triangulation, cross-checking claims about Shahrur's position against both his own English-language statements and independent secondary analyses, and through explicit disclosure of the secondary-sourcing limitation regarding al-Jabi described above. As with any qualitative library-based synthesis, this method does not permit statistical generalization; its findings should be read as a structured comparative-evaluative argument rather than as an empirical survey of the full range of scholarly responses to Shahrur's hermeneutics.

C. Results and Discussion

Structured comparative analysis across the three-way dispute yields four interrelated findings, presented here as a term-by-term reconstruction of the Shahrur-al-Jabi dispute, a benchmarking of both positions against al-Suyūṭī's classical standard, a Gadamerian evaluation of both methods, and a synthesis-derived recommendation scheme.

1. Results

1.1 Term-by-Term Reconstruction of the Shahrur–al-Jabi Dispute

Table 1 summarizes the term-by-term dispute between Shahrur and al-Jabi as documented in the available literature, focusing on the four cases that receive the most sustained treatment: al-Dhikr, the muḥkam-mutashābih distinction, nubuwwah, and the general a-synonymy thesis underlying all three. In each case, Shahrur's redefinition proceeds from a general linguistic axiom applied to the term in relative isolation, while al-Jabi's counter-reading proceeds from a fuller lexicographic survey combined with the immediate textual and thematic context in which the term occurs. (Wathani, 2018)

On al-Dhikr, Shahrur defines the term as denoting the process by which the Qur'an is transformed from a pre-linguistic to a linguistic, specifically Arabic, form, a definition he derives through syntagmatic-paradigmatic semantic analysis. (Wathani, 2018) Al-Jabi's response identifies at least six distinct lexical senses of the root dh-k-r attested in classical Arabic, including remembrance, sound, praise, supplication, admonition, and glorification, and observes that a survey of every Qur'anic occurrence of the term fails to locate a single instance supporting Shahrur's specific technical sense of linguistic transformation. (Wathani, 2018) Al-Jabi's critique here is not merely quantitative but methodological: he argues that Shahrur's procedure of consulting a single dictionary source while treating the resulting definition as exhaustive constitutes a basic failure of lexicographic diligence, one particularly ironic given Shahrur's explicit ambition to produce a comprehensive contemporary reading, or qirāʾah muʿāṣirah, of the text. (Wathani, 2018)

On the muḥkam-mutashābih distinction central to Qur'an 3:7, Shahrur proposes that the Qur'an consists of three components, namely umm

al-kitāb, understood as the muḥkamāt verses governing human legal and ethical conduct and open to ijtihād, al-Qurʾān wa sabʿ al-mathānī, understood as the mutashābihāt verses, and tafṣīl al-kitāb. (Wathani, 2018) Al-Jabi's counter-reading proceeds through both a lexical analysis, arguing that muḥkam denotes something fixed and admitting no alteration while mutashābih denotes resemblance between two things requiring specification of the compared elements, and a thematic-contextual analysis of the whole of Sūrah Āl ʿImrān, from which al-Jabi concludes that the entire Qur'an is muḥkam in the sense of being textually fixed and unaltered, with the muḥkam-mutashābih distinction instead concerning the content and provenance of the teaching rather than the fixity of the wording itself. (Wathani, 2018)

On nubuwwah, Shahrur's framework requires a sharp division between the Prophet's role as bearer of risālah, comprising the ethical muḥkamāt, and his role as bearer of nubuwwah, comprising cosmological and historical knowledge identified with the mutashābihāt. (Wathani, 2018) Al-Jabi responds with a lexical decomposition of the term nabiyy into three or four converging semantic roots, denoting spiritual elevation, a clear path, and momentous true report, combined with a thematic-contextual survey of Qur'anic verses addressing the Prophet as nabiyy, from which al-Jabi concludes that nubuwwah denotes an integrated spiritual station rather than a functionally separable knowledge-domain distinct from risālah. (Wathani, 2018) Across all three cases, and consistent with the general a-synonymy thesis that underlies them, al-Jabi's recurring methodological objection is that Shahrur's redefinitions are driven by a prior commitment to finding non-overlapping technical meanings rather than by a genuinely open lexicographic and contextual inquiry into what the terms actually denote across their full range of Qur'anic usage. (Wathani, 2018)

Table 1. Term-by-term dispute between Shahrur and al-Jabi (as documented by Wathani) (Wathani, 2018)

Disputed Term	Shahrur's Redefinition	Al-Jabi's Counter-Reading	Al-Jabi's Core Objection
al-Dhikr	Process of transforming the Qur'an from pre-linguistic to Arabic linguistic form (syntagmatic-paradigmatic analysis)	At least six attested lexical senses (remembrance, sound, praise, supplication, admonition, glorification); no Qur'anic occurrence supports Shahrur's sense	Single-dictionary reliance; ignores full attested Qur'anic usage
Muḥkam / Mutashābih	Three-part structure: umm al-kitāb (muḥkamāt, legal-ethical, open to ijtihād), al-Qur'ān wa sabʿ al-mathānī (mutashābihāt), tafṣīl al-kitāb	Muḥkam = textually fixed, unaltered (applies to the whole Qur'an); distinction concerns content/provenance, not wording-fixity	Conflates textual fixity with content-classification; contradicted by Q. 3:7 read in full sūrah context
Nubuwwah	Functionally separate from risālah: nubuwwah = cosmological/historical knowledge (mutashābihāt)	Nabiyy derives from three-four converging roots (elevation, clear path, momentous report); denotes integrated spiritual station	Artificial functional split not supported by lexical derivation or thematic survey of nabiyy verses
A-synonymy thesis (general)	No true synonyms exist in Arabic; every term must carry a distinct technical meaning (after Ibn Jinnī, al-Jurjānī)	Selectively adopts one contested classical position (e.g., Ibn Fāris) while ignoring others (al-Rāzī, al-Fayrūzābādī) and contextual polysemy	Elevates a genuinely disputed linguistic axiom into an unqualified interpretive rule

1.2 Benchmarking against al-Suyūṭī's Al-Itqān

Benchmarked against al-Suyūṭī's riwāyah-dirāyah synthesis and his specific chapter on al-wujūh wa-l-naẓāʾir, the two positions diverge sharply in their methodological conformity. Shahrur's procedure, as reconstructed above, applies a general synchronic-structural linguistic theory, itself a contested position within the classical and modern debate over Arabic synonymy, (Ahmadifar, 2022; Al Mughira et al., 2024) to individual Qur'anic

terms largely in isolation from the transmitted exegetical tradition documenting how those terms were actually understood and used across the Qur'anic corpus and by the early exegetical community. This procedure stands in direct tension with al-Suyūṭī's own methodological commitment, since al-Suyūṭī's wujūh-wa-naẓāʾir catalogue was compiled precisely to demonstrate that Qur'anic terms carry multiple, contextually determined meanings validated through transmitted precedent, a finding that structurally undercuts any a priori assumption that a term's meaning can be fixed through lexical analysis alone. (Zaripov, 2025) Al-Jabi's procedure, by contrast, reconstructs precisely the riwāyah-dirāyah synthesis al-Suyūṭī's Al-Itqān established as normative: his lexicographic analysis corresponds to the dirāyah component, while his thematic-contextual survey of full sūrahs and cross-referenced Qur'anic usage corresponds to a dirāyah-adjacent form of internal riwāyah, namely tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi-l-Qurʾān, or interpreting the Qur'an through the Qur'an, a method al-Suyūṭī's own encyclopedic project explicitly privileges. (Suyūṭī, 2011; Harianto et al., 2025)

Researcher's synthesis of this benchmarking exercise suggests a finding with implications beyond the specific Shahrur-al-Jabi dispute: al-Suyūṭī's classical standard functions here not as an appeal to authority but as an operational methodological criterion capable of adjudicating between competing modern interpretive claims on procedural rather than doctrinal grounds. This distinction matters because it forecloses the objection, raised implicitly by defenders of unrestricted modernist reinterpretation, that invoking a classical standard necessarily amounts to theological conservatism dressed as methodology. The wujūh-wa-naẓāʾir standard does not tell an interpreter what a term must mean; it tells an interpreter what kind of evidence, namely convergent lexical possibility and transmitted exegetical attestation, is required before a proposed meaning can be considered established. Measured against this procedural criterion rather than against any specific classical conclusion, al-Jabi's method satisfies the standard and Shahrur's does not, independent of whether one shares al-Suyūṭī's own theological commitments.

1.3 Evaluation through Gadamer's Fusion of Horizons

Evaluated against Gadamer's fusion-of-horizons criterion, the same asymmetry reappears, though from a philosophical rather than an internally Islamic vantage point. Gadamer's framework holds that legitimate understanding requires neither the elimination of the interpreter's own historically situated fore-understanding nor its uncontested imposition upon the text, but a dialogical process in which the text's transmitted horizon actively corrects and reshapes the interpreter's initial assumptions. (Vorova, 2026; Damanik, 2023) Shahrur's methodology, as documented in the literature, explicitly aims to derive an objective meaning from the text's internal linguistic structure considered independently of both the text's transmitted historical horizon and any prior exegetical mediation, a stance Wathani's reconstruction describes as seeking a relation between the discourse of the text and the discourse of interpretation rather than an intersubjective relation mediated by transmitted understanding. (Wathani, 2018) Measured against Gadamer's own theory, this move risks precisely the kind of naive objectivism that Gadamer's hermeneutics was constructed to displace, since it treats the interpreter's contemporary linguistic-scientific framework as capable of accessing the text's meaning without the corrective friction that engagement with the text's own transmitted horizon would provide. (Akbar, 2020)

Al-Jabi's combined method, precisely because it holds classical lexicography and contextual-historical analysis together rather than substituting one for the other, more closely approximates Gadamer's dialogical ideal, a structural resemblance Wathani's own analysis identifies explicitly, tracing it to Gadamer's linked concepts of historically effected consciousness, fore-understanding, fusion of horizons, and application. (Wathani, 2018) This is not to say that al-Jabi's method achieves a fully realized Gadamerian fusion without qualification. Wathani's own concluding assessment notes an important respect in which al-Jabi's critique remains methodologically conservative: by consistently defending the historically dominant, already-established reading against Shahrur's proposed innovations, al-Jabi arguably privileges the transmitted horizon's

authority more heavily than Gadamer's model, which insists on the interpreter's own horizon as an equally active and non-eliminable partner in the hermeneutical dialogue, would strictly license. (Wathani, 2018) Researcher's own assessment of this tension is that it does not so much refute the finding that al-Jabi's method outperforms Shahrur's on Gadamerian grounds as it identifies a genuine, unresolved methodological question for future contextualist scholarship: how a philologically disciplined critique of an ill-grounded modernist reading can be conducted without that discipline collapsing, in turn, into an equally uncritical defense of inherited consensus. This question, left substantially open by the existing literature, is one to which the present study's discussion section returns.

Step	Move	Operation
1	Reconstruct each party's claim	State Shahrur's redefinition and al-Jabi's counter-reading for the term in question, independently
2	Benchmark against al-Suyūṭī (riwāyah-dirāyah / wujūh-wa-naẓāʾir)	Test whether the claimed meaning is grounded in transmitted exegetical precedent and full lexical range, or in an isolated a priori axiom
3	Benchmark against Gadamer (fusion of horizons)	Test whether the interpreter's contemporary horizon and the text's transmitted horizon are held in genuine dialogical tension, or one is collapsed into the other
4	Synthesize evaluative verdict	Combine both benchmarks into an integrated judgment; flag any case where the two benchmarks diverge for separate discussion

Figure 1. Dual-benchmark evaluation model applied to the Shahrur–al-Jabi dispute

1.4 Recommendation Scheme

Synthesizing the term-by-term reconstruction, the classical benchmarking, and the Gadamerian evaluation above, this study derives a three-tier recommendation scheme addressed to tafsīr pedagogy, journal peer review in Qur'anic studies, and public scholarly engagement with contested modernist hermeneutics. For tafsīr pedagogy, the recommendation is to teach al-Suyūṭī's wujūh-wa-naẓāʾir methodology explicitly as a procedural, rather than merely historical, evaluative tool, equipping students to assess any interpreter's semantic claims, classical or contemporary, against

the joint criteria of lexical possibility and transmitted attestation. For journal peer review in Qur'anic studies, the recommendation is to require authors proposing novel technical distinctions between terms conventionally treated as near-synonymous to demonstrate explicitly that their proposed distinction is not contradicted by the full range of the term's attested Qur'anic usage, a standard that, applied consistently, would have flagged the specific methodological gaps al-Jabi identifies in Shahrur's al-Dhikr analysis at the review stage rather than only after publication. For public scholarly engagement with contested modernist hermeneutics, the recommendation, informed directly by the contrast between al-Jabi's disciplined academic critique and the polemical, takfīr-oriented responses to Shahrur that al-Jabi's own work explicitly sought to avoid replicating, is that academic institutions and Islamic studies associations actively model and promote philologically grounded critique of modernist reinterpretation as an alternative to both uncritical popular adoption and polemical rejection. (Wathani, 2018; Mutmainnah, 2024)

Table 2. Three-tier recommendation scheme

Domain	Recommendation	Rationale
Tafsīr pedagogy	Teach al-Suyūṭī's wujūh-wa-naẓāʾir methodology as a live procedural tool for evaluating any interpreter's semantic claims, not only as classical history	Equips students to assess contemporary hermeneutical claims (Shahrur's or others') on evidentiary rather than ideological grounds
Journal peer review in Qur'anic studies	Require authors proposing novel technical distinctions between conventionally near-synonymous terms to show the distinction is not contradicted by the term's full attested Qur'anic usage	Would have flagged the specific gaps al-Jabi identifies in Shahrur's al-Dhikr analysis at review stage, before publication
Public scholarly engagement	Model and promote philologically grounded, non-polemical critique (as al-Jabi practiced) as the alternative to uncritical popular adoption or takfīr-oriented rejection of modernist hermeneutics	Offers a demonstrated third path beyond the adoption/rejection binary dominating public discourse on figures like Shahrur

2. Discussion

The most specific finding to emerge from this study is that al-Jabi's twin methodology of lexicographic and thematic-contextual analysis satisfies both al-Suyūṭī's classical riwāyah-dirāyah standard and Gadamer's philosophical fusion-of-horizons criterion more fully than Shahrur's explicitly presentist, structurally axiomatic method does, and that this convergence across an internally Islamic classical standard and an externally philosophical modern standard is not coincidental. Both standards, despite emerging from entirely different intellectual traditions separated by roughly a millennium, converge on the same underlying requirement: that a claim about a text's meaning must be answerable to evidence beyond the interpreter's own present framework, whether that evidence takes the form of transmitted exegetical precedent, as al-Suyūṭī requires, or the text's own historically embedded horizon actively engaged in dialogue, as Gadamer requires. This finding refines the existing literature in a specific way: whereas prior scholarship has treated the question of Shahrur's methodological adequacy primarily through internal Islamic legal and theological critique (Hamdani, 2023) and has treated Gadamer's applicability to Muslim reformist hermeneutics as a separate comparative-philosophical question applied mainly to Rahman and Abu Zayd, (Akbar, 2020; Swazo, 2011) the present study demonstrates that these two evaluative registers, classical Islamic and Gadamerian philosophical, yield convergent rather than merely parallel verdicts when applied to the same specific case.

The second specific finding, concerning the limits of al-Jabi's own method, carries a different and arguably more consequential implication for the future of contextualist Qur'anic scholarship. Because al-Jabi's critique, however methodologically disciplined, tends in practice to vindicate the historically dominant reading against Shahrur's proposed innovation in every case examined, a question arises that neither al-Jabi's original work nor Wathani's reconstruction of it fully addresses: whether a genuinely Gadamerian fusion of horizons, one that holds the interpreter's own present horizon as equally active rather than merely corrective, is structurally compatible with a critique whose primary evidentiary standard is convergence with already-transmitted precedent. Researcher's assessment is

that this tension is real but not fatal to al-Jabi's approach, for a reason Gadamer's own theory supplies: the fusion of horizons does not require that the interpreter's present horizon prevail over the text's transmitted horizon in any given instance, only that both horizons remain genuinely at stake in the interpretive dialogue rather than one being dismissed a priori. Al-Jabi's method keeps Shahrur's proposed innovations genuinely at stake, testing them rather than dismissing them on ideological grounds alone, which is precisely what distinguishes his approach from the polemical, takfīr-oriented criticism he explicitly declined to emulate. (Wathani, 2018) What remains genuinely underdeveloped, both in al-Jabi's original work and in the broader literature, is a worked example of a contemporary re-reading that satisfies both the al-Suyūṭī and the Gadamer standards while still arriving at a genuinely novel interpretive conclusion, since every case examined in this study involves al-Jabi's classical framework prevailing over Shahrur's innovation rather than the two horizons producing a synthesis neither party had previously articulated.

These findings carry direct practical implications, translated above into the three-tier recommendation scheme addressed to pedagogy, peer review, and public scholarly engagement. At the level of pedagogy, the implication is that tafsīr curricula which teach al-Suyūṭī's Al-Itqān primarily as a historical monument to classical scholarship, rather than as a live methodological toolkit, forfeit one of the most readily available and rigorously developed instruments for training students to evaluate contemporary hermeneutical claims critically. At the level of peer review, the implication is that Qur'anic studies journals currently lack a widely shared, explicit procedural standard for adjudicating novel semantic claims of the kind Shahrur advances, relying instead on individual reviewers' background knowledge of classical lexicography, a gap the wujūh-wa-naẓāʾir-based standard proposed in this study's recommendation scheme is specifically designed to close. At the level of public scholarly engagement, the implication is that al-Jabi's model of disciplined, non-polemical academic critique offers Islamic studies associations and public-facing scholars a demonstrably viable alternative to the false choice between uncritical popular

amplification of modernist reinterpretation and polemical, takfīr-oriented rejection of it, a false choice that continues to dominate much public discourse surrounding contested figures such as Shahrur. (Mutmainnah, 2024)

Looking beyond these immediate implications, this study's findings open at least three directions for future research that its own library-based, secondary-sourced design cannot itself pursue. First, and most directly responsive to the methodological limitation disclosed above, future research with direct access to al-Jabi's original three-volume Arabic text should verify, extend, and where necessary correct the present study's reconstruction of his argument, since the analysis here has been mediated entirely through Wathani's secondary account. (Wathani, 2018) Second, comparative research could extend the al-Suyūṭī-Gadamer dual benchmarking framework developed here to other contested modernist Qur'anic hermeneutics beyond Shahrur, including the work of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Muhammad Arkoun, to test whether the same convergence between classical Islamic and Gadamerian philosophical standards observed here holds more generally or is specific to the particular linguistic character of Shahrur's a-synonymy thesis. Third, and most theoretically ambitious, future work could attempt to construct the kind of genuinely novel interpretive synthesis, satisfying both classical and Gadamerian standards while still reaching conclusions neither al-Suyūṭī's tradition nor Shahrur's modernism had previously articulated, that the present study identifies as the still-missing achievement of the contextualist project as a whole.

D. Conclusion

This article set out to address a specific scholarly anxiety: whether a classical exegetical framework compiled nearly five centuries before a given modernist hermeneutical controversy can be legitimately deployed as an evaluative benchmark for that controversy without either committing anachronism or degenerating into a merely rhetorical appeal to traditional authority. The reconstruction and dual benchmarking undertaken here support a qualified affirmative answer. Al-Suyūṭī's Al-Itqān, and specifically its wujūh-wa-naẓāʾir methodology, functions not as a doctrinal verdict

imported wholesale into a modern dispute but as a procedural standard, articulable independently of its specific historical origin, against which any interpreter's semantic claims about the Qur'anic text can be tested. Applied to the specific dispute between Muhammad Shahrur and Salim al-Jabi, this standard, together with the independently derived philosophical standard of Gadamer's fusion of horizons, converges on the same evaluative verdict: al-Jabi's combined lexicographic and thematic-contextual critique satisfies both standards more fully than Shahrur's explicitly presentist, axiomatically driven a-synonymy thesis does.

At the same time, this study has identified a genuine limitation internal to al-Jabi's own approach, one that the existing literature on his critique has not fully articulated: a method whose evidentiary standard is convergence with transmitted precedent risks, even when procedurally rigorous, tilting the Gadamerian dialogue toward the text's transmitted horizon rather than sustaining the fully reciprocal exchange Gadamer's theory in principle requires. The three-tier recommendation scheme addressed to tafsīr pedagogy, journal peer review, and public scholarly engagement represents this study's attempt to translate both the positive finding and this residual limitation into a workable framework for evaluating future contextualist Qur'anic scholarship. In answering its own guiding question, this study concludes that classical exegetical standards, properly reconstructed as procedural rather than doctrinal criteria, remain analytically indispensable for holding contemporary hermeneutical innovation methodologically accountable, and that Salim al-Jabi's largely underexamined critique of Muhammad Shahrur offers a demonstrably successful, if not yet fully theorized, model of how that accountability can be exercised without collapsing into either uncritical modernism or reflexive traditionalism.

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