

Farouk Abdul Razzaq Al-Alusi's Approach to Historical Writing

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Abstract

This research is titled "Farouk Abdul Razzaq Al-Alusi's Approach to Historical Writing." It comprises an introduction, two sections, followed by a conclusion, and a list of sources and references. In the introduction, we outline the content covered by the research. The first section addresses "his approach to authoring books," comprising a set of points in which we discuss the period during which his books were written, their distinguishing features, the style he employed in writing them, and other matters. In the second section, we discuss "his approach to writing research studies," likewise organized into a set of points addressing the introductions with which al-Alusi prefaced his research, his citations of the Noble Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah, his style in presenting topics, his method of presenting scholarly material, and other matters. The research concludes with a conclusion in which we set out a number of findings, including: that al-Alusi possessed scholarly competence in the subjects he studied, mastering their foundations and producing answers that opened the door to further writing on them. He relied on a comprehensive body of research drawing on numerous and varied sources — linguistic, historical, and others. Finally, we compiled a list of the sources and references upon which we relied in this research.

Keywords: al-Alusi, methodology (approach), historical

Introduction

Farouk Abdul Razzaq al-Alusi is considered one of the towering scholarly figures in the field of historical writing, whether in his authored books or his research studies, which together encompassed diverse topics in Islamic history across its various eras. He had a keen sense for identifying what was important and worthy of careful selection and investigation.

Having reviewed the biography of the historian al-Alusi and his written works, it became clear to us that he was distinguished by the approach of the impartial historian in his study of events. This is what we will discuss in two main sections, covering his authored books and then his research published in scholarly journals, highlighting this through important points without delving into unnecessary or tedious detail, in keeping with ease of presentation for the sake of scholarly benefit.

His Approach to Authoring Books

Content and Substance:

1. His book-length works fall into two historical phases. The first phase extended from 2012, when he published his first book, until 2015; his output during these three years consisted of five books.(1) The second phase of his authorship consisted of draft manuscripts he left behind, which appeared after his death in the form of printed books, as his family had them printed and published in 2023.(2)
2. The books published during the first period were distinguished by precision and thorough scrutiny, which undoubtedly stems from his personally reviewing and overseeing them. The books printed after his death, however, are in need of correction for the lapses and errors they contain, and require review by specialists when issued as a second edition.
3. Al-Alusi's style in his books on the topics he chose was marked by precision and clarity, achieved by returning to the original wellsprings of his sources and relying on the texts contained therein according to their age, as well as by adopting the viewpoints presented in modern works or opposing and refuting them on the basis of historical evidence and testimony. He spared no effort in reaching these sources, even where

they were manuscripts that had not yet seen the light of publication. In his book on the study and critical edition (*tahqiq*) of *Tuhfat al-Lata'if* by Ibn Fahd al-Makki (d. 954 AH), he drew on a large number of manuscripts held in various centers and locations, both inside and outside Iraq.⁽³⁾ He also relied on printed primary sources as well as modern references — not only in the book he critically edited, but across all his works, each of which he appended with a list of sources and references spanning manuscripts, printed works, and modern studies, as well as, at times, foreign references, university theses and dissertations, articles, and others.

4. Al-Alusi was conscious of what he wrote; he had a clear vision of the methodology he employed. He was among the historians calling for a rereading of history, and his contributions to historical writing were grounded in critique. He held that clarity of vision was essential, along with adopting a new framework for historical events, away from selective bias or the interpretation of history according to the agenda of a particular people or faction. Surveying the contents of his authored books as a whole, we find that he does not simply repeat what others have said; rather, he examined events with a discerning, scrutinizing eye reflecting precision and thorough verification, combined with critique grounded in historical evidence and testimony.⁽⁴⁾

5. The titles of his books from the second phase, published after his death — may God have mercy on him — were often lengthy and sometimes carried the findings of the research within them, which suggests to the reader that the conclusions were predetermined. We believe, though without certainty, that these were additions made by the publisher rather than part of the original title set by the author before his death, since it seems implausible that an author would state and clarify the findings of his research or book in this manner. For example, but not limited to, his book titled *The Mawali and Their Role in Spreading Islam*⁽⁵⁾ had the phrase “and the Arab Islamic conquests” added to it, followed by “(and some of them adopted destructive ideas and misguided notions, and opposed the Arabs' right to lead the Muslims)”; and his book *India and Its Neighbors from the Islamic Conquest to Disintegration and Partition* had the phrase “and the deviant ideas adopted by the regimes that ruled them” added. Here it may be said that the study's conclusion appears evident in this title or others, and this observation — as noted — may have emerged for marketing reasons on the part of the publisher itself.

6. Al-Alusi's works are generally characterized by being directed not only at specialist academics and researchers but also at non-specialists, who can benefit from them and are encouraged to acquire them and learn about the important historical dimensions they contain.

7. The subjects on which al-Alusi wrote were diverse, spanning political and social topics, the pre-Islamic “Days of the Arabs” (*Ayyam al-'Arab*), as well as Orientalism and Orientalists — indicating his broad knowledge and wide reading. He was highly productive and prolific in authorship, enriching the historical library with numerous references.

8. Al-Alusi followed the descriptive-historical method, which predominates in his writings; he frequently presented topics in chronological order, relying on historical sources and drawing on the breadth of his knowledge. He did not, however, confine himself to this method alone; in many places in his works he adopted the analytical method as well, responding to, elaborating on, or presenting texts and offering his own opinion on them. For instance, discussing the standing of the mawali in the Abbasid state and the influence and control they held, he stated that the Abbasid caliphate appeared to have begun to falter in its policy, no longer trusting even the mawali forces loyal to it — including those who had played a role in its founding — fearing they might seize power for themselves; it therefore worked to fragment their unity, for example by killing Abu Muslim al-Khurasani.⁽⁶⁾

9. Al-Alusi was known for scholarly integrity in his writing; he was precise in transmitting scholarly material and careful to present topics drawn from both ancient historical sources and modern references in detailed form. This quality made his writings an important resource and reference that researchers could rely upon in their own work; his citations offer a clear illustration of his precision in mastering scholarly material and his command of the details of the topics he addressed.⁽⁷⁾

Section Two: His Approach to Writing Research Studies

1. Al-Alusi prefaced his research studies with concise introductions, at times opening with the basmala and praise of God, before discussing the importance of the topic and outlining its contents. An example of this is his statement: "Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds, and peace and blessings upon the best of God's creation, our master Muhammad, the Messenger of God, and upon his pure household and honored companions, and those who follow them in righteousness until the Day of Judgment... And thereafter."

The history of the Arab Islamic state witnessed the emergence of numerous families that played a major role in the nation's renaissance and elevation.(8)

2. His Citation of the Noble Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah

a. *The Noble Qur'an*

Al-Alusi cited verses from the Noble Qur'an in the course of his discussion of the topics addressed in his research, using them to substantiate his views and guide his writing, and as his primary evidence in establishing arguments for his ideas and refuting the views of those who opposed this peaceable religious law (shari'a). An example of this is what he mentioned in his discussion of the economic resources of the Arab Islamic state during the era of the Messenger of God (peace be upon him), where in defining zakat he wrote: "In religious law, it is a term for what a person disburses, as God's due, to the poor," or "it is a due owed to the poor from the wealth of the rich." (9)

The basis for this lies in numerous Qur'anic verses, among which we select His words: "And establish prayer and give zakat and obey the Messenger, that you may receive mercy." (10)(11)

Likewise, in his research on the enemies of Islam and their role in distorting and misrepresenting historical accounts, discussing the fragmentation and neglect [of Islamic history], he stated: "Islamic history is a single history — a history of one creed, one civilization, and one nation ('Indeed this, your nation, is one nation, and I am your Lord, so worship Me')(12) — and any attempt to sever its parts or fragment its unity is a conspiracy against Islam, its civilization, and its history..." (13)

Many similar instances occur throughout his research and writings, indicating his close familiarity with the Noble Qur'an, his extensive memorization of it, and his understanding of the historical material contained within it. We have limited ourselves to these two examples to illustrate the presence of Qur'anic citation in his research, not as an exhaustive account, since such citation is widespread throughout most of what he wrote.

b. *The Prophetic Sunnah*

Al-Alusi also cited prophetic hadiths, and his citations took two directions: some he presented as evidence supporting his own discussion and views, and others he cited in engagement with the views of others. We will note two examples of his use of hadith in his research, by way of illustration rather than exhaustive listing. In his research on 'Ata' ibn Abi Rabah: His Life and Scholarly Career, discussing the merit of seeking and pursuing knowledge, he stated: "The Prophetic Sunnah urges the pursuit of knowledge, as in the Prophet's saying (peace be upon him): 'Whoever follows a path in pursuit of knowledge, God will make easy for him a path to Paradise.' (14) They would travel in order to obtain a single hadith known to be held by someone in a particular land; hence the journey in pursuit of hadith was well known and famous..." (15) Likewise, in his research on the Ghassaniyya [a Murji'ite sect], he stated: "They are the followers of Ghassan ibn Aban al-Kufi, (16) whose doctrine on faith (iman) resembled that of Yunus, (17) except that he held that each trait of faith is called 'part of faith,' whereas Yunus held that 'no single trait is either faith or part of faith,' and Ghassan claimed that faith neither increases nor decreases." (18) This view contradicts that of the people of hadith and the Sunna, who hold that faith increases and decreases according to the increase or decrease in acts of obedience, based on God's words: "And when His verses are recited to them, it increases them in faith" (19), and the Prophet's saying (peace be upon him): "O women, give charity, for I have seen that you are the majority of the inhabitants of the Fire." They said, "Why is that, O Messenger of God?" He said: "You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen any more deficient in

intellect and religion than you, more able to sway the mind of a resolute man, than one of you, O women.”(20)(21)

3. His Methodology and Style in Presenting Topics

Having reviewed the research studies of Dr. al-Alusi — may God have mercy on him — we set out his methodology and style of presentation in the following points:

a. His approach to arranging topics

The methods by which he organized and arranged his research studies varied from one study to another. In some, we find him dividing his research into an introduction, chapters, and a conclusion;(22) in others, into an introduction, sections (mabahith), and a conclusion;(23) in yet another, he divides his topics into points preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion;(24) and in other studies, he prefers to number his research points, arranging them according to the sequence of topics within the study.(25)

b. His approach to presenting scholarly material

In all his research, al-Alusi — may God have mercy on him — relied on historical narrations (marwiyat), and he was faithful in transmitting them from reliable and authoritative sources cited throughout his research. He did not confine himself to historical narrations alone but also drew on philological sources to define terms and clarify their meanings. An example is his definition of the term *irja'* (postponement/deferral): “Linguistically, *irja'* carries two meanings: the first is delay and postponement, as in the expression ‘he postponed the matter,’ meaning he delayed it, from which the Murji'a derive their name — hence one says ‘a Murji'i man.’”(26) He likewise drew on biographical dictionaries and works on the generations (*tabaqat*) of scholars, providing biographical information on the figures and groups about whom he wrote. An example is what he wrote in his biography of the eminent Companion Suhayl ibn 'Amr, may God be pleased with him: “He is Suhayl ibn 'Amr ibn 'Abd Shams ibn 'Abd ibn Nasr ibn Malik ibn Hasl ibn 'Amir ibn Lu'ayy ibn Ghalib ibn Fahd al-Qurashi al-'Amiri.”(27)

In presenting historical narrations, he relied on early sources as well as a variety of modern references. An example is his discussion of 'Ata' ibn Abi Rabah, where he drew on the words of Ibn Khaldun (d. 808 AH), stating: “Ibn Khaldun explains the reasons the mawali reached this degree of learning, saying in his *Muqaddima*: ...The Arabs were preoccupied with leadership and authority in the Arab state, together with the disdain they felt at engaging in the transmission of knowledge, which had become one of the crafts, so that they left it to the mawlas [non-Arab converts/freedmen], who together took charge of the religious sciences, while the leaders disdained crafts and professions and left them to those non-Arabs (mawali) who undertook them.”(28)

This methodology is evident throughout all his research and writings; his style was clear and rigorous in drawing on a wide variety of sources and references, reflecting the breadth of his reading and the depth of his knowledge.

4. His Use of the Question-and-Answer Method in Presenting Topics

Al-Alusi employed the question-and-answer method in presenting topics in some of his research studies. An example occurs in his study *The Method of Rewriting Islamic History*, where, discussing this approach, he asked: Who among people is most capable and best suited to rewrite history?

In answer to this question, we say: the most capable and best-suited person to write this history is one who fulfills the conditions we have set out.(29)

5. His Views

Tracing through al-Alusi's research — may God have mercy on him — we find that in many places he comments on historical narrations and even responds to the views of certain scholars. Among the views that reflect his historical outlook and personal thinking is what he stated after surveying scholars' definitions of the Khawarij: “It is clear upon reflection that the definition of the Khawarij is not fixed, as is the case with many terms and expressions that carry multiple overlapping meanings, since a purely linguistic consideration negates the specific technical (terminological) meaning intended.”(30)

Conclusion

1. The research showed that the historian al-Alusi possessed scholarly competence in the topics he studied, mastering their foundations and producing answers that opened the door to further writing on them; he drew on a comprehensive body of research encompassing numerous and varied sources — linguistic, historical, and otherwise.
2. He was distinguished by scholarly integrity and methodological rigor in citing from sources and references.
3. Analysis and critique were not generally predominant in his writings, which lent them a particular distinction and favorable reception.
4. It became evident that our historian was a veritable repository of knowledge, as reflected in the abundance of his output, which filled the pages of his research — demonstrating the breadth of his reading and the depth of his experience.

List of Footnotes

- (1) *Tuhfat al-Lata'if fi Fada'il al-Hibr 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas wa Wajj al-Ta'if* (A Study and Critical Edition); Social Life in Iraq during the Umayyad Era; Orientalism, Orientalists, and the Fabrications Directed against the Nation of Islam and Its Leaders; Foreign Ambitions in the Arab Homeland, Past and Present; The Spread of Islam in Africa (North and South of the Sahara).
- (2) For example, but not limited to: *Andalusia from Prosperity to Decline*; *The Days of the Arabs Before and After Islam*; *The History of the Islamic East*.
- (3) See the sources used in the critical edition of *Tuhfat al-Lata'if*, p. 311.
- (4) See, for example, his book: *Quraysh, Lords of the Arabs: How and Why, and Its Role in Leading the Arab Islamic State and Spreading Islam*, Dar Amjad for Printing, Publishing and Distribution (Jordan, 2023).
- (5) Dar Amjad for Printing, Publishing and Distribution (Jordan, 2023).
- (6) Abu Muslim al-Khurasani: 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Uthman ibn Yasar ibn Muslim, born in Isfahan in 100 AH/718 CE, of Persian origin, known by the kunya Abu Ishaq. He grew up in Kufa and became known for his fierce hostility toward the Umayyads, joining the Abbasid da'wa and being regarded as its founder. He was killed in 137 AH/755 CE under the caliph al-Mansur. Ibn al-'Adim, Kamal al-Din 'Umar ibn Ahmad ibn Hibat Allah (d. 660 AH/1262 CE), *Bughyat al-Talab fi Ta'rikh Halab*, ed. Suhayl Zakkar, Dar al-Fikr (Beirut, n.d.), vol. 10, p. 4622; Ibn Khallikan, *Wafayat al-A'yan wa-Anba' Abna' al-Zaman*, vol. 2, p. 152.
- (7) All his books, on every page, are appended with footnotes and marginal notes indicating his sources and references. See, for example: *The Arabian Gulf and the Role of the Arab Tribes in Confronting the Attacks of Invaders and Opportunists*; *The Orientalists' View of the Biography of the Prophet* (peace be upon him) and the Prophetic Sunnah; *Andalusia from Prosperity to Decline*; and other books.
- (8) Al-Alusi, *The Role of the Family of 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Awf* (may God be pleased with him) in Administration in the Arab Islamic State until the End of the Second Century AH, p. 78.
- (9) Al-Shawkani, Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn Muhammad ibn 'Abdullah (d. 1250 AH/1834 CE), *Nayl al-Awtar Sharh Muntaqa al-Akhbar min Ahadith Sayyid al-Akhyar*, ed. 'Isam al-Din al-Sababti, Dar al-Hadith (Egypt, 1413 AH/1993 CE), vol. 3, p. 169.
- (10) Surat al-Nur, verse 56.
- (11) Al-Alusi, *The Resources of the Arab Islamic State during the Era of the Prophet* (peace be upon him), p. 169.
- (12) Surat al-Anbiya', verse 92.
- (13) Al-Alusi, *The Enemies of Islam and Their Role in Distorting and Misrepresenting Historical Accounts*, p. 30.
- (14) Al-Tirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, vol. 5, p. 28.
- (15) Al-Alusi, 'Ata' ibn Abi Rabah: His Life and Scholarly Career, p. 293.
- (16) Ghassan ibn Aban al-Kufi: one of the theologians (mutakallimun) of the Murji'a in Kufa, who lived in the second century AH and became known for his doctrines on faith. He held that faith consists in

knowledge of God and His Messenger and acknowledgment of what God revealed and what the Messenger brought. Al-Baghdadi, *al-Farq bayn al-Firaq*, p. 116.

(17) Yunus ibn 'Awn al-Numayri, founder of the Yunusiyya sect, one of the purely Murji'ite factions. He held that faith consists in knowledge of God, submission to Him, love in the heart, and verbal affirmation, and that obedience does not increase it nor does disobedience diminish it; thus in his view a believer remains a believer even if he commits grave sins, so long as he remains sincere to God. His faction was among the most well-known Murji'ite sects in the Umayyad era. Al-Baghdadi, *al-Farq bayn al-Firaq*, pp. 202–203; al-Isfarayini, Tahir ibn Muhammad (d. 471 AH/1078 CE), *al-Tabsir fi al-Din wa-Tamyiz al-Firqa al-Najiya 'an al-Firaq al-Halikin*, ed. Kamal Yusuf al-Hut, 'Alam al-Kutub (Lebanon, 1403 AH/1983 CE), p. 98.

(18) Al-Baghdadi, *al-Farq bayn al-Firaq*, p. 203; al-Maqrizi, *al-Mawa'iz wa-al-I'tibar bi-Dhikr al-Khitat wa-al-Athar*, Dar Sadir (Beirut, 1399 AH/1979 CE), vol. 2, p. 350.

(19) Surat al-Anfal, verse 2.

(20) Al-Bukhari, *al-Jami' al-Sahih*, vol. 1, p. 98.

(21) Al-Alusi, *The Murji'a: Their Sects*, p. 185.

(22) See: Al-Alusi, *The Eminent Companion al-Mughira ibn Shu'ba* (may God be pleased with him) and His Impact on Islam, pp. 41–56.

(23) See: Al-Alusi, *Fabrication (Wad') and Its Historical Context and Its Adverse Effect on Islamic Belief and Civilization*, pp. 167–179; Al-Alusi, *The Resources of the Arab Islamic State during the Era of the Prophet* (peace be upon him), pp. 169–177.

(24) See: Al-Alusi, *The Role of Scholars in Andalusia in Unifying the Country in the Fifth Century AH*, pp. 1–15.

(25) See: Al-Alusi, 'Ata' ibn Abi Rabah: His Life and Scholarly Career, pp. 285–294.

(26) Al-Alusi, *The Murji'a and Their Sects*, pp. 182–183; see also: Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, vol. 1, p. 84.

(27) Al-Alusi, *The Eminent Companion Suhayl ibn 'Amr* (may God be pleased with him) and His Role in Islam, p. 230; see also: Ibn Sa'd, *al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*, vol. 7, pp. 404–405.

(28) Al-Alusi, 'Ata' ibn Abi Rabah, p. 290; see also: al-Muqaddima, pp. 600–602.

(29) Al-Alusi, *The Method of Rewriting Islamic History*, pp. 68–69.

(30) Al-Alusi, *The Khawarij*, p. 139.

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