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"One of the Most Dangerous Matters": the Ḫalaf Allāh Affair and the Concept of *Usṭūra*

Abstract

In his doctoral thesis *Narrative Art in the Holy Qur'an* (1947) Muḥammad Aḥmad Ḫalaf Allāh implemented a literary method to analyze the Qur'anic narratives which caused a heated public debate among academics and Islamic scholars. One of the issues under discussion was his understanding of the Qur'anic term *usṭūra* and the phrase *asāṭīr al-awwalīn*. At the height of the controversy around his dissertation, the author attempted to explain, defend, legitimize and justify his findings about these Qur'anic terms. The different ways he attempted to do so are discussed in this paper. These are: referencing medieval authorities in Islamic theology, *tafsīr*, and philosophy; attributing the meaning of *usṭūra* to the older definitions of the word; positioning himself as the defender of the Qur'an – by referencing the ongoing debate critical of Orientalists; implementing the idea of *manhaǧ* (method) as the modern claim to professional authority.

Keywords: *Usṭūra*, Islamic Modernism, *Tafsīr*, Orientalism, Exegetical Authority, Cultural Translation

In 1947 Muḥammad Aḥmad Ḫalaf Allāh,[1] a student at the Faculty of Letters, department of Arabic Language at the Fu'ad University in Cairo, submitted his doctoral thesis *Narrative Art in the Holy Qur'an* (NAHQ). The scholar implemented a literary method to analyze the Qur'anic narratives – and the results presented in the dissertation caused a heated public debate among academics and Islamic scholars. The author claimed that the Qur'anic stories should be approached as literary narratives, not as historical documents or factual recordings of history and that their aim is first and foremost to convey religious meanings and evoke certain emotions among the listeners such as, e.g. the fear of punishment. Eventually, his thesis was rejected by the doctoral committee, the author expelled from the university, and his supervisor and mentor Amīn al-Ḫūlī (d. 1966), whose methodological approach constituted the basis of Ḫalaf Allāh's thesis, was prohibited from supervising any dissertation in Qur'anic studies.[2]

My aim in this paper is to take a closer look at the meaning Ḫalaf Allāh ascribed to term *usṭūra* (pl. *asāṭīr*; widespread meaning: legend, myth, or fable) and the phrase *asāṭīr al-awwalīn* (ancient fables) as mentioned in the Qur'an and the ways he justified his understanding – in the first published version of the doctoral thesis printed in 1950–1951 and two articles concerning this subject from the literary magazine *Ar-Risāla* that appeared in autumn of 1947. He distinguished three categories of narratives (*alwān al-qaṣaṣ*) in the Qur'an: historical (*tārīḫiyya*), allegorical (*tamṯīliyya*), and mythical (*usṭūriyya*), i.e. narrative based in *asāṭīr*.[3]

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[1] Scholars provide different dates of birth and death of Muḥammad Ḫalaf Allāh – although in most sources it is stated that he was born in 1916, French scholar J. Jomier, relying on testimonies of Ḫalaf Allāh himself, claimed he was born several years earlier (Jaques Jomier, *Quelques positions actuelles de l'éxégèse coranique en Égypte révélées par une polémique récente (1947–1951)*, MIDÉO: Mélanges de l'Institut dominicain d'études orientales du Caire 1 (1954), p. 44; Rotraud Wieldandt, *Die Offenbarung und Geschichte im Denken moderner Muslime,* Wiesbaden, 1971, p. 134). In the literature of the subject, three different dates of his death were provided – 1991, 1997 and 1998, see respectively: Gabriel S. Reynolds, *Allah. God in the Qur'an*, New Haven, 2020, p. 233; Shepard, William, "Khalafallāh, Muḥammad Aḥmad", in: Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE, Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Devin J. Stewart (ed.), Viewed: September 2023, <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/khalafallah-muhammad-ahmad-COM_35430>; Mohammad Salama, *The Qur'ān and Modern Arabic Literary Criticism. From Ṭāhā to Naṣr*, London 2018, p. 51.

[2] Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, 'The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 23 (2003), p. 32.

[3] For a more general overview of the Ḫalaf Allāh affair and his thought, see: Yvonne Haddad*, Contemporary Islam and the Challenge of History*, New York 1982, pp. 46–53; Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, 'The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 23 (2003), pp. 8–47; Anwār Al-Ǧundī, *Al-Musāǧlāt wa-al-maʿārik al-adabiyya fī maǧāl al-fikr wa-at-tārīḫ wa-al-ḥaḍāra*, Al-Qāhira 2007, pp. 340–354; Donald Malcolm Reid, *Cairo University and the Orientalists*, *International Journal Middle East Studies* 19 (1987), pp. 51–76; Ḥasan Maḥmūd Barʿī Ǧanāyim, 'Al-Qiṣṣa al-qur'āniyya bayn al-fann wa-at-tārīḫ fī tafsīr al-muḥaddiṯīn. Muḥammad Aḥamd Ḫalaf Allāh namūḏaǧan', *Maǧallat*

According to Ḫalaf Allāh, the Qur'an does not deny the presence of *asāṭīr* in its narratives; it primarily proves that their source is God, and not the prophet Muhammad. The claim about *asāṭīr* being part of the Qur'anic narratives stirred controversy among many Egyptian intellectuals and Islamic scholars of that time as it deviated from the traditional Islamic interpretation of the concept, especially given the widespread meaning of the word *usṭūra*. At the height of the controversy around his dissertation, the author attempted to explain, defend, legitimize and justify his findings about this Qur'anic word. The different ways he attempted to do so are the main subject discussed in this paper. I argue that through the lens of a single concept – how it was framed, understood and how the author engaged in public discussion defending it – insights into the Egyptian, and Arabic knowledge production of the early postwar period can be achieved.

I relied on the first edition of NAHQ published in 1950–1951 and the articles digitalized by the Al-Sharekh Archive.[4] The arguments Ḫalaf Allāh made during the public discussion were already present in his doctoral thesis (according to the edition from 1951) – but the debate that followed the submission of the dissertation made him rephrase and reiterate the most crucial and convincing arguments. Hence, I use both sources interchangeably, occasionally pointing out the differences between them.

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markaz al-dirāsāt wa-al-buḥūṯ al-islāmiyya, 34 (year of publication unknown), pp. 43–96; D. M. *Reid Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Cambridge 1990, pp. 139–157; Salama, *The Qur'ān and Modern Arabic Literary Criticism. From Ṭāhā to Naṣr*; Gabriel S. Reynolds, *Allah. God in the Qur'an*, New Haven, 2020, pp. 233–247. An example of a recent application of Ḫalaf Allāh's method in today's humanities is: Ali Akbar, 'A Historical-Contextualist Approach to the Joseph Chapter of the Qur'an', *Open Theology* 8 (2022), pp. 331–344. Anwār Al-Ġundī, *Al-Musāğlāt wa-al-maʿārik al-adabiyya fī mağāl al-fikr wa-at-tārīḫ wa-al-ḥaḍāra*, Al-Qāhira 2007, pp. 340–354; Donald Malcolm Reid, *Cairo University and the Orientalists*, *International Journal Middle East Studies* 19 (1987), pp. 51–76; Ḥasan Maḥmūd Barʿī Ġanāyim, 'Al-Qiṣṣa al-qurʾāniyya bayn al-fann wa-at-tārīḫ fī tafsīr al-muḥaddiṯīn. Muḥammad Aḥamd Ḫalaf Allāh namūḏağan', *Mağallat markaz al-dirāsāt wa-al-buḥūṯ al-islāmiyya*, 34 (year of publication unknown), pp. 43–96; D. M. *Reid Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Cambridge 1990, pp. 139–157; Salama, *The Qur'ān and Modern Arabic Literary Criticism. From Ṭāhā to Naṣr*, pp. 51–64; Gabriel S. Reynolds, *Allah. God in the Qur'an*, New Haven, 2020, pp. 233–247. An example of a recent application of Ḫalaf Allāh's method in today's humanities is: Ali Akbar, 'A Historical-Contextualist Approach to the Joseph Chapter of the Qur'an', *Open Theology* 8 (2022), pp. 331–344.

[4] Ḫalaf Allāh Muḥammad Aḥmad, 'Al-Usṭūra wa-al-ʿiğāz al-qurʾānī', *Ar-Risāla* 3 (1947), viewed September 2023, <https://archive.alsharekh.org/Articles/30/11688/414717>; Ḫalaf Allāh Muḥammad Aḥmad, 'Ḥawla al-fann al-qaṣaṣī fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm', *Ar-Risāla* 13 (1947), Viewed September 2023, <https://archive.alsharekh.org/Articles/30/11685/414674>.

"Opening the door": legitimization of the new reading of the Qur'anic narratives

The influence of Al-Ḫūlī's thought on the insights presented in NAHQ was enormous: from the core argument of the book, to the methodology (historical contextualization of the Qur'an revelation; focus on psychological aspects of the early Islamic history; insistence on uncovering one true meaning of the Qur'anic verses) – all these ideas can be traced back to the work of Ḫalaf Allāh's supervisor. The detailed investigation into continuities between the work of the "sheikh of the religious renewal" and Ḫalaf Allāh lies beyond the scope of this paper; however, what follows from this close intellectual affinity is the fact that by publishing, disseminating, and defending the findings from his dissertation, Ḫalaf Allāh entered the arena of Islamic modernist and reformist thought. The spirit of *taǧdīd* as envisioned by Al-Ḫūlī – an all-encompassing project of intellectual renewal that, besides Islamic studies, also concerned the studies on Arabic grammar, rhetoric and literature – permeated the book: not only with reference to the subjects mentioned above, but with regard to the underlying conviction that a change is needed in the ways the Qur'an is interpreted and the ways the academic methodologies of Arabic literary history are applied.

In this comprehensive understanding of *taǧdīd*, Islamic studies and literary studies both were the author's "areas of intervention": the author wanted to present the "correct" ways of studying literary history and the Qur'an.[5] However, for Ḫalaf Allāh, a doctoral student at the secular Fu'ād I University, it was the field of literary studies – not Islamic or Qur'anic studies – that constituted the primary point of departure for his research. In other words, his main interest was the Qur'an and its interpretation, but he located his work on the holy scripture within the area of literary studies. This approach is discernible in the way the author frames his research interests – he approached the Qur'anic narratives as a "starting point for the study of Arabic story in general and religious stories in particular"[6] and as "a methodological genre (*ġarad manhaǧī*) of academic literary studies."[7] In the chapter concerned with the different categories (*alwān*) of narrative, the author claims: "…the religious narrative is [nothing more than] a category of literary narratives."[8] This superiority of the modern literary approach over the traditional Islamic exegesis can be observed in the way the classical sources are quoted and analyzed. In opposition to pre-modern

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[5] Muḥammad Aḥmad Ḫalaf Allāh, *Al-Fann al-qaṣaṣī fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*, 1950–1951, place unknown, pp. 9, 14.

[6] Ibidem, p. 15.

[7] Ibidem, p. 11.

[8] Ibidem, p. 136.

scholars who often presented different or contradictory interpretations of the same ayat, Ḥalaf Allāh quotes only these thinkers and passages that justify or prove his ideas. In chapter two, concerning the notion of artistic narratives in the Qur'an, the author admits openly that he chose Ar-Rāzī as the only *mufassir* who came closer to the literary aspects of the narratives he wanted to depict.[9]

The legitimization by quoting Islamic scholars – contemporary and traditional – in the case of the understanding of *usṭūra* was not an easy undertaking because, as Ḥalaf Allāh himself admitted, the Islamic thinkers were "reluctant to mention *usṭūra* and the fact that it is present in the Qur'an." Hence, in place of presenting a direct justification from the texts of Islamic authorities, the author claims that several scholars "opened the door" and "allowed for uttering the presence of *usṭūra* in the Qur'an", mainly through their considerations of "religious and moral instructions" in Qur'anic narratives.[10] These scholars were Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) and Faḫr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 1210).

According to Ḥalaf Allāh, the Persian *mufassir* paved the way to the new understanding of *usṭūra* in his exegesis of the aya 39 from the sūra *Yūnus*: "But they are denying what they cannot comprehend – its prophecy has yet to be fulfilled for them. In the same way, those before them refused to believe – see what was the end of those evildoers!"[11] The reading of that verse by Ar-Rāzī indicates the following: the polytheists who listened to the Qur'anic narratives and called them derogatorily *asāṭīr al-awwalīn* displayed lack of understanding in that what was meant or aimed at (*al-maqṣūd*) by the Qur'an were "other matters" (*umūr uḫrā*) and not the story itself (*nafs al-ḥikāya*).[12] Ar-Rāzī then goes on to list several of these "other matters", among them God's Omnipotence and lesson or exhortation (*ʿibra*) about the Hereafter.[13] Subsequently, Ḥalaf Allāh quotes at length from *Tafsīr Al-Manār* in reference to the story of the angels Hārūt and Mārūt from the sūra *Al-Baqara*, and interprets ʿAbduh's words as an indication that legends are literary vessels for different, not always literal meanings.[14] However, as unambiguously emphasized in the articles in *Ar-Risāla*, it is the quotation from Ar-Rāzī that is the driving force for his argument: Ḥalaf Allāh interprets Ar-Rāzī's exegesis of this verse by claiming that the author of *Mafātīḥ al-ġayb* wants to distinguish between two concepts: the structure or the body of the narrative (*haykal al-qiṣṣa* or *ǧism al-ḥikāya*) and the religious instructions these Qur'anic narratives contained. In line with the distinction

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[9] Ibidem, p. 135.
[10] Ibidem, p. 197.
[11] *The Qur'an. A new translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem*, Oxford 2005.
[12] Ḥalaf Allāh *Al-Fann*, p. 197.
[13] Faḫr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī *Tafsīr Al-Faḫr ar-Rāzī*, Bayrūt, 1981, p. 102.
[14] Ḥalaf Allāh *Al-Fann*, p. 197.

he reads into Ar-Rāzī, the "body of the narrative," the literal understanding of what happened in the story, is not what was meant or aimed at (*al-maqṣūd*) by the Qur'an – it is only a literary tool, like any other artistic means applied by writers. A tool to achieve the actual goal: religious and moral instructions.

By rooting his insights into the Qur'anic narratives in the exegetical thought of Ar-Rāzī, Ḥalaf Allāh presented himself as a mere follower of the great scholar. In response to European orientalist critique of the Qur'an, he writes: "We will not say to them nothing else than what Ar-Rāzī said to the ancestors centuries ago"; the intellectual consequences of his distinction between the body of the narrative and the religious instructions (which will be addressed in the next subchapter) are depicted as a result of following Ar-Rāzī's opinion and interpreting or explaining the Qur'anic narratives by using his "traditional/old rhetorical or religious *tafsīr*"[15] (*at-tafsīr al-balāġī aw ad-dīnī al-qadīm*).

"Orientalist nonsense" and "correct scientific study"

There are certain "benefits we gain" should we follow Ar-Rāzī (as interpreted by Ḥalaf Allāh in the previous paragraph), claimed the author of NAHQ.[16] Most importantly, it allowed Ḥalaf Allāh to fire back at the European Orientalists: by referencing two entries from the Arabic translation of the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islām* (EI) Ḥalaf Allāh addressed the Orientalist argument indicating that the Qur'anic stories such as the Companions of the Cave or the story of Moses from *sūra Al-Kahf* are based on legends,[17] thus undermining Qur'an's historical authenticity and its holy and impeccable status. The distinction between literal and metaphorical meanings of the Qur'anic narratives was Ḥalaf Allāh's answer to Orientalists: because it is not the "body of the narrative" and historical recording but its religious and moral guidance that is meant by the holy scripture, the Orientalist reading of these narratives does not undermine the authenticity of the Qur'an and "will not contradict any verses of the Holy Qur'an."[18] In other words: thanks to Kahlaf Allāh's distinction into literal and literary or artistic meanings, the accusations of lack of historical accuracy presented by some scholars would not be able to harm the holy scripture.

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[15] Muḥammad Ḥalaf Allāh 'Ḥawla al-fann', *Ar-Risāla*, p. 1123.

[16] Ibidem, p. 1123.

[17] Ḥalaf Allāh quotes the entry from EI on the Companions of the Cave (*aṣḥāb al-kahf*) and the prophet Elijah, *Al-Fann*, pp. 206 and 209.

[18] Ibidem, p. 209.

Ḫalaf Allāh outlines two reasons for presenting this view on the Qur'anic meaning of the word *usṭūra*: firstly, to "secure the Qur'an from the Orientalists' and atheists' nonsense" and secondly, "so that we do not lag behind (*nataḥallaf*) in literary studies and by doing so we fail to understand the most eloquent text we take pride in, namely the Noble Qur'an."[19] The first reason is reminiscent of the ongoing Egyptian debate on the credibility of Orientalist knowledge as presented in the Arabic translation of the EI. The critical and skeptical approaches towards the Orientalists were expressed by a variety of intellectuals: conservative Islamic scholars such as Rašīd Riḍā or Anwar al-Ǧundī, but also reform-minded thinkers, such as Ḫalaf Allāh's supervisor Amīn al-Ḫūlī, pointed out the methodological inconsistencies in Orientalist science.[20] In this debate, Orientalists were presented as the colonial face of the European knowledge production, approaching Islam with upfront hostility: a book Ḫalaf Allāh quotes at length in the first chapter written by a British Anglican missionary William St. Clair Tisdall was an example of an outward confrontational attitude towards Islam.[21] The apprehension that the wrong, incorrect understanding of Islam will spread among Muslims in consequence of Orientalist conceptions was expressed, albeit in different ways, by many intellectuals of that time.[22] This was the main danger the critics saw in Ḫalaf Allāh's dissertation and what the author himself echoed in his formulation of *usṭūra* as "one of the most dangerous matters": that reading of the Qur'an with methods inspired by Western scholars may harm the core fundamentals of Islam. The affair, in general, and the discussion around the term *usṭūra* in particular, was, according to G. Šabasevičiūtė, an example of such "methodological anxieties" born out of the danger perceived in this way; she points out that these reactions constituted "part and parcel of intellectual movement in interwar Egypt aiming to dissociate modern forms of knowledge from their European origins."[23] In this context, Ḫalaf Allāh's emphasis on his anti-Orientalist stance in the articles can be seen as not only following in the footsteps of Al-Ḫūlī but also attempting to

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[19] Ḫalaf Allāh 'Ḥawla al-fann', p. 1123.

[20] Yumnā al-Ḫūlī, *Amīn Al-Ḫūlī wa-al-abʿād al-falsafiyya li-at-taǧdīd*, Windsor 2014, p. 23; Said F. Hassan, Abdullah Omran, 'The reception of the Brill Encyclopedia of Islam: An Egyptian debate on the credibility of orientalism (1930–1950)', in: *The Muslim Reception of European Orientalism. Reversing the Gaze*, ed. Susannah Heschl and Umar Ryad, New York 2019, pp. 65–69.

[21] Ḫalaf Allāh *Al-Fann*, p. 30–31. C. Bennett, while offering a nuanced and not only critical depiction of Tisdall's work, writes: "He [i.e. Tisdall] believed in the composite nature of Islam and that the Quran was historically inaccurate." (Bennett Clinton, *Victorian Images of Islam*, Piscataway, 2014, p. 141.) Challenging such Orientalist claims about the historical inaccuracies in the Qur'an was one of Ḫalaf Allāh's main stated intentions for writing his dissertation.

[22] E.g., see: Malek Bennabi, *Aẓ-Ẓāhira al-qurʾāniyya*, ʿAbd aṣ-Ṣabūr Šāhīn (trans.), Dimašq 2000, p. 54.

[23] Giedrė Šabasevičiūtė, *Sayyid Qutb: an Intellectual Biography*, Syracuse 2021, p. 62.

reinforce the validity of his claims among intellectuals shaping Egyptian public opinion by joining the ranks of defenders of the Qur'an.

Yet, Ḫalaf Allāh did not perceive all European academics the same way as Orientalists, who "almost completely fail to understand the style of the Qur'an and the ways of constructing and building its narratives."[24] On the contrary, he admitted to being inspired by methodologies in the field of literary history, particularly by the French scholar Gustave Lanson (d. 1934), whose essay *La méthode de l'histoire littéraire* bears similarities with ideas presented in NAHQ.[25] Moreover, Ḫalaf Allāh mentions a group of British academics who contributed to a study of the history of literature in a book published by Oxford University (without mentioning their names or the title of the publication).[26] Among the different scholars Ḫalaf Allāh refers to, these intellectuals do not belong to the group together with "orientalists and atheists" despite the same European, Western provenance. The method and the ways in which these British and French literary historians structure their research are considered by Ḫalaf Allāh the "correct scientific study" (*ad-dars al-ʿilmī aṣ-ṣaḥīḥ*[27]) – not only in contrast to the Orientalists but in contrast to the methodologies pursued in Egyptian academia as well.

Whereas the Orientalists are directly addressed in the previously outlined reasons for introducing the new reading of the term *usṭūra* (to "secure the Qur'an from the Orientalists' and atheists' nonsense"), the "Western scholars", as Ḫalaf Allāh called them in NAHQ, are not mentioned in the second argument ("so that we do not lag behind in literary studies and by doing so we fail to understand the most eloquent text we take pride in, namely the Glorious Qur'an"). Though not mentioned, they are nonetheless meant in this quote, because it was behind the European methodology

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[24] Ḫalaf Allāh *Al-Fann*, p. 10.

[25] These are, among others: the insistence on implementing a singular, complex historical method that should structure the whole research into the history of literature and allow to distinguish between "impressions" and factual, scientific knowledge as well as grouping the literary works into genres, schools and movements (see: Lanson Gustave, *Essais de méthode de critique et d'histoire littéraire*, Paris 1965, pp. 32–56; especially p. 43 and p. 47; Ḫalaf Allāh *Al-Fann*, pp. 11–13). Ḫalaf Allāh did not provide the title of the publication by Lanson he claimed to be inspired by, he mentioned only that it was translated by a famous critic and translator Muḥammad Mandūr and that it concerned a "literary method" (Ḫalaf Allāh *Al-Fann*, p. 11). As the first Arabic translation by Mandūr of Lanson's *La méthode* was published in 1946 in Beirut by Dār al-ʿilm li-al-malāyīn (Tāriq Mandūr, *Taqdīm ʿan al-mutarğim wa-at-tarğama*, in: Lānsūn/Māyih, *Manhağ al-baḥṯ fī al-ʾadab wa-al-luġa*, Muḥammad Mandūr (trans.), Al-markaz al-qawmī li-at-tarğama, Al-Qāhira, 2015, p. 4.), and given that this essay outlines the methodology of literary history that Ḫalaf Allāh mentioned, it is safe to assume that the version from 1946 is the edition and publication by Lanson Ḫalaf Allāh referred to when writing his dissertation.

[26] Ibidem, p. 11.

[27] Ibidem, p. 14.

that Egyptian academia "lagged", according to Ḫalaf Allāh. This broader context is missing from the polemics in the magazine and can only be clear with reference to the book, where the author presents the perceived shortcomings of scientific methodological approaches in Egypt.[28] The importance of methodology will be shortly discussed in the next paragraphs.

Truth and method

According to Ḫalaf Allāh, there is only one correct meaning of the word *usṭūra* and this is "what the ancients have recorded of their stories and tales."[29] The widespread and popular meaning of this term indicating a legend, myth, fable, or lie – a meaning that, combined with Ḫalaf Allāh's assertion about the presence of asāṭīr in the Qur'an, created a highly controversial mixture according to many contemporary intellectuals – was simply incorrect, the author of NAHQ claimed authoritatively. He justified his claim with reference to the tafāsīr by Aṭ-Ṭabari, Az-Zamaḫšarī and Muḥammad ʿAbduh, who, according to Ḫalaf Allāh, all point to the older meaning of the word. Besides mentioning modern and classical philologists and Islamic scholars, Ḫalaf Allāh justified his understanding with a crucial argument that contributed greatly to the controversies in the Egyptian press and academic environment: he claimed it was the Qur'an itself that conveyed this older meaning (*al-maʿnā al-laḏī qaṣada ilayhi al-Qur'an*).[30] This conclusion is not presented by Ḫalaf Allāh as one based on his independent *iǧtihād*;[31] the meaning of *usṭūra* is, according to the author of NAHQ, *the* true explanation of the recurring Qur'anic expression "*asāṭīr al-awwalīn*."

Ḫalaf Allāh dedicated two articles to explain the contention around his reading of the term *usṭūra* – the first concerned with the opinions of the Islamic scholars and the second presenting the arguments directly from the Qur'an. He begins by asking: does the Qur'an deny the existence of *asāṭīr*? By analyzing the ayat where the term *asāṭīr al-awwalīn* is present, he first establishes that all the verses belong to the Meccan period of revelation, even if some of them are parts of the Medinan sūras. Subsequently, he considers the historical and psychological reasons that caused the Meccan polytheists to utter these accusations against the prophet's revelation, as well as ways the Qur'an recounts these events and responds to them. He concludes that in none of those contexts it is clear that the Qur'an directly addresses the accusation of

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[28] Ibidem, pp. 11–14.
[29] Ḫalaf Allāh, 'Al- Usṭūra wa-al-iʿǧāz al-qurʾānī', *Ar-Risāla* 3 (1947), p. 1205.
[30] Ḫalaf Allāh 'Ḥawla al-fann al-qaṣaṣī', p. 1122.
[31] Haddad, *Contemporary Islam and the Challenge of History*, p. 52.

the presence of "legends" in it – the response of the Qur'an is a reaction to the polytheists' disbelief either in the Judgment Day or in the divine origin of the Qur'an, but it does not refer to the fact that the non-believers call parts of Qur'anic revelation *asāṭīr al-awwalīn*.[32]

What made Ḫalaf Allāh so certain of the correctness of his reading and of what the Qur'an unequivocally meant by these narratives? It was the authority of the scientific and religious methods (*manhaǧ* in singular). There is a separate chapter dedicated to the methodology of the dissertation – the research strategies are very close to the historical and literary method of Al-Ḫūlī and his other students, e.g. prominent scholar ʿĀʾiša ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān (d. 1998).[33] However, in legitimizing the view on *usṭūra* as one expressed by the Qur'an itself, Ḫalaf Allāh did not root his authority by attributing it to Al-Ḫūlī, but instead had recourse to a method deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition – the theory of law, *uṣūl al-fiqh* and its approach of interpreting the legal verses. According to Ḫalaf Allāh, the method consisted of four steps, which he subsequently applied to interpret the ayat containing the phrase *asāṭīr al-awwalīn*. These steps were: collecting the verses, understanding and listing their occurrences, explaining their occurrences and, lastly – and most importantly with regard to the legitimization process, – the judgment or verdict of the Qur'an itself on that matter. He phrased the methodological approach in the same manner he referenced Ar-Rāzī in that he presented himself as a follower of a much older tradition: "our path will be no different than this path [i.e. the path of *al-uṣūlyyīn*]."[34] Implementing the centuries-old exegetical tradition enabled Ḫalaf Allāh to approach the meanings of the Qur'an he claimed to be true.

Before he begins to present all the verses on the subject of *asāṭīr al awwalīn*, the author states that they will be collected in order to "examine them from a scientific perspective which will provide a clear truth." Here, again, we may attribute such an approach to Al-Ḫūlī, who also believed that applying his method would lead to discovering the true meaning of the Qur'an. Sh. Naguib put it aptly: the sheikh of the renewal equated "truth with knowledge verified by a systematic method."[35] However, the connection between the scientific method, scholarly authority and the claim for objectivity and truth was not confined to modernist religious thinkers, but, rather, constituted an important subject among Egyptian intellectuals, as Y. Di Capua observed with reference to professional historians of modern Egypt:

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[32] Ḫalaf Allāh *Al-Fann*, pp. 203–204.

[33] See: ʿĀʾiša ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān, *At-tafsīr al-bayānī li-al-Qurʾān al-Karīm. Al-ǧuzʾ al-awwal*, place unknown, 1990, pp. 10–11

[34] Ḫalaf Allāh, *Al-Fann*, p. 205.

[35] Shuruq Naguib, 'Bint al-Shāṭiʾ's Approach to Tafsīr: An Egyptian Exegete's Journey from Hermeneutics to Humanity', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17,1 (2015), pp. 48–49.

Beginning in the late 1930s, the concept of manhağ came to represent academic historians' claim to professional authority. Or, put differently, manhağ was the vehicle through which professional historians presented their theoretical apparatus as scientific ('ilmī), that is, as empirical, objective, politically impartial, and disinterested knowledge.[36]

This conclusion holds true also with reference to Ḫalaf Allāh – whether it was the traditional religious path as exemplified by the reference to the uṣūlyyūn, or the way of "correct scientific study" inspired by Gustave Lanson and European scholars of literature – the reference to the method perceived as an objective tool producing true, scientific meanings allowed Ḫalaf Allāh to reinforce his claim to authority as a scholar. Because Ḫalaf Allāh's methods of literary, historical, and religious inquiry were "correct" and "sound" contrary to the "erratic" ways applied by other scholars, in Al-Ḫūlī's and his own opinion, he was able to recover the true meanings of the Qur'anic narratives.

Conclusion: Formation of exegetical authority and cultural translation

The main aim of my study was to discuss different ways Ḫalaf Allāh legitimized his findings about the term *usṭūra* in the Qur'an. These are: referencing medieval authorities in Islamic theology, *tafsīr*, and philosophy; attributing the meaning of *usṭūra* to the older definition of the word; positioning himself as the defender of the Qur'an – by referencing the ongoing debate critical of Orientalists; ascribing his findings additional authority by presenting them as the true interpretation and the aim of the Qur'an itself; implementing the of the idea of *manhağ* (method) as the modern claim to professional authority. I claimed that this approach allows for some insights into Egyptian knowledge production of the early post-war period: it demonstrates how the seemingly different forms of knowledge such as French literary history, modernist Islamic thought, and religiously driven discourse against Orientalism were reformulated and intertwined within the context of one academic work. Now, to conclude my paper, I will emphasize that the previously outlined ways of legitimization Ḫalaf Allāh applied in his research are not to be viewed as a simple strategic choice. Rather, I see them as an attempt of a dialogue from within the Islamic discursive tradition – an effort in the formation of exegetical authority as

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[36] Yoav Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past. Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt*, Los Angeles 2009, p. 201.

discussed by Sh. Naguib, and a complex endeavor of cultural translation in the meaning elaborated by O. El Shakry.

The citations from widely accepted exegetical works, classical and modern, were a needed step in order to legitimize a new Qur'anic interpretation that moved "beyond the boundaries and authority of permitted readings", as Sh. Naguib convincingly argued.[37] In the case of *usṭūra*, in the face of the absence of direct confirmation in the authoritative literature, the author looked instead for indications that in his view "opened the door" and laid the theoretical groundwork for further elaboration in the desired direction. As Naguib pointed out, an exegetical reading becomes "new" by innovatively applying linguistic and theological disciplines, albeit confined within the boundaries of these disciplines. By quoting from various classical scholars and "wrestling for the ghost of Abduh"[38] with his critics, Ḥalaf Allāh was able to demonstrate his knowledge and exegetical skills, but he moved beyond the boundaries of the classical Islamic disciplines. Because Ḥalaf Allāh's approach towards the citation process established in the Muslim exegetical tradition was narrowed down to the sources and quotations confirming his view, which, it may be argued, can be attributed to the superior position of modern literary studies over theological studies in his research, it exposed his work to criticism from the side of Islamic scholars. The traditional citational process, a "declaration of allegiance to the predecessors"[39] was not implemented to the extent presented by other contemporary *mufassirs*. In comparison, following the same modernist method inherited from Al-Ḥūlī, but applied differently than Ḥalaf Allāh, ʿAbd Ar-Raḥman did not confine her legitimating citational practice only to the sources she agreed with, but, more in line with traditional approaches, she included several opinions of other authoritative scholars. Even though eventually she would decide to choose only one of them based on the judgment of the Qur'an (i.e. similarly to Ḥalaf Allāh), her way of reaching this exegetical conclusion involved more dialogical engagement with tradition.[40] Nonetheless, as a student of Al-Ḥūlī who directly followed in his footsteps by applying his method in NAHQ, Ḥalaf Allāh entered the arena of Islamic reformist thought and the "interpretative community" in general. The theological arguments originated from Islamic heritage were not only justifications but they constituted the driving force behind his argumentation.

Ḥalaf Allāh legitimized his modernist approach – at times, openly inspired by, and, at others, aspiring to the methodologies forged in European academia – with reference to Anti-Orientalist rhetoric, traditional Islamic sources, and,

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[37] Naguib, 'Bint al-Shāṭiʾ's Approach to tafsīr', p. 60.

[38] Reid, 'Cairo University', p. 69.

[39] Naguib, 'Bint al-Shāṭiʾ's Approach to tafsīr', p. 55.

[40] Ibidem, p. 57.

particularly in the context of *usṭūra*, older meaning of the word as found in classical dictionaries. I argue that this process can be interpreted as cultural translation in the meaning proposed by Omnia El Shakry in *The Great Social Laboratory* – not as a simple adaptation of "universal" Western academic methods into "particularity" of Islamic contexts, but as a "translation" that "was and is always a creative endeavor," and "relies upon an already existent grammar of lexical understanding."[41] This "necessarily impure"[42] process was a way of anchoring and translating modern, partially Western ideas of objective methodologies in the humanities into the grammar of different intellectual discourses – not by simply adapting and transplanting the ideas from the West, but by rearticulating them from within Islamic discursive tradition of jurisprudence and *tafsīr*; and by taking into account contemporary Egyptian debates such as the discussion on the credibility of Orientalism. Hence, tracing the legitimization attempts of the concept of *usṭūra* in the context of the Ḫalaf Allāh affair along their blurred boundaries between different modes of knowledge offers a narrow but possibly productive insight into the complexities of Egyptian intellectual history in the early postwar period.

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[41] Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt*, Stanford 2007, p. 10.

[42] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York 2010, p. X.

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