Article

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

1. Introduction

Leadership is one of the most contested issues in the early development of Islam. Soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, 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 Muhammad’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 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 ʿulāʾl-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 ʿAbbāsid periods. This timespan allows us to discern the development of the meaning of the Qur’anic “ʿulāʾl-amr” and how interpretation of the ʿulāʾl-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 Qurʿān” (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 (ṣāḥifah) 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 “ʿulāʾl-amr” has been understood differently by different exegetes. Mujāhid (d. 104/722) interprets ʿulāʾl-amr in both 4:59 and 83 as “people who possess understanding in religion and reason” (ʿulāʾl-fiqh fīʾl-din waʾl-ʿaql) (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). Dāḥḵā (d. 105/723) offers two different meanings of ʿulāʾl-amr in Q 4:59, namely that “they are the Companions of the Messenger of God, i.e., preachers (duʿāt) and transmitters (ruwāt)” (al-Ḏāḥḵā 1999, vol. 1, p. 297) and “fuqahāʾ and ʿulamāʾ who taught people about the teachings of their religion and its proof” (al-Ḏāḥḵā 1999, vol. 1, p. 295). As for the second occurrence in 4:83, he simply glosses the term as “fuqahāʾ and ʿulamāʾ in religion” (Ibid.). The model of exegesis developed by Mujāhid and Dāḥḵā 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 Qurʿān (Leemhuis 1988). Paraphrastic exegesis is defined by Gilliot as follows: it “consisted of giving brief, often synonymic explanations of Qurʿānic terms or passages” (Gilliot 2013b, vol. 1, p. 334). Hussein Abdul-Raof distinguishes between Mujāhid’s tafsīr and that of Dāḥḵā, arguing that the former “deals mainly with semantically ambiguous and polysemous Qurʿānic 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 *tafsîr* of Hasan Baṣrî (d. 110/728), “the celebrated proponent of free-will (*qadar*) and model for the ascetics and mystics” (Gilliot 2013a, vol. 1, p. 167). Baṣrî consistently refers to *ulu'l-amr* in both 4:59 and 83 simply as ‘ulamâ’ (al-Baṣrî 1982, vol. 1, pp. 286, 288). However, Baṣrî’s explication of Q 4:59 does not seem to support his identification of *ulu'l-amr* as ‘ulamâ’. In addition to citing a Prophetic tradition—“No obedience to a creature on disobeying the Creator” (*lā ta'ata li-makhlūq fī ma'siyyat al-khâliq*)—Baṣrî narrates a story indicating that obedience in the verse refers to a military commander. It is reported that Ziyâd appointed Ḥakam b. ʿAmr b. Ḥishâbi to lead a military expedition. When encountering Ḫurān b. Ḥasan, 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?’” Ḥakam responded, “Yes, that is correct”. Ḥakam replied, “Indeed, I visit you to remind you about that hadîth” (Ibid.). It is unlikely that Baṣrî 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.

Suddî (d. 128/745) and Muqâtîl b. Sulaymân (d. 150/767) interpret Q 4:59 by furnishing its supposed historical context, known as “asbâb al-nuzûl” (occasions of revelation). It is for their use of this interpretive technique that these two *tafsîrs* mark the beginning of “narrative exegesis”. In this type of *tafsîr*, 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 Suddî and Muqâtîl refer to the same story in which the Prophet Muhammad sent Khalîd b. Wâlid, along with ‘Ammâr b. Yâsîr, 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 Khalîd asking about ‘Ammâr. When the latter had arrived, the man said: “O Abū Yaqzân, I have become a Muslim and declared that there is no god but God and Muhammad is His servant and messenger. However, my people ran away when they heard you were coming. Is my Islam of any benefit to me, or shall I flee too?” ‘Ammâr responded: “Stay, for it is beneficial to you”. The man returned to his family and told them to stay. The following morning, Khalîd invaded the area but found no one except for this man, so he imprisoned him and seized his property. ‘Ammâr 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”. Khalîd 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 ‘Ammâr but forbade him from giving amnesty to anyone in the future without the express permission of his leader. Khalîd said: “How would you let this broken slave to insult me?” The Prophet advised: “O Khalîd, please do not insult ‘Ammâr. Truly, whoever insults ‘Ammâr, God will insult him; whoever hates ‘Ammâr God will hate him; and whoever condemns ‘Ammâr God will condemn him”. ‘Ammâr stood up and left angrily. Khalîd followed him and held him by his cloak and asked him for forgiveness (al-Suddî 1993, p. 206; Muqâtîl b. Sulaymân 2002, vol. 1, pp. 382–83). While Suddî stops at the end of story, Muqâtîl continues to make the point that Q 4:59 was revealed concerning ‘Ammâr, noting that “the phrase *ulu'l-amr* among you” refers to Khalîd, as “the Prophet appointed him to manage people’s affairs, so God commands obedience to commanders of military expedition chosen by the Prophet” (Muqâtîl b. Sulaymân 2002, vol. 1, p. 383).

The identification of *ulu'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 Walîd 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 Saḥîh (d.211), for instance, quotes the views of Baṣrî and Muqâtîl along with chains of transmitters. Soon after citing Q 4:59, Saḥîh’s *tafsîr* asserts: “Ma’mar told
us on the authority of Hasan (Basri) that ulu’l-amr are ‘ulama’” (Abd al-Razzaq 1999, vol. 1, p. 464). As regards Mujahid’s view, he says, “Ma’mar informed us on the authority of Ibn Abi Najih that Mujahid referred to ulu’l-amr as the people of understanding and knowledge (ahl al-fiqh wa’l-’ilm)” (Ibid., vol. 1, p. 465). Along with the two sources, San‘ani recounts a hadith narrated by Abu Hurayrah: “Whoever obeys me, obeys God, and whoever disobeys me disobeys God. Whoever obeys my commander (amir) obeys me, and whoever disobeys my commander disobeys me” (Ibid.). San‘ani 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 ulu’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 ulu’l-amr as “those who possess knowledge (dhawul’-l-’ilm)” (Ibid., p. 132). The absence of sources in Ibn Qutaybah’s tafsir perhaps reflects his concern only to clarify unfamiliar terms, as the title of his work, Tafsir gharib al-Qur’an (exegesis of the unfamiliar in the Qur’an), seems to suggest. In the introduction to this tafsir, Ibn Qutaybah makes it clear that his sources are taken from various books of scholars. He relies mainly on the works of two philologists, Abu ‘Ubaydah’s (d. 210/824) Majaz al-Qur’an (The Meanings of the Qur’an) and Farrā’s (d. 207/822) Ma’ant ‘l-Qur’an (The Meanings of the Qur’an) (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 Tabari (d.310). Following his succinct explication of “Obey God and obey the Messenger”, Tabari spends a great deal of time elucidating who the Qur’anic ulu’l-amr are: “People of ta’wil differ on ulu’l-amr whom God enjoins His servants to obey” (al-Tabari 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 ulu’l-amr are commanders (umarā’). Belonging to this groups are figures like Abu Hurayrah, Ibn Abbās, Muyīn b. Mihrān, Ibn Zayd, and Suddī. However, a closer look will reveal some differences among them. Whereas Abu Hurayrah speaks of umara’ usually rendered as military commanders, Ibn Zayd points to “sulāfīn” (sing. sulțān). Two views are attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās: in one report, Ibn ‘Abbās relates ulu’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. Muyīn refers to those involved in an expedition (ashbāb al-sarāqāq) during Muhammad’s lifetime.

The second group of scholars are those who understand ulu’l-amr as the people of knowledge and understanding, including Mujahid, Ibn Abi Najih, Ibn Abbās (according to another report), ‘Atā’ b. Sa’īb, Hasan Basri, and Abūl-‘Āliyāh. 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. Mujahid, for example, is reported to use the term “ulu’l-fiqh” (those who possess understanding) in one report; however, in another report, he says “ulu’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 tafsir cited earlier, Mujahid instead refers to ulu’l-amr as “ulu’l-fiqh fi’l-dīn wa’l-aql” (those who possess understanding in religion and reason), a phrase associated with Ibn Abi Najih in Tabari’s tafsir. Other expressions used include “ahl al-fiqh wa’l-dīn” (Ibn ‘Abbās), “al-fuqahā’ wa’l-’ulamā’” (“Atā’), and “’ulamā’” (Hasan Basrī). The third and fourth groups associate ulu’l-amr with Muhammad’s Companions. In the third group, Tabari places Mujahid (again) who contends that ulu’l-amr are Companions, for they were the most qualified people in terms virtues, understanding, and piety. In the fourth group, Ikrīmah specifies Abū Bakr and ‘Umar b. Khāṭṭāb as ulu’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.
Tabari offers the same explanation when commenting on the second occurrence of *ulāl’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 *ulāl’amr* are both military commanders (*umārā‘*) and political leaders (*wulāt*). Tabari develops his view on the basis of several hadiths in which the Prophet commands obedience to leaders for the benefit and interest of the Muslim community. In one hadith, 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 hadith 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 *ulāl’amr* as the Prophet’s Companions, more specifically Abū Bakr and ‘Umar, as cited by Ṭabarî, 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 Tālib, the last two of the *khulafa’ rāshidūn,* which can be understood as reflecting concerns about the implications of political conflicts following the abrupt transition from ‘Uthmān to ‘Ali. Not only did the public unease with political succession lead to the first *fitnah* (civil war) between ‘Ali and Mu‘āwiya, ‘Uthmān’s nephew, but the far-reaching consequences include theological conflicts and subsequent schisms. Of course, eliminating ‘Uthmān and ‘Ali as *ulāl’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, Samarqandi (d. 375/985) adds another view generalizing the Qur’anic *ulāl’amr* to include *khulafa’* and *umārā‘* (al-Samarqandi 1993, vol. 1, p. 363). It is not unlikely that Samarqandi means to include both *khulafa’ rāshidūn* and the following caliphs from the Umayyads and ‘Abbásids. In his exegesis of Q 4:83, he explicitly names Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān, and ‘Ali as *ulāl’amr* without pointing to any differences nor mentioning his sources (Ibid., vol. 1, p. 371).

In the fifth century questions about the leadership of *khulafa’ rāshidūn* apparently attracted more attention. Tha‘labî (d. 427/1035), begins his exegesis with the view of ‘Ikrimah that *ulāl’amr* are Abū Bakr and ‘Umar, based on a hadith narrated by Mālik b. Anas in which the Prophet said: “Emulate two people after me, namely, Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. Truly I have two vizziers 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‘labî 2002, vol. 3, p. 333). In the following lines, Tha‘labî cites the statement of Abū Bakr al-Warrāq who identifies *ulāl’amr* as *khulafa’ rāshidūn* (Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān, and ‘Ali), 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 ‘Ali” (Ibid.). To affirm the leadership of the four figures, Warraq quotes a tradition reported on the authority of Saffinah, the slave of the Prophet, narrating that when the Prophet built a mosque in Medina, Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān, and ‘Ali 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‘labî still revolve around the close Companions of the Prophet. On the one hand, Bakr b. ‘Abd Allah al-Muzannî maintains that *ulāl’amr* are “the Companions of the Prophet based on a hadith ‘My Companions are like stars, whoever you follow you will be guided’” (Ibid., vol. 3, p. 334). On the other hand, ‘Atā’ gives a broader definition of *ulāl’amr* saying, “*muhājirūn* (Migrants from Mecca) and *ansār* (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 \textit{ulā’l-amr} with people around the Prophet, whether they are Companions in general, \textit{khulafā’ rāshidūn}, or, more specifically, Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. Next, Tha’labī explores other possible meanings of \textit{ulā’l-amr}, including, for instance, \textit{‘ulama’} and \textit{fuqaha’}. Previous authorities, such as Jābir b. ‘Abd Allah, Hasan Baṣrī, Daḥhāk, Muḥājīd, Muḥāraf b. Fadlāh, and Ismā’īl b. Abī Khālid, are cited, all of whom maintain that they are “\textit{fuqaha’} and \textit{‘ulama’}, 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 \textit{tafsīr}, namely statements attributed to Abūl-Aswād 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 \textit{‘ulama’} are rulers over kings” (Ibid.). Ibn ‘Abbās emphasizes the importance of reason (\textit{‘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 (\textit{‘aql}) is closer to his God than the entire \textit{muṣlihimūn} without reason. The tiniest good deed of the right-minded person is better than the \textit{jihād} of ignorant over a thousand years” (Ibid.).

At the end of his exegesis, Tha’labī refers to the view of previous authorities who understand \textit{ulā’l-amr as ‘umārā’} and \textit{sa拉丁}, 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 Muqāṭīl. Tha’labī’s discussion on the nature of obedience to \textit{ulā’l-amr} is significant, as he incorporates other sources not found in Ṭabarṭ’s \textit{tafsīr}, such as the views of ‘All and Shāfī’ī. The former says that “[t]he obligation of the \textit{imām} (leader) is to govern according to what has been revealed by God and deliver the trust (\textit{amānā}). 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 \textit{ulā’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”, Shāfī’ī says, “they were commanded to obey \textit{ulā’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’ānic \textit{ulā’l-amr} other than saying, “people of reason among the Companions such as Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān, and ‘Aḥī” (Ibid., vol. 3, p. 335).

Up to this point, it seems clear that the identity \textit{ulā’l-amr} has been the subject of much contention and contestation among Sunni exegetes. The diversity of views and even contradictions in the \textit{tafsīr} tradition should be understood as a dynamic process within the genre itself. The exegetical works of the post-Tha’labī \textit{tafsīr} underwent a sort of systematization, as is evident in the works of Māwārdī (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. Māwārdī, for example, divides Q 4:59 into three discrete phrases: “Obey God and obey the Messenger”, “on \textit{ulā’l-amr}”, and “If you believe in God and the Last Day . . . ”. On the \textit{ulā’l-amr}, for instance, he says that “there are four opinions”, and then elaborates the four views along with who stated them (al-Māwārdī 2010, al-Nukat, vol. 1, p. 499). First, \textit{ulā’l-amr} are \textit{umārā’} according to Ibn ‘Abbās, Abū Hurayrah, Suddī, and Ibn Zayd. On this view, Māwārdī 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 \textit{‘ulama’} and \textit{fuqaha’} according to Jābir b. ‘Abd Allah, Hasan Baṣrī, ‘Aḥī, and Abūl-’Ālīyah. Third, they are Companions of the Prophet according to Muḥājīd. Fourth, they are Abū Bakr and ‘Umar according to ‘Ikrimah. Māwārdī 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 \textit{ulā’l-amr}
in Q 4:83 is presented slightly differently, but it is also treated in the same systematic manner. Firstly, they are umara’ according to Ibn Zayd and Suddî; secondly, they are military commanders; and thirdly, they are the people of knowledge and understanding, according to Hasan Basrî, Qatādah, Ibn Jurayj, and Ibn Abi Najîh (Ibid.).

As Mâwardî’s work is the first systematic attempt at tafsîr, it is quite surprising that his al-Nukat wa’l-’uyûn has not attracted the scholarly attention that it deserves. Perhaps this is due to his renown as a political theorist with his al-Ahkâm al-sultânîyâh. Mâwardî’s al-Ahkâm 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 mu’assirûn, chief among them being Ibn Jawzî. This latter exegete begins his commentary on Q 4:59 by distinguishing two views concerning its historical context, as also noted by Mâwardî, but he strives to furnish more comprehensive sources. For example, the report of Ibn ’Abbâs on ‘Abd Allah b. Hudhâfah, Ibn Jawzî states, can be found in the hadîth collections of Bukhârî (d. 256/870) and Muslim (d. 261/875). Meanwhile, the story of ‘Ammâr and Khâlid cited by Suddî and Muqâtîl is narrated by Abû Sâlih. Furthermore, Ibn Jawzî 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 ‘Abbâs. On the Qur’anic ulûl-amr, Ibn Jawzî repeats the four views previously stated by Mâwardî, noting that two different views may be attributed the one individual. For instance, in one report, Ibn ‘Abbâs states umara’ and in another, ‘ulama’ (Ibn al-Jawzî 2002, vol. 2, pp. 115–17).

Ibn al-Jawzî’s exegesis of Q 4:83, particularly on the identity of ulûl-amr, is short but significant in that he reverses the order of views enumerated by Mâwardî and eliminates the category of “Companions” as ulûl-amr. The four views are as follows: first, ulûl-amr are Abû Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmân, and ‘Ali according to Ibn ‘Abbâs (Tha’labî attributes this view to Abû Bakr al-Warraq); second, Abû Bakr and ‘Umar according to ‘Ikrima; third, ‘ulama’ according to Hasan (Basrî), Qatâdah, and Ibn Jurayj; and fourth, military commanders according to Ibn Zayd and Muqâtîl (Ibid., vol. 2, p. 147). It is not clear why the order is reversed compared to his discussion of the first occurrence of ulûl-amr in Q 4:59. Similar to Mâwardî, Ibn al-Jawzî 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 tafsîr, Ibn al-Jawzî 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-Jawzî takes is a highly ordered one. In fact, the Zâd al-masâr is a kind of “shorthand” tafsîr. Therefore, elliptical is his method that Ibn al-Jawzî’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 Muhammad, 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 ulûl-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 ulûl-amr to be develops and changes. One of the earliest Shi’i exegetes to address the identity of ulûl-amr is Qummî (d. 307/919). In his exegesis of both Q 4:59 and 83, Qummî refers to the ulûl-amr simply as “’amtr al-mu’minûn” (Commander of the Faithful) (al-Qummî 1984, vol. 1, pp. 141, 145) and no further explanation is provided. The fact that ‘Alî’s name is not mentioned may
suggest that his audience would have understood that the title “amīr al-mu’mīnīn” is a direct reference to ‘Ali.

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 ʿulūl-amr. Furāt cites a few reports that, according to Ja’far b. Muḥammad, known as Ja’far al-Ṣādiq, the Qur’anic phrase “ʿulūl-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. Abī Talib 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 ʿulūl-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 tawīf (walking in circle around the ka’bah), until the Prophet showed it. God revealed ‘Obedience to ‘Alī is obligatory on the basis of Q 4:80 (‘Whoever obeys the Messenger obeys God’) and obedience to ‘Alī b. Abī Talib 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 ʿulūl-amr are ‘Alī and the Family of the Prophet.

Furāt refers to several hadīths and reports on the virtues of ‘Alī. One such hadīth 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 ʿulūl-amr, and he responded: “Those who possess understanding and knowledge (ʿulūl-fiqh waʿl-ʿilm)” When asked to explain whether this term is specific (khāṣṣ) or general (ʿamm), 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 Abbān b. Taghllub that ʿulūl-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 ʿulūl-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 Muhammad b. ‘Alī) that ʿulūl-amr are “appointed imams” (awsīya’), and he also mentions some materials already reported by Furāt (al-ʿAyyāshī 2000, vol. 1, pp. 250, 253). To support the argument that Q 4:59 was revealed concerning ‘Alī, Hasan and Husayn, ‘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, Hasan and Husayn, ‘Ayyāshī goes on to recite: “Additionally, blood-relatives are closer to one another in God’s Book” (Q 33:6) and says, “After Husayn, this turns to ‘Alī b. Husayn, then to Muḥammad b. ‘Alī” (Ibid., vol. 1, p. 251). In another source, Abbān b.
Taghballub is reported to have met with Abūʾl-Hasan al-Ridā 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 Shiʿī authorities to support the argument that the ālāʾ-amr verse refers exclusively to Shiʿī imams, especially from ‘Alī to Jaʿfar. 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. Instead of focusing on narratives about ‘Alī, ‘Ayyāshī broadens his sources to include reports concerning all of the Shiʿī 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 ʿAbd Allah: “Thanks to God, who had taught you about your imams and leaders at the time when other people rejected them” (al-ʿAyyāshī 2000, vol. 1, p. 252). In another report, Abū ʿAbd Allāh expresses the exclusiveness of the Shiʿah 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 ʿAbd 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 Hasan b. ‘Alī, then Husayn b. ‘Alī, then ‘Alī b. Husayn, then Muḥammad b. ‘Alī Abū Jaʿfar. Shiʿis before the time of Abū Jaʿfar were unaware of pilgrimage rites (manāṣık), or what is permissible and forbidden, till Jaʿfar 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 Jaʿfar 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 Muḥīd (d. 413/1032) further emphasizes this point by showing several pieces of textual evidence from the Qurʾān concerning the leadership of ‘Alī and the infallibility of imams. For Muḥīd, Q 4:59 “imposes the necessity of knowing the imams by way of commanding an absolute obedience to them” (al-Muḥīd 2003, p. 155). Using polemical rhetoric, he writes: “If the opponent (mukhālīf) asked, ‘Show us the text of the Qurʾān on ‘Alī!’ We respond that the leadership of ‘Alī can be established on the basis of the general principle (of the Qurʾānic 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.). Muḥīd 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-Qurʾānic scriptures. He also argues that the nisāb (the minimum amount that a Muslim must have before being obliged to zakat) is not clearly stipulated in the Qurʾān, nor are the specific details of prayer or fasting—and yet nobody disputes them. Muḥīd then concludes that “the leadership of amīr al-muʿminīn is confirmed in the text from the Prophet, even if it is not explicitly stated in the Qurʾān” (Ibid., p. 156).
Mufid further argues that one of the Qur’anic texts that implicitly establishes the leadership of ’Ali is Q 4:59, in which God commands obedience to ulāl’-amr just as He requires obedience to Himself and His Messenger. Additionally, amīr al-mu’minīn is one of those ulāl’-amr without a doubt. Mufid admits that scholars are divided on the identity of ulāl’-amr, i.e., whether they are ‘ulama’, military commanders, or imams. For Mufid, amīr al-mu’minīn fulfills all of these criteria as he is among the ‘ulama’ and led military expeditions during Muhammad’s time. ’Ali 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 ’Ali, 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 wād. ih. ah) (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 ’Ali rather than to justify the authority of imams, as was the concern of earlier exegetes such as ‘Ayyāshī and Furāt.

Mufid’s disciple, Sharīf Murtadā(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 ’Ali. Murtadā 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, Murtadā 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 (aṣḥābīnā) 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-Imanah. 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 ijma’. (al-Murtadā 2010, vol. 2, pp. 80–81)

Murtadā’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 Murtadā’s response is not only brief but also opaque.

Another exegete of the fifth century, Daylami (d. 444), offers a brief commentary on the Qur’anic ulāl’-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-Daylami 2008, p. 182). He then cites a version of a ḥadīth on obedience: “Whoever
obey me obeys God and whoever obeys my leader (\textit{amārī}) obeys me . . . ". Note the use of the term "\textit{amārī}" instead of naming 'Ali. 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, Tūsī (d. 460/1068) and Tabrīsī (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 \textit{tafsīr}, Tūsī and Tabrīsī seem to play a similar role to that of Māwardī and Ibn Jawzī in the Sunni tradition. When explicating the identity of \textit{ulā'l-amr}, Tūsī writes: "On the \textit{ulā'l-amr}, there are two interpretations among \textit{mu fasīrūn}. Firstly, the view of Abū Hurayrah, Ibn 'Abbās in one report, Maymūn b. Mīhrān, Suddī, Jubārī, Balkhī, and Tabārī is that they are \textit{umāratā'.} Secondly, the view of Jābir b. 'Abd Allah, Ibn 'Abbās in another report, Mūjahīd, Hasan (Baṣrī), 'Āṭa' and Abū 'Ī-Āliyah is that they are "\textit{ulā'mā'}" (al-Tūsī n.d., vol. 3, p. 236). Tūsī then discusses the prevalent view among Shi'i (\textit{aṣḥābuddīn}, our friends) by referring to such authorities as Abū Ja'far al-Bāqir and Abū 'Abd Allah who maintained that \textit{ulā'l-amr} are Shi'i imams from the Family of Muhammad. "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, Tūsī intends to utilize a scholarly consensus that '\textit{ulā'mā'} and \textit{umārā'} are not infallible. If it is accepted that it is only infallible \textit{ulā'l-amr} who must be obeyed, then Q 4:59 should be understood as referring to the infallible Shi'i imams.

Tūsī upholds a dominant view among Shi'i; nevertheless, he has no qualms alluding to Sunni \textit{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 Mūjahīd, Qatādah, Maymūn b. Mīhrān, 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 \textit{imam}s is in line with referring to God and His Messenger" (Ibid.). In his exegesis of 4:83, Tūsī first mentions Abū Ja'far's view and then the views of Sunni exegetes. According to Abū Ja'far, \textit{ulā'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 'Ali, \textit{ulā'l-amr} are "commanders of military expedition and political leaders". Tūsī contends that these Sunni scholars relied on reports concerning military expeditions and were unable to authenticate them. Secondly, according to Hasan, Qatādah, Ibn Jurayj, Ibn Abī Najīh, and Zujjāj, the Qur'anic \textit{ulā'l-amr} are the people of knowledge and understanding who accompanied the Prophet, if they were asked about any matter, as knowledgeable people, they would be able to answer. In response to this position, Tūsī refers to the view of the Mu'tazīlī theologian al-Jubbā'ī (d. 303/915) who called into question the identification of \textit{ulā'l-amr} as '\textit{ulā'mā'}' because the latter were entrusted with sovereignty over people. Tūsī concludes his exegesis, saying, "The first opinion [the view of Abū Ja'far] is the strongest (\textit{aqqūt}) 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 '\textit{ulama}'" (Ibid., vol. 3, p. 273).

For his part, Tabrīsī repeats much of what Tūsī has explicated concerning the identity of \textit{ulā'l-amr}. Comparing the works of Tūsī and Tabrīsī 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 Tūsī, Tabrīsī identifies two views among Sunni exegetes, along with names of various previous authorities. Nevertheless, Tabrīsī adds the underlying assumption of Sunni exegetes that \textit{ulā'l-amr} are '\textit{ulā'mā'}', saying: "Some of them argued that in case of disputes [on religious matters] people refer to '\textit{ulama}', not political leaders" (al-Tabrīsī 2006, vol. 3, p. 96). When discussing Shi'i positions, he rephrases Tūsī's analysis with some additions or omissions. For example, Tabrīsī reiterates Tūsī's argument that the identification of \textit{ulā'l-amr} as '\textit{ulama}' 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.). Tabriṣ, therefore, concludes that only infallible imams must be obeyed and followed. Another argument developed by Tabriṣ is that ʿulīʾl-amr are above all people, just as the Prophet is above the ʿulīʾl-amr and all peoples. “That is the quality of imams from the Family of the Prophet”, Tabriṣ 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 Shariʿah and Caliphs over his people (ummah)” (Ibid.).

Tabriṣ’s exegesis of Q 4:83 adds no significant explanation to Ṭust’s ʾtafsīr; in fact, it is much shorter than the latter’s exegesis. Tabriṣ mentions the view of Abū Jaʿfar as well as the two groups of Sunni exegetes, as already summarized by Ṭust. He also refers to Jubbāʾī’s view but does not recount Ṭust’s arguments reinforcing Abū Jaʿfar’s opinion (Ibid., vol. 3, p. 119). There is no need to speculate whether or not Tabriṣ supports Abū Jaʿfar. Perhaps he considers it sufficient to rely on Jubbāʾī’s argument against the view of Sunni exegetes that ‘ulamaʾ cannot be ʿulīʾl-amr, since they do not possess authority (amr) over people. It is worth noting that neither Ṭust nor Tabriṣ mention those Sunni exegetes who understand ʿulīʾl-amr as Muḥammad’s Companions, the four guided caliphs (Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān, and ‘Ali) 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 ʿulīʾl-amr remained a contested issue. Whereas the negotiation of the identity of ʿulīʾl-amr continued to develop in the ʾtafsīr tradition, Muslim jurists tended to ascribe a stable meaning to the Qur’anic ʿulīʾl-amr—either as ‘ulamāʾ/ fuqahaʾ (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. 546/1064) 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 ʿulīʾl-amr as fuqahaʾ or ‘ulamāʾ (scholars), and therefore, Q 4:59 becomes a point of reference concerning legal and religious matters. Among the fuqahaʾ, the Qur’anic phrase “obey God and obey the Messenger”, for instance, is taken to justify the authoritativeness of the Qurʾan 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 ʿAbd al-Barr 1999, vol. 1, p. 765). Abū Yaʿlā (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 ʿulīʾl-amr, indicates that legal evidence (adillah) in Shariʿah can be both textual (mansūḥ, based on texts) and nontextual (ghayr mansūḥ, not based on texts). This means that God asks people to refer the matter to the Qurʾan and Sunnah as well as to scholars’ ʾijtihād by way of deducing general principles and specific legal rulings from the two foundational texts (Qurʾan and Sunnah) (Ibn al-Jawzī 2002, vol. 2, p. 117).

Among Muslim political theorists, however, the term ʿulīʾl-amr is often understood as political leaders. In his al-ʿakhkām al-sulṭānīyah (Rules Concerning Leadership), one of the earliest books expounding political theory in Islam, Mawārdī invokes Q 4:59 to justify the necessity of political leadership (al-Mawārdī 1983, al-ʿakhkām, p. 5). For Mawārdī, it is the instruction to obey people in authority (ʿulīʾl-amr) that makes this verse central to the concept of the caliphate. His al-ʿakhkām 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 Mawardi, 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, fuqaha’ tended to understand ulu’l-amr as the ‘ulama’ of the community, while in the other sphere, political theorists associated ulu’l-amr with political authority. Although this does not mean that political leaders have no religious authority, just as ‘ulama’ lack political powers, it seems apparent that for political theorists, the Qur’anic ulu’l-amr are somehow related to temporal powers, while for fuqaha’, they represent religious scholars whose main task is to grapple with religious matters through ijtihad. In fact, it is in the exegetical works that the negotiation of the authority of ulu’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 ulu’l-amr is more contentious in the Muslim exegetical works than in fiqh or the siyasa shar’iyyah literature. That the tafsir tradition opens up ample space for divergent views is not debateable at all, for there is no single authority to distinguish one correct interpretation from others. Qur’an exegetes like Tabarî 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 Mawardi and Ibn Jawzi, into groups/categories without any judgments. This article has also shown that a diversity of interpretations can similarly be found in the Shi’i tafsir 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 ‘Ali 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 ulu’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 tafsir—for instance, the term ulu’l-amr was understood as ‘ulama’ or Muhammad’s Companions. Such meanings continued to develop along with references to the supposed historical context of the verse. The category of ‘ulama’ is also expressed differently: for instance, as “ulu al-ilm” or “ulu’l-fiqh” and other expressions. Moreover, people around the Prophet as ulu’l-amr also underwent shifts and changes, e.g., khulafa’ rashidun (Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthman, and ‘Ali) or only the first two figures; this plurality of meanings is recorded by Tabarî and Tha’labi. The identification of ulu’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 ‘Ali. 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 Muhammad and Murtada. While ‘Ayyashi interprets Q 4:59 by referring to Abu ‘Abd Allah who implicitly engaged those who denied the imams, Muqaddasi and Muradi openly polemicize against their opponents (nukhbatin) and strongly reject their arguments. Polemical tones diminish significantly in the tafsirs of Tusi and Tabarsi 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 tafsir (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 “Tafsir 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 ulu’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
Jennifer Gordon writes, “Although they lived after the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam and devoted other texts to this phenomenon, Ibn R̄awand̄ī was born in K̄har̄as̄an around 205/815. He was connected with Mu‘taṣilites 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 the Qur’an—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 tāqiyyaḥ; 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). 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-Mufīd (d. 413/1020), al-Sharīf al-Murtadād (d. 436/1044), and Abū ‘Alī al-Faḍl ibn al-Hasan al-Ṭabarī (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 tāqiyyaḥ; 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 R̄awand̄ī was born in K̄har̄as̄an around 205/815. He was connected with Mu‘taṣilites 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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