

AUTHORITY

SULTĀN; ULŪ AL-AMR

Definitions and Usage

The Qurʾān refers to Divine authority over human-kind, angels, jinn, and the entirety of the natural world as an absolute prerogative by stating Allah's exclusive possession of power (*qudra*, Q 2:20, 106, 109) and its synonym *sultān* (Q 7:71; 37:157); dominion (*mulk*, Q 3:26; 67:1) command (*amr*, Q 13:31; 3:128); judgment (*ḥukm*, Q 6:57; 12:40, 67); and glory (*ʿizza*, Q 4:139; 10:65; 35:10) (see BEAUTIFUL NAMES OF ALLAH; DIVINE DECREE; JUDGMENT; KINGDOM; POWER; PROOF).

Divine authority commands undivided obedience (*q.v.*) (Q 2:285; 4:46; 33:66) both to Allah and to those in whom He invests authority—Prophets and Messengers (*q.v.*) (Q 3:179; 4:136)—specifically the Prophet Muḥammad (*q.v.*), upon him blessings and peace (Q 3:32, 132; 4:69, 80), who represents the supercessive and everlasting role of Islam (Q 3:19, 85; 5:3) (see ABROGATION), and thereafter leaders and scholars, identified as “those in command” (*ulūl-amr*) in two verses: *O Believers, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you; and if you have a dispute concerning any matter, refer it to Allah and the Messenger if you are [in truth] believers in Allah and the Last Day* (Q 4:59); and *If they referred it to the Messenger and to those in authority among them, those of them whose task is to investigate it would have known it* (Q 4:83). It is to this last category that the rest of this article is devoted.

The expression *ulūl-amr*, literally “the possessors of command,” is a construct of the accusative form of the singularless noun *ulū*, “those who possess,” with the masculine singular noun *amr* (pl. *umūr*), one of several similar constructs in the Qurʾān, such as the possessors of blood ties (*ulūl-arḥām*, Q 8:75), strength and brute force (*ulū quwwatim wa-ulū baʿsin shadīd*, Q 27:23), and hearts (*ulūl-albāb*, Q 2:179). *Amr* stems from the trilateral root ²-m-r and means situation (*ḥāla*), affair (*shaʿn*), event (*ḥāditha*)—such as the Day of Resurrection (Q 16:1)—and injunction, as in the transitive verb *amara*, “to command” (Ibn Manzūr; Fayyūmī, *Miṣbāḥ*; and Fayrūzābādī, *Qāmūs*, *sub* ²-m-r). The intransitive verb *amira* denotes magnitude—for example, “there was a large group” (*amira al-qawm*, *cf.* Ibn Manzūr, *sub* a-m-r), because when people become numerous they need a leader (*amīr*), hence the meaning of “abundant” for the term *maʿmūr* in the report “The best property is a prolific mare (*muhratun maʿmūra*)” (Aḥmad, *Tatimmat musnad al-Makkiyyin*, ḥadīth

Suwayd b. Hubayra §15845; narrated through trustworthy reporters but *mursal*: missing the Companion-link; *cf.* Haythamī, *Majmaʿ* 5:258)—and, by extension, an enormity (*q.v.*) as in the verse *Truly you have done a dreadful thing (shayʿan imran)* (Q 18:71; *cf.* Ṭabarī).

Exegeses of those in authority

The expression *those in authority* (Q 4:59 and 83) has received a variety of mutually compatible interpretations. The two major ones refer to military commanders or people of learning and jurisprudence, or both meanings may be equally meant.

The first gloss refers to commanders of military detachments, according to Abū Hurayra (d. 58/678), Ibn ʿAbbās (3BH-68/619-688) in one narration, and some of the Successors and later scholars such as Maymūn b. Mahrān (40-117/ca.660-735), Zayd b. Aslam (d. 136/ca.754), Wakīʿ b. al-Jarrāḥ (d. 196/ca.812), al-Shāfiʿī (150-204/767-820), and al-Bukhārī (194-256/810-870) (Bukhārī and Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī*, *Tafsīr*, *qawluh Aṭīʿul-Lāha wa-aṭīʿur-Rasūla wa-ulūl-amri minkum*; Muslim, *Imāra*, *wujūb ṭāʿat al-umarāʾ*; *Tafsīrs* of Ṭabarī, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Ibn al-Mundhir, *sub* Q 4:59). A similar gloss is “those who govern.” Ibn ʿUyayna (107-198/ca.725-ca.814) said: “I asked Zayd b. Aslam about it at a time when no one in Madina could explain the Qurʾān like him other than Muḥammad b. Kaʿb. He said: ‘Read what precedes it and you will know.’ I read *Behold, Allah bids you to deliver all that you have been entrusted with unto those who are entitled thereto, and whenever you judge between people, to judge with justice. Verily, most excellent is what Allah exhorts you to do: verily, Allah is all-hearing, all-seeing!* (Q 4:58). Then he said: “This verse refers to those who govern (*al-wulāt*).” Al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286) also chose this meaning but stated that “it comprises caliphs, judges, and military commanders... as long as they stand for truth” (*sub* Q 4:59).

The second gloss refers to people of learning and jurisprudence who must be imitated, according to Jābir, Ibn ʿAbbās in another narration, and most of the Successors, including al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), ʿAṭāʾ al-Kurāsānī (50?-135/670?-753), ʿIkrima (d. 107/725), Mujaḥid (d. 104/722), and al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 102/ca.721)—specifically the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs and Ibn Masʿūd according to the latter two, and more specifically Abū Bakr and ʿUmar according to ʿIkrima (*Tafsīrs* of Ṭabarī, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Ibn al-Mundhir, *sub* Q 4:59). This is also Mālik’s (93-179/712-795) view (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Aḥkām*, *sub* Q 4:59) and that of al-Bayhaqī (384-458/994-1066)