

Environmental Ethics In The Quran:
A Study Of Semantic Analysis And Interpretation Of The
Term "*Khalifah*"

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Abstract: The term "*kehalifah*" is often equated with leadership, referring to a perspective that interprets it as an equivalent to the term "*imamah*." While not entirely incorrect, many view it as a definitive meaning. However, referring to the Quran, "*kehalifah*" holds a broader and more universal significance. The limited understanding of "*kehalifah*" as merely a leader seems to have narrowed its original meaning. Therefore, this research aims to delineate the concept of "*kehalifah*" through semantic analysis and interpretations from authoritative Quranic commentators. In this study, we employ a literature review with a qualitative approach, and data collection is conducted through documentary techniques to gather data from various verses in the Quran as well as explanations from Quranic scholars in classical and contemporary tafsir literature. The collected data is then analyzed using the content analysis method. The results of this research indicate that the term "*kehalifah*" in the Quran signifies the trust and

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responsibility of humans on Earth to prosper and preserve its flora and fauna. Verses related to “*khalifah*” depict that it plays a crucial role in maintaining the balance of nature. This research has significant implications in the context of environmental conservation. Additionally, these findings provide a deeper insight into the importance of building a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, both being creations of Allah.

Keywords: Khalifah, Trust, Semantics, Quranic Exegesis.

INTRODUCTION

The term "*khalifah*" is often equated with leadership in Islam. In Islamic literature, scholars interpret the word "*khalifah*" as an equivalent of the term "*imamah*," which means leader or ruler.(1) This interpretation is based on several *hadis* about "*khalifah*" and "*imamah*," where the meanings of these two terms are not distinguished.(2) However, many consider this interpretation to be final. In reality, if we refer to the Quran, "*khalifah*" has a broader meaning than merely a leader. Thus, interpreting "*khalifah*" exclusively as a leader seems to have reduced the true meaning of the term "*khalifah*."(3)

In the Quran, the term "*khalifah*" has a broader meaning. Ziauddin Sardar explains that in the Quran, "*khalifah*" signifies humanity's responsibility as Allah's representatives. This encompasses the duty to maintain balance and harmony in nature and the environment, as well as to treat all of Allah's creations with respect and compassion.(4) This interpretation aligns with the views of Islamic scholars regarding the meaning of "*khalifah*" in the Quran. The term "*khalifah*" refers to Allah's representatives on earth, namely Adam and his descendants.(5) This role is contingent upon obedience to Allah, upholding His laws, and submitting to His justice. A *khalifah*'s obedience is demonstrated through efforts to prosper the earth and avoid causing harm. Therefore, the concept of "*khalifah*" in the Quran is more closely associated with "al-‘amir" or the one who prospers.(6)

Hence, this paper will discuss the term "*khalifah*" in the Quran by referring to various scholars. It will also present the perspectives of Muslim intellectuals regarding the term "*khalifah*" in the Quran. The aim is to explore and identify the environmental values and ethics necessary for fostering a harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

THE MEANING OF *KHALIFAH* IN THE QURAN

In the Quran, the term "*khalifah*" appears nine times: twice in the singular form "*khalifah*," three times in the plural form "*khalifa*," and four times in the plural form "*khalaf*." (7) According to al-Tabari, (8) al-Qurtubi, (9) and Ibn Kathir, (10) the word "*khalifah*" is derived from "*khalaf*," which means to replace someone and take over their authority in a particular matter. The meaning of replacement here has various motives; according to Raghīb Al-Isfahani, it could be because the predecessor has died, become incapable, or to honor the successor. Based on this latter reason, Allah made humans His representatives on earth. (11) Ibn Faris adds the meaning of "*al-taghayyur*" or change. (12) This indicates that a "*khalifah*" is someone capable of making changes on earth, either for good or bad.

According to the *mufasssirin*, there are several perspectives on the meaning of "*khalifah*" in the Quran. In the narrations of Ibn Abbas and Ibn Mas'ud, the "*khalifah*" refers to Adam, who acts as Allah's representative in upholding His rules and commands. This interpretation is similarly held by al-Tabari (8) and al-Qurtubi. (13) More generally, Ibn Kathir explains that "*khalifah*" refers to groups of people who succeed each other in every era and generation, as mentioned in *Surah al-An'am* 6:165 and *Surah al-Naml* 27:62. (14) However, al-Razi argues that "*khalifah*" cannot be exclusively attributed to Adam but should refer to humankind in general, to avoid categorizing Adam among those who corrupt and shed blood. (15)

In contemporary tafsir, al-Thanthawi explains similarly to previous views that "*khalifah*" is someone who replaces their predecessor as a representative. (6) According to Ibn 'Ashur, "*khalifah*" here has two meanings: figurative (*majazi*) and literal (*haqiqi*). Figuratively, it means Allah appoints a representative to manage affairs on earth. It means that the earth was previously prosperous under a nation called Hin and Bin, which then caused corruption. Thus, Adam and his descendants came to replace them and to prosper the earth. (16)

Shaykh al-Tarifi in his *tafsir* interprets "*khalifah*" as "*al-amir*" or one who prospers the earth, succeeding each other through the ages until the end of time. They manage human affairs, both great and small, based on Allah's commands and laws (17). The first "*khalifah*" was Adam, and every person who holds his position and obeys Allah

upholds justice among His creations. However, those who cause corruption and shed blood unjustly are not considered to hold Adam's position.(17)

Contemporary *mufassirin's* views seem more contextual, considering that when Adam was sent to earth, the human community consisted only of Adam and Eve. Not all humans can be called "*khalifah*" because a "*khalifah*" must obey Allah and avoid causing corruption on earth through unjust and sinful acts.

From the above explanation, it can be concluded that although the term "*khalifah*" carries the connotation of leader or ruler, it is essentially understood as one who prospers the earth and preserves the environment, which is the source of human life and its continuity. As Ibn 'Athiyah explains,(16) the singular form "*khalifah*" refers specifically to the messengers who are Allah's representatives, while the plural forms "*khulafa*" and "*khala'if*" refer to other servants who continue the messengers' missions.

KHALIFAH AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Based on the above views, according to the *mufassirin*, "*khalifah*" is not limited to discussing leadership. It also encompasses environmental values and ethics. Sheikh Ali Jum'ah explains that the concept of "*khalifah*" on earth in the Islamic worldview involves human responsibility to prosper and preserve the environment.(18) Ziauddin Sardar similarly states that being a "*khalifah*" on earth includes individual and collective responsibility to maintain the balance and harmony of nature, preserve the environment and its flora and fauna, and treat all of Allah's creations with respect and compassion.(4)

This understanding is built on two considerations: first, the consideration of '*aqidah*' (faith) which describes the close relationship between humans, nature, and God. Second, the consideration of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) which provides many *shari'ah* (Islamic law) provisions in daily activities.(18)

Firstly, the relationship between nature and its Creator. The Quran provides a strong depiction of the relationship between nature and God. In *Surah al-Nur*, verse 41, and *Surah al-Isra*, verse 44, it is explained that the heavens, the earth, and all within them, including flora and fauna, constantly glorify Him. Ibn Kathir explains that everything in the heavens and the earth, from angels, humans, jinn,

and animals, to inanimate objects, constantly worship Him by glorifying Him.(10) This shows that nature is not an inanimate object that can be treated arbitrarily.

From this, it can be understood that in the Islamic view, nature is not something empty or devoid of value. Nature also has worth in the eyes of God.(19) This differs from the Christian teaching, which believes that nature is 'fallen' and considered the opposite of grace. Hence, St. Augustine stated that nature 'cannot be redeemed';(20) it cannot teach us anything about God and therefore has no theological or spiritual value. Nature, devoid of God's presence and grace, as Francis Bacon suggested, needs to be 'tortured' to reveal its secrets.(4)

Secondly, the relationship between nature and humans. The relationship between nature and humans is like the relationship between soul and body; the absence of the soul would render the body lifeless. Similarly, without nature, or with the destruction of nature, human existence on earth is threatened. Therefore, this relationship must stand firmly on agreement and harmony.(18) This means humans cannot act arbitrarily without considering the impact on nature. The damage inflicted on nature will eventually be felt by humans.

The relationship between humans and the earth generally revolves around three levels. First, the level of "*intifa' bi al-taskbir*" or utilization related to physical activity. Humans (Adam) were created from the earth's soil, then returned to the soil, and are resurrected from it.(9) This event mirrors the cycle of plants that are harvested and then grow again. Moreover, from the earth, humans derive their livelihood: crops, livestock, and everything Allah has subjected to humans on land and sea.(16) This is the lowest level of the relationship between the earth and humans, merely fulfilling human needs.

Second, the level of "*tafakkur*" and "*i'tibar*" or contemplation and learning, related to intellectual activity. This level is explained in Surah Ali Imran, verses 190-191, stating that the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day, are signs for those who think.(18) According to al-Thanthawi, nature with all its orderliness, from the creation of the heavens and the earth, stars, plants, trees, and the existence of day and night, provides a lesson about the existence of the One Almighty God who has arranged everything perfectly.(6)

Third, the level of love and kindness pertains to spiritual activity. The Quran's depiction of this level is found in *Surah al-Dukhan*, verse 29. As explained by al-Tabari, this verse relates to the drowning of Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, yet neither the heavens nor the earth mourned for them.(16) According to Ibn Kathir, the heavens did not mourn because no righteous deeds of theirs had ascended to the heavens, making their loss insignificant. Similarly, they left no mark of worship on the earth, thus they were not given the chance to redeem themselves.(10) From this, it is evident that the relationship between nature and humans is so strong that human life is dependent on it in the sight of Allah.

THE ROLE OF *KHALIFAH*IN PROSPERING THE EARTH

The role of humans as "*khalifah*" (stewards) on earth carries a noble purpose. Being a "*khalifah*" means fulfilling Allah's command to protect and preserve the earth. In his concept of Green Deen,(21) Ibrahim Abdul-Matin explains that God created humans from the soil as a sign for humans to care for it to the best of their abilities. This includes protecting it from various destructive efforts and managing its resources proportionally and sustainably.(21)

To achieve this, Sheikh Ali Jum'ah formulates two fundamental duties as "*khalifah*" on earth. First, to prosper the earth so that all creatures have their needs met. Second, to repair any damage that occurs to ensure sustainability and prevent the extinction of creatures in the universe.(18)

Firstly, the matter of prospering the earth is mentioned in the Quran in *Surah Hud*, verse 62, which indicates that humans are made as inhabitants (*sukkan*) and prospered (*ummar*) of the earth.(9) Sheikh Ali Jum'ah explains that prospering the earth includes all activities and actions that aim to bring goodness to its inhabitants and fulfill the needs of life.(18) It also means striving to build a virtuous and just society where every individual has freedom as a basis for responsibility and honor in the eyes of Allah.(22)

Therefore, the activity of prospering the earth in Islam has two elements. First, it is related to the correct method (*salah al-manhaj*). Second, it is related to the right performance and maximum effort (*itqan al-'amal*). These two elements aim to eliminate or avoid oppression and destruction. As explained by Ibn Khaldun, the

wisdom behind the prohibition of oppression is that it can destroy civilization and its downfall, as well as cut off the human lineage.(23)

Secondly, there is the duty of making improvements (*al-islah*). The term "*islah*" comes from the word "*salaha*," which means improvement, the opposite of "*fasad*" or damage. This term is often associated with human actions or behavior.(11) The Quran uses this term in *Surah al-A'raf*, verse 56: "And do not corrupt the earth after it has been set right." This verse indicates two things: first, the prohibition against corrupting the earth suggests that humans have the potential to cause damage. Second, if humans have the potential to cause damage, they also have the potential to do the opposite, which is to make improvements. Herein lies the second role of the "*khalifah*": in addition to striving to prosper, the "*khalifah*" must also strive to repair any damage caused by human actions driven by their desires.

Originally, nature was created with its *fitrah* (innate nature), just as humans have *fitrah*. *Fitrah* here means peace (*sbalah*) and order (*intizham*).(18) If the damage appears in human life and nature, it is a sign that humans have turned away from their *fitrah*, which calls for love and peace. (19) Therefore, humans need to return to their *fitrah*, which is full of love and peace. Hostility and hatred have led to wars and conflicts, resulting in damage to the earth.

CONCLUSION

Many studies have been conducted on the concept of "*khalifah*" as a leader, but the examination of "*khalifah*" as a mandate and human responsibility to prosper the earth and its inhabitants requires a more comprehensive and detailed study. In the Quran, "*khalifah*" is understood as "*al-amir*" or the one who prospers. This perspective is based on the idea that humans play a central role in maintaining the balance of nature and the continuity of life within it. The damage occurring on Earth is due to irresponsible human actions.

Allah has endowed humans with the potential to utilize nature as a resource for their lives. The utilization of nature must be based on the alignment and interconnectedness between humans and nature, preventing free exploitation that leads to the extinction and degradation of the environment. Therefore, being a "*khalifah*" means being a responsible human being towards the surrounding

environment, capable of fostering a harmonious relationship between nature and humanity, with a sense of mutual interconnectedness.

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