



A Critical Analysis of Asma Afsaruddin's paper on *Ulu al-Amr*

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Abstract

This article examines "Ulu al-Amr" written by Asma Afsarruddin. It adopts a library-analytical method. This study aims to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of this Orientalist as a piece of Western scholarship of Quranic studies. The positive points of this article include choosing a practical topic and writing concisely. This article also has three negative points. The first negative point is that it has made an incomplete induction in the cases of the Qur'anic verses. The author mentions only one verse about the "Ulu al-Amr", while two verses of the Holy Quran directly refer to it. Furthermore, other verses indirectly refer to this concept. The second negative point is her use of wrong reasoning. She believes that the lack of a king at the beginning of Islam accounts for the weakness of the report attributed to Ubayy b. Ka'b, who relates that *ulu'l-amr* was a reference to the political rulers (*al-Salatin*). The third negative point is that the author uses only the opinions of the Sunnis and ignores the Shias' beliefs and their interpretations of this verse. The present article tries not only to mention the defects but also to inform the author of this entry to perfect it by providing additional content.

Keywords: Asma Afsarruddin, Quran, politics, Ulu al-Amr, Shia.

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Introduction

Oliver Leaman has edited *The Quran: an Encyclopedia* which consists of entries on Quranic studies. There is an entry in this book about “Ulu'l-Amr” written by Asma Afsaruddin. The significance of such articles is to introduce the content of Islamic resources on the relevant issue in English to the Western community. This entry touches upon an important issue. This article tries to investigate and criticize the entry “Ulu'l-Amr” to shed light on the political perspective of Islam.

Lexically, Ulu'l Al-Amr consists of two words: ‘Ulu’ and ‘Al-Amr.’ “Ulu” means ‘owner,’ and “Al-Amr” means ‘command’ (Fīrūz Ābādī 1995, 2:1767. Mūṣṭafawī 2006, 1:180). This term is practically challenging. Sunnis believe that it means rulers and commanders (al-Māwerdī 1992, 1:499; Fakhr al-Razī 1999, 10:144; Qurṭubī 1985, 3:168), but Shiites believe that it means the twelve Imams (al-Sabzivārī 1409, 8:312; al-Ṣābūnī 2010, 5:102; Ṭabātabā'ī 1996, 4:391). Some of the works written on *ulu al-amr* are as follows:

1. Book: *Āyāte wīlāyat dar Qurān*, by Nāsir Makārim Shīrāzī, Qom: Nasl-i Javan, 2007.
2. Book: *Āyāte wīlāyat*, by Moḥammad Murtaẓavī, Qom: Ashiyāni Mihr, 2011.
3. Book: *Maḥlūmiyate Tārīkhī*: review and criticize the verses of Wīlāyat from the view of al- 'Ālūsī written by Faṭeme Parhizqār, Qom: Hajar, 2021.
4. Article: “Tafsīr mafhūmī uli al-amr dar Nizām Hindīsī Sūriyi Nīsā’,” written by Mohammad 'Alī Majdafaqīhī and Muḥammad 'Alī Rayḥanī Nīā.
5. Article: “Naqd wa barrasi delālat 'Āye 59 sūra-yi Nīsā bar iṣmat uli al-amr bā tā'kīd bar manābi' shia,” written by Miqdād Ebrahīmī Kushālī.
6. Article: “Muqāyisa-ya maṣādīq uli al-amr dar tafāsīr rewā'ī farīqayn”, written by Nidā Ja'farī Fishārakī.



7. Article: “Bāzkhānī dīdgāh Fakhr-Rāzi darbari-yi mashrū‘īyat-i itā‘at az uli al-amr,” written by Fathullāh Najjārzādīgān.

There are several articles about the concept of “ulu'l-amr,” but they are not in English. On the other hand, those English articles about the *uli al-amr* barely consider the Shiite view. The innovation of this article is to analyze the Ulu'l Al-Amr and the Shiite vision of it in English.

1. The Author

Asma Afsaruddin (b. 1958) is an American scholar of Islamic studies (Durham 2010, 307). She has some teaching experience at Harvard University and John Hopkins University. She received her Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in 1993. Judged by her written works, she has specialized in three fields: Islamic religious and political thoughts, the study of the primary Islamic texts (Qur'an and hadith), and gender studies. Afsaruddin contributed to the *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, published by Cambridge University Press, as an editorial board member. In addition, she was an editor of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Medieval Islamic Civilization* and a consultant for *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*.³

2. Her Publications

Afsaruddin's publications include the following:

1. *Contemporary Issues in Islam* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015)
2. *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2013)
3. *The First Muslims: History and Memory* (Oxford: One world Publications, 2008)
4. *Excellence and Precedence: Medieval Islamic Discourse on Legitimate Leadership* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002)

3. <http://www.noormags.ir/view/fa/creator/186167>

5. Hermeneutics and Honor: Negotiation of Female “Public” Space in Islamic/ate Societies (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1999)

6. Humanism, Culture, and Language in the Near East: Essays in Honor of Georg Krotkoff (Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, Ind., 1997)

The book *striving in the Path of God* received awards in Kuwait and Iran.⁴

3. The Content of the Entry on “Ulu’l-Amr”

The author names certain Muslim scholars such as Mujahid b. Jabir (d. 720 AD), Muqatil b. Sulayman al-Balkhī (d. 767 AD), Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 AD), Al-Mawardī (d. 1058 AD), Ibn Taymīyya (d. 1328 AD), and Ubayy b. Ka‘b. and overviews their interpretations of the meaning of *ulu’l-amr*, which include ‘rulers’, ‘the possessors of insightful understanding in religion and intellect’, ‘people of knowledge’, ‘all the companions of Muhammad (*ashab Muhammad*),’ and so on. The author asserts that it is the politicized meaning, i.e., rulers (*al-Salatin*), that become privileged in the later political treatises and exegetical works (Afsaruddin 2006, 672-673).

4. Analysis of the Entry on “Ulu Al-Amr”

This entry includes two strengths and three weaknesses. The advantages are tackling an important subject and its brevity, and the defects are its limited search, analysis, and argumentation.

4.1. The Strengths

This entry has two positive points: First, the term “Ulu’l-Amr” is one of the most significant phrases in the Quran with consequences for our time and age. There are two reasons for the significance of the term “Ulu Al-Amr”: 1) the high position of *ulu al-amr*: The command to follow the *ulu al-amr* is in addition to the order to follow God and the Messenger. In fact, following the *ulu al-amr* is like following God and the Messenger, 2)

4 . <http://www.ettehadkhabar.ir/fa/posts/42481>



infallibility of Ulu Al-Amr: The order to follow the *ulu al-amr* is absolute and has no restrictions. It means that you should follow the *ulu al-amr* in all matters (Ṭabrisī 1993, 3:100; Ṭabātabā'ī 1996, 4:391; Rabbānī Gulpāyigānī 2006, 262:263).

Second, short texts are more attractive than long texts. Many valuable religious books on the spiritual heritage of Muslims are less studied. There are several factors for this fact. One of the most significant factors is the quantity of content and the absence of a summary (Ḥusaynī 2004, 310). The author of this entry has provided a brief account of the topic.

4.2. The Weaknesses

There are three weaknesses to this entry. First, although the term “Ulu al-Amr” occurs in two verses of the Quran, the author points only to one verse. The first verse in Sūra al-Nisa' says: “O you who have faith! Obey Allah and obey the Apostle and those vested with authority (*uli al-amr*) among you. And if you dispute concerning anything, refer it to Allah and the Apostle, if you have faith in Allah and the Last Day. That is better and more favourable in outcome” (4:59).

The second verse is also in Sūra al-Nisa': “When a report of safety or alarm comes to them, they immediately broadcast it; but had they referred it to the Apostle or to those vested with authority (*uli al-amr*) among them, those of them who investigate would have ascertained it. And were it not for Allah's grace upon you and His mercy, you would have surely followed Satan, [all] except a few” (4:83).

The second weakness is that in one part of this entry, the author relies on a flawed argument to reject the hadith of Ubayy b. Ka'b which introduces “Ulu al-Amr” as the kings; hence, Muslims should follow the kings after the Prophet's death (Afsaruddin 2006, 672-673). The author criticizes the hadith of Ubayy b. Ka'b, saying that after the Prophet's demise, there was no kingdom in the Islamic territory (ibid, 673). Of

course, Ubayy ibn Ka‘b’s hadith is not valid because of conflict with Jabir’s hadith that comes in the next paragraphs, but the author’s argument does not work too, because the absence of a kingdom in Islamic territories does not mean that a king should not be obeyed.

The third weakness is that although the author has tried to explore various views propounded by Muslim scholars (ibid, 672-673), she has failed to do justice in this regard and has ignored the Shia’s point of view about *ulu al-amr*. Nevertheless, the author is not expected to present every single view of the matter offered by all Islamic sects, but to tackle the most significant ones.

5. Ulu’l-Amr in the Shia Hadiths

This entry overviews certain Sunni accounts, not any Shiite interpretation of “Ulu’l-Amr.” In contrast to Sunni scholars (Al-Sūyūfī 1984, 2:177; Al-Ṭabarī 1991, 5:94), the majority of Shiite scholars believe that “Ulu al Amr” refers to the Twelve Shiite Imams (Al-Baḥrānī 1994, 2:103; Al-Ḥuwayzi 1703, 1:499). For this claim, the Shiites refer to certain hadiths, mentioned in the Shia and Sunni sources, which refer to people called Ulu Al-Amr:

The first hadith is narrated by Jabir b. Abdullāh Anṣārī, who asked the Prophet (s): "O Messenger of Allah, we know God and His Messenger, but who are the Ulu Al-Amr?" The Prophet said: “They are my successors and the Muslim imams after me, the first of whom is ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, and after him, in order, Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, ‘Alī b. Ḥusayn, and Muḥammad b. Ali, who is known as Bāqir in the Torah, and you will see him in his old age, and whenever you see him, give him my greetings. After Muḥammad b. ‘Alī, Ja‘far b. Muḥammad, Mūsā b. Ja‘far, ‘Alī b. Mūsā, Muḥammad b. ‘Alī, ‘Alī b. Muḥammad, Ḥasan b. ‘Alī, and after him, his son with the same name and nickname as that of mine. He is the one who hides from people's eyes, and his absence is prolonged until only people who have firm faith remain” (Khazāz Rāzī 1979, 54; Qandūzī 2000, 341).



The second hadith is from Imam Bāqir (a) who says in the interpretation of this verse: Ulu'l Al-Amr is from the children of 'Alī and Fatima until the time of doomsday.

The third hadith is narrated from imam Ṣādiq (a) who says: "They (Ulu al-Amr) are 'Alī b. Abī Ṭalib, Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, Muḥammad b. 'Alī, and Ja'far, that is, me. Thank God for recognizing your imams and leaders at a time when people deny them" ('Ayāshī 1984, 252).

6. The Verses that Indirectly Refer to Ulu al-Amr

In addition to the verses that directly refer to the term Ulu Al-Amr, some verses indirectly refer to it. Unfortunately, the entry did not mention these verses either. It was appropriate that at least the author referred to these indirect verses by quoting certain scholars' opinions. These indirect verses are the verses of *Wilāyah* and *Mawaddat*: the verse of *Mawaddat* is: "Say, I do not ask you for any reward in return for that [message], except for friendship among relatives" (Quran 42:23). 'Allāmah Ṭabātabā'ī, one of the contemporary Shia exegetes, by referring to the *hadith of Thaqaalayn* and the *hadith of Safīna*, considers the reason for the obligation to love the *Ahl al-Bayt* to be their noble status as the religious authorities to whom people should refer. In this way, the love for the *Ahl al-Bayt* is nothing, but the continuation of the Prophet's mission (Ṭabātabā'ī 2011, 18:46). The verse of *Wilāyah* is: "Your guardian is only Allah, His Apostle, and the faithful who maintain the prayer and give the zakat while bowing down" (Quran 5:55). According to the history, the verse is related to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭalib, who gave his ring to a poor man while praying (Shūshtarī 2008, 2:400; Ḥakīm Ḥaskānī 1989, 1:209). Some other Islamic scholars state it with a slight difference (Qumī, 2002, 1:170; al-'Ayāshī 1978, 1:327). 'Allāmah Ṭabātabā'ī believes that according to this verse, in addition to Imam 'Alī, the rest of the *Ahl al-Bayt* are also the administrator of society because they also have the same place (Ṭabātabā'ī 2011, 6:20).

7. The Shiite Account of “Ulu’l-Amr”

The Shiites believe that the structure of the Verse of “Ulu’l-Amr” implies their infallibility (*isma*) (‘Allāma al-Ḥillī 1995, 493). Ayatollah Miṣbāḥ Yazdī says that there are two reasons why “Ulu’l-Amr” should be infallible. First, the Qur’ān commanded obedience to the “Ulu’l-Amr”, and the command is not subject to any constraints or restrictions. Otherwise, the Qur’ān would not issue an unconstrained order to obey them. The second reason is that the command to obey “Ulu’l-Amr” is immediately preceded by the order to obey God and the Prophet (Miṣbāḥ Yazdī 1997, 206). On the other hand, according to the “Hadith kisā’,” Imam ‘Alī and his children [Ḥasan and Ḥusayn] are infallible (Muslim b. Ḥajjāj 2002, 15:190; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal 1991, 7:415).

Moreover, the Shiites believe that “ulu’l-amr” refers to the “Ahl al-Bayt” (the Prophet’s Household); that is, the Twelve Shiite Imams. For example, the hadith of Jābir [which narrates from the Prophet and refers to the Infallibles by name] (Al-Khazzāz al-Rāzī 1980, 45; al-Ṣadūq 1974, 1:152), hadith of the Ark (*Hadith al-Safīna*)⁵, and the Hadith of the Two Weighty Things (*Hadith al-Thaqalayn*)⁶ are three major hadiths according to which “ulu’l-amr” refers to the Twelve Shiite Imams (Ṭabātabā’ī 1995, 4:399).

5. Hadith al-Safīna: "The example of my household among you is like Noah's Ark, whoever boards it will survive and whoever misses it will drown." (Nisā’ī 1990, 5:45)

6. Hadith al-Thaqalayn: "I [Muhammad] left among you two treasures which, if you cling to them, you shall not be led into error after me. One of them is greater than the other: The book of God [Quran], which is a rope stretched from Heaven to Earth, and [the second one is] my progeny, my Ahl al-Bayt. These two shall not be parted until they return to the pool [of abundance in paradise, kawthar]." (Ḥakīm al-Nayshābūrī 1990, 2:273)



The viewpoints of certain Shia scholars are as follows:

1. ‘Allāmah al-Ḥillī: He believes that there are several hadiths in Shiites and Sunni sources with the meaning that “Ulu’l-Amr” refers to the Twelve Imams. In his view, these hadiths are very frequent (*mutawātir*), and as such, they have the highest degree of authenticity (‘Allāmah al-Ḥillī 1995, 539).

2. ‘Allāmah Ṭabātabā’ī: He believes *uli al-amr* are not common people, but they are innocent people. The command to obey *uli al-amr*, which comes in the Qur’ān, is absolute and there is no condition. As such, this verse (4:59) of the Qur’ān shows that *uli al-amr* are innocent (Ṭabātabā’ī 1995, 4:393).

3. Imam Khumaynī: Imam Khumaynī believes that the term "Ulu Al-Amr" corresponds to Imam ‘Alī (Khumaynī 1944, 284). In addition, this term includes the Shia imams after him (Khumaynī 2009, 87). This rule applies to both religious and non-religious matters. This rule is like the rule of the Prophet. God has given them this sovereignty (Khumaynī 2006, 159).

4. Ayatollah Makārim Shīrāzī: All the Shia exegetes agree that "Ulu’l Al-Amr" are the infallible Imams (peace be upon them). The political and spiritual leadership of the Islamic society has been entrusted to them by God and the Prophet in all aspects of life, and it does not include anyone else. Of course, it is necessary to obey those appointed by them to a position in the Islamic society, under certain conditions, not because they are *uli al-amr*, but because they are the representatives of the *uli al-amr* (Makārim Shīrāzī 1995, 3: 557).

Conclusion

The account of Asma Afsaruddin of “Ulu’l al-Amr” includes some strengths and weaknesses. Although it touches upon a significant topic, it suffers from three weaknesses. In the Holy Quran, "Uli al-Amr” has two direct and several indirect verses, while the author has limited himself to mentioning

only one verse. The second weakness of this entry is the author's argument that the reason for the inaccuracy of "Uli al-Amr" for kings is that a kingdom did not emerge in the Islamic world until two centuries after the advent of Islam. Actually, the kingdom emerged in the Islamic world. The hereditary government of the Umayyad and the Abbasids was a monarchy. Moreover, the non-existence of a kingdom in the Islamic world is not proof that the Prophet did not intend the concept of a kingdom. The third weakness is that the entry overviews only Sunni accounts. In contrast to Sunni scholars, Shiite scholars, by referring to the Qur'ān and hadiths, believe that "Ulu al Amr" refers to the Twelve Shiite Imams who are divinely-appointed leaders in spiritual and political matters.



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