

## Semantics of Leadership in the Qur'an: A Possible Reading

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### Abstract

Although the notion of leadership is semantically inflated, its meaning and semiotic potential are fading; Muslim societies await a saviour, but detailed studies on leadership are scarce. The article opens new avenues of interpretation for this and other Qur'anic terms, configuring geographic considerations and interpretational hot spots, starting from universal laws (*sunnatullah*), and addressing leadership references in religious practice and daily life. It highlights the most prominent leadership concepts in the Qur'anic text, and questions their core meanings and extended semantic fields. The conclusions develop more inclusive approaches to plural exegesis, and broaden the discourse of Qur'anic Studies.

**Key words:** *al-khalifa*, *al-imam*, leadership, Moses, particular, Qur'an, universal

## Leadership: A Topos and Depleted Concept

Leadership is one in a series of popular terms (such as democracy, freedom, identity, and project) that are overused today, resulting in quantitative inflation and the loss of meaning, both of the term and the concept in general. Studies that address the topic have a vast range of titles, and there are calls from academic, economic and social spheres for easy and practical instructions on various types of leadership.<sup>1</sup> Phrases such as the ten steps to effective leadership, principled leadership, and the seven secrets of strategic leadership are symptomatic examples of how the topic manifests in public opinion. At the time of writing in early 2022, Google offered nearly six billion search results for it.

This unstoppable trend of interest in the leadership phenomenon tells us that it is an issue of great importance to the public. In addition, the many problems that are being pushed under the guise of leadership indicate a considerable conceptual diversity. In his seminal study *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, Peter G. North asserts that the number of definitions of leadership is almost equal to the number of authors of such definitions. North's study offers a detailed and compelling overview and development of the definitions of leadership in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>2</sup> In this diversity, several critical determinants help us better understand the concept of leadership, whose definitions inevitably mention cultivation, commitment, improvement, mission, tangible results, universal goals, and vision.

Most studies on leadership confirm that it is crucial to imply leadership through its process. The perception of leadership as a process expands the scope of its concept, and explains why there are so many related theories and definitions. As North states: "It emphasises that leadership is not a linear, one-way event, but rather an interactive event".<sup>3</sup> Despite the many straightforward and monotonous approaches that surround it, leadership, like most processes, involves various factors, and a degree of complexity and development. Kevin Morrell emphasises that

... monolithic constructions of leadership restrict our scope to analyse complexity and criticise existing order and hegemonies, both of which are key

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1 For detailed discussions, see: W.J. Duncan, K.G. LaFrance, and P.M. Ginter, "Leadership and Decision Making: A Retrospective Application and Assessment", *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 9:4 (2003), pp. 1-20.; R.P. Vecchio, "Entrepreneurship and Leadership: Common Trends and Common Threads", *Human Resource Management Review*, 13 (2003), pp. 303-327; D. Vera and M. Crossan, "Strategic Leadership and Organisational Learning", *Academy of Management Review*, 29:2 (2004), pp. 222-240.; Y. Sankar, "Character Not Charisma is the Critical Measure of Leadership Excellence", *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 9:4 (2003), pp. 45-55.

2 Peter G. North, *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (London: SAGE, 2016), pp. 2-5.

3 North, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, p. 6.

to academic scholarship. This suggests that some move to more integrative accounts of leadership is worthwhile.<sup>4</sup>

A synthesis of the numerous definitions of the concept can be expressed through a parable, in which leadership is a journey through challenging terrain and difficult times. Leaders are those who know this mercurial terrain (the world and *Zeitgeist* in which they live), and have an internal compass that guides them through its aporia and navigates the future.

This article stems from the need to expand the field of analysis and understanding of leadership, in a small step towards new approaches to this critical yet disavowed term. Its primary interest is to question the concept of leadership in a Muslim context, which is certainly not exempt from the flood of leadership propaganda. It is, however, developing particular patterns of reading, understanding and analysing leadership, which are in turn most often conditioned by the centuries-old crisis and depression of Muslim communities. Leadership is a prevalent topic for Muslims, for various reasons, and this is especially evident in religious discourses that link leadership to notions that include the caliphate, mahdi, sultan, and ummah. Leadership is often portrayed as a one-man show and held as a naive hope that one person can cure all ills. This partially explains the dominance of autocratic regimes in such societies.

Because these topics deserve elaboration, this article focuses its discourse on leadership among Muslims with regard to the Qur'anic perception of the phenomenon. Before we turn to the Qur'anic text, however, three vast areas in which Muslims (have the opportunity to) recognise the concept of leadership will be discussed, from the most abstract to the most concrete.

## The Three Levels of Leadership

The starting point of this research relates specifically to the Qur'anic perspective of the notion of leadership. It is about cosmology, religious sciences or duties, and everyday life. Before this is elaborated in more detail, other potential fields in which the phenomenon of leadership is of paramount importance will be explained.

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4 Kevin Morrell, "Leadership, Rhetoric, and Formalist Literary Theory", *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 3:4, (2010), p. 87.

## Leadership as a Universal Law

The cosmos, or God's creation, is a space in which the concept of leadership is clearly demonstrated. According to the Qur'an, the world around us is filled with signs from which we can read the meaning and messages of God, just as we do from the Qur'an itself. Natural phenomena are therefore identified with Qur'anic words, and the cosmos is a highly sophisticated system, in which numerous such phenomena occur: the planets move in precise orbits; the moon follows its own orbit; and the stars and celestial bodies in galaxies reveal intricate subsystems and processes that constantly contribute to the vast expanses of space. The primary feature of this system is that it functions according to precise coordinates. Leadership is the cornerstone of this system, and of the life process of the universe in general. By closely observing and reflecting on the cosmos, we can understand how everything in it found its place and path of movement. The universe is a mirror of the perfectly organised principle of leadership. This kind of leadership belongs to natural laws, or what is designated as *sunnatullah* in the Qur'an. Numerous verses show the perfect equilibrium of leadership in the cosmos, including Surah Ya-Sin (38-41):

The sun, too, runs its determined course laid down for it by the Almighty, the All-Knowing. We have determined phases for the moon until finally it becomes like an old date-stalk. The sun cannot overtake the moon, nor can the night outrun the day: each floats in [its own] orbit.<sup>5</sup>

These verses, which are a panorama of the perfect movement of celestial bodies governed by what we call divine leadership, contain parallel physical and spiritual conditions. The word "float" in Arabic (*yasbahūn*) also means glorifying the Lord (*tasbiḥ*). In this semantic coincidence, the connection between the process of leadership and celebration can be explored, starting from the hypothesis that the leadership process is simultaneously a sublime act of glorifying the Lord.

## Leadership as a Religious Duty

The notion of leadership as a religious duty is especially evident in episodes of the Prophet Muhammad's life, and in his sayings.<sup>6</sup> This article explains the potential elaboration of leadership in the religious sciences, especially in the science of hadith.

5 *The Qur'an (Oxford World's Classics)*, M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (trans.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

6 For more details, see Al-Azami, Nabeel, Muhammad (s): *11 Leadership Qualities that Changed the World* (Swansea: Claritas Books, 2019).

The Prophet's hadith about travel is significant; it explicitly states that a group must choose a leader when travelling, even if it is a group of only three people:

Abu Sa'id and Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with both of them) reported that the Prophet (may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him) said: "When three people set out on a journey, they should appoint one of them as their leader."<sup>7</sup>

In this hadith, the Prophet simultaneously emphasises the importance of travel, and of determining the leader of the journey. Leadership is a process, as is a journey, and neither, no matter how insignificant, can be realised without a leader, or without applying the principle of leadership. This hadith does not explain the detailed characteristics of a leader or how a leader is chosen, but rather focuses on the need to apply the principle of leadership. The choice of a leader in our activities (processes or affairs) is therefore given as an obligation that the Prophet decisively described.

Another hadith generalises the principle of leadership, in the words of the Prophet: "Every one of you is a shepherd, and everyone is responsible for his flock."<sup>8</sup>

An essential message of this hadith is that leadership is equated with responsibility. Because no one is exempt from this responsibility, no one can be absolved from the duty of leadership. In the second part of the hadith, the domains of each of us are explained in more detail. Many assume leaders to be presidents, generals, or mayors, and in this way, the leadership space is perceived as exclusive. This creates a space of self-abolition, which in turn leads to a negative social psychology, in which someone else is always responsible for the collective state.

According to the Prophet, leadership is a duty, as in the case of travel and other (life) processes, but above all, it is an inevitable state of responsibility. Some are responsible for collectives and communities, while others are responsible for families, households, tribes, and companies or other workplaces. The point of this attitude is that a conscientious individual (or a believer) within a society cannot be exempted from the responsibility of leadership. The believer is responsible for his domain, no matter how small it may be. He must find the answer and provide it within his area of responsibility, thereby forming a circle of answerability,<sup>9</sup> which is an essential manifold concept in the religious worldview.

7 *Riyad as-Salihin*, Book 7, Hadith 5, p. 960. <https://sunnah.com/riyadussalihin:960>; (Accessed on: 07/03/2022)

8 *Sahih al-Bukhari* 7138; *Sahih Muslim* 1829; <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:7138>; <https://sunnah.com/muslim:1829a> (Accessed on: 03/03/2022)

9 For more on this topic, see: Ali al-Sharbagi, *Mas'uliyya fi al-islam ala daw' al-kitab wa al-sunna*, (Damascus: Dar al-Yamama li al-nashr wa al-tiba'a, 2002); and Mairaj U. Syed, *Coercion and Responsibility in Islam: A Study in Ethics and Law* (Oxford: Oxford Islamic Legal Studies, 2017).

## Leadership as an Everyday Skill: Al-Ghazali

The previously mentioned hadith, in which every individual in a society is considered a shepherd or guardian (a kind of leader), alludes to the fact that the concept of leadership permeates all human life in the most general sense. In such a perspective, every adult becomes part of the life process of leadership, and each new day presents us with decisions we must make about our lives. The concept of daily leadership includes organising family life, arranging one's household, and going to work. The question is, how consciously or unconsciously do we do this, i.e., what is the intensity of our will? A glance at someone's desk, activity planner, wardrobe or simply the space in which they live can reveal much about their leadership style.

Classical Muslim authors also gave activities their attention to this aspect of leadership in everyday life. In the *Mublikat* or *Destructive Powers*<sup>10</sup> volume of his seminal work, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali elaborates on the human character and its psychology, and represents man's mental structure as a complex kingdom-like system. To understand this perspective, it is critical to know how this system works, and to recognise the management and leadership patterns within it. Correctly understanding this relationship means properly understanding personal leadership. This results in a good life, exemplary deeds, and personal and social well-being.

Al-Ghazali believes that the believer's most important task is to understand the fundamental tool or, more precisely, the organ through which the Supreme God is known, which is undoubtedly the heart, and he devotes an entire chapter ("The Book of the Heart's Wonders") to this. The heart therefore occupies a leading position in the conception of man in general, with all other organs designated "servants of the heart" as Al-Ghazali vividly describes it:

Everything else is a means used and employed by the heart, as a master employs goods, as a shepherd uses his flock and as a craftsman uses his tools. Only a pure heart is received from Allah in which there is nothing but Allah.<sup>11</sup>

He then develops a detailed geography of the heart and its armies, which can help the heart or kill it. The heart needs these parts of the body just as a man needs a driver and a chariot to travel the path that ultimately leads to the Lord. All other parts of the body should therefore be subordinated to the heart, and serve it. If this matrix is reversed, the heart begins to serve something else, like carnal desire. This violates the concept of authentic leadership in human cosmology, and the system collapses. In this case, man is ruled by the destructive

10 Al-Imam Abi Hamid Muhammad Ibn Muhammad al-Gazali, *Ihya' ulum al-din* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2005).

11 Al-Gazali, *Ihya' ulum al-din*, p. 876.

powers for which al-Ghazali entitled this volume of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*. He also outlines plausible examples of how leadership operates in the inner kingdom of the human being:

An example of the soul in the body, I mean that subtle part of the man we talked about, as an example of a ruler in his country. The body is the kingdom of the soul, its home and homeland, and the organs and stimuli are like artisans and soldiers, and the power of reason is like a counsellor and a reasonable helper. The request is like a disobedient slave supplying the city with food and groceries, and anger and bias are like police commanders. The slave in charge of groceries is known as a liar, conspirator, deceiver and pervert who portrays himself as a benefactor, and his advice hides evil and deadly poison. It is his practice and custom to oppose the Minister's Adviser and to take the opposite view of any Minister's proposal. His opposition is daily and constant. Suppose the governor in his kingdom does not feel the need for a minister to act on his advice and opinion because he does not pay any attention to what this corrupt slave tells him because he believes, based on his experience, that it is best to act contrary to what the slave advises him. In that case, the police commander will punish that slave, take him to the minister, and force him to obey the minister. Then the slave will be the one who listens, not the one who is obeyed, the one who carries out orders, not the one who gives the orders.<sup>12</sup>

Al-Ghazali insists that leadership is held firm because it ensures that man, or his inner kingdom, is safe and able to provide prosperity and justice for himself and others. He identifies this as man's "great struggle" to recognise the agents and forces of leadership, and subdue all other elements of his being (such as instincts). This is a struggle to establish order in the human soul, overcome egoism, and exalt empathy and charity, and refers to the hadith of the Prophet, who said after a battle that he was returning from "a small fight and turning to the big one".<sup>13</sup>

In another example, al-Ghazali concretises the image of the human body as a city:

The reason by which one learns is the manager of that city, while the potentials by which one learns, that is, the external and internal senses, are like the army and helpers. The organs are like subjects, and the soul, prone to evil (*nafs*), which is passion, desire and anger, is like an enemy who wants to take over his kingdom and destroy his subjects. His body is like a tower of defenders, and his *nafs* is like those who reside there. Suppose he fights against his enemy, subdues and subjugates him to what he wants. In that case, he will become famous when he returns to the capital, as the Almighty says: *God has raised such*

12 Al-Gazali, *Ihya' ulum al-din*, p. 881.

13 Al-Gazali, *Ihya' ulum al-din*, p. 882.

*people to a rank above those who stay at home* (Surat al-Nisa': 95) If he loses what is entrusted to his care, and if he neglects his subjects, he will be disgraced and disgraced and will be sanctified before Allah on the Day of Resurrection and it will be said to him: "Bad shepherds, you ate meat and drank milk, but you did not find an apartment for the lost sheep, nor did you treat the sick. I will take revenge on you today" – as stated in one saying.<sup>14</sup>

Al-Ghazali's last example ends with the condemnation of a shepherd who did not fulfil his responsibilities. This refers to the previously mentioned hadith, which attributes leadership to each individual. In *The Book of Heart's Wonders*, al-Ghazali describes and interprets the vision of man's spiritual order, and the dynamic relationship between the forces within it. In everyday activities, individuals make decisions that critically determine the character of their leadership. Between getting out of bed and going to sleep, we adjust our inner world to external stimuli and realities. But whom do we choose as the primary referent when we are faced with major or minor decisions from cultural, political or practical spheres? Do we opt for the heart, or its inferior armies (desires, egos, instincts)? The answer we choose is illustrative of our daily leadership style.

## Leadership in the Qur'an: The Main Concepts

The previous pages contain a cross-section of domains in which we can recognise and analyse the phenomenon of leadership, from more abstract categories to more concrete ones. But our fundamental question is how this term appears in the Qur'anic text as the source of the Muslim worldview. Most authors on the topic of leadership in Islam have not treated the concept of leadership in the Qur'an separately, or exclusively. Examples from the life of the Prophet,<sup>15</sup> or broad analyses of leadership in Islam, are often given to provide a range of explanations of the religious principles that govern leadership.<sup>16</sup> While such studies are welcome, and valuable for many reasons, they lack a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of leadership in the Qur'an. This applies not only to leadership, but is to an extent an established rule in Muslim academia, where the primary text is taken for granted, and rarely placed in the initial position of research. The main reason for this state of affairs is the unresolved question (tafsir) of the Qur'an as an open text, which was masterfully elaborated by the great al-Jurjani in his seminal work *Dalail al-'I'gaz*. This situation causes excessive

14 Al-Gazali, *Ihya' ulum al-din*, pp. 881-882.

15 See: John Adair, *The Leadership of Muhammad* (London: Kogan Page, 2010).

16 See: Rafik Issa Beekun and Jamal A Badawi, *Leadership: An Islamic Perspective* (Maryland: Amana, 1999).

caution, and even fear, regarding any (new) interpretation or “additional possible reading of the [Qur’anic] text”.<sup>17</sup>

The Qur’an is, without a doubt, the fundamental font of the Muslim spirituality and worldview. In the context of leadership as a process or journey, the Qur’an should be the compass by which believers orient themselves in their time, and which informs their responses to present and future challenges. In this sense, the Qur’anic text is decisive: it is a universal guide, a catalogue of life, as emphasised in the first sentences of this Heavenly revelation:

This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance for those who are mindful of God.<sup>18</sup>

It was in the month of Ramadan that the Qur’an was revealed as guidance for mankind, clear messages giving guidance and distinguishing between right and wrong.<sup>19</sup>

In other parts of the Qur’an, the terms remedy (or solution) and grace are added to the guideline, as in verse 57 of Surah Yunus:

People, a teaching from your Lord has come to you, a healing for what is in [your] hearts, and guidance and mercy for the believers.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the theme of leadership is multifacetedly related to the identity of believers on a cosmic level, through religious duty to everyday acts. It would be logical to start from a book that reminds believers of their essence (Anbiya: 10): “And now We have sent down to you [people] a Scripture to remind you”.<sup>21</sup>

Formally, the Qur’anic text contains two terms that most directly refer to leadership: khalifa and imam.

## The Ethical Background: The Leader as *al-Khalifa*

*Al-khalifa* is one of the most prominent leadership-related terms in the Qur’an. The story of the caliph describes the creation of man, and God’s decree that man be His steward on Earth. This episode is described in detail in several places in the Qur’an, and the term caliph is first mentioned decisively in the thirtieth verse

17 Sohaib Saeed, “Fights and Flights: Two Underrated ‘Alternatives’ to Dominant Readings in tafsir”, *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 24:1 (2022), p. 46.

18 Sura al-Baqara: 2,3, in: *The Qur’an (Oxford World’s Classics)*, M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 4

19 Sura al-Baqara: 185, in: *The Qur’an*, p. 20.

20 *The Qur’an*, p. 132.

21 *The Qur’an*, p. 203.

of Surah Baqara: “When your Lord told the angels, ‘I am putting a successor on Earth ...’”<sup>22</sup>

Although Muslim literature speaks prolifically of this event and offers numerous interpretations, it primarily refers to the astonishment of the angels, the revolt of Iblis, the crossing of the borders into Eden, and the final descent to Earth.

At this point, a closer analysis of the semantics of *al-khalifa* and its possible repercussions on the concept of leadership is required. The word itself is complex – its three-consonant root points to ‘something behind’. Verb *khalifa* means to succeed, follow, come after, or come upon something. *Al-khalifa* is the vicar, deputy, successor, and caliph: in essence, a person in the background. In Tefir literature, the background is usually associated with the creation event, the healing in Eden, and the descent to Earth.

Here, it is necessary to investigate the semantic background of *al-khalifa*, and the semantic forces that more precisely determine the idea of a leader in the Qur’an. From a leadership perspective, it is essential to note that *al-khalifa* is a general determinant for man, who is a deputy, vicegerent and successor in the most sublime sense, and the representative of the Lord on Earth. His leadership position, in that sense, is inviolable. It aligns with the previous understanding of leadership as a comprehensive concept that applies to each individual, and the domain of his activism.

But what is behind *al-khalifa*, and what is the background of the Qur’anic model of leaders? According to Qur’anic teaching, the source and origin of man is His Creator. Man is a leader who came to Earth to present the Divine Message, and who should presume the kingdom of God over himself and his ephemeral desires. This is clearly stated in Surah Sad, which explicitly mentions the term *khalifa* for the second time, now in the context of the Prophet David:

David, We have given you mastery over the land. Judge fairly between people. Do not follow your desires, lest they divert you from God’s path: those who wander from His path will have a painful torment because they ignore the Day of Reckoning.<sup>23</sup>

This verse emphasises that the path by which David, as a master, came to Earth must not be forgotten. *Al-khalifa*, or the Qur’anic model of a leader, speaks of one who always calls to the sublime and the heavenly. The determinants of this leader are not mundane or lowly; his vision is focused on the Day of Return to the Primordial Homeland (his ancestral home), or the Day of Reckoning.

<sup>22</sup> *The Qur’an*, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> *The Qur’an*, p. 291.

Man is a being whom the Creator designated the ultimate leader, and who came upon divine command. The essential determinant of the caliph is his spiritual background, with which the actions of believers should therefore be optimally aligned. The spiritual background of *al-khalifa* should also be sought in clear verses, such as that of Surah Baqara (198): "... Provide well for yourselves: the best provision is to be mindful of God."<sup>24</sup>

Awareness of God does not refer solely to the inner strength of the Qur'anic model of leaders. This consciousness grows into its manifest part, according to the verse from Surah al-Araf (26): "... the garment of God-consciousness is the best of all garments – this is one of God's signs, so that people may take heed!"<sup>25</sup>

The best provision and garment of *al-khalifa* is the living word of God, which is His revelation. There is a central spiritual background to *al-khalifa*, which is confirmed by the Prophet's description, as transmitted by Aisha. The companions of the Prophet asked her on occasion: "O Mother of Believers! How were the ethics of our Prophet?" She answered precisely: "His ethics were the Quran."<sup>26</sup>

*Al-Khalifa* is a leader whose background is the divine message (Qur'an). The Qur'an is simultaneously his proactive response (to the world), and responsibility (towards the Creator). The vision and action of *al-khalifa* as the Qur'anic model of a leader are constantly imbued with the Divine message. This message is his origin, and the algorithm by which he processes all challenges before him. From this perspective, a parallel can be drawn between the scarcity of modern tafsirs, and the absence of true leaders in the Muslim world over the last few centuries.

## Making a Difference: The Leader as *al-Imam*

*Al-imam* is another term that directly refers to a leader in the Qur'anic text, and is a known and established term in Muslim societies. *Al-imam* is mentioned more than *al-khalifa*, both in the singular and plural.

In a particular group of verses, the term *imam* refers to specific personalities, i.e., deputies or leaders of certain collectives:

Sura al-Baqara (124):

When Abraham's Lord tested him with specific commandments, which he fulfilled, He said, 'I will make you *a leader [imam]* of people.' Abraham asked,

24 *The Qur'an*, p. 22.

25 *The Qur'an*, p. 95.

26 Tirmizi, Birr and Sila, 69. <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi>; (Accessed on: 27/02/2022)

‘And will You make leaders from my descendants too?’ God answered, ‘My pledge does not hold for those who do evil.’<sup>27</sup>

Sura al-Isra (71):

On the Day when We summon each community, along with its *leader [imam]*  
...<sup>28</sup>

In the same sense, the term’s plural (*al-‘aimma*) is mentioned when the Qur’an refers to religious leaders, specifically prophets. Additionally, the Qur’an points to the leaders of the forces of evil and trouble, as seen in these verses:

Sura al-‘Anbiya (73):

We made all of the *leaders [al-‘aimma]*, guiding others by Our command, and We inspired them to do good works, to keep up the prayer, and to give alms: they were Our true worshippers.<sup>29</sup>

Sura al-Qasas (5):

We wished to favour those who were oppressed in that land, to make them *leaders (al-‘aimma)*, the ones to survive, to establish them in the land ...<sup>30</sup>

Sura al-Sajda (24):

When they became steadfast and believed firmly in Our messages, We raised *leaders [al-‘aimma]* among them, guiding them according to Our command.<sup>31</sup>

The leaders of the forces of evil are mentioned in the Qur’anic text in the following places:

Sura Al-Tawba (12):

But if they break their oath after having made an agreement with you, if they revile your religion, then fight *leaders [al-‘aimma]* of disbelief – oaths mean nothing to them – so that they may stop.<sup>32</sup>

Sura Al-Tawba (41):

We made them *leaders [al-‘aimma]* calling [others] only to the Fire: on the Day of Resurrection they will not be helped.<sup>33</sup>

27 *The Qur’an*, p. 14 (emphasis added).

28 *The Qur’an*, p. 179 (emphasis added).

29 *The Qur’an*, p. 206 (emphasis added).

30 *The Qur’an*, p. 245 (emphasis added).

31 *The Qur’an*, p. 265 (emphasis added).

32 *The Qur’an*, p. 117 (emphasis added).

33 *The Qur’an*, p. 248 (emphasis added).

The Qur'an associates a third meaning with the term *al-imam*: that of an instruction, record, or book:

Sura Ya-Sin (12):

We shall certainly bring the dead back to life, and We record what they send ahead of them as well as what they leave behind: We keep an account of everything in a clear Record [*imam*].<sup>34</sup>

Sura Hud (17):

Can they be compared to those who have clear proof from their Lord, recited by a witness from Him, and before it the Book of Moses, as a guide [*imam*] and mercy?<sup>35</sup>

Sura Ahqaf (12):

Yet the Scripture of Moses was revealed before it as a guide [*imam*] and mercy, and this is a scripture confirming it in the Arabic language to warn those who do evil and bring good news for those who do good.<sup>36</sup>

These verses show the semantic panorama of *al-imam*. The meaning of the leader prevails, whether as a forerunner of good, such as the Prophet, or embodied in those who control the forces of evil. *Al-imam* is also mentioned in several places as a record (Surah Yasin) or divine guide. In Surah Al-Hijr, *al-imam* is noted in a more general sense, as a clear sign or explicit instruction of what happened to the tribe of Thamud, who lived north of Medina.<sup>37</sup>

With *al-imam*, the Qur'anic text refers more specifically to the leaders of specific communities, unlike *al-khalifa*, which mainly refers to man as a unique creature of God. The fundamental meaning of the word 'imam' refers to the spatial determinant: in front of; in the presence of; forward, onward, and ahead. *Al-imam* is a leader, a master, which in the Muslim world predominantly means a leader of prayer or a prominent religious leader. In essence, this person should be an example of behaviour, a person who makes an extra effort or a step forward: a figure of orientation, or the leading light for a particular collectivity. *Al-imam* is one who makes a difference in his environment, being a step ahead of the collective.

From the verses mentioned, we understand leaders to be among the promoters of good and evil forces. In both cases, these individuals have made an extra effort forward, and thereby positioned themselves as beacons in their

34 *The Qur'an*, p. 281.

35 *The Qur'an*, p. 137.

36 *The Qur'an*, p. 328.

37 See: *The Qur'an*, p. 164.

communities. Because *al-'aimma* represent the elite in terms of values, the Qur'an indicates that we should emulate the best forerunners of the good (the Prophets), while fighting and resisting those who promote evil and destruction.

It is critical to consider what makes a leader so prominent. What is the power that inspires *al-imam* to go a step further, and sacrifice himself? The answer can be found in another meaning of the term in the Qur'anic text: each leader must have his own spiritual and intellectual guide. In the Qur'anic semantic universe, these two concepts merge into the concept of *al-imam*.

The holy book and the chosen people permeate each other. Moses, for instance, exemplifies spirituality, as a Prophet and a leader (*imam*), but the Book of Moses is also a guide (*imam*). The Qur'an unequivocally states that leaders are guided by a divine command (*al-amr*), i.e., they are inspired by the revelation and the living word of God. A divine source of inspiration is the only guarantee that a person can take a substantial step forward (*ila amam*), and thus make a valuable difference to the society in which he lives. A separate study is needed to examine those verses that speak of the leaders of the good and their qualities, as that goes beyond the scope of this paper. Additionally, those on the other side should not be forgotten: the leaders of evil are similarly inspired by sources of corrupt spirituality (egoism, Satan, carnal desire), and make a difference in the world by destroying it morally and physically.

Finally, we must remember that the root of *al-khalifa* also refers to the space behind, or the background. The word *al-imam* in this sense is contrasting, because it refers to something advanced, or the space in front. These two fundamental Qur'anic concepts of leadership oppose each other in their semantic originality. This creates a unique semantic tension, or semiotic paradox, which is a common strategy of the Qur'anic text as a whole. But what in particular about the spiritual background of *al-khalifa* makes *al-imam* a leader: divine revelation, or God's record? The two central notions of leadership in the Qur'anic text are firmly linked to the word of God, and the semiotic and stylistic crescendo within the Qur'an manifests as a divine message. Above all, the appreciation of this semantic strategy through the figure of paradox opens a venue for textual decolonisation, which "can allow for new" ecologies of knowledge "that recognise the validity of multiple perspectives to develop".<sup>38</sup>

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38 Joseph E. B. Lombard, "Decolonising Qur'anic Studies", *Religions* (2022), p. 187.

## The Qur'an's Main Hero: The Prophet Moses as a Leader

Having addressed the fundamental concepts of leadership in the Qur'anic text, it is necessary to point out, at least briefly, its concrete examples of leaders. The Qur'an is much more than a book: it is a divine narration. In essence, it, like other revelations of God, is a medium of living divine communication.

In terms of presence, the Prophet Moses is the most prominent individual in the Qur'an. The frequency of his story is remarkable: Moses is mentioned 136 times, which is more than any other prophet. His story is present in fifty chapters, mostly al-Qasas, Taha, al-Shu'ara, al-Araf, and al-Baqara. Because these factors give him special status in the Qur'an, he requires special attention when discussing the Qur'anic concept of leadership.

A detailed story about Moses' life and mission allows us to learn about his characteristics and actions, and provides a sufficient reference from which to extrapolate the peculiarities of leadership in the Qur'anic paradigm. This is a topic that deserves special study, but as we approach the end of this paper, it is appropriate to mention some illustrative episodes from Moses' life. Is it possible to think about the structure of Moses' work with people by reading the twelve tribes or sources in Surahs al-Araf (160), al-Ma'ida (12) and al-Baqara (16)? His encounter with Khidr is described in detail in Surah al-Kahf (60-83), in which different levels of world perception and interpretations of (historical) events can be analysed. An essential topic of this episode is the attitude (leader) towards knowledge, i.e., the hierarchy of leadership. The problem of making quick judgments is apparent when Moses helps his compatriot (al-Qasas, 14-22). In this episode, we follow the dialectic of the leader as one who teaches, and as one who condemns. The Midian phase of Moses' life as a servant is crucial to the process of his maturity, and can be considered a preparatory phase for independent leadership. In this context, Moses' constant striving to be proactive can be seen as a fundamental virtue of his leadership. This is particularly significant at a time when his mission is seemingly defeated, as described in Surah al-Shu'ara (60-62):

Pharaoh and his people pursued them at sunrise, and as soon as the two sides came within sight of one another, Moses' followers said, 'We shall definitely be caught.' Moses said, 'No, my Lord is with me: He will guide me ...'<sup>39</sup>

Moses was adorned with a staunch faith in God during the most momentous crises of his life, and the greatness of his leadership was hidden in his unwavering confidence in God's guidance. With such confidence, invoking miracles with complete commitment to the mission was possible.

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39 See: *The Qur'an*, p. 234.

## Conclusion

Leadership is simultaneously an over-exploited and under-researched phenomenon. This is a paradox especially felt in the Muslim world, which has dreamt of a saviour for centuries. This article therefore offers a semantic-semiotic analysis of the concept of leadership, with a focus on areas where it could be examined closely. The range of these areas is broad, from the study of space, through the analysis of religious texts, to the questioning of everyday human activities and their connection with leadership. The impeccable fibre of the universe reflects the marvellous tenets of divine and cosmic leadership. All this, and the Qur'anic concept of universal laws (*sunnatullah*) requires a separate study. Although hadith sources contain unequivocal statements about leadership as a duty and an inherent trait, great scholars of Islam, like al-Ghazali, focus just on the necessary variants of leadership in daily life activities. If we do not establish a clear leadership principle in our spiritual geography (with the heart at the top), however, our lives will be disrupted.

This article addressed questions related to the concept of leadership in the Qur'an, starting with the most apparent terms *al-khalifa* and *al-imam*. It established the rich semantics of these terms, which crucially determine the concept of leadership from a Qur'anic perspective. A creative semantic tension exists between *al-khalifa* and *al-imam*, in their contrasting forward and backward directions. Although paradoxical at first glance, these fundamental notions of leadership are firmly connected by the determinant Divine message, the background against which a human appears as a leader. At the same time, the Divine message makes a person a leader because it inspires him to take a step forward, and establish an ethical difference in the world around him. To fully concretise the image of a leader in the Qur'an, the article examined Moses, and his specific position in the Qur'anic text. In this way, it circled from the most general spheres to concrete examples of leadership, while emphasising the concept from the Qur'anic perspective. In the Qur'anic universe, leadership is presented as a process or dynamic journey. Guides on this path are the bearers of change, who step forward (*ila amam*) carried by the primordial determinant and spiritual background (*khalfiyya*), and the universal compass of the Qur'an. This article is both initial and initiating: although its aim was to open new potential interpretations of leadership in the Qur'anic text, this is just one of a vast array of Qur'anic concepts that should be contextualised in the current and future challenges of Muslims and their world.

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## Semantika vođstva u Kur'anu: moguće čitanje

### Sažetak

Semantika pojma vođstva je u velikoj inflaciji, dok njegovo značenje i semiotički potencijal blijede; Muslimanska društva iščekuju neku vrstu spasitelja, ali detaljne studije o vođstvu su rijetke. Ovaj članak nudi novi interpretativni okvir za ovaj i druge kur'anske pojmove, konfigurirajući neuralgične tačke vezane za geografiju i tumačenje vođstva. U članku se ovaj pojam analizira od univerzalnih zakona (*sunnatullah*) preko vjerske prakse pa sve do svakodnevnog života. Markirani su najizraženiji koncepti vođstva u kur'anskom tekstu, propitana njihova temeljna značenja ali i proširena semantička polja ovog pojma. U zaključcima su ponuđeni inkluzivni pristupi pluralnoj egzegezi koji proširuju diskurs studija o Kur'anu.

**Ključne riječi:** partikularno, univerzalno, halifa, imam, vođstvo, Musa, Kur'an