



CONTESTING EXEGETICAL AUTHORITY: SCHOLARLY PATRONAGE, POWER, AND THE SAUDI SALAFI CRITIQUE OF AL-ŞĀBŪNĪ'S *ŞAFWAT AL-TAFĀSĪR*

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INFO ARTIKEL	ABSTRAK
Diterima: 02 Februari 2026 Direvisi: 21 Februari 2026 Disetujui: 14 Maret 2026 Tersedia Daring: 30 April 2026 Kata Kunci: <i>Tafsir Al-Qur'an</i> <i>Otoritas Keagamaan</i> <i>Patronasi Keilmuan</i> <i>Analisis Wacana Kritis</i> <i>Salafisme Saudi</i>	Penelitian ini mengkaji kontroversi seputar <i>Şafwat al-Tafāsīr</i> karya Muḥammad 'Alī al-Şābūnī sebagai perebutan hak berbicara atas nama al-Qur'an, bukan semata-mata sebagai daftar kesalahan doktrinal dan teknis. Dengan analisis wacana kritis tiga dimensi Norman Fairclough dalam desain studi kasus kualitatif berbasis kepustakaan, penelitian ini membaca kitab tafsir tersebut bersama dua kritik utamanya, yaitu <i>Tanbīhāt Hāmmah</i> karya Muḥammad Jamīl Zaynū dan bagian terkait dalam <i>al-Rudūd</i> karya Bakr Abū Zayd, lalu menghubungkan pilihan bahasanya dengan kondisi produksi, sirkulasi, dan penerimaannya di Arab Saudi. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa metode sintesis-pedagogis al-Şābūnī, yakni memilih, meringkas, dan menata tafsir-tafsir klasik, menjadi sumber keluasan pembacanya sekaligus kerentanannya terhadap serangan. Para kritikus mengubah perbedaan mengenai <i>ta'wīl</i> , sifat-sifat Tuhan, dokumentasi hadis, qiraat, dan seleksi sumber menjadi dakwaan pelanggaran epistemik melalui leksikon <i>tahrīf</i> , <i>jahl</i> , <i>khiyānah fī al-naql</i> , dan penyimpangan dari <i>manhaj al-salaf</i> . Rekomendasi ulama, konsultasi dengan ahli, persetujuan lembaga pengawasan buku, dan katalog bantahan memberi penilaian individual bobot putusan kolektif. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa polemik tersebut mempertemukan dua rezim legitimasi tafsir, yaitu rezim sintesis-pedagogis yang mengakomodasi keragaman sumber secara selektif dan rezim purifikasi tekstual Salafi yang menuntut batas teologis yang ketat serta kesetiaan redaksional dalam transmisi. Bukti yang tersedia lebih kuat menunjukkan kedekatan institusional dan kendali atas sirkulasi daripada klaim bahwa negara menyusun atau memerintahkan kritik tersebut.
ABSTRACT	
Keywords: <i>Qur'anic exegesis</i> <i>religious authority</i> <i>scholarly patronage</i> <i>critical discourse analysis</i> <i>Saudi Salafism</i>	<i>This article examines the controversy over Muḥammad 'Alī al-Şābūnī's Şafwat al-Tafāsīr as a contest over who may speak for the Qur'an, not simply as an inventory of doctrinal and technical errors. Using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional critical discourse analysis within a qualitative, library-based case study, it reads the commentary alongside its two principal critiques, Muḥammad Jamīl Zaynū's Tanbīhāt Hāmmah and the relevant section of Bakr Abū Zayd's al-Rudūd, and connects their wording to the conditions under which they were produced, circulated, and received in Saudi Arabia. The analysis shows that al-Şābūnī's synthetic-pedagogical method of selecting, condensing, and ordering classical commentaries accounts for both the work's wide readership and its exposure to attack. The critics recast disagreements over ta'wīl, the divine attributes, hadith documentation, variant readings, and source selection as epistemic misconduct through a lexicon of tahrīf, jahl, khiyānah fī al-naql, and departure from manhaj al-salaf. Endorsements, specialist consultation, book-supervision approval, and catalogues of refutation gave individual judgements the weight of a collective verdict. The article argues that the polemic set two regimes of exegetical legitimacy against each other: a synthetic-pedagogical regime that accommodates diverse sources selectively and a Salafi regime of textual purification that demands strict theological boundaries and verbatim fidelity in</i>

transmission. The available evidence supports a conclusion of institutional proximity and control over circulation more firmly than a claim that the state authored or ordered the critique.

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1. Introduction

A commentary on the Qur'an never appears in an empty room. A dispute about a work of tafsir is therefore seldom only a dispute about what a verse means. It is also an argument about which sources are legitimate, which methods deserve trust, and who is entitled to speak for the Qur'an. Commentaries have served as vehicles of social critique (Abidin et al., 2024), of resistance to rulers (Khidhir, 2024), and of competing theories of legitimate authority (Sirry, 2021). Contemporary tafsir has also been described as a mode of scriptural theology in its own right (Saleh, 2020), and its authority depends increasingly on media, genealogies, and interpretive communities (Pink, 2019), with shifts in who counts as a competent interpreter (Kaltsum & Amin, 2024).

Muhammad 'Alī al-Ṣābūnī's *Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr* is a clear case in point. In his *muqaddimah*, al-Ṣābūnī explains that modern Muslims are absorbed by the demands of daily life and rarely manage to return to the large classical commentaries. He therefore set out to offer a selection from the major works in plain and orderly language while keeping *munāsabah*, lexical explanation, *asbāb al-nuzūl*, commentary proper, *balāghah*, and practical benefits in view (al-Ṣābūnī, 1981, pp. 19–20). The project is a synthesis with a teaching purpose. Al-Ṣābūnī presents himself as a filter and arranger of the tradition for new readers, which helps explain the book's wide reception. Synthesis, however, carries risks. Every abridgement requires selection, every selection involves omission and paraphrase, and every combination brings together sources that do not always agree on theology.

The controversy grew from exactly these risks. Several Saudi scholars, most prominently Muḥammad Jamīl Zaynū, Ṣāliḥ al-Fawzān, and Bakr Abū Zayd, criticised al-Ṣābūnī's treatment of the attribute verses, his use of *ta'wīl*, the accuracy of his quotations, the grading and documentation of hadith, his presentation of variant readings, and his reliance on sources they considered unsafe. In the critical texts these matters are rarely framed as legitimate methodological disagreement (*khilāf*). They are raised to the level of scholarly trustworthiness, the soundness of creed (*'aqīdah*), and loyalty to the method of the pious forebears (*manhaj al-salaf*) (Abū Zayd, 1993, pp. 310–313; Zaynū, 1987, pp. 5–10). Exegetical authority thus depends on more than explaining verses. It also depends on the capacity to name errors, to enlist the support of senior scholars, to reach publishers, and to give scholarly verdicts social consequences. Scholarly patronage is understood here in that broad sense, as access to universities, book-supervision bodies,

publishing houses, mosques, endorsements, and the legitimacy attached to office, rather than as payment from rulers to scholars (Farquhar, 2016; Thurston, 2023).

Earlier studies of al-Ṣābūnī have concentrated on his method and on particular themes. The author's own thesis mapped the epistemology of *Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr*, the place of *tafsīr bi-l-ma'thūr* and *tafsīr bi-l-ra'y* within it, and its mechanisms of source selection (Al Munir, 2016). Riyadi (2021) examined al-Ṣābūnī's legal reasoning on adultery, Fithria (2024) extracted the moral virtues his commentary promotes, and Al-Riday and Walusimbi (2025) described the balance between transmitted and reasoned interpretation in his legal commentary *Rawā'ī' al-Bayān*. These works confirm the reach of al-Ṣābūnī's writing, including in Indonesia, but they analyse the results of his interpretation rather than the process through which his authority was disputed and constrained.

A second body of work addresses the Saudi religious field at the macro level. Studies of Wahhābism and of the relationship between the ulama and the Saudi state show a relationship that has shifted between cooperation, accommodation, competition, and the deliberate reduction of clerical influence (Al-Rasheed, 2021; Bunzel, 2023, 2025; Sinani, 2022). The literature is divided on how far the state directs religious discourse. Some authors read Saudi religious policy as a strategy of securitisation and control (Mohiuddin, 2025; Sheikh, 2025), while research on state-sponsored exegesis elsewhere warns against a simple "control argument" and finds that scholars keep much of their interpretive autonomy (Lukman, 2023; Mursyid et al., 2024). Parallel scholarship on the theology of the divine attributes shows that the doctrine of *tawḥīd al-asmā' wa-l-ṣifāt* has become a marker of Salafi identity against Ash'arī and Māturīdī positions (Nahouza, 2018; Ťupek & Beránek, 2025), and that Salafi challenges to traditionalist scholars turn on questions of method and authority as much as on doctrine (Hamdeh, 2021; Ismail, 2023). Yet these studies seldom show how such structures leave traces in the wording and genre of a refutation aimed at one commentary. Critical discourse analyses of tafsir and of Salafi discourse exist, but they mostly examine present-day Indonesian texts and media (Khamdan et al., 2024; Nasirin et al., 2025; Romadlon & Biyanto, 2023).

This article occupies the space between these literatures. It reads the commentary and its critiques as one discursive event that involves language, the production of knowledge, the circulation of books, and institutional authority. Its contribution lies in explaining how scholarly correction turned into the policing of epistemic boundaries and how it drew force from the Saudi religious field. The terms "Salafi" and "Wahhabi" are used with care, since their history is not uniform and the two labels have been separated, merged, or used interchangeably depending on context (Lauzière, 2026). Here "Salafi" refers to the critics' methodological claim to follow the *salaf*, and "Wahhabi" to the historical configuration of Saudi religious life rooted in the Najdī reform tradition.

The study asks three questions. First, how did al-Ṣābūnī build the authority of *Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr* as a synthetic and pedagogical commentary, and which linguistic strategies did his critics use to contest that authority? Second, how were the critical texts produced, authorised, distributed, and consumed, so that the dispute ceased to look like a disagreement between individuals? Third, how did the relationship between clerical

authority and Saudi institutions shape the social consequences of the controversy? The unit of analysis is the controversy as documented in the commentary and the two principal critiques, set in the Saudi religious context of the 1980s and early 1990s.

The article proceeds in five parts. The method section describes the corpus and the analytical model. The results report findings at the levels of text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice. The discussion interprets them as a clash between two regimes of exegetical legitimacy and weighs the critique, and the conclusion answers the research questions and points to further research.

2. Method

This is a qualitative, library-based case study. The case is not al-Ṣābūnī's thought as a whole but the controversy that arose when the compilatory method of *Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr* met the textual-purification standards of its Saudi critics. The design keeps statements tied to the settings in which they were produced and circulated. The material object comprises *Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr* and the principal critiques written against it. The commentary is read as a text that declares its purpose and interpretive ethos, while the critiques are read as texts that choose examples, frame charges, and summon authorities. The formal object is the relationship between exegetical discourse, scholarly patronage, and power. The author is not a neutral outsider to the material. His earlier master's thesis examined the epistemology of *Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr* (Al Munir, 2016), which gave him detailed knowledge of the commentary's structure and sources but also the risk of reading it sympathetically. To limit this risk, the analysis records the critics' objections in their own terms before evaluating them, and it credits those objections that are textually justified instead of treating the critique as a whole as ideological. The study involved no human participants or informants. The texts themselves are the research subjects, and the voices examined are those of the commentator, the critics, and the scholars they cite. The primary sources are the fourth edition of *Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr* (al-Ṣābūnī, 1981), the third edition of Zaynū's *Tanbīhāt Hāmmah* (Zaynū, 1987), and the section of Abū Zayd's *al-Rudūd* that deals with al-Ṣābūnī's works (Abū Zayd, 1993). Secondary sources are books and peer-reviewed articles on tafsir, discourse analysis, religious authority, Salafism, and Saudi politics. Table 1 sets out the corpus, the role each text plays in the analysis, and the passages read most closely.

Table 1. Corpus and units of analysis

Text	Author and edition	Role in the analysis	Passages read closely
<i>Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr</i>	Muḥammad 'Alī al-Ṣābūnī; 4th ed., Beirut: Dār al-Qur'ān al-Karīm, 1402/1981	The commentary under dispute	Endorsements and introduction (pp. 5–11, 19–20); verses cited by the critics

Text	Author and edition	Role in the analysis	Passages read closely
<i>Tanbīhāt Hāmmah</i>	Muḥammad Jamīl Zaynū; 3rd ed., Jeddah: Maktabat al-Sawādī, 1407/1987	Itemised critique	Preface and grounds for writing (pp. 5–7); Q 68:42 (pp. 7–9); Q 33:56 (pp. 9–10); Q 65:1 (pp. 11–12); Q 38:75 and hadith items (pp. 12–14)
<i>al-Rudūd</i>	Bakr ibn ‘Abd Allāh Abū Zayd; Riyadh: Dār al-‘Āṣimah, 1414/1993	Catalogue of refutations and final verdict	Section on al-Ṣābūnī’s abridgements (pp. 309–313)
Secondary literature	Books (2016–2026) and journal articles (2021–2026)	Context, comparison, interpretation	Tafsir and authority; Salafism; the Saudi religious field; discourse analysis

Source: compiled by the author from the primary texts. Page numbers refer to the editions listed.

Table 1 shows that the corpus is asymmetric by design. The commentary is a multi-volume work, whereas the critiques are short and targeted. The analysis therefore follows the critics’ own selection of verses and reads each selection against the commentary’s declared method.

Data were gathered through documentation and close reading in three stages. The first stage inventoried al-Ṣābūnī’s programmatic statements about his reasons for writing, his intended readers, the principle of abridgement (*ikhtiṣār*), and the structure of each entry. The second stage identified the units of controversy in the critiques: the attribute verses (*āyāt al-ṣifāt*), *ta’wīl*, hadith, variant readings (*qirā’āt*), expressions judged to be excessive (*ghuluw*), accuracy of quotation, and the selection of sources. The third stage recorded the actors, institutions, publishers, forms of endorsement, and statements about the circulation of books. The research instrument was a coding sheet whose categories were derived from Fairclough’s textual features and from the units that the critics themselves name. Every quotation was logged with its page number.

The data were analysed with Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice (Fairclough, 2018, 2023). At the level of text, attention went to lexicalisation, modality, structures of opposition, the representation of actions, the naming of actors, patterns of quotation, and omission. Terms such as *tahrīf*, *jahl*, and *khiyānah* were treated as devices that fix the gravity of an error and the identity of the person criticised. At the level of discursive practice, the analysis followed how the critiques moved from classroom reading and consultation to publication, catalogues of refutation, and endorsement, and how readers were constructed as people who need mediation. Intertextuality was used to trace how *Ṣafwat al-Taḥfāsīr* reworked earlier commentaries and how the critics reworked *Ṣafwat*, hadith, classical tafsir, and the voices of senior scholars into a new narrative. At the level of sociocultural practice, textual and discursive findings were related to the structure of

religious authority in Saudi Arabia. Discourse analysis of this kind is an established method in the study of religion (Hjelm, 2022). Figure 1 summarises the design.

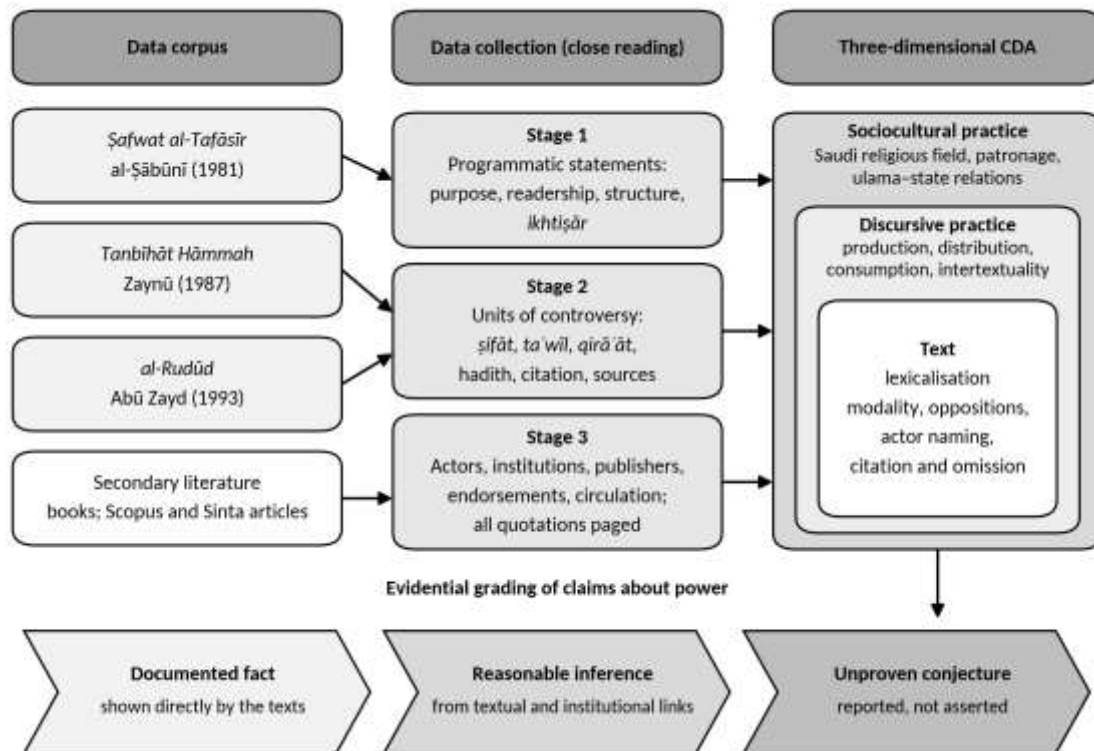


Figure 1. Research design: corpus, three-stage close reading, and Fairclough's three-dimensional model with evidential grading

Source: prepared by the author, adapted from Fairclough (2018, 2023).

Figure 1 shows the three stages of collection feeding the three analytical dimensions, with every claim about power passing through a final evidential filter that serves as the study's main safeguard of validity. Claims were sorted into facts shown directly by the documents, reasonable inferences from the relationship between texts and institutions, and conjectures that the evidence cannot yet support. Only the first two categories are asserted in the findings. Trustworthiness was further supported by triangulating the commentary, the critiques, and the secondary scholarship, by reading the critics' reports of disputed passages alongside the commentary's own framing, and by keeping a paged audit trail. The distinction keeps the analysis of power from sliding into accusations that go beyond the data.

3. Results

Şafwat al-Tafāsīr as a Synthetic-Pedagogical Project

The introduction to *Şafwat al-Tafāsīr* is built on the idea of a crisis of access. Al-Şābūnī depicts the modern Muslim as a reader whose time is consumed by daily life and who cannot work through long commentaries. From this picture he draws a moral duty for scholars, namely to convey the meaning of the Qur'an in clear language that is neither convoluted nor longer than necessary (al-Şābūnī, 1981, pp. 19–20). Abridgement is thus

presented as a service to the community rather than as second-rate scholarship. The title itself carries an epistemological programme. *Şafwah* implies choosing what is best from detailed commentaries and rearranging it in concise and systematic form. Al-Şābūnī lists seven recurring elements: an overview of the sūrah (*bayna yaday al-sūrah*), its connection with what precedes (*munāsabah*), vocabulary, occasions of revelation, commentary, rhetoric (*balāghah*), and benefits and subtleties (*fawā'id* and *laṭā'if*) (al-Şābūnī, 1981, p. 20). The pattern guides readers from an overview of the sūrah to linguistic detail and then to conclusions.

Brevity here changes the form of knowledge as well as its length. Material once dispersed across large works is moved into a single authorial narrative with a predictable sequence. Format and medium help determine who is recognised as the mediator between text and reader (Kaltsum & Amin, 2024; Pink, 2019). The regular format made *Şafwat al-Tafāsīr* easy to use in classrooms and study circles. Its intertextuality is open yet controlled. Al-Şābūnī draws on al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī, al-Qurṭubī, al-Ālūsī, and others whose theological commitments differ. He assumes that a lexical, rhetorical, or interpretive excerpt can be judged by its local usefulness without accepting the whole system of its author. Readers who regard the Sunni tradition as a broad space see breadth and skill here. For the critics, the same assumption was the weak point, because a source carries the imprint of its school and can plant ideas the reader does not notice. Combining sources without theological labels blurs the line between reliable (*mu'tamad*) authorities and those that call for caution. The basic disagreement therefore concerns whether a quotation can be detached from the theological identity of its source.

From Exegetical Correction to Charges of Epistemic Misconduct

Zaynū opens *Tanbīhāt Hāmmah* by acknowledging the merits of *Şafwat al-Tafāsīr*: accessible language, concise summaries at the head of each sūrah, discussion of rhetoric, a collection of exegetes' opinions, good printing, and an affordable price (Zaynū, 1987, pp. 5–7). The acknowledgement establishes the ethos of a critic who has seen the good in his opponent before naming the faults. The tone then changes. The reasons for writing are placed under the headings of defending the Qur'an and the Sunnah, advising the author, warning the public, and fulfilling the duty of commanding right and forbidding wrong. The dispute thus appears as a religious obligation, not as scholarly competition between two academics. The critic speaks as a defender of revelation, and the author criticised must prove that his writing does not endanger it. Zaynū also mentions questions from students, requests from senior scholars (*mashāyikh*), consultation with experts, and the approval of the book-supervision authority. These references widen the speaking subject from "I" to "we". An individual judgement thereby acquires the form of a collective voice.

The first example developed in detail is Q 68:42, *yawma yukshafu 'an sāq*. Zaynū charges that al-Şābūnī quoted the hadith about the uncovering of the *sāq* without the clause that explicitly attributes the act to God. He sets the wording he attributes to *Şafwat* beside a longer version of the hadith and reads the difference as an omission in support

of *ta'wīl* (Zaynū, 1987, pp. 7–9). The argument has two layers. The first is philological and asks whether the quotation is complete, whether the source is correct, and whether the omission changes the meaning. The second concerns intention and asks whether the change was made to conceal a creedal position. Only the first can be tested by comparing texts, yet in the polemic the two are fused, so that a presumption about intent appears as certain as a comparison of wordings. Zaynū then affirms the divine attributes without *ta'wīl* and without *tashbīh*. He names the shin (*sāq*), hand (*yad*), fingers (*aṣābi'*), face (*wajh*), and eye (*ʿayn*) as attributes accepted in a manner befitting God and cites Q 42:11 against anthropomorphism. The philological critique thus operates inside a particular theological grammar in which the completeness of a quotation matters because it bears on the legitimacy of affirming the attributes (*ithbāt*).

This conflict should not be reduced to “literal” against “metaphorical”. The critics claim to follow the meaning transmitted by the *salaf* without specifying modality (*kayfiyyah*), while al-Ṣābūnī uses *ta'wīl* to avoid any suggestion of corporeality. Both sides reject *tashbīh*, but they differ on which linguistic tools are legitimate. The polemic hardened when this common ground dropped out of view and a difference of method became a difference of identity. In the discussion of Q 33:56, Zaynū quotes expressions attributed to al-Ṣāwī and used by al-Ṣābūnī to honour the Prophet as *manba' al-raḥamāt* and *manba' al-tajalliyāt*. He links them to the prohibition of excess (*ghuluw*) and raises the possibility that such phrases amount to *shirk* if understood as referring to the Prophet's essence (Zaynū, 1987, pp. 9–10). The rhetorical question suggests dialogue, but the range of possible answers has already been narrowed. The same pattern appears when this case is placed beside discussions of al-Khiḍr, *ʿilm ladunnī*, and the rank of saints. Each example becomes part of an ideological profile in which al-Ṣābūnī is portrayed as close to Sufi idiom, inclined to *ta'wīl*, and careless in separating sources. The cumulative effect turns an error on a page into a trait of the author.

On Q 38:75 the critique of the paraphrase *khalaqtu bi-dhātī* again moves through the opposition between *salaf* and *khalaf*. Replacing “hand” (*yad*) with “essence” (*dhāt*) is said to erase the indication of “two hands” and to open the way to negating the attributes (*ta'ṭīl*) (Zaynū, 1987, pp. 12–14). *Tanbīhāt Hāmmah* also criticises the presentation of a variant reading at Q 65:1. Zaynū reports that he consulted a specialist in the readings and was told that the reading could not be presented without adequate explanation (Zaynū, 1987, pp. 11–12). The specialist functions as a credentialing device, allowing the critic to speak for the division of expertise within the Qur'anic sciences as well as for creed. The critique of hadith works in the same way. The accuracy of attribution, the completeness of wording, and the grade of a report become measures of trustworthiness (*amānah*) (Zaynū, 1987, pp. 13–14). These are legitimate questions, but the polemic goes beyond verification when weaknesses in a number of examples are used to fix a permanent identity, such as being weak in hadith, untrustworthy, or ignorant of the discipline in use. Table 2 summarises the principal units of controversy.

Table 2. Principal units of controversy and the direction of the charge

Passage	Critic's objection	Nature of the issue	How the charge is extended
Q 68:42 (<i>sāq</i>)	Hadith quoted without the clause ascribing the act to God	Philological, completeness of quotation	Omission read as deliberate support for <i>ta'wīl</i>
Q 33:56	Praise of the Prophet as <i>manba' al-raḥamāt</i> via al-Ṣāwī	Theological, limits of veneration	Linked to <i>ghuluw</i> and possibly <i>shirk</i> ; Sufi profile
Q 38:75	Paraphrase <i>khalaqtu bi-dhātī</i> replaces "hands"	Theological, method on attributes	Read as <i>madhhab al-khalaq</i> leading to <i>ta'ṭīl</i>
Q 65:1	Variant reading given without explanation	Technical, science of readings	Backed by consultation with a specialist
Hadith items	Attribution, wording, and grading	Technical, documentation	Generalised as weakness in hadith and lack of <i>amānah</i>
Source selection	Mixing al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr with al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī, al-Ṭabrisī, al-Ṣāwī	Intertextual, theological affiliation of sources	Sources ranked by distance from the critics' creedal boundary

Source: Zaynū (1987, pp. 7–14); Abū Zayd (1993, pp. 309–313).

Table 2 shows that only two of the six units are technical in a narrow sense, and even these are extended into judgements of character. The remaining units concern theology or intertextual affiliation, and in each case the charge moves from the passage to the author. A comparable movement has been observed among contemporary Salafi preachers, who present the affirmation of attributes "without *takyīf* and without *tahrīf*" as the only acceptable reading of anthropomorphic verses (Romadlon & Biyanto, 2023), and among Salafi scholars who use hadith grading as a tool for asserting authority over madhhab-based traditionalists (Hamdeh, 2021). The escalation is summarised in Figure 2.

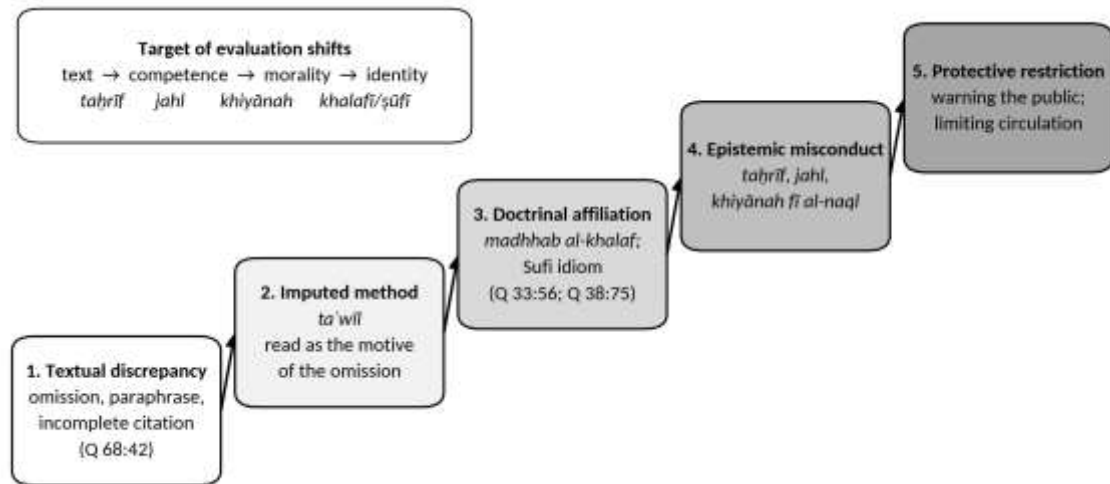


Figure 2. Discursive escalation from exegetical correction to epistemic misconduct

Source: prepared by the author from Zaynū (1987) and Abū Zayd (1993).

Figure 2 traces a staircase. A lack of precision becomes *ta'wil*, *ta'wil* is tied to the school of the later theologians (*madhhab al-khalaf*), and that school is presented as a danger to creed. A slip of the pen would call for a correction on the page, but a threat to readers' creed can justify restricting circulation as an act of protection.

Abū Zayd aggregates these criticisms through a list of refutations of *Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr* and of al-Ṣābūnī's other abridgements. The list turns scattered cases into a pattern. Authors, titles, and objections form an archive that suggests consensus (Abū Zayd, 1993, pp. 310–313). In the passage that follows, Abū Zayd uses the vocabulary of *jaḥl*, *khiyānah*, *talbīs*, *taḥrīf*, and *madhhab al-khalaf*, and he names the mixing of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr with al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī, al-Ṭabrisī, and al-Ṣāwī (Abū Zayd, 1993, p. 311). The list works as a moral map that ranks sources by their distance from the critic's creedal boundary. Table 3 shows how this lexicon distributes the charges.

Table 3. Evaluative lexicon in the critiques and what each term judges

Term	Literal sense	Dimension judged	Discursive effect
<i>taḥrīf</i>	distortion of wording or meaning	Relation to the text	Turns paraphrase or omission into tampering with revelation
<i>jaḥl</i>	ignorance	Competence	Denies the author standing in the discipline
<i>khiyānah fī al-naql</i>	breach of trust in transmission	Morality	Presents a textual lapse as a moral fault
<i>talbīs</i>	deceptive mixing	Intention	Imputes concealment of a creedal position
<i>khalafī, ṣūfī</i>	follower of the later theologians; Sufi	Identity and affiliation	Places the author outside the critics' Sunni boundary

Source: compiled by the author from Zaynū (1987) and Abū Zayd (1993, pp. 309–312).

As Table 3 indicates, the lexicon is performative. One chain of words passes verdict on content, capacity, intention, and affiliation at the same time. In Fairclough's terms, labels of this kind are traces of power relations because they try to make one classification accepted as reality that no longer needs negotiation (Fairclough, 2023). Similar labelling functions have been documented in the contest between Salafis and al-Azhar in Egypt, where charges about creed and Sufism serve to question the Azharī claim to represent authentic Islam (Ismail, 2023).

Discursive Practice: Production, Circulation, and Consumption of the Polemic

The controversy did not gain force from harsh sentences alone. *Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr* itself entered public space through academic networks. Its opening pages carry forewords and commendations from figures who saw a need among students for a concise commentary (al-Ṣābūnī, 1981, pp. 5–11). These endorsements tied the work to education and conferred legitimacy before the reader reached the content. *Tanbīhāt Hāmmah* uses a similar mechanism of legitimation in the opposite direction. Zaynū mentions classroom reading, student questions, consultation with experts, dialogue with the author, requests from scholars, approval by the book-supervision authority, and publication of the epistle (Zaynū, 1987, pp. 5–7). The sequence tells a procedural story of criticism that is observed, checked, put to the author, and announced for the public good. Abū Zayd extends this with a bibliographic technique. He gathers refutations, letters, and the assessments of senior figures into a catalogue of criticism that serves as an archive of orthodoxy, recording who has objected, under what title, and which offence is attributed to al-Ṣābūnī (Abū Zayd, 1993, pp. 309–312). The effect is an impression that the scholarly community has reached a settled verdict.

Distribution changes the meaning of texts. When a criticism moves from a classroom conversation to a printed epistle and is then cited in a larger book, its status changes from a local opinion to a reference. Fairclough stresses that texts are transformed as they pass along chains of discursive practice (Fairclough, 2018). Here each citation added weight and narrowed the distance between the original accusation and the “fact” the reader receives. Consumption was contested as well. Readers of *Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr* sought quick and orderly explanation, while readers of *Tanbīhāt Hāmmah* sought guidance on distinguishing safe commentaries from dangerous ones. Al-Ṣābūnī offers mediation through the selection of the tradition, and his critics offer mediation through the supervision of that selection. The conflict concerned the position of gatekeeper between tradition and the public. Audiences, however, are not passive. Research on Salafi media shows that listeners accept some teachings, reject others, and negotiate them with the religious habitus they already have (Rosidi, 2024). Neither the popularity of *Ṣafwat* nor the publication of refutations guarantees that readers accepted either side wholesale.

Sociocultural Practice: Scholarly Patronage and Saudi Religious Authority

The Saudi religious field was historically shaped by the relationship between the ruling family and the ulama who inherited the Najdī reform movement. Rulers managed the state and security while the ulama supplied legal language and religious legitimacy,

in a division of labour that changed over time (Bunzel, 2023). Modern institutionalisation through universities, ministries, fatwa bodies, missionary agencies, and the supervision of printing gave religious authority a bureaucratic form, and the Islamic University of Medina became a hub of a transnational religious economy in which material and spiritual capital were exchanged on unequal terms (Farquhar, 2016). The doctrine of obedience to those in authority (*ṭāʿat walī al-amr*) could strengthen political legitimacy, but the state could also constrain scholars, select voices it found suitable, and redirect religious priorities (Al-Rasheed, 2021; Bunzel, 2025). Studies of post-Salafism show that state policy, public pressure, and internal revision have fragmented contemporary Salafi authority (Sinani, 2022).

During the polemic, nonetheless, definitions of *ahl al-sunnah* and *manhaj al-salaf* had institutional consequences. The critics defended a reading and, with it, the right to decide which sources could be taught without warning. In Fairclough's vocabulary, the order of discourse limited intertextual possibilities by deciding which voices could be combined and which mixtures were dangerous. The pattern approaches religious securitisation, in which theological difference is constructed as a threat to the creed of the community so that measures beyond ordinary refutation come to seem reasonable (Mohiuddin, 2025). Table 4 grades the evidence on which claims about power in this case can rest.

Table 4. Evidential grading of claims about power in the controversy

Claim	Evidence in the corpus	Grade
Critiques invoked senior scholars and specialist consultation	Explicit statements in Zaynū's preface (1987, pp. 5–7, 11–12)	Documented fact
A book-supervision authority approved the critique	Reported by Zaynū (1987, p. 7)	Documented fact (as reported by the critic)
Distribution of certain abridgements by al-Ṣābūnī was halted	Reported by Abū Zayd (1993, pp. 311–312)	Documented fact (as reported by the critic)
Critics were institutionally close to the Saudi religious establishment and able to affect circulation	Convergence of the two reports with known institutional roles	Reasonable inference
The state authored or commanded the entire critique	No decree, administrative trail, or correspondence in the corpus	Unproven conjecture

Source: analysis by the author following the grading shown in Figure 1.

Table 4 shows where the evidence is firm and where it stops. Zaynū mentions the approval of the book-supervision authority, and Abū Zayd reports that the distribution of certain abridgements was halted (Abū Zayd, 1993, pp. 311–312; Zaynū, 1987, p. 7). These reports establish institutional proximity and a capacity to regulate circulation. Without decrees, administrative records, or correspondence, however, one cannot

conclude that the state wrote or ordered the critique. The finding is consistent with research showing that patronage and clerical agency coexist, with state-backed scholars keeping room to criticise even while benefiting from official support (Thurston, 2023).

4. Discussion

Two Regimes of Exegetical Legitimacy

The first research question asked how al-Ṣābūnī built the authority of his commentary and how the critics contested it. The findings answer it by describing a clash between two regimes of legitimacy, summarised in Figure 3. The first is the synthetic-pedagogical regime. Here the quality of a commentary is measured by the ability to select, simplify, order, and convey the tradition clearly. Its governing values are clarity (*wuḍūḥ*), order (*tartīb*), concision (*ikhtiṣār*), and breadth of reading, and the authority of the exegete arises from skill in bringing sources together without burdening readers with every debate. The second is the Salafi regime of textual purification. Quality is judged by accuracy of wording, transparency of sources, classification of hadith, and creedal boundaries. Its governing values are trust in transmission (*amānah fī al-naql*), commitment to the method of the *salaf* (*iltizām bi-manhaj al-salaf*), and a firm separation from *ta'wīl* and from suspect sources. The authority of the critic arises from the right to audit, classify, and warn.

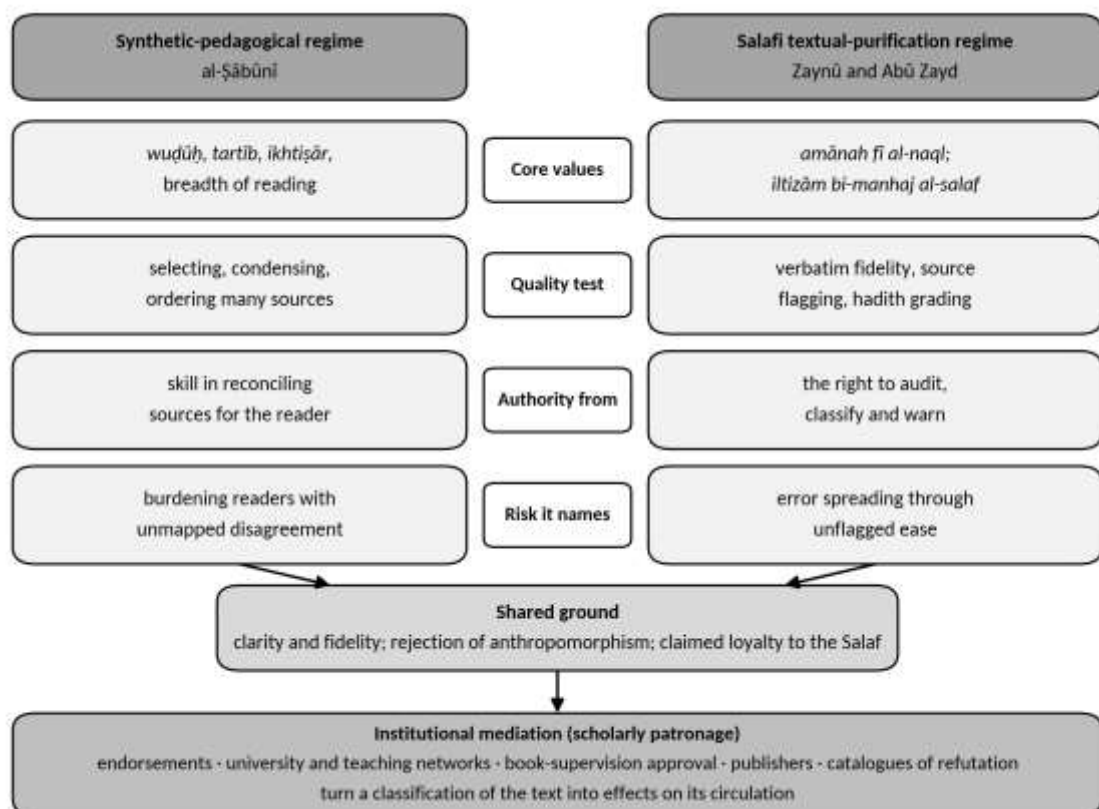


Figure 3. Two regimes of exegetical legitimacy and the institutional mediation that links them

Source: prepared by the author.

Figure 3 shows that the two regimes are not wholly opposed. Al-Ṣābūnī also claims precision and respect for the *salaf*, and his critics grant that readers need accessible commentary. The conflict hardened because shared values were given different measures. For al-Ṣābūnī, *amānah* can mean conveying the results of selection honestly in new language. For Abū Zayd, it requires preserving the wording and marking the theological framework of each source. This explains why technical revision could not settle the polemic. Once the critique had fixed the author's identity as *khalaḥfī*, Sufi, untrustworthy, and weak in hadith, every new case was read as further proof of a pattern.

This result extends earlier work in two ways. Hamdeh (2021) showed that the dispute between al-Albānī and madhhab-based traditionalists was at bottom a dispute about scholarly authority, and Ismail (2023) found that Salafi challenges to al-Azhar combine creed, Sufism, and institutional rivalry. The present case shows the same dynamic at work on a single commentary and identifies the mechanism that converts a philological objection into a verdict on identity. The findings also give textual grounding to the claim that *tawḥīd al-asmā' wa-l-ṣifāt* functions as a criterion of Salafi belonging (Nahouza, 2018; Ťupek & Beránek, 2025). In the critiques of *Ṣafwat*, completeness of quotation matters because it serves the affirmation of attributes, which suggests that the boundary of belonging is enforced through ordinary editorial judgements and not only through explicit creedal statements. Adli et al. (2025) describe the Salafi–Ash'arī dispute over the divine names as a site of authority-building with symbolic as well as doctrinal dimensions. The *Ṣafwat* controversy shows how that symbolic dimension is produced in writing, through naming, listing, and cataloguing.

Patronage, Circulation, and the Saudi Religious Field

The second and third research questions concerned the production and circulation of the critiques and the role of Saudi institutions. The findings suggest that the link between tafsir and power is often sought in political verses or in praise of rulers, while this case reveals a subtler form. Power operated through standards of quotation, lists of recommended sources, the reputation of office, printing permission, and the ability to turn an evaluation into a rule of circulation. Gusmian (2019) demonstrated for New Order Indonesia that the production and reception of tafsir are always bound up with the social position of the exegete and with regimes of knowledge. In the Saudi context of the *Ṣafwat* dispute, that relationship worked above all through the supervision of orthodox boundaries. Bourdieu's account of symbolic power helps explain why. The force of an utterance depends on recognition of the person and institution that speak it (Rey, 2018). A label of “deviant” spoken in private lacks the effect of one backed by endorsement, publication, and a supervisory body. Recent Bourdieusian studies of religious authority in Mauritania and Indonesia reach a comparable conclusion, finding that established actors defend their position in the religious field by controlling what counts as legitimate doctrine (Hermansah et al., 2026; Thurston, 2023).

The study also speaks to the disagreement noted in the introduction between accounts that stress state control and accounts that reject it. Readings of Saudi religious policy as deliberate securitisation (Dogan-Akkas, 2026; Mohiuddin, 2025) and as curated

statecraft (Sheikh, 2025) find partial support here, since a supervisory authority is reported to have approved the critique and distribution was reportedly restricted. At the same time, the evidence does not show a chain of command running from the state to the text. It fits better with studies that find religious scholars keeping interpretive initiative within state-sponsored settings (Lukman, 2023; Mursyid et al., 2024). The present article therefore proposes the notion of *mediated patronage*: scholarly critics act on their own theological convictions, while their proximity to institutions converts those convictions into effects on circulation. This modifies Fairclough's notion of the order of discourse by adding an explicit circulation dimension, in which the question is not only which voices may be combined in a text but also which texts may reach which readers. Saudi-backed networks of translation, education, and publishing have carried similar exegetical preferences abroad (Farquhar, 2016; Yakubovych, 2024), including to Indonesia, where Saudi-linked Salafi schools and literature have grown in influence (Chaplin, 2021; Makruf & Asrori, 2022).

Weighing the Critique Proportionately

Critical discourse analysis should not be used to dismiss a critique merely because the critic enjoyed institutional proximity. Several objections by Zaynū and Abū Zayd touch serious academic issues: the accuracy of hadith attribution, the completeness of quotation, the difference between paraphrase and source text, and the explanation of the status of a reading. A concise commentary is not exempt from standards of verification. Because it is widely read, it needs a transparency that allows readers to tell quotation from summary and summary from the author's own choice. Conversely, accuracy in a number of cases does not justify unlimited generalisation. Labels such as *jahl* and *khiyānah* require heavier proof than error or incompleteness. Using al-Zamakhsharī for rhetoric is not the same as accepting the whole of Mu'tazilī theology, and drawing on al-Rāzī does not make the compiler identical with every argument of his *kalām*. Intertextuality has degrees of adoption that should be distinguished. Studies of compilatory commentaries show that works built on earlier tafsir select, supplement, and reorder their sources with an independent authorial hand (Amin et al., 2025; Bahtiar & Qadafy, 2025).

Critique must also separate factual error from theological difference that has precedent within Sunni history. *Ta'wīl* of the attribute verses was used by part of the Sunni scholarly tradition to preserve divine transcendence (*tanzīh*), while other scholars chose consignment (*tafwīd*) or affirmation without modality (*ithbāt bi-lā takyīf*) (Holtzman, 2018; Suleiman, 2024). Ibn Taymiyya's rejection of rationalist *ta'wīl* rested on a detailed theory of reason and revelation (El-Tobgui, 2020), which shows that the Salafi position is itself a reasoned hermeneutical choice and not a mere default. Equating all such difference with betrayal of revelation narrows the internal history of Sunnism and turns a methodological choice into epistemic excommunication. Salafi editors have been shown to insert their own interpretive positions while claiming mere continuity with classical scholarship (Sunarwoto, 2024), and the standard historiography of tafsir has been criticised for applying Salafi criteria as if they were neutral (Qadafy, 2022).

Comparative work on hadith criticism likewise shows that Salafi and Sufi-leaning scholars share basic criteria but part ways on how apparent contradictions should be resolved (Razak et al., 2025).

Principles of verification, a hierarchy of evidence, and openness to the complexity of the tradition are needed to keep criticism from sliding into epistemological extremism (Rohayana & Sofi, 2021). With these principles in mind, three separations should be maintained. The first separates textual error from presumed authorial intent. The second separates the use of one element of a source from acceptance of its whole ideology. The third separates the scholarly authority to criticise from the administrative power to restrict circulation. These separations make criticism fairer and easier to test. Al-Ṣābūnī can be corrected where his quotations are inaccurate, and his critics can be criticised where their labels exceed the evidence. The point has practical weight in contexts such as Indonesia, where contemporary Salafi teachers use new media to spread their reading of the attribute verses and sharpen divisions with traditionalist communities (Syarif et al., 2023), and where discourse about Salafi da'wa online both preserves textual orthodoxy and adapts it to wider audiences (Ridho et al., 2026).

The study has limitations. It rests on published texts and on the critics' own reports of institutional involvement. It did not have access to administrative decisions, supervisory correspondence, or publishers' records, and it did not analyse any responses written by al-Ṣābūnī or by his defenders. Other printings may differ in pagination. These limits explain the evidential grading applied throughout.

5. Conclusion

The controversy over *Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr* shows that the history of modern tafsir is also a history of policing the boundaries of knowledge. In answer to the first research question, (1) al-Ṣābūnī designed his commentary as a synthetic-pedagogical project in which a broad tradition was selected, condensed, and arranged for modern readers, and this strategy gave the work both readability and authority while exposing it to criticism about paraphrase, omission, hadith documentation, variant readings, and the mixing of sources. At the level of text, the critics used oppositions of *salaf* and *khalaf*, *amānah* and *khiyānah*, complete and truncated, and *tawhīd* and *ghuluw* to raise methodological difference to the level of epistemic misconduct. In answer to the second question, (2) specialist consultation, endorsements, catalogues of refutation, publication, and repetition created the impression of a scholarly consensus and turned individual judgements into collective verdicts. In answer to the third question, (3) the proximity of the critics to teaching institutions, book supervision, and Saudi networks of legitimacy gave their classifications material consequences for circulation.

The polemic therefore brought together two regimes of legitimacy, the synthetic-pedagogical and the Salafi regime of textual purification. Both care about clarity and trustworthiness, but they draw different lines around selection, paraphrase, and the use of sources. Conclusions about power must remain measured. The data support scholarly patronage, institutional proximity, and control over circulation, but they are not sufficient to show that the critique as a whole was the product of a state chain of command. The most defensible position is to test the critique philologically while

explaining the social conditions that gave it force. Further research could extend this approach in three directions: archival work on Saudi book-supervision records and publishers' files, analysis of any replies by al-Ṣābūnī and his defenders, and reception studies of how *Ṣafwat al-Tafāsīr* and the critiques are read in pesantren and Islamic universities in Indonesia and elsewhere.

6. Author Contributions

Abd. Malik Al Munir is the sole author of this article and was responsible for conceptualisation, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, writing of the original draft, and review and editing of the final manuscript.

7. Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript the author used Claude (Anthropic), a generative AI assistant, to translate and restructure the Indonesian draft into English, to support language editing, to draw Figures 1–3 from the author's analytical categories, and to locate and check the bibliographic metadata of secondary sources. The author reviewed and revised all AI-assisted output, verified every reference against its source, and takes full responsibility for the content of the article.

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