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Who Are Those in Authority? Early Muslim Exegesis of the Qur'anic *Ulū'l-Amr*

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Abstract: The term *ulū'l-amr* (those in authority) is central to the Muslim understanding of leadership, although it has been understood differently by different scholars. The term appears twice in the Qur'an, namely in verses 59 and 83 of chapter 4 (sūrat al-Nisā'), which serve as the cornerstone and starting point of the entire religious, social, and political structure of Islam. This article carefully examines early Muslim exegesis of the Qur'anic *ulū'l-amr* and how the two verses have become the *locus classicus* of intra-Muslim polemics. The main point of this article is to trace the early development of the meaning of *ulū'l-amr* in the exegetical works (*tafsīr*) of both Sunni and Shi'i Qur'an commentators during the first 600 years of Islamic history. It will be argued that it is chiefly in the *tafsīr* tradition that the meaning and identity of *ulū'l-amr* is negotiated, promoted, and contested. The diversity of Muslim interpretations and the different trajectories of Sunni and Shi'i exegesis, as well as the process of exegetical systematization, are highlighted. While Sunni exegetes seem to engage with one another internally, Shi'i commentators tend to polemicize Sunni exegesis to uphold their version of *ulū'l-amr* as infallible imams (leaders).

Keywords: Qur'anic interpretation; *tafsīr*; Sunnism; Shi'ism



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1. Introduction

Leadership is one of the most contested issues in the early development of Islam. Soon after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, the question of succession quickly arose: *who has the right to lead the nascent Muslim community?* The Muslim sources include a reasonably detailed account of the heated debate over the question of succession, which ultimately “divid[ed] the community between those who favored allegiance to successors from the Family of the Prophet, particularly ‘Alī, and those who looked back to the political leaders of the pre-Islamic era as the more worthy candidates (the clan of Banū ‘Abd al-Shām, from whom ‘Uthmān and Umayyad dynasty came) (El-Hibri 2010, p. 3)”. Two issues formed the primary concern at the time: (1) Who should be appointed as leader of the Muslim community? (2) How should he be elected? While one group of Muslims believed that leaders must be appointed from the Family of the Prophet and chosen on the basis of either Muḥammad’s God’s decree, others contended that leadership was open to any qualified individual elected through a general consensus. Although the debate relates to succession, as Patricia Crone has rightly noted, it also has political implications, because choosing leaders is tantamount to choosing a path to salvation (Crone 2004, p. 21). It can be asked, moreover, whether and to what extent such a political contestation has had implications for Muslim interpretation of Qur’anic verses dealing with questions of leadership.

The Qur’anic *locus classicus* for considering the question of leadership is Q 4:59 and 83 in which the term “*ulū'l-amr*” (those charged with authority) occurs. In the first appearance of this term, obedience to *ulū'l-amr* follows the dual charge to obey both God and the Prophet: “You who believe, obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. If you are in dispute over any matter, refer it to God and the Messenger, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day: that is better and fairer in the end” (Q 4:59 [in this article, I use M.A.S. Abdel Haleem’s Qur’an translation (Abdel Haleem 2010)]). The second

occurrence of the term, found in the same chapter (*sūrat al-Nisā'*), addresses the practical dimension of referring certain questions to the Prophet and *ulū'l-amr*: "Whenever news of any matter comes to them, whether concerning peace or war, they spread it about; if they refer to the Messenger and those in authority among them, those seeking its meaning would have found it out from them. If it were not for God's bounty and mercy towards you, you would almost all have followed Satan" (Q 4:83). Thus, the question arises: Who are those in authority? What is the nature of their authority and how is it constructed? Why is obedience to them obligatory?

This article discusses exegetical responses to the above questions by examining how Q 4:59 and 83 have been interpreted by successive generations of Muslims. Due to the centrality of these Qur'anic passages in informing early Sunni and Shi'i conceptions of leadership, this article focuses on exegetical works (*tafsīr*) of the first 600 years of Islamic history, covering the Umayyad and 'Abbāsid periods. This timespan allows us to discern the development of the meaning of the Qur'anic "*ulū'l-amr*" and how interpretation of the *ulū'l-amr* passage has shaped, and has been shaped by, the concept and practice of leadership in Sunni and Shi'i Islam. As will soon become clear, Muslim exegesis of this period constitutes a significant part of what Walid Saleh calls "the golden age of *tafsīr*". Even by the fourth/tenth century, Saleh writes, "one could draw upon a seemingly inexhaustible store in order to offer an analysis and commentary of the whole Qur'ān" (Saleh 2020, pp. 668–69). I am interested in exploring such a proliferation of "meaning-making" in the early period of Islamic history until the time when the *tafsīr* tradition was systematized. In this article, I select major exegetical works from both Sunni and Shi'i traditions and present them in a somewhat chronological order. One of the main arguments put forth here is that the differences of opinions occur not only between Sunnis and Shi'is, but also within each group itself. As the issue of leadership is essential to both, this article highlights the ways in which Sunni and Shi'i exegetes both engage and polemicize with one another and among themselves through their interpretations of the Qur'anic text.

2. Sunni Exegetical Approaches

According to Claude Gilliot, written works of *tafsīr* emerged in the early second/eighth century, though "[i]t should not be concluded that such works were complete commentaries *ad litteram*; they may have amounted to a kind of notebook (*ṣaḥīfah*) and did not always follow the order of the Qur'anic text" (Gilliot 2013a, p. 167). From quite early in the second century of Muslim exegesis, the term "*ulū'l-amr*" has been understood differently by different exegetes. Mujāhid (d. 104/722) interprets *ulū'l-amr* in both 4:59 and 83 as "people who possess understanding in religion and reason" (*ulū'l-fiqh fī'l-dīn wa'l-'aql*) (Mujāhid 1989, pp. 285, 287). This is also the view of Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767) in his commentary on Q 5:83 (Ibn Jurayj 1992, p. 101). Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 105/723) offers two different meanings of *ulū'l-amr* in Q 4:59, namely that "they are the Companions of the Messenger of God, i.e., preachers (*du'āt*) and transmitters (*ruwāt*)" (al-Ḍaḥḥāk 1999, vol. 1, p. 297) and "*fuqahā'* and '*ulamā'* who taught people about the teachings of their religion and its proof" (Ibid., vol. 1, p. 295). As for the second occurrence in 4:83, he simply glosses the term as "*fuqahā'* and '*ulamā'* in religion" (Ibid.). The model of exegesis developed by Mujāhid and Ḍaḥḥāk is confined to paraphrasing certain words or phrases. Fred Leemhuis argues that paraphrastic exegesis recorded in later collections suggests that early Muslims such as Mujāhid explained obscure words as they were reciting the Qur'an (Leemhuis 1988). Paraphrastic exegesis is defined by Gilliot as follows: it "consisted of giving brief, often synonymic explanations of Qur'anic terms or passages" (Gilliot 2013b, vol. 1, p. 334). Hussein Abdul-Raof distinguishes between Mujāhid's *tafsīr* and that of Ḍaḥḥāk, arguing that the former "deals mainly with semantically ambiguous and polysemous Qur'anic expressions", while the latter "provides brief exegetical details about selected phrases or expressions of selected ayahs" (Abdul-Raof 2010, p. 138). However, upon closer examination, as exemplified above, this distinction cannot stand.

Another example of paraphrastic exegesis is the *tafsīr* of Ḥasan Baṣrī (d. 110/728), “the celebrated proponent of free-will (*qadar*) and model for the ascetics and mystics” (Gilliot 2013a, vol. 1, p. 167). Baṣrī consistently refers to *ulū’l-amr* in both 4:59 and 83 simply as ‘*ulamā*’ (al-Baṣrī 1982, vol. 1, pp. 286, 288). However, Baṣrī’s explication of Q 4:59 does not seem to support his identification of *ulū’l-amr* as ‘*ulamā*’. In addition to citing a Prophetic tradition—“No obedience to a creature on disobeying the Creator” (*lā ṭā’ata li-makhlūq fi ma’ṣiyat al-khāliq*)—Baṣrī narrates a story indicating that obedience in the verse refers to a military commander. It is reported that Ziyād appointed Ḥakam b. ‘Amrū al-Ghifānī to lead a military expedition. When encountering ‘Imrān b. Ḥaṣīn, Ḥakam asked, “Do you know why I visit you? Are you aware that the Prophet once said to one of his commanders: ‘No obedience on disobeying God’?” Ibn Ḥaṣīn responded, “Yes, that is correct”. Ḥakam replied, “Indeed, I visit you to remind you about that ḥadīth” (Ibid.). It is unlikely that Baṣrī intends to provide a historical context for Q 4:59 but rather to confirm that obedience to a leader is restricted to whether that obedience violates God’s laws or not.

Suddī (d. 128/745) and Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) interpret Q 4:59 by furnishing its supposed historical context, known as “*asbāb al-nuzūl*” (occasions of revelation). It is for their use of this interpretive technique that these two *tafsīrs* mark the beginning of “narrative exegesis”. In this type of *tafsīr*, the Qur’anic verse is explained by referring to prophetic traditions that can help with an understanding of the verse or “edifying narratives, generally enhanced by folklore from the Near East, especially that of the Judeo-Christian milieu” (Gilliot 2013a, p. 168; Abdul-Raof 2010, p. 29). Regarding Q 4:59, both Suddī and Muqātil refer to the same story in which the Prophet Muḥammad sent Khālīd b. Walīd, along with ‘Ammār b. Yasir, on a military expedition. As they drew closer to the intended people, night fell, and they stopped to camp. A spy informed the people in the area about the coming of the Muslims, which caused them to flee, except for one man who asked his family to get ready to move, and he then went to the camp of Khālīd asking about ‘Ammār. When the latter had arrived, the man said: “O Abū Yaḡzān, I have become a Muslim and declared that there is no god but God and Muḥammad is His servant and messenger. However, my people ran away when they heard you were coming. I stayed. Is my Islam of any benefit to me, or shall I flee too?” ‘Ammār responded: “Stay, for it is beneficial to you”. The man returned to his family and told them to stay. The following morning, Khālīd invaded the area but found no one except for this man, so he imprisoned him and seized his property. ‘Ammār went to him and said: “Let this man go, for he is a Muslim and I have already given him amnesty and told him to stay”. Khālīd said: “Why did you protect him (while I am the leader)?” They exchanged angry words and went to the Prophet, who sanctioned the amnesty given by ‘Ammār but forbade him from giving amnesty to anyone in the future without the express permission of his leader. Khālīd said: “How would you let this broken slave to insult me?” The Prophet advised: “O Khālīd, please do not insult ‘Ammār. Truly, whoever insults ‘Ammār, God will insult him; whoever hates ‘Ammār God will hate him; and whoever condemns ‘Ammār God will condemn him”. ‘Ammār stood up and left angrily. Khālīd followed him and held him by his cloak and asked him for forgiveness (al-Suddī 1993, p. 206; Muqātil b. Sulaymān 2002, vol. 1, pp. 382–83). While Suddī stops at the end of story, Muqātil continues to make the point that Q 4:59 was revealed concerning ‘Ammār, noting that “the phrase *ulū’l-amr* among you” refers to Khālīd, as “the Prophet appointed him to manage people’s affairs, so God commands obedience to commanders of military expedition chosen by the Prophet” (Muqātil b. Sulaymān 2002, vol. 1, p. 383).

The identification of *ulū’l-amr* as developed by the exegetes mentioned above began to be reiterated by exegetes of the following period. This characteristic of exegesis has been aptly described by Walid Saleh as a genealogical tradition in the sense that later exegetes reconnect their exegetical works with earlier authorities, by providing either a survey or assessment of previous interpretations (Saleh 2004, p. 14; Pink 2016, p. 765). The third-century exegete Ṣaṇ’ānī (d.211), for instance, quotes the views of Baṣrī and Mujāhid along with chains of transmitters. Soon after citing Q 4:59, Ṣaṇ’ānī’s *tafsīr* asserts: “Ma’mar told

us on the authority of Ḥasan (Baṣrī) that *ulū'l-amr* are '*ulamā'*' (Abd al-Razzāq 1999, vol. 1, p. 464). As regards Mujāhid's view, he says, "Ma'mar informed us on the authority of Ibn Abī Najīh that Mujāhid referred to *ulū'l-amr* as the people of understanding and knowledge (*ahl a-fiqh wa'l-'ilm*)" (Ibid., vol. 1, p. 465). Along with the two sources, Ṣan'ānī recounts a ḥadīth narrated by Abū Hurayrah: "Whoever obeys me, obeys God, and whoever disobeys me disobeys God. Whoever obeys my commander (*amīr*) obeys me, and whoever disobeys my commander disobeys me" (Ibid.). Ṣan'ānī offers no exegesis on Q 4:83 at all.

Another third-century exegete, Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889), presents paraphrastic exegesis of both Q 4:59 and 83 with no mention of any past authorities. He is undoubtedly aware of the historical context of 4:59 narrated by early exegetes, as he interprets *ulū'l-amr* as "commanders dispatched by the Prophet to lead a military expedition" (Ibn Qutaybah 1978, p. 130). As for Q 4:83, he identifies *ulū'l-amr* as "those who possess knowledge (*dhawū'l-'ilm*)" (Ibid., p. 132). The absence of sources in Ibn Qutaybah's *tafsīr* perhaps reflects his concern only to clarify unfamiliar terms, as the title of his work, *Tafsīr gharīb al-Qur'ān* (exegesis of the unfamiliar in the Qur'an), seems to suggest. In the introduction to this *tafsīr*, Ibn Qutaybah makes it clear that his sources are taken from various books of scholars. He relies mainly on the works of two philologists, Abū 'Ubaydah's (d. 210/824) *Majāz al-Qur'ān* (*The Literary Expression of the Qur'ān*) and Farrā's (d. 207/822) *Ma'ānī l-Qur'ān* (*The Meanings of the Qur'ān*) (Ibid.).

It is from the beginning of the fourth century that the production of exegetical meanings tends to proliferate, as exemplified in the encyclopedic work of Ṭabarī (d.310). Following his succinct explication of "Obey God and obey the Messenger", Ṭabarī spends a great deal of time elucidating who the Qur'anic *ulū'l-amr* are: "People of *ta'wīl* differ on *ulū'l-amr* whom God enjoins His servants to obey" (al-Ṭabarī 2001, vol. 7, p. 176). He classifies four sets of different views furnished with chains of transmission, yet each of these groups includes a variety of expressions. The first group includes those who opine that *ulū'l-amr* are commanders (*umarā'*). Belonging to this group are figures like Abū Hurayrah, Ibn 'Abbās, Maymūn b. Mihrān, Ibn Zayd, and Suddī. However, a closer look will reveal some differences among them. Whereas Abū Hurayrah speaks of *umarā'* usually rendered as military commanders, Ibn Zayd points to "*salāṭīn*" (sing. *sulṭān*). Two views are attributed to Ibn 'Abbās: in one report, Ibn 'Abbās relates *ulū'l-amr* with an unnamed commander of a military expedition, and in another, he names the commander as 'Abd Allah b. Hudhāfah b. Qays al-Sahmī. The name of the commander mentioned by Ibn 'Abbās is different from the one narrated by Suddī, as cited above. Maymūn refers to those involved in an expedition (*aṣḥāb al-sarāyā*) during Muḥammad's lifetime.

The second group of scholars are those who understand *ulū'l-amr* as the people of knowledge and understanding, including Mujāhid, Ibn Abī Najīh, Ibn Abbās (according to another report), 'Aṭā' b. Sa'īb, Ḥasan Baṣrī, and Abū'l-'Āliyah. Nevertheless, again, they actually use different expressions and sometimes two different terms attributed to the same individual. Ibn 'Abbās can be found in both groups. Mujāhid, for example, is reported to use the term "*ulū'l-fiqh*" (those who possess understanding) in one report; however, in another report, he says "*ulū'l-fiqh wa'l-'ilm*" (those who possess understanding and knowledge), and still in another, "*ahl al-'ilm*" (people of knowledge). It is interesting to note that in his *tafsīr* cited earlier, Mujāhid instead refers to *ulū'l-amr* as "*ulū'l-fiqh fī'l-dīn wa'l-'aql*" (those who possess understanding in religion and reason), a phrase associated with Ibn Abī Najīh in Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*. Other expressions used include "*ahl al-fiqh wa'l-dīn*" (Ibn 'Abbās), "*al-fuqahā' wa'l-'ulamā'*" ('Aṭā'), and "*'ulamā'*" (Ḥasan Baṣrī). The third and fourth groups associate *ulū'l-amr* with Muḥammad's Companions. In the third group, Ṭabarī places Mujāhid (again) who contends that *ulū'l-amr* are Companions, for they were the most qualified people in terms virtues, understanding, and piety. In the fourth group, 'Ikrimah specifies Abū Bakr and 'Umar b. Khaṭṭāb as *ulū'l-amr* (Ibid., vol. 7, pp. 176–82). As will be discussed later, this fourth view can be understood to imply polemics against Shi'ah, which seems to intensify in the following centuries.

Ṭabarī offers the same explanation when commenting on the second occurrence of *ulū'l-amr*, in Q 4:83. At the end of his exegesis of both Q 4:59 and 83, he presents his preferred position, saying that the soundest view is that the Qur'anic *ulū'l-amr* are both military commanders (*umarā'*) and political leaders (*wulāt*). Ṭabarī develops his view on the basis of several ḥadīths in which the Prophet commands obedience to leaders for the benefit and interest of the Muslim community. In one ḥadīth, the Prophet is reported to have said: "There will be after me leaders that you will see good things because of their virtues and bad things because of their wickedness. Listen to them and obey everything that confirms the truth. Perform prayer behind them. If they do righteousness, that is good for you and them; if they do vileness, that is bad for you and curse to them" (Ibid., vol. 7, p. 183). Another ḥadīth cited supporting his preferred view as follows: "It is obligatory upon an individual Muslim to obey what he likes or dislikes, except when he is commanded to do evil. No obedience to those who call for evil" (Ibid.).

As suggested earlier, the identification of *ulū'l-amr* as the Prophet's Companions, more specifically Abū Bakr and 'Umar, as cited by Ṭabarī, indicates an implied polemic against those who cast doubt about the authority of Companions. Moreover, the statement attributed to 'Ikrimah excludes 'Uthmān b. 'Affān and 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the last two of the *khulafā' rāshidūn*, which can be understood as reflecting concerns about the implications of political conflicts following the abrupt transition from 'Uthmān to 'Alī. Not only did the public unease with political succession lead to the first *fitnah* (civil war) between 'Alī and Mu'āwiyah, 'Uthmān's nephew, but the far-reaching consequences include theological conflicts and subsequent schisms. Of course, eliminating 'Uthmān and 'Alī as *ulū'l-amr* is problematic for Sunni Muslims because their status as Guided Caliphs (*khulafā' rāshidūn*) had become a consensus at the time. It comes as no surprise that in the second half of the fourth century, Samarqandī (d. 375/985) adds another view generalizing the Qur'anic *ulū'l-amr* to include *khulafā'* and *umarā'* (al-Samarqandī 1993, vol. 1, p. 363). It is not unlikely that Samarqandī means to include both *khulafā' rāshidūn* and the following caliphs from the Umayyads and 'Abbāsids. In his exegesis of Q 4:83, he explicitly names Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and 'Alī as *ulū'l-amr* without pointing to any differences nor mentioning his sources (Ibid., vol. 1, p. 371).

In the fifth century questions about the leadership of *khulafā' rāshidūn* apparently attracted more attention. Tha'labī (d. 427/1035), begins his exegesis with the view of 'Ikrimah that *ulū'l-amr* are Abū Bakr and 'Umar, based on a ḥadīth narrated by Mālik b. Anas in which the Prophet said: "Emulate two people after me, namely, Abū Bakr and 'Umar. Truly I have two viziers in heaven and on earth. In heaven are Gabriel and Michael, while on earth are Abū Bakr and 'Umar. For me, both are like the head of the body" (al-Tha'labī 2002, vol. 3, p. 333). In the following lines, Tha'labī cites the statement of Abū Bakr al-Warrāq who identifies *ulū'l-amr* as *khulafā' rāshidūn* (Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and 'Alī), as it is reported by Jābir b. 'Abd Allah that the Prophet said: "The caliphate of my people after me is in the hands of Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān and 'Alī" (Ibid.). To affirm the leadership of the four figures, Warraq quotes a tradition reported on the authority of Safinah, the slave of the Prophet, narrating that when the Prophet built a mosque in Medina, Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and 'Alī each contributed by adding stones, one after the other, and the Prophet said: "They are leaders on my behalf after me" (*wulāt amrī min ba'dī*) (Ibid.). The next two opinions recorded by Tha'labī still revolve around the close Companions of the Prophet. On the one hand, Bakr b. 'Abd Allah al-Muzannī maintains that *ulū'l-amr* are "the Companions of the Prophet based on a ḥadīth 'My Companions are like stars, whoever you follow you will be guided'" (Ibid., vol. 3, p. 334). On the other hand, 'Aṭā' gives a broader definition of *ulū'l-amr* saying, "*muhājirūn* (Migrants from Mecca) and *anṣār* (Supporters from Medina) and those who follow in doing good". This latter view is based on Q 9:100: "The Pioneers—the first of the Migrants and the Supporters, and those who followed them in righteousness. God is pleased with them, and they are pleased with Him. He has prepared for them Gardens beneath which rivers flow, where they will abide forever. That is the sublime triumph".

It is evident that Tha'labī identifies *ulū'l-amr* with people around the Prophet, whether they are Companions in general, *khulafā' rāshidūn*, or, more specifically, Abū Bakr and 'Umar. Next, Tha'labī explores other possible meanings of *ulū'l-amr*, including, for instance, '*ulamā'*' and '*fuqahā'*'. Previous authorities, such as Jābir b. 'Abd Allah, Ḥasan Baṣrī, Ḍaḥḥāk, Mujaḥid, Mubārak b. Faḍālah, and Isma'il b. Abī Khālid, are cited, all of whom maintain that they are "*fuqahā'*" and '*ulamā'*', the people of religion who taught people about the teachings of their religion, [who] commanded right and forbade wrong, and therefore people are obliged to obey them" (Ibid.). Tha'labī cites two significant sources that are not found in earlier *tafsīrs*, namely statements attributed to Abū'l-Aswad al-Du'ālī and Ibn 'Abbās. The former is reported to have said: "Nothing is more virtuous than knowledge. Kings are rulers over people, and '*ulamā'*' are rulers over kings" (Ibid.). Ibn 'Abbās emphasizes the importance of reason (*aql*) as follows: "The foundation of religion is constructed on reason; religious obligations are based on reason, and our God is known through reason and so the instrument to reach Him is reason. A right-minded person (*'āqil*) is closer to his God than the entire *mujtahidūn* without reason. The tiniest good deed of the right-minded person is better than the *jihad* of ignorant over a thousand years" (Ibid.).

At the end of his exegesis, Tha'labī refers to the view of previous authorities who understand *ulū'l-amr* as *umarā'* and *salāṭīn*, a view that has been attributed to Abū Hurayrah and Ibn Zayd. He also mentions the historical context of Q 4:59 as narrated by Suddī and Muqātil. Tha'labī's discussion on the nature of obedience to *ulū'l-amr* is significant, as he incorporates other sources not found in Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, such as the views of 'Alī and Shāfi'ī. The former says that "[t]he obligation of the *imam* (leader) is to govern according to what has been revealed by God and deliver the trust (*amāna*). If he performs just that, then the subjects are obliged to listen, obey, and respond to him" (Ibid., vol. 3, p. 335). The latter offers an argument for the need for an explicit command to obey *ulū'l-amr*, as the people of Mecca at the time were not familiar with leadership, and they assumed that obedience was only due to the Prophet: "Therefore", Shāfi'ī says, "they were commanded to obey *ulū'l-amr*" (Ibid.). Tha'labī's inclusion of ḥadīths to reinforce his exegesis is more extensive than previous works. At least six ḥadīths are cited to buttress the necessity of obedience to leaders. In his exegesis of Q 4:83, Tha'labī gives no further elaboration of the identity of the Qur'anic *ulū'l-amr* other than saying, "people of reason among the Companions such as Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and 'Alī" (Ibid., vol. 3, p. 335).

Up to this point, it seems clear that the identity *ulū'l-amr* has been the subject of much contention and contestation among Sunni exegetes. The diversity of views and even contradictions in the *tafsīr* tradition should be understood as a dynamic process within the genre itself. The exegetical works of the post-Tha'labī *tafsīr* underwent a sort of systematization, as is evident in the works of Māwardī (d. 450/1058) and Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200). "Systematization" here refers to the kind of exegetical procedure in which a particular verse is divided into several discrete words or phrases, and the exegete then presents, in numerical forms, the various interpretations that have been introduced in the past. Māwardī, for example, divides Q 4:59 into three discrete phrases: "Obey God and obey the Messenger", "on *ulū'l-amr*", and "If you believe in God and the Last Day ...". On the *ulū'l-amr*, for instance, he says that "there are four opinions", and then elaborates the four views along with who stated them (al-Māwardī 2010, *al-Nukat*, vol. 1, p. 499). First, *ulū'l-amr* are *umarā'* according to Ibn 'Abbās, Abū Hurayrah, Suddī, and Ibn Zayd. On this view, Māwardī mentions a ḥadīth reported by Abū Hurayrah as well as the verse's occasion of revelation. He rightly notices that there is a subtle difference between the report of Ibn 'Abbās and that of Suddī—while the former maintains that the verse was revealed concerning 'Abd Allah b. Hudhafah, the latter refers to 'Ammār b. Yāsir and Khālid b. Walīd. Second, they are '*ulamā'*' and '*fuqahā'*' according to Jābir b. 'Abd Allah, Ḥasan Baṣrī, 'Aṭā', and Abū'l-'Āliyah. Third, they are Companions of the Prophet according to Mujaḥid. Fourth, they are Abū Bakr and 'Umar according to 'Ikrimah. Māwardī does not express his preference; however, he offers a brief explanation of the nature of obedience to leaders and how such obedience must be revoked in the case of doing evil. The identity of *ulū'l-amr*

in Q 4:83 is presented slightly differently, but it is also treated in the same systematic manner. Firstly, they are *umarā'* according to Ibn Zayd and Suddī; secondly, they are military commanders; and thirdly, they are the people of knowledge and understanding, according to Ḥasan Baṣrī, Qatādah, Ibn Jurayj, and Ibn Abi Najīh (Ibid.).

As Māwardī's work is the first systematic attempt at *tafsīr*, it is quite surprising that his *al-Nukat wa'l-'uyūn* has not attracted the scholarly attention that it deserves. Perhaps this is due to his renown as a political theorist with his *al-Aḥkām al-sultāniyah*. Māwardī's *al-Aḥkām* has been the subject of much discussion (Gibb 1962; Lambton 1981; Mikhail 1995) and translated into numerous languages. Nevertheless, his systematic treatment of exegetical works is followed by the next generations of *mufasssīrūn*, chief among them being Ibn Jawzī. This latter exegete begins his commentary on Q 4:59 by distinguishing two views concerning its historical context, as also noted by Māwardī, but he strives to furnish more comprehensive sources. For example, the report of Ibn 'Abbās on 'Abd Allah b. Hudhāfah, Ibn Jawzī states, can be found in the ḥadīth collections of Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and Muslim (d. 261/875). Meanwhile, the story of 'Ammār and Khālid cited by Suddī and Muqātil is narrated by Abū Ṣāliḥ. Furthermore, Ibn Jawzī notes that the two conflicting reports of a specific circumstance leading to the revelation of Q 4:59 are originated from the same source, namely Ibn 'Abbās. On the Qur'anic *ulū'l-amr*, Ibn Jawzī repeats the four views previously stated by Māwardī, noting that two different views may be attributed the one individual. For instance, in one report, Ibn 'Abbās states *umarā'* and in another, '*ulamā'*' (Ibn al-Jawzī 2002, vol. 2, pp. 115–17).

Ibn al-Jawzī's exegesis of Q 4:83, particularly on the identity of *ulū'l-amr*, is short but significant in that he reverses the order of views enumerated by Māwardī and eliminates the category of "Companions" as *ulū'l-amr*. The four views are as follows: first, *ulū'l-amr* are Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and 'Alī according to Ibn 'Abbās (Tha'labī attributes this view to Abū Bakr al-Warraq); second, Abū Bakr and 'Umar according to 'Ikrima; third, '*ulamā'*' according to Ḥasan (Baṣrī), Qatāda, and Ibn Jurayj; and fourth, military commanders according to Ibn Zayd and Muqātil (Ibid., vol. 2, p. 147). It is not clear why the order is reversed compared to his discussion of the first occurrence of *ulū'l-amr* in Q 4:59. Similar to Māwardī, Ibn al-Jawzī also does not favor any of the above views, as his main goal is to systematize various views that have been developed previously. In the introduction to his *tafsīr*, Ibn al-Jawzī describes his approach to this brief but intelligible exegesis of the Qur'an, since a large number of earlier Qur'anic commentaries are either too long or too short. As a result, Jane McAuliffe rightly notes:

This work summarizes and coordinates the principal areas of exegetical debate on each Qur'anic verse. The approach which Ibn al-Jawzī takes is a highly ordered one. In fact, the *Zād al-masīr* is a kind of "shorthand" *tafsīr*. Therefore, elliptical is his method that Ibn al-Jawzī's work would be arduous to understand for one who had no acquaintance with the other principal works of traditional exegesis. (McAuliffe 1988, p. 104)

3. Shi'i Exegetical Approaches

Contrary to the common assumption that the authority to interpret the Qur'an lies exclusively with the imams who succeeded the Prophet Muḥammad, a closer look at Shi'i exegeses of Q 4:59 and 83, which are central to their conception of imamate, shows changing dynamics and patterns. Like Sunni exegetes, Shi'i exegetes also approach the Qur'anic *ulū'l-amr* with the possibility of different insights, and such a diversity of views can genealogically be traced back to different authorities in the past. Even though Shi'i exegetes seem to reach a consensus that Q 4:59 and 83 refer to the imamate in Shi'ism, their interpretation of who exactly the Qur'an intends the *ulū'l-amr* to be develops and changes. One of the earliest Shi'i exegetes to address the identity of *ulū'l-amr* is Qummī (d. 307/919). In his exegesis of both Q 4:59 and 83, Qummī refers to the *ulū'l-amr* simply as "*amīr al-mu'minīn*" (Commander of the Faithful) (al-Qummī 1984, vol. 1, pp. 141, 145) and no further explanation is provided. The fact that 'Alī's name is not mentioned may

suggest that his audience would have understood that the title “*amīr al-mu‘minīn*” is a direct reference to ‘Alī.

In the fourth century, two Shi‘i exegetes, namely Furāt (d. 310/923) and ‘Ayyāshī (d. 320/932), offer quite detailed and diverse interpretations on the identity of *ulū‘l-amr*. Furāt cites a few reports that, according to Ja‘far b. Muḥammad, known as Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, the Qur’anic phrase “*ulū‘l-amr* among you” refers to ‘Alī (Furāt 1995, pp. 108–9), without explaining how the term “*ulu al-amr*” in plural, which means “those in charge with authority”, can be attributed to one person (‘Alī). The most prominent authority in Furāt’s *tafsīr* is Ja‘far who is reported to have commented on Q 4:59, saying: “Obedience to ‘Alī is obligatory on the basis of Q 4:80 (‘Whoever obeys the Messenger obeys God’) and obedience to ‘Alī b. Abi Ṭālib is obedience to the Messenger of God” (Ibid., p. 108). Unlike Sunni exegesis, the sixth imam also claimed that Q 4:59 was revealed about ‘Alī himself. In one instance, Ja‘far said that the Qur’anic *ulū‘l-amr* are ‘Alī and the Family of the Prophet. When asked why God did not name ‘Alī and his family in His Book, Ja‘far responded:

God revealed (the verse on) prayer to the Prophet, but made no mention of how many, three or four times, till the Prophet himself explained it. God also required pilgrimage without detailing the practice of *ṭawāf* (walking in circle around the ka‘bah), until the Prophet showed it. God revealed ‘Obey God and obey the Messenger and *ulū‘l-amr*’ concerning ‘Alī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, and the Prophet clarified, ‘For whoever I am his leader, ‘Alī is his leader.’ The Prophet also said, ‘I leave for you the Book of God and my household (*ahl baytī*). I prayed to God not to separate the two, and it was accepted.’ Had the Prophet not explained it, the family of ‘Abbās or the family of ‘Aqīl or the family of fulān would claim it. Thus, God revealed Q 33:33: ‘God desires to remove all impurity from you, O people of the household (*ahl al-bayt*), and to purify you thoroughly’. (Ibid., p. 110)

Furāt refers to several ḥadīths and reports on the virtues of ‘Alī. One such ḥadīth that is relevant for our discussion is narrated by Salmān al-Fārisī, in which the Prophet says: “O ‘Alī, obedience to you is obedience to me, and obedience to me is obedience to God. Whoever obeys you obeys me, and whoever obeys me obeys God. I swear with the One who sent me with the truth, our love for the people of the household is greater than a jewel, red ruby, and emerald. God has taken covenant (*mīthāq*) of the people of the household that we love in the Qur’an, no one can add or reduce it till the Day of Resurrection, that is, Q 4:59” (Ibid., p. 109). It should be noted that even though the evidence connecting ‘Alī and his family with Q 4:59 is overwhelming, Furāt opens the possibility for other meanings. It is reported that Ja‘far was asked about *ulū‘l-amr*, and he responded: “Those who possess understanding and knowledge (*ulū‘l-fiqh wa‘l-‘ilm*)”. When asked to explain whether this term is specific (*khāṣṣ*) or general (*‘amm*), his answer was: “No, it is special for us” (*bal khāṣṣ lanā*) (Ibid., p. 108). It is not clear whether “*khāṣṣ lanā*” refers to the specific Imami leaders or solely to Shi‘i scholars. Another important report is the view of Abbās b. Taghallub that *ulū‘l-amr* are “commanders of military expedition, the first among them is ‘Alī” (Ibid., p. 109).

In ‘Ayyāshī’s exegesis, ‘Alī is no longer singled out as the only representative of *ulū‘l-amr*; rather, he emphatically includes ‘Alī’s descendants as well. He begins by citing the statements of Abū Ja‘far (the father of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, named Muḥammad b. ‘Alī) that *ulū‘l-amr* are “appointed imams” (*awṣiyā’*), and he also mentions some materials already reported by Furāt (al-‘Ayyāshī 2000, vol. 1, pp. 250, 253). To support the argument that Q 4:59 was revealed concerning ‘Alī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, ‘Ayyāshī reinforces his position by referring to Q 33:33 on the purity of *ahl al-bayt* (people of household), providing the following narrative: “The Prophet took the hands of ‘Alī, Fatimah, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, and then covered them with his cloak in the house of Umm Salamah, saying ‘O Lord, each Prophet has a weighty thing (*thaqal*) and family (*ahl*), and they are my weighty thing and family” (Ibid., vol. 1, p. 250). ‘Ayyāshī goes on to recite: “Additionally, blood-relatives are closer to one another in God’s Book” (Q 33:6) and says, “After Ḥusayn, this turns to ‘Alī b. Ḥusayn, then to Muḥammad b. ‘Alī” (Ibid., vol. 1, p. 251). In another source, Abbās b.

Taghallub is reported to have met with Abū'l-Ḥasan al-Riḍā and asked about Q 4:59. The latter responded: "It was about 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib". After being silent for some time, he was asked, "Then, who else?". He responded: "Ḥasan". After being silent for some time, he was asked: "Then, who else?". He answered: "Ḥusayn". Furthermore, this continued till he mentioned the names of all appointed imams (Ibid.).

'Ayyāshī brings up other Shi'i authorities to support the argument that the *ulū'l-amr* verse refers exclusively to Shi'i imams, especially from 'Alī to Ja'far. The fact that his list of imams is not complete is understandable, as he wrote his *tafsīr* before the Great Occultation of the Twelfth Imam in 329/939.¹ Instead of focusing on narratives about 'Alī, 'Ayyāshī broadens his sources to include reports concerning all of the Shi'i imams and emphasizes the point that Q 4:59 represents the divine declaration about obedience to all of them. He cites polemical statements of Abū 'Abd Allāh: "Thanks to God, who had taught you about your imams and leaders at the time when other people rejected them" (al-'Ayyāshī 2000, vol. 1, p. 252). In another report, Abū 'Abd Allāh expresses the exclusiveness of the Shi'ah position vis-à-vis others, saying: "Whoever obeys the Prophet obeys God, and indeed the Prophet has delegated it to 'Alī and his imams, and you accepted them while others denied them. By God, we would love if you say what we have said, and hold firmly what we have held up. We are in the middle between you and God. By God, there will be nothing good for those who oppose us" (Ibid., vol. 1, p. 259).

In yet another report, Abū 'Abd Allāh was asked about the pillars upon which the Islamic religion was built and that no one is permitted to disobey. He responded as follows:

Yes, bear witness that there is no god but God, faith in His Messenger and acceptance of what comes from God, a portion of the wealth must be spent for *zakāt* and the sovereignty (*wilāyah*) in which God commanded the sovereignty of the Family of Muḥammad. The Prophet said, "Whoever dies and does not recognize his imam dies dying in ignorance". Therefore, the imam was 'Alī, then Ḥasan b. 'Alī, then Ḥusayn b. 'Alī, then 'Alī b. Ḥusayn, then Muḥammad b. 'Alī Abū Ja'far. Shi'is before the time of Abū Ja'far were unaware of pilgrimage rites (*manāsik*), or what is permissible and forbidden, till Ja'far performed his pilgrimage and taught them rites of pilgrimage and what is permissible and forbidden. That is what has happened. The earth will not stand without an imam. (Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 252–53)

The obligation to recognize the imam is reiterated in 'Ayyāshī's exegesis of Q 4:83. After reciting the verse, Abū Ja'far said: "If an individual wakes up during the night, fasts during the day, spends his whole wealth for charity and performs pilgrimage throughout his life, but he does not recognize the authority of the imam and obey him, all of his actions will be in vain and he is not among the people of faith" (Ibid., vol. 1, p. 259).

The fifth-century exegete Mufīd (d. 413/1032) further emphasizes this point by showing several pieces of textual evidence from the Qur'an concerning the leadership of 'Alī and the infallibility of imams. For Mufīd, Q 4:59 "imposes the necessity of knowing the imams by way of commanding an absolute obedience to them" (al-Mufīd 2003, p. 155). Using polemical rhetoric, he writes: "If the opponent (*mukhālīf*) asked, 'Show us the text of the Qur'an on 'Alī!' We respond that the leadership of 'Alī can be established on the basis of the general principle (of the Qur'anic text), not in its detail. Had this been indicated in detail, then there would be no dispute or difference. However, even though the general principle may open to possibilities, this does not prevent (us) from establishing the proof to people (concerning the imamate of 'Alī)" (Ibid.). Mufīd goes on to argue analogically that even though the Prophet Muḥammad's description in the Torah and the Gospel is obscure; nonetheless, Muslim scholars still try to prove his prophethood based on pre-Qur'anic scriptures. He also argues that the *niṣāb* (the minimum amount that a Muslim must have before being obliged to *zakāt*) is not clearly stipulated in the Qur'an, nor are the specific details of prayer or fasting—and yet nobody disputes them. Mufīd then concludes that "the leadership of *amīr al-mu'minīn* is confirmed in the text from the Prophet, even if it is not explicitly stated in the Qur'an" (Ibid., p. 156).

Mufid further argues that one of the Qur'anic texts that implicitly establishes the leadership of 'Alī is Q 4:59, in which God commands obedience to *ulū'l-amr* just as He requires obedience to Himself and His Messenger. Additionally, *amīr al-mu'minīn* is one of those *ulū'l-amr* without a doubt. Mufid admits that scholars are divided on the identity of *ulū'l-amr*, i.e., whether they are '*ulamā'*', military commanders, or imams. For Mufid, *amīr al-mu'minīn* fulfills all of these criteria as he is among the '*ulamā'*' and led military expeditions during Muḥammad's time. 'Alī was also a caliph after the Prophet's death; all of this is agreed upon by the vast majority of people. "With that identification", Mufid concludes, "he must be the one pointed to in the verse" (Ibid.). To corroborate the specific identification of 'Alī, and not anybody else, he refers to the *wilāyah* verse (Q 33:6) and several other verses (e.g., 9:119; 2:177; 76:8) that, in Shi'is' views, confirm the imamate. Imbued with polemical tones, he writes that "the specificity of *amīr al-mu'minīn* for the imamate seems ambiguous to our opponents due to their weakness" (Ibid., 159). He even accuses those who differ from or reject Shi'i political doctrines of committing an apparent crime (*jināyah wāḍiḥah*) (Ibid., p. 160).

In the last section of his exegesis of Q 4:59, Mufid addresses an imaginary opponent's question: "How is the designation of the imam through the (divine) text better than through election?" In his response, Mufid delineates three arguments. First, one of the prerequisites to become an imam, Mufid contends, is that he must be the most virtuous in God's eyes, the most knowledgeable, the bravest, and the most pious; all of these criteria cannot be established through reason. Thus, there is no other way to determine this, except with the text revealed by the most Knowing of all secrets and mysteries. Second, an imam must be as infallible as the Prophet, and the question of infallibility can only be proven by the text from God. Third, there is no evidence in Shari'ah that the election of imams is obligatory. Based on these arguments, Mufid concludes, the belief that the imam should be elected has been refuted, and thus the textual proofs for the invalidity of election can be established (Ibid.). Here, we can see that Mufid's primary concern is to discredit those who oppose the leadership of 'Alī rather than to justify the authority of imams, as was the concern of earlier exegetes such as 'Ayyāshī and Furāt.

Mufid's disciple, Sharīf Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044), urges his readers to reflect (*ta'ammal*) on their opponents' arguments, especially concerning the textual evidence to support the leadership and infallibility of 'Alī. Murtaḍā introduces his commentary on Q 4:59, similar to Mufid, by arguing that the fact that God enjoins obedience to leaders suggests that leaders must be impeccable and could not do wrong. This divine provision confirms that such a leader must be the *amīr al-mu'minīn*. Interestingly, Murtaḍā recounts the argument of his opponents in great detail as follows:

The verse (Q 4:59) does not textually specify *amīr al-mu'minīn*, and we could not find anyone among our people (*aṣḥābinā*) who has relied on it. The only person who took that verse as the basis of the argument for the infallibility of imams was Ibn Rāwandī² in his *Kitāb al-Imamah*. The crux of the matter is that the verse does not signify that meaning at all. None of the other verses cited also exhibits the identification of *imam*. Assuming that Q 4:59 refers to the infallibility of imams as proposed by Ibn Rāwandī, this cannot be taken to approve the leadership of *amīr al-mu'minīn*. After all, this question must be settled through *ijmā'*. (al-Murtaḍā 2010, vol. 2, pp. 80–81)

Murtaḍā's response, notably, is terse. He says, "Please reflect on these statements of those who opposed the imamate" (Ibid., vol. 2, p. 81). He argues that leadership and infallibility are two sides of the same coin. If the textual evidence pointing to the infallibility of imams is abundant, then this necessitates the authority of *amīr al-mu'minīn* in the first place. It is quite surprising to see that Murtaḍā's response is not only brief but also opaque.

Another exegete of the fifth century, Daylamī (d. 444), offers a brief commentary on the Qur'anic *ulū'l-amr*, whom he calls "imams from the prophet's descendants, who stood up in his place and who took on responsibilities to handle people's problems and difficulties" (al-Daylamī 2008, p. 182). He then cites a version of a ḥadīth on obedience: "Whoever

obeys me obeys God and whoever obeys my leader (*amīrī*) obeys me . . . ". Note the use of the term "*amīrī*" instead of naming 'Alī. Daylamī's language is far less polemical, or he is at least not interested in engaging those who object to the Shi'i conception of the imamate.

The exegeses of two Imami exegetes of the second half of the fifth century and first half of the sixth century, Ṭūsī (d. 460/1068) and Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1154), respectively, are significant not only because of their important influence on later works but also because they reopen the possibility for diverse interpretations. In terms of their systematic approach to *tafsīr*, Ṭūsī and Ṭabrisī seem to play a similar role to that of Māwardī and Ibn Jawzī in the Sunni tradition. When explicating the identity of *ulū'l-amr*, Ṭūsī writes: "On the *ulū'l-amr*, there are two interpretations among *mufasssīrūn*. Firstly, the view of Abū Hurayrah, Ibn 'Abbās in one report, Maymūn b. Mihrān, Suddī, Jubā'i, Balkhī, and Ṭabarī is that they are *umarā'*. Secondly, the view of Jābir b. 'Abd Allah, Ibn 'Abbās in another report, Mujāhid, Ḥasan (Baṣrī), 'Aṭā' and Abū'l-Āliyah is that they are '*ulamā'*'" (al-Ṭūsī n.d., vol. 3, p. 236). Ṭūsī then discusses the prevalent view among Shi'is (*aṣḥābunā*, our friends) by referring to such authorities as Abū Ja'far al-Bāqir and Abū 'Abd Allah who maintained that *ulū'l-amr* are Shi'i imams from the Family of Muḥammad. "God commands an absolute obedience to them", he argues, "as He obliges obedience to the Prophet and Himself. For no obedience is allowed except to those who are infallible, protected from errors and negligence" (Ibid.). With this argument, Ṭūsī intends to utilize a scholarly consensus that '*ulamā'*' and *umarā'*' are not infallible. If it is accepted that it is only infallible *ulū'l-amr* who must be obeyed, then Q 4:59 should be understood as referring to the infallible Shi'i imams.

Ṭūsī upholds a dominant view among Shi'is; nevertheless, he has no qualms alluding to Sunni *tafsīr*. When interpreting the Qur'anic phrase, "If you are in dispute over any matter, refer it to God and the Messenger" (Q 4:59), he refers to the view of Mujāhid, Qatādah, Maymūn b. Mihrān, and Suddī that "refer it to God" is meant "to the Qur'an", while "the Messenger" is his "Sunnah". He goes on to say, "refer to *imams* is in line with referring to God and His Messenger" (Ibid.). In his exegesis of 4:83, Ṭūsī first mentions Abū Ja'far's view and then the views of Sunni exegetes. According to Abū Ja'far, *ulū'l-amr* are infallible imams. Next, he acknowledges that Sunni authorities have proposed different interpretations from that of Abū Ja'far. Firstly, according to Ibn Zayd, Suddī, and Abū 'Alī, *ulū'l-amr* are "commanders of military expedition and political leaders". Ṭūsī contends that these Sunni scholars relied on reports concerning military expeditions and were unable to authenticate them. Secondly, according to Ḥasan, Qatādah, Ibn Jurayj, Ibn Abī Najīh, and Zujjāj, the Qur'anic *ulū'l-amr* are the people of knowledge and understanding who accompanied the Prophet, for if they were asked about any matter, as knowledgeable people, they would be able to answer. In response to this position, Ṭūsī refers to the view of the Mu'tazilī theologian al-Jubbā'ī (d. 303/915) who called into question the identification of *ulū'l-amr* as '*ulamā'*' because the latter were entrusted with sovereignty over people. Ṭūsī concludes his exegesis, saying, "The first opinion [the view of Abū Ja'far] is the strongest (*aqwā*) for God explains that they should refer [any disputes] to people of knowledge who are infallible. Referring to someone who is not infallible does not necessitate knowledge as it allows errors as has been agreed upon, whether they are leaders of military expedition or '*ulamā'*'" (Ibid., vol. 3, p. 273).

For his part, Ṭabrisī repeats much of what Ṭūsī has explicated concerning the identity of *ulū'l-amr*. Comparing the works of Ṭūsī and Ṭabrisī on Q 4:59 and 83 reveals a strong affinity between the two, though it must be acknowledged that the latter adds something significant to this discussion. Like Ṭūsī, Ṭabrisī identifies two views among Sunni exegetes, along with names of various previous authorities. Nevertheless, Ṭabrisī adds the underlying assumption of Sunni exegetes that *ulū'l-amr* are '*ulamā'*', saying: "Some of them argued that in case of disputes [on religious matters] people refer to '*ulamā'*', not political leaders" (al-Ṭabrisī 2006, vol. 3, p. 96). When discussing Shi'i positions, he rephrases Ṭūsī's analysis with some additions or omissions. For example, Ṭabrisī reiterates Ṭūsī's argument that the identification of *ulū'l-amr* as '*ulamā'*' is wrong and then argues that "God is no exalted to command obedience to someone who will disobey Him or to follow those who differ

in statement and action, for it is impossible for those who differ to be obeyed, just like it impossible to agree on disagreements" (Ibid.). Ṭabrisī, therefore, concludes that only infallible imams must be obeyed and followed. Another argument developed by Ṭabrisī is that *ulū'l-amr* are above all people, just as the Prophet is above the *ulū'l-amr* and all peoples. "That is the quality of imams from the Family of the Prophet", Ṭabrisī argues, "whose imamate and infallibility have been confirmed and people have agreed on their great status and justice" (Ibid.). He concludes his exegesis of Q 4:59 by saying that "the imams stood in the place of the Prophet after his death, and therefore, referring to the imams is like referring to the Prophet during his life because the imams are the protectors of his Shari'ah and Caliphs over his people (*ummah*)" (Ibid.).

Ṭabrisī's exegesis of Q 4:83 adds no significant explanation to Ṭūsī's *tafsīr*; in fact, it is much shorter than the latter's exegesis. Ṭabrisī mentions the view of Abū Ja'far as well as the two groups of Sunni exegetes, as already summarized by Ṭūsī. He also refers to Jubbā'ī's view but does not recount Ṭūsī's arguments reinforcing Abū Ja'far's opinion (Ibid., vol. 3, p. 119). There is no need to speculate whether or not Ṭabrisī supports Abū Ja'far. Perhaps he considers it sufficient to rely on Jubbā'ī's argument against the view of Sunni exegetes that '*ulamā'* cannot be *ulū'l-amr*, since they do not possess authority (*amr*) over people. It is worth noting that neither Ṭūsī nor Ṭabrisī mention those Sunni exegetes who understand *ulū'l-amr* as Muḥammad's Companions, the four guided caliphs (Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and 'Alī) or Abū Bakr and 'Umar particularly.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

From the above discussion, it can be inferred that, at least until the sixth century, the meaning of the Qur'anic *ulū'l-amr* remained a contested issue. Whereas the negotiation of the identity of *ulū'l-amr* continued to develop in the *tafsīr* tradition, Muslim jurists tended to ascribe a stable meaning to the Qur'anic *ulū'l-amr*—either as '*ulamā'* / *fuqahā'* (in legal discourses) or political leaders. The centrality of Q 4:59 to Muslim discourses on the question of authority is reflected, for instance, in Ibn Ḥazm's (d. 456/1064) assessment of the verse when he writes: "We have observed in this verse and found it comprehensive in dealing with every single thing that people in the past and today have talked about, what they agreed and disagreed concerning legal issues and Islamic practices enjoined by God, and nothing has been left" (Ibn Ḥazm 1985, vol. 1, p. 9). Legal scholars like Ibn Ḥazm tend to understand *ulū'l-amr* as *fuqahā'* or '*ulamā'* (scholars), and therefore, Q 4:59 becomes a point of reference concerning legal and religious matters. Among the *fuqahā'*, the Qur'anic phrase "obey God and obey the Messenger", for instance, is taken to justify the authoritativeness of the Qur'an and Sunnah, as "refer it to God" is understood to mean "refer to the Book of God", while "refer to the Messenger" means "to his Sunnah" (See Ibn Ḥazm 1985, vol. 8, p. 1116; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr 1999, vol. 1, p. 765). Abū Ya'lā (d. 458/1065), as cited by Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), contends that the fact that "obey" is repeated before the words "Allah" and "Messenger", and is not repeated before *ulū'l-amr*, indicates that legal evidence (*adillah*) in Shari'ah can be both textual (*manṣūṣ*, based on texts) and nontextual (*ghayr manṣūṣ*, not based on texts). This means that God asks people to refer the matter to the Qur'an and Sunnah as well as to scholars' *ijtihād* by way of deducing general principles and specific legal rulings from the two foundational texts (Qur'an and Sunnah) (Ibn al-Jawzī 2002, vol. 2, p. 117).

Among Muslim political theorists, however, the term "*ulū'l-amr*" is often understood as political leaders. In his *al-Aḥkām al-sulṭānīyah* (Rules Concerning Leadership), one of the earliest books expounding political theory in Islam, Māwardī invokes Q 4:59 to justify the necessity of political leadership (al-Māwardī 1983, *al-Aḥkām*, p. 5). For Māwardī, it is the instruction to obey people in authority (*ulū'l-amr*) that makes this verse central to the concept of the caliphate. His *al-Aḥkām al-sulṭānīyah* discusses the issue of leadership of the Muslim community and the necessity of the conditions of this institution throughout Muslim history. As the highest spiritual and political leadership of the Islamic community, the institution of the caliphate is meant to replace the prophetic mission in upholding

and preserving faith and administering Muslim affairs. For Māwardī, the necessity of the institution of the caliphate or imamate is as necessary as *nubuwwah* (prophethood), that is, the religiopolitical leadership of the Muslim community under the leadership of the Prophet himself.

It seems clear that, among medieval Muslim scholars, Q 4:59 has become a foundational text for legal and political conceptualizations. In the one sphere, *fuqahā'* tended to understand *ulū'l-amr* as the '*ulamā'*' of the community, while in the other sphere, political theorists associated *ulū'l-amr* with political authority. Although this does not mean that political leaders have no religious authority, just as '*ulamā'*' lack political powers, it seems apparent that for political theorists, the Qur'anic *ulū'l-amr* are somehow related to temporal powers, while for *fuqahā'*, they represent religious scholars whose main task is to grapple with religious matters through *ijtihād*. In fact, it is in the exegetical works that the negotiation of the authority of *ulū'l-amr* between the temporal and the religious can be noticed most clearly, as seen in their exegesis of Q 4:59 and 83.

Thus, the identity of the Qur'anic *ulū'l-amr* is more contentious in the Muslim exegetical works than in *fiqh* or the *siyāsah shar'iyah* literature. That the *tafsīr* tradition opens up ample space for divergent views is not debatable at all, for there is no single authority to distinguish one correct interpretation from others. Qur'an exegetes like Ṭabarī may have been able to recount various, sometimes conflicting interpretations and then determine what seemed to them to be the correct one; nevertheless, the variety of opinions of previous authorities continued to be endorsed and even classified by later exegetes, such as Māwardī and Ibn Jawzī, into groups/categories without any judgments. This article has also shown that a diversity of interpretations can similarly be found in the Shi'i *tafsīr* tradition, either because Shi'i exegetes refer to different authorities or because diverse views are attributed to the same authority. Even though Shi'i exegetes seem to agree on the leadership and infallibility of 'Alī and other imams on the basis of Q 4:59 and 83, the way they argue, infer, and engage with one another is undoubtedly more dynamic than has commonly been assumed.

It is worth noting that the various meanings of the Qur'anic *ulū'l-amr* developed over a period of time; this study has highlighted both Sunni and Shi'i exegetical trajectories. In fact, from the beginning, different interpretations emerged in Sunni *tafsīr*—for instance, the term *ulū'l-amr* was understood as '*ulamā'*' or Muḥammad's Companions. Such meanings continued to develop along with references to the supposed historical context of the verse. The category of '*ulamā'*' is also expressed differently: for instance, as "*ulū al-'ilm*" or "*ulū'l-fiqh*" and other expressions. Moreover, people around the Prophet as *ulū'l-amr* also underwent shifts and changes, e.g., *khulafā' rāshidūn* (Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and 'Alī) or only the first two figures; this plurality of meanings is recorded by Ṭabarī and Tha'labī. The identification of *ulū'l-amr* as Companions, either in general or in particular, gives the impression of implied polemics against Shi'is, who only recognize the leadership of 'Alī.

In the Shi'i tradition, early exegetical works include explicit polemics, which tend to intensify in the fourth and fifth centuries, as exhibited in the works of Mufīd and Murtaḍā. While 'Ayyāshī interprets Q 4:59 by referring to Abū 'Abd Allah who implicitly engaged those who denied the imams, Mufīd and Murtaḍā openly polemicize against their opponents (*mukhālifūn*) and strongly reject their arguments. Polemical tones diminish significantly in the *tafsīrs* of Tūsī and Ṭabrisī in the late fifth and sixth centuries, which coincides with the extensive use of Sunni sources. Generally speaking, Shi'i exegesis tends to engage with Sunni *tafsīr* (albeit polemically), but not the other way around. Sunni exegesis, it should be noted, seems to engage more internally. The result of this study confirms Saleh's observation that "*Tafsīr* became sectarian early on, and remains so despite the uniformity of its outlook due to professionalization and especially its use of philology" (Saleh 673). This sectarian feature of Qur'anic exegeses is clearly evident from their interpretations of *ulū'l-amr*. Each of the two Islamic sects has long approached the issue of leadership with a firm conviction regarding who has the right to succeed the Prophet. Tayeb El-Hibri is correct in saying that "a lot of the divergence in the religious concepts

and institutions of Sunnis and Shi'is therefore emanate from that initial disagreement over who should have succeeded the Prophet and what really happened on the eve of his death—debates that created such a sudden rift in the community afterward” (El-Hibri ix). Regardless of the nature of the exegetes’ engagements with this question of leadership and succession, either internally or externally, it is worth noting that attempts at an exegetical systematization in both traditions occurred almost simultaneously from the mid-fifth century onward.

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Notes

- ¹ Jennifer Gordon writes, “Although they lived after the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam and devoted other texts to this phenomenon, the commentaries of al-Shaykh al-Tūsī, al-Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 413/1020), al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044), and Abū ‘Alī al-Faḍl ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1154) fail to acknowledge the Twelfth Imam’s absence—both when naming the Imam as the one meant by the phrase ‘those in authority among you’ (discussed in the third chapter) and when naming the Imam as proper recipient of the *khums* tax. Taken at face value, the omission of the Occultation seems like evidence of dissimulation (*taqiyyah*)—an attempt to avoid naming a living authority who might pose a challenge to the temporal powers of the day. However, why bother with dissimulation in a religious text written for the faithful, especially when these same authors have written well-known and more easily accessed works that give in-depth treatments to the Occultation, fully acknowledging the Imam’s absence? In my reading, these commentaries do not display *taqiyyah*; instead, they reveal the exegetes at their most politically radical and uncensored: the exegetes truly believe that the only authority who deserves fealty is one who is sinless. For our commentators, even a hidden Imam is a far more legitimate and effective authority than any ruler who is present” (Gordon 2014, p. 5).
- ² Ibn Rāwandī was born in Kharāsān around 205/815. He was connected with Mu’tazilites but later became estranged from former colleagues. Most sources present conflicting narratives about his life, but he is mostly depicted as a heretic who maliciously ridicules all religions, including Islam. For a discussion, see (Stroumsa 1999).

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