

Al-Quran Preserves Civilization and Humanity: Methodological Reflections

Jasser Auda

In the name of Allah, the Merciful Sovereign, the Merciful Forgiver. All praise is due to Allah, Lord of the worlds. Peace be upon the happiest of His creation and the seal of His messengers, Muhammad, and his family. May Allah be pleased with the Migrants and the Supporters and those who follow them in excellence until the Day of Judgment.

Summary

Amongst the Quranic miracles (al-i'jaz al-qur'ani), the signs that prove its divine origin, is the miracle of its continuous ability to address and improve civilization ('umran) and humanity (insaniyah) across history and geography! This article reflects upon the question of methodology or "how" we can read the Quran today in a way that allows us to benefit from its "civilizational miracle" (al-i'jaz al-'umrani); the goal is to (re-)construct the current hegemonic systems towards the Quranic objectives (maqasid al-qur'an).

Introduction

Allah Almighty says:

﴿وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِّمَّا نَزَّلْنَا عَلَىٰ عَبْدِنَا فَأْتُوا بِسُورَةٍ مِّثْلِهِ وَادْعُوا شُهَدَاءَكُمْ مِّنْ

دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ﴾ سورة البقرة - 23

**“AND IF YOU ARE IN DOUBT ABOUT WHAT WE HAVE SENT DOWN
UPON OUR SERVANT, THEN PRODUCE A SURAH LIKE IT AND CALL
UPON YOUR WITNESSES OTHER THAN ALLAH, IF YOU ARE TRUTHFUL”
(AL-BAQARAH 23)**

This ayah—from the first few pages of the Quran in Surah Al-Baqarah—contains the first mention in the Quran of the miraculous nature (i'jaz) of the Quran, which is an ongoing challenge from the time of the Prophet's mission to produce something like it, whether it be the entire Quran, ten surahs, or even just one surah as this ayah states.

The term "surah" is a Quranic concept and should not be equated with "chapters" or "sections" as in human writings; rather, it is a collection of ayahs—another Quranic concept that are not "verses"—enclosed by meanings, hence named "surah." The expression here is "from its like", and not "like it" or "similar to it," meaning merely from the same genre of this speech, not necessarily identical to it.

The tradition (sunnah) of Allah sending a clear sign with each prophet that people cannot dispute has been consistent across all messages, and various forms of these signs come with the stories of the messengers. Since the Prophet ﷺ is the Seal of the Prophets, this divine tradition required that his miraculous sign ﷺ remains available to access and valid until the Day of Resurrection, which is this great Quran.

"And they say, 'Why are not signs sent down to him from his Lord?' Say, 'The signs are only with Allah, and I am only a clear warner.' Is it not sufficient for them that We revealed to you the Book which is recited to them?" (Al-Anqabut 50-51). In the hadith the Prophet ﷺ said: "There has been no prophet among the prophets but was given miracles/signs because of which people believed, but what I have been given is divine inspiration which Allah has revealed to me, so I hope that my followers will outnumber the followers of the other prophets on the Day of Resurrection." (Bukhari 7274)

The terms "miracle" (mu'jizah) and "inimitability" (i'jaz) are human-made concepts although the root ('-j-z) is in the Quran, as in: "And Allah is not to be caused failure (yu'jizahu) by anything in the heavens or on the earth" (Fatir 44). Nothing can cause Allah Almighty to fail, but humans will fail if they try to replicate the signs of the messengers, including this Quranic challenge. Scholars, both past and present, have enumerated the various aspects of this inimitability that distinguish the Quran from all human speech. Traditionally, they have categorized these aspects into (1) linguistic inimitability, (2) informative inimitability, (3) scientific inimitability, (4) legislative inimitability, and (5) psychological inimitability.

(1) Regarding the rhetorical inimitability (i'jaz bayani): Anyone familiar with the Arabic language can clearly distinguish the unique composition of this speech, both in its overall structure and in detail, from all other human speech, including that of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Additionally, it was revealed over twenty-three years in a non-sequential order, yet each revelation fits perfectly into its respective place in the Quran, exhibiting a coherence beyond human capacity.

(2) Among the aspects of inimitability mentioned by commentators is the inimitability of information, both historical and future. This refers to the accuracy of the Quran's references to historical events that were unknown at the time of the Prophet ﷺ. Evidence for this grows as researchers uncover more about human history and the history of nations. Remarkably, this historical narration comes without specific dates, using terms like "before" and "after," presenting a concept of time with complexity and relativity unknown in human speech. Additionally, the Quran's accurate predictions about future events, which have always come true, further establish its inimitability.

(3) Many contemporary scholars have also explored what they term as scientific inimitability. This refers to the precision of Quranic descriptions related to various aspects of creation in the universe. There is a distinction, however, between scientific theories and scientific facts, and the Arabic Quranic text is chosen with exceptional precision to accommodate evolving theories. This ongoing alignment with new scientific discoveries is a form of inimitability unknown even in the most advanced scientific books, which continuously evolve and correct themselves. Furthermore, the Quran is free from the numerous scientific errors that were prevalent and accepted in the era of its revelation, avoiding these errors without explicitly correcting them.

(4) Contemporary scholars have also written about what they term "legislative inimitability," referring to the superiority and nobility of Islamic law compared to other human-made laws, both ancient and modern. The ability of its principles to meet legislative needs for a righteous and balanced society is unmatched by any human effort.

(5) Psychological inimitability: We can identify three different dimensions: responding to the innermost thoughts, miraculous healing power of the Quran, and the miraculous ease of memorizing and recalling the Quran. These are all signs of the Quran's divine origin.

Civilizational Miracle (al-i'jaz al-'umrani)

Let's turn our attention now to a different kind of miracle, which I chose to term as: Civilizational Miracle (al-i'jaz al-'umrani). It is the miracle of the Quran's continuous ability to (1) address and (2) improve civilization ('umran) and humanity (insaniyah) across history and geography. Since the time of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in Seventh Century Arabia and until today in every city around our world, the Quran is addressing humanity and is indeed relevant to deal with its challenges and improve its life.

The big question, however, is: If the Quran is able to do that, how come humanity, including Muslims are at where they are today. The answer is two-fold: (1) Benefiting from the Quran requires believing in it. Individuals and societies who do not truly believe in the Quran -Muslims or non-Muslims- will not accept to build their lives on its principles and develop their civilization based on its concept of 'Umran. (2) Muslims who believe in the Quran must endorse a methodology of reading the Quran in a way that allows them to benefit from its "civilizational miracle" (al-i'jaz al-'umrani). They must set a goal of (re-)constructing the current hegemonic systems towards the Quranic objectives (maqasid al-qur'an). The above-mentioned methodology of reading the Quran is what this article is about.

Purposes (Maqasid)

The purposes of a believer in this earthly life journey are defined by his Lord, the Most High, and foremost among these purposes is the reason for creating humankind itself, such as worship, which Allah has spoken about: (And I did not create the jinn and humankind except to worship Me - Adh-Dhariyat 56). Worship aims to achieve heedfulness: (O people, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you so that you may become heedful - Al-Baqarah 21). Heedfulness aims to achieve gratitude: (And fear Allah that you may be grateful - Al Imran 123). Another purpose of humankind's creation is to act as successors (khulafa) on earth, as understood from Allah's words: (They [angels] said, "Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?" He said, "Indeed, I know that which you do not know" - Al-Baqarah 30).

Successorship also implies ruling with justice and adhering to His path: (O Dawud, We made you a successor upon the earth, so judge between the people in truth and do not follow desire - Sad 26), and it implies trial: (And He made you successors on the earth to see how you would act - Al-A'raf 129). Furthermore, the trials of this world are meant to test who among you is best in action: (He who created death and life to test you which of you is best in deed - Al-Mulk 2). Thus, the purposes of human existence intertwine and support each other in this life, which the servant of Allah should aim to realize practically when he/she engages in heart-based or physical deeds. These Quranic purposive meanings continuously interact with the realities of people in every era and context, resulting in purposes for each believer's actions and purposes for the day to day paths they follow. In our time, it is necessary to endorse a general objective for Quranic Studies that is along the following lines: "A contemporary derivation of a network of Quranic maqasidi/purposive systems, contributing to the reconstruction of hegemonic systems towards achieving the purposes of the Quran."

It suits the context here to briefly outline what is meant by each word of this statement that conveys the general purpose of Quranic Studies required for realizing the "civilizational miracle" (al-i'jaz al-'umrani) of the Quran.

A contemporary derivation of a network of Quranic maqasidi systems

As for derivation (istinbat), I mean by it the concept mentioned in the Almighty's words: "When there comes to them some matter touching (public) safety or fear, they divulge it. If they had only referred it to the Messenger, or to those charged with authority among them, the proper investigators would have derived it for them" (An-Nisa 83). This concept is broader than what is conventionally termed as derivation among logicians or jurists, who usually contrast it with induction. In its logical depth, they subject derivation to the mechanisms of Greek logic (Organon), unlike induction which involves the inquirer proposing a pre-existing issue or relationship and then surveying the research field—here, the Holy Quran—to prove that issue, which they then classify between an incomplete induction that does not encompass all cases and a complete induction which they formally consider to encompass all cases, etc.

I believe that this logic—with its derivations and inductions—falls short of fulfilling what we learn from the expansive, complex Quranic logic, which is a purposeful Arabic connected, integrative, multi-dimensional, and renewable logic as will be discussed shortly. Therefore, the process of derivation should be the generation of meanings from the following yields: purpose-seeking in the sense of searching for goals at all levels, connection-seeking in the sense of searching for links in all forms, integration in the sense of starting from a higher conception in which the parts under investigation are composed, and multi-dimensionality in the sense of moving beyond binary deterministic choices among philosophical, linguistic, disciplinary, and foundational classifications in all their colors, and to consider them all as valid dimensions. From these yields, a meaning intended by the researcher striving for the purpose—by the grace of Allah alone—emerges.

And as for describing derivation as contemporary, it is because no human has the right to claim that his exegesis or purposefulness is the definitive and/or final interpretation or intended meaning of the ayahs and surahs, because even if the exegesis or purposefulness is valid, the full comprehension of all its aspects is of the knowledge that only Allah knows: "And none know its interpretation but Allah" (Al Imran 7). The complete interpretation of the Quran will not be revealed until the Day of Resurrection: "The day when its interpretation comes, those who had forgotten it before will say, 'Indeed, the messengers of our Lord had come with the truth'" (Al-A'raf 53). Therefore, the nature of exegesis (tafsir)—meaning the explanation of meanings to make them accessible to seekers of knowledge—, and interpretation (ta'wil)—meaning the diversion of the apparent to the underlying meaning—, both require that what can be renewed should be continuously renewed in every era and context. And because the derivation of purposes is a branch of both exegesis and interpretation, then it naturally evolves with changing eras and contexts.

As for the network, it is the closest structure I know to express the complex relationships in which parts are connected without a hierarchical order necessarily imagined in the form of simple geometric shapes. The hierarchies that are closer to Allah's sunnah in His creation—whether the creation we categorize as materials or as meanings—are intertwined in a way that does not conform to these shapes.

As for the system, I mean by it any composite of parts that are organized to achieve a purpose, whether we know it or not. The Quranic purposive systems that we derive extend over the entire Quran, or a chapter of it, or a group of chapters, or a section of a chapter, or a Quranic topic, among many categories. The purposive system is composed of sub-purposes that we derive from its parts and dimensions within that scope, and the relationships of the systems with each other are complex. Then, a system might be composed of other systems, imagined to be structured on various frameworks, and systems might intersect in shared elements between them, and systems might connect with each other in a sense of revelation or a consideration from reality.

Furthermore, the Quranic topics that we can research in order to identify their objectives/maqasid fall under various categories that are beyond enumeration. Indeed, the Quranic topics themselves are ever-renewing -along with their objectives- with the renewal of sciences and phenomena. Here, I list some of the most prominent of these Quranic topics in a non-sequential and non-exhaustive manner, as follows:

The objectives of beliefs such as belief in Allah -especially knowing Him through His Beautiful Names- and His angels, His books, His messengers, the Last Day, destiny, and other doctrines; the objectives of stories such as the stories of the prophets, past nations, and the biography of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in the Quran, among others; the objectives of parables in the context of the surah and the context of lived reality; the objectives of the unwitnessed such as paradise, hell, angels, jinn, the Supreme Assembly (al-mala' al-a'la), the heavens and the earths, and others; the purposes of the creation of witnessed creation, such as mountains, trees, livestock, stars, the sun, the moon, water, wind, and others; the objectives of ritual acts or rites such as the purposes of prayer, almsgiving, fasting, pilgrimage, minor pilgrimage, vows, supplication, and others; the objectives of various types of legislation, such as social aspects, including the objectives of marriage, divorce, custody, maintaining kinship ties, and neighborliness, and like transactions among people, including the objectives of sales, writing debt, obligatory inheritances, and spending, and so forth.

We should then explore the objectives of the Prophetic Sunnah, peace and blessings be upon the Prophet, as indicated primarily by the Quran. Naturally, we were guided in this regard by the classifications of earlier scholars of the Sunnah, such as

verbal, practical, and tacit Sunnah, as well as the Prophet's actions intended for legislation, judiciary matters, political leadership, advice, and others. This also includes what is referred to as the objectives of legislative silence (al-sukut al-tashree'i), meaning the omission of specific details in the Quran or Sunnah to avoid making them immutable, so that their rulings can remain flexible with changing circumstances. These topics are mentioned in the relevant places within the interpretations of the ayahs.

Moreover, the topics of the Quran are constantly changing, not because the Quranic text itself changes, but because the understanding of it is renewed with the advancement of knowledge in every era and land. This encompasses new fields of knowledge that have recently emerged and have acquired new names in our time.

Therefore, we should explore other objectives in the Quran, such as the objectives of economics, architecture, arts, linguistics, management, planning, environment, law, international politics, anthropology, psychology, space sciences, earth sciences, engineering and environmental sciences, and other emerging sciences, along with the more established disciplines over the past two millennia, such as medicine, agriculture, politics, warfare, history, Arabic and other languages, zoology, and others.

In addition, there are the sciences known as Islamic sciences, such as Quranic interpretation, Hadith, fiqh (in its legislative sense), and the various types of foundational principles, among others. Whether a field is inherited or new, all areas of knowledge are continuously renewed, and deriving objectives from the Quran that should be pursued by these disciplines is a type of understanding that the Quranic community of students must renew in every era.

Then, the topics of the Quran are renewed not only with the advancement of sciences but also with the renewal of lived experiences/phenomena. I personally advocate for the transition of Islamic studies, methodically and gradually, from specialization in sciences based on academic classifications, which categorize fields into humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and applied sciences, to categorizing disciplines according to major lived phenomena and decide on priorities for dealing with them based on Quranic objective priorities. This should be done while integrating the study of phenomena with foundational studies, which are more closely linked to the methodology of engaging with the texts of revelation.

The required reconstruction of hegemonic systems towards achieving the purposes of the Quran

Historic changes can occur within the lifespan of a single generation, provided that generation is prepared for this breakthrough: 'Allah has promised those of you who believe and do righteous deeds that He will surely grant them succession to authority on earth as He granted it to those before them, and that He will establish for them their religion which He has approved for them, and will replace their fear with security for them to worship Me and not associate anything with Me' (An-Nur 55).

As for reconstruction, it refers to observing the presence of good and evil in our reality, according to Islamic standards, then working to enhance the good and support its movements on the ground so that our reality can align more closely with the Quranic objectives. It also involves working to eliminate evil in all its forms and undermine its foundations so that our reality can more fully witness the fulfilment of those objectives. Reconstruction does not mean blindly destroying contemporary hegemonic systems with all the good and benefits for people they include, nor is it merely a cosmetic beautification, as we sometimes see under the guise of “compatibility with Shariah” or its maqasid/objectives, despite their significant deficiencies in terms of principles and practical manifestations, compared to what Allah intended for His servants.

By methodology, I mean the level of fundamental principles and basic theories upon which disciplines and studies are built, and the paradigm that frames the resulting practical applications and real-life institutions.

It is a fact that the magnificent Quran is not a book of history, economics, politics, sociology, architecture, arts, medicine, language, law, astronomy, chemistry, engineering, theology, or any other specialized field that manifests in our academic and practical systems. However, the Quran teaches us how to methodically engage with all these disciplines and all real-life phenomena: how to conceptualize them to start with, then how to support what is right and rectify what is wrong to fulfill the Creator’s objectives in His creation. Contemporary Quranic Studies should attempt to guide the goals of real-world systems in all their dimensions towards fulfilling the systems of Quranic purposes.

The Quran's Approach to Interpreting itself Governs Quranic Studies

The most accurate criteria by which Quranic Studies can be judged are those of the Quran itself. Let us point out a few “shifts”, which must be elaborated on foundationally and practically in the context of Quranic Studies today:

1. From fragmentation or disjointed interpretation to an integrative reading through uncovering a system of comprehensive objectives.
2. From blind imitation without discerning the correctness of transmitted reports to striving in seeking the truth.
3. From a purely theoretical methodology with no practical impact to linking interpretive perspectives with changes in scientific and practical reality.
4. From justification or comparison with scientific and practical reality to judging through Quranic concepts or terminology.
5. From understanding the Sunnah as a parallel or opposing source to the Quran to understanding it as an explanation, elaboration, and application of the Quran.
6. From the logic of contradiction and abrogation in understanding the ayahs to the logic of their consistency at the level of objectives.
7. From postmodern deconstruction of truths to distinguishing between human myths and divine revelation.

Quranic Logic is: Purposeful, Arabic, Connected, Holistic, Multidimensional, and Ever-Renewing

The Quranic logic (mantiq, from the root n-t-q) as I understand it from the Quran itself. Mantiq signifies the indications of signs in all their dimensions that lead us to truths in all their dimensions. This is a different definition from how philosophers perceive logic as rules that automatically lead from premises to conclusions, even though Quranic logic includes these rules, albeit without falling into illusions of absoluteness or constancy.

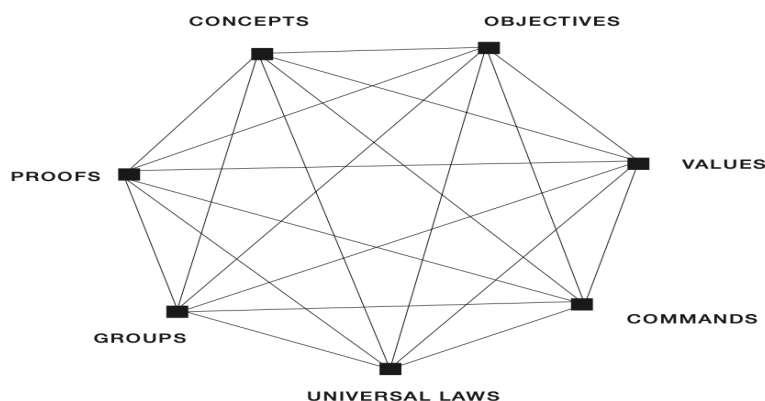
In the Quran, signs in the ayahs are first the sounds of the clear Arabic tongue, which aim, through their sequence of meanings, to signify the truths of the structured and consistent meanings in the Arabic linguistic system. In the Quranic logic, truths also

emerge from studying the communication between signs, arguments, and systems at various levels. This logic does not fall into the limitations of binaries—all binaries—when grasping shades of gray, and even logical shades between opposing ends, because it is based on multiple dimensions and perspectives, all directed toward the truths of the ayahs. The Quranic logic, due to its multidimensional nature, employs various means to establish arguments for the truth. It is constantly renewing with the changing times.

Conceptual Elements Emerge from Methodological Objectives

The key to answering the question of conceptualization to be the key to all knowledge: knowledge of Allah, which means answering the question: how does revelation teach us about Allah, the Almighty? And what meanings shape our knowledge of Him, methodologically speaking? This question led me to a level of Quranic objectives that I called elsewhere methodological objectives,¹ which are: achieving objectives, correcting concepts, classifying categories, observing the divine laws, adhering to values, establishing arguments, and acting upon commands.

These seven objectives produced what I called the composite framework or the seven conceptual elements: objectives, concepts, categories, divine laws, values, arguments, and commands. This composite seven-element framework—with all of its elements and their complex connections—lies at the heart of all definitions, and from their manifestations in every ayah, surah or topic, we can deduce the objectives that ultimately lead to the comprehensive and general objectives on all levels of analysis.



¹ Refer to: Jasser Auda, *Re-envisioning Islamic Scholarship: Maqasid Methodology as a New Approach*. Wales: Caritas, 2021. Arabic: *Al-Manhajiyyah Al-Maqasidiyyah*, Istanbul: Al-Maqasid, 2021.

A New Classification of Disciplines that Places the Quran at Their Core

How can Quranic Studies transform lived reality? The answer to this question, after the pure grace of Allah, lies in influencing three areas: research, education, and institutions. However, the desired goals in these three fields cannot be achieved within current approaches to Islamic studies, as they suffer -methodologically speaking- from inconsistencies with the epistemological, logical, and cognitive principles that the Quran intended. Thus, current approaches to Islamic studies generally do not represent the comprehensiveness of the Quranic concepts of Islam, universe, and humanity, and do not reflect the inclusiveness of the concept of fiqh (deep understanding) and ijtihad (reasoning) across all aspects of life.

Today's Islamic studies encompass the history of exegesis, hadith, jurisprudence, theology, Sufism, history, Islamic political theory, and various branches of jurisprudence without critically evaluating the old -or new- based on the standards of the Quran. Islamic studies, which can be called "Islamic thought" and which include "maqasid studies" (studies of Islamic objectives), adopt the prevalent classifications of knowledge as they exist in secular educational and research systems. They do not critically evaluate, based on the Quran, the epistemological foundations on which these classifications were built, which leads to justifying the existing reality and falling into cognitive contradictions, postmodern fragmentation and eventual nihilism.

Thus, a classification of disciplines in Islamic Studies is suggested, as follows: foundational methodological studies, specialized critical studies, contemporary phenomena studies, and institutional planning studies.

Foundational Methodological Studies involve studying the sciences of revelation, including jurisprudence, exegesis, hadith, theology, and language. The goal is not to trace the historical works or authors but rather to study them in light of the revelation itself, aiming to provide a foundation for the applied branches: specialized critical studies, contemporary phenomena studies, and institutional planning studies. Naturally, these four areas are interconnected, and a scholar in foundational sciences may address issues in applied branches or vice versa.

Specialized Critical Studies involve dealing with contemporary sciences and disciplines, not to reject them entirely in the name of tradition, "Islamize" them in an apologetic manner, or dismantle them. Instead, it aims to reconstruct them wholly or partially based on the principles and purposes of the revelation. This will eventually lead to reshaping educational disciplines that redefining professional specializations, retaining useful aspects grounded in the Quranic conception—objectives, concepts, categories, principles, values, arguments, and commands—and establishing overarching principles for every field. These principles inform structures, products, and institutions, while dismantling and rebuilding what contradicts with a comprehensive Quranic conception of objectives. This approach fosters creativity in education, research, and action, either within a reformulated discipline or through interdisciplinary studies, which is the methodological path to transcend disciplines, leading to Phenomena Studies.

As for Phenomena Studies, they are the proposed way in order to establish authentic and independent Islamic educational and research and institutional systems, free from contemporary secular dominance. These studies can benefit from foundational methodological studies, specialized critical studies, and planning studies to support them. They also leverage previous efforts in phenomena studies that align with Islamic methodology. Encouraging these studies can help liberate humanity from the dominance of economic interests in scientific disciplines, which has led to widespread injustices and corruption in research, education, and institutional systems.

Applying this idea to education means that Islamic studies students, according to their educational level, should study a group of major and interconnected phenomena, representing a comprehensive field of knowledge, all based on a holistic exegesis of the Quran at the foundation of their pedagogy.² Their subsequent academic studies and professional work will align with a network of specialists in the same or related phenomena, who are connected to a network of institutional implementations in order to change the reality on the ground in every context.

This article is an attempt to offer methodological ideas as to how to realize the Quran's "civilizational miracle" (al-i'jaz al-'umrani) in our time. Allah is the Best Guide.

² I suggest: Jasser Auda, *Al-Tafsir Al-Maqasidi*, 5 volumes published so far (3 others under preparation), Maqasid Institute for the Study of the Quran (MISQ), 2025.