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Definiteness and Indefiniteness in Recurring Qur'anic Vocabulary: A Semantic and Contextual Study

[التعريف والتنكير في المفردات القرآنية المتكررة: دراسة دلالية سياقية]

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Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of definiteness (al-ta'rif) and indefiniteness (al-tankir) as they manifest in recurring vocabulary across the Holy Qur'an, tracing the conceptual framework of each category, its formative mechanisms, and the semantic divergence between their respective contextual occurrences. A given expression may appear in an indefinite form in one Qur'anic location and in a definite form in another; in each instance examined, the choice between definiteness and indefiniteness proves to be precisely calibrated to its context. Considered as a linguistic and stylistic phenomenon, definiteness and indefiniteness afford the author a degree of compositional flexibility in engaging with the individual word within the sentence and in shaping its meaning for the reader.

Keywords: *Definiteness, indefiniteness, recurring Qur'anic vocabulary, contextual semantics; Arabic linguistics*

الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث ظاهرة التعريف والتنكير في الألفاظ القرآنية المتكررة، ويسعى إلى الكشف عن مفهوم كلٍ منهما وآليات صياغته، والاختلاف الدلالي بين سياقيهما في القرآن الكريم. وقد رصد البحث أن اللفظ الواحد قد يرد نكرةً في موضع ومعرفةً في موضع آخر، وأن التعريف أو التنكير في كل موضع جاء ملائماً لسياقه ومنسجماً مع المقام ومقتضى الحال. وقد درس البحث سبعة ألفاظ قرآنية متكررة هي: (الحق، والحياة، والبلد، والقرية، والقوة، والنار، والليل)، محلياً دلالاتها في حالي التعريف والتنكير من خلال آيات قرآنية كريمة متعددة. وخلص البحث إلى أن التعريف والتنكير مظهر لغوي أسلوبى يمنح المنشئ مرونةً في التعامل مع المفردة داخل الجملة، ويوسع دلالة اللفظ أو يضيقها بحسب طبيعة السياق ومقاصده؛ وأن اختيار القرآن الكريم بين التعريف والتنكير في كل موضع جاء محكماً دقيقاً، كاشفاً عن بلاغة إعجازية تتجاوز حدود البيان البشري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعريف، التنكير، الألفاظ القرآنية المتكررة، الدلالة السياقية، اللسانيات العربية.

1. INTRODUCTION

All praise belongs to God, who has guided the seeker to His purposes and allowed us to perceive the focal points and watchpoints of His Book. Prayers and peace be upon our master Muḥammad, his family, and his companions. This study aims to illuminate the semantic functions of definiteness and indefiniteness in the Holy Qur'an through an examination of their occurrences therein, and to uncover the nuances that characterize this stylistic alternation between the two categories.

The phenomenon of definiteness and indefiniteness is among those linguistic features that pertain exclusively to the noun. What a noun signifies in its definite state differs from what it signifies in its indefinite state, in accordance with the speaker, the communicative situation, and the subject matter. In several of its dimensions and purposes, this phenomenon resembles what has been termed *al-muṭlaq wa-al-muqayyad* (the unrestricted and the restricted) in the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*).

Before examining the semantic functions of definiteness and indefiniteness in the Qur'an, it is necessary to define both terms briefly so that the matter may be clear and the meaning unambiguous.

Definiteness (*al-ta'rif*) in the Linguistic Sense

In the lexical sense, *al-ta'rif* refers to making a noun denote a specific entity, which is understood through singularization and particularization after generalization. One says (*عرفه بالشئ*) "he identified him by the thing" with the sense of determination; and (*وعرفته بزيد*) "I identified him to Zayd" means I made him known by a certain mark and clarified it until he became recognized. That which is known is the opposite of that which is obscure, and *al-mu'arrif* (the place of identification) is in origin the locus of identification and may function as a passive participle.¹

In the technical sense, *al-ta'rif* is the specification of an entity between the speaker and the listener until it is recognized and becomes the subject of discourse and reflection between them. It serves purposes that stir thoughts and feelings in the recipient, just as its stylistic employment awakens a sense of the spirit of beauty and its enjoyment.

Some nouns are more deserving of the definite form than others. The subject of predication (*al-musnad ilayhi*) is most entitled to definiteness, because it is the entity upon which a judgment is passed; it should be known so that the judgment may be informative. The noun, in all its patterns, achieves its nominal character denoting an abstract meaning removed from time by virtue of its being made definite.²

Indefiniteness (*al-tankīr*) in the Linguistic Sense

With regard to indefiniteness, it must be noted that the concept of an expression in this state differs from what it is in the definite state. This difference does not in many cases arise from its structure alone, but rather from its signification and the manner of its use. The fundamental distinction between definiteness and indefiniteness is that indefiniteness is not recognized by any specific marker; the expression simply remains free from the constraints of definiteness.

1 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, entry "ʿ-r-f," 5:636–637; al-Fīrūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, entry "ʿ-r-f," 3:178–179.

2 Ḥusayn Jumʿah, *Fī Jamāliyyat al-Kalimah*, 124.

Thus, indefiniteness is absolute, while definiteness comes to restrict that absoluteness and to determine the dimensions of the expression in its signification and usage.¹

This observation might suggest to the reader, or cause someone to suppose, that the definite form is more transparent and more deserving of use than the indefinite form. What escapes such a person is that vagueness is appropriate in certain contexts, and that the path of clarity is not always the right way to take, particularly in contexts of promise and warning, praise and censure, which by their nature involve comparison. The reason is that the aspirations of thought have multiple sources in accordance with the multiplicity of meanings, and the indefinite noun, which encompasses many individuals, causes the mind to range from east to west, apprehending it with insight from its beginning to its end, so that the soul acquires from it a grandeur and is adorned with a nobility.²

Indefiniteness, in the technical sense, is every noun from which no particular entity is understood, and which is not intended to denote a specific referent; it is thus free and liberated from particularization.³

It occurs for benefits and is employed for purposes that the definite form cannot fulfill, either from a linguistic standpoint or from a rhetorical and semantic standpoint, and all of these draw upon context and upon its correspondence to the demands of the situation and communicative register.

The function performed by the indefinite noun, whether it occupies the position of subject or predicate in a sentence or text, cannot be performed by the definite noun. The indefinite noun possesses characteristics that emanate from the concept of indefiniteness itself and from its semantic nature.

When we speak of semantic nature, we mean the gradation of signification between the definite and the indefinite, without this implying a ranking in terms of grammatical infelicity resulting from usage. Every indefinite noun differs in its isolated form from what it is in syntactic usage, whether in terms of word order or in terms of signification. It is the psychological, intellectual, and thematic dimensions of signification that require the construction of a syntactic arrangement using either a word free from all constraints or a word restricted to specific conditions and their attributes. The word, thus liberated in the harmony of form and meaning, acquires a varied and stimulating semantic character. The Qur'an presents verses in which indefiniteness appears in sensitive contexts, and these are not restricted to the first meaning that comes to mind. When the expression is examined with care and scrutiny, its signification is found to expand, and it possesses luminous radiations that intimate the more important meaning and the more precise intention. Similarly, when these verses are contemplated, one finds that definiteness in a given context serves a functional purpose.

Indefiniteness, for its part, comes for a different functional purpose. As the classical scholar Ibn al-Zamlakānī observed: "One might suppose that the definite form is more transparent and preferable to the indefinite, not realizing that vagueness is appropriate in certain contexts, and that the path of clarity is not always the right way. The reason is that the

1 Ibid., 159.

2 Ibn al-Zamlakānī, *Al-Burhān al-Kāshif li-I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, 133–136.

3 Ḥusayn Jum'ah, *Fī Jamāliyyat al-Kalimah*, 160.

aspirations of thought have multiple sources in accordance with the multiplicity of meanings, and the indefinite noun, which encompasses many individuals, causes the mind to range from east to west, apprehending it with insight from its beginning to its end, so that the soul acquires from it a grandeur and is adorned with a nobility. This is the case with what lacks a definite singular referent; in contrast, the definite form, pertaining to a single specific individual, fixes the mind at a determined, circumscribed measure and settles it there."¹

Ibn al-Zamlakānī affirms in the above passage that the indefinite is the original state and definiteness is constructed upon it, since indefiniteness may be used to denote generality in a way the definite form cannot achieve. This does not, however, negate the importance of definiteness in its own appropriate textual context.²

This entails the phenomenon of multiple functional meanings for a single morphological structure: the definite form signifies a particular meaning in one instance and a different meaning in another, so that the expression with which it is associated acquires a signification distinct from what it would bear if rendered indefinite. Yet these significations can only be determined and uncovered through the contextual environment that surrounds them.

Although the original state of an expression is indefiniteness, making it definite is one of the means by which language is harnessed to reinforce meaning: a noun may be rendered definite to achieve the sense of generality and whatever derives from it, whether transformation, depreciation, exaltation, or aggrandizement, in accordance with the position of the expression within its linguistic and social context. Tamām Ḥassān noted that making an expression definite is one means of reinforcing meaning when it could be left indefinite, observing: "Rendering an indefinite noun definite by the article (al-) may yield the generic sense or the sense of prior acquaintance; but this yield is by convention a linguistic (inherited) one, not a stylistic deviation, because stylistic deviation may charge the definite article with a meaning not inherent to it by original convention."³

Since definiteness serves to specify signification and to demonstrate the precision of what language indicates through its varying contexts, indefiniteness may come as "a deepening that grants the structure the capacity for continuous and renewed semantic enrichment that transcends what is conventionally understood."⁴ Just as a specific signification emerges from the choice of a definite form in the Qur'an, so too has the Qur'an employed indefinite expressions with varied significations required by the Qur'anic context and the intended meaning.

Following this theoretical grounding, the study proceeds to examine the semantic functions of definiteness and indefiniteness in the Qur'an across a selected set of expressions appearing within their Qur'anic contexts. It will be shown that definiteness will impart to these expressions a specificity of signification and a precision of reference, while indefiniteness in the same expressions will grant the structure the capacity for continuous renewed enrichment that exceeds conventional meaning.

1 Ibn al-Zamlakānī, *Al-Burhān al-Kāshif li-I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, 136.

2 See: *Dalā'il al-I'jāz, al-Jurjānī*, 132; *Miftāḥ al-'Ulūm, al-Sakkākī*, 85; and al-Tirāz, *al-'Alawī*, 208.

3 *Al-Bayān fī Rawā'i al-Qur'ān*, 1:33.

4 Muḥammad 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, *Al-Balāghah wa-al-Uslūbiyyah*, 260.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Holy Qur'an is distinguished by its precise and purposeful linguistic choices. Among the most remarkable of these is the phenomenon wherein the same lexical item appears in one Qur'anic passage with the definite article (al-) and in another passage without it, each occurrence serving a distinct semantic and rhetorical function. Despite the longstanding observations of classical exegetes and rhetoricians on isolated cases of this phenomenon, no comprehensive analytical study has been devoted to examining it systematically across a representative selection of Qur'anic vocabulary. The central question this study addresses is: what are the precise semantic and rhetorical functions that govern the alternation between definiteness (al-ta'rif) and indefiniteness (al-tankīr) in recurring Qur'anic expressions, and how does contextual variation determine the appropriateness of each form?

3. OBJECTIVES

This study pursues the following objectives:

- i. To clarify the conceptual and terminological foundations of definiteness (al-ta'rif) and indefiniteness (al-tankīr) in Arabic linguistic and rhetorical scholarship.[APDFB1.1][MU1.2]
- ii. To analyze the semantic divergence between definite and indefinite occurrences of the same Qur'anic expression across different contextual settings.
- iii. To demonstrate that the Qur'anic choice between definiteness and indefiniteness is never arbitrary but is always governed by the functional requirements of its immediate rhetorical and thematic context.
- iv. To draw upon the cumulative insights of classical Qur'anic exegetes, grammarians, and rhetoricians in illuminating the semantic dimensions of each case studied.
- v. To contribute to the broader field of Qur'anic stylistics by establishing a systematic analytical model for examining this grammatical-semantic phenomenon.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study employs a descriptive-analytical approach, combining classical Arabic rhetorical theory with contextual semantic analysis. Each selected lexical item is examined across two or more Qur'anic passages in which it appears in alternating definite and indefinite forms. The analysis proceeds in three stages: first, the syntactic and morphological dimensions of each form are identified; second, the classical exegetical and rhetorical tradition is surveyed to gather cumulative scholarly interpretations; and third, a synthetic semantic reading is proposed that accounts for the specificity of the Qur'anic context and the rhetorical purpose served by the choice of definiteness or indefiniteness in each instance.

The seven lexical items selected for analysis are: al-ḥaqq (right/truth), ḥayāt (life), balad (city/land), qarya (town/village), quwwa (strength/power), nār (fire), and layl (night). These lexical items were selected through purposive qualitative sampling because they exhibit clear alternations between definite and indefinite forms and have received substantial attention in the classical exegetical and rhetorical tradition. The present study does not aim to provide an exhaustive survey of all Qur'anic occurrences of these expressions. Rather, it focuses on representative passages in which the semantic and rhetorical effects of definiteness and indefiniteness are particularly evident. The selected occurrences were chosen according to three criteria: (1) the presence of a clear alternation between definite and indefinite forms; (2) the availability of extensive discussion in classical tafsīr and balāghah literature; and (3) their suitability for illustrating broader contextual-semantic principles. The study therefore

prioritizes analytical depth and contextual comparison over comprehensive coverage of every Qur'anic occurrence. [APDFB2.1][MU2.2]

Section One: Definiteness and Indefiniteness of the Word al-Ḥaqq (Right/Truth)

God Almighty says:

"And [recall] when you said: 'O Moses, we can never endure one kind of food, so call upon your Lord to bring forth for us of what the earth produces, of its herbs, its cucumbers, its garlic, its lentils, and its onions.' He said: 'Would you exchange what is better for what is inferior? Go down to any city, and indeed you shall have what you have asked.' And humiliation and misery were cast over them, and they drew upon themselves the wrath of God. That was because they used to disbelieve in the signs of God and kill the prophets **without the right** (bi-ghayri al-ḥaqq). That was because they disobeyed and persisted in transgression." (Al-Baqarah 2:61)

God Almighty also says:

"They shall be overcome with humiliation wherever they are found, except for a covenant with God or a covenant with people. They have drawn upon themselves the wrath of God and been decreed misery, because they used to disbelieve in the signs of God and kill the prophets **without right** (bi-ghayri ḥaqq). That was because they disobeyed and persisted in transgression." (Āl 'Imrān 3:112)

The word al-ḥaqq is rendered definite in the first verse and indefinite in the second. The definite form al-ḥaqq in the verse from Sūrat al-Baqarah indicates that they were killing the prophets without the specific right that would justify killing: namely, the known, recognized ground for lawful killing. Moreover, definiteness appears first in the Qur'an as an indication that the right permitting the taking of life is well known among Muslims, as God Most High says: "And do not kill the soul that God has forbidden [to be killed] except by right (illā bi-al-ḥaqq)" (Al-An'ām 6:151). The definite article here points to that recognized right, and definiteness was therefore the more appropriate choice.

The indefinite form, for its part, signifies that they were killing the prophets without any right whatsoever: neither a right that would warrant killing nor any other consideration. That is to say, there was no dimension of right that would justify any harm to the prophets, let alone their killing.

The word ḥaqq here is indefinite in the broadest sense, whereas al-ḥaqq is the known definite right. The purpose of the indefinite form is to intensify the reproach directed at them and to render their deed more reprehensible than the definite form would achieve, because indefiniteness means they killed without any cause for killing whatsoever, not any right, no matter of what kind.¹

The indefinite ḥaqq is intended to affirm universal negation: there was no right, neither the one recognized among Muslims nor any other, that could have justified killing the prophets.² It is well known that no prophet may rightfully be killed, yet since one might conceive of

1 al-Gharnāṭī, *Malāk al-Ta'wīl al-Qāṭi' bi-Dhawī al-Ilḥād wa-al-Ta'wīl*, 1:71–73.

2 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr aw Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, 2:134.

some imagined pretext for it,¹ the context of denunciation and censure here is the more powerful one of the two; and both are, in any case, reprehensible and blameworthy.

In the qualification "without the right," there is an exposure of the ugliness of their conduct, even though the killing of prophets is by definition unlawful. The purpose is to signal that they override what is right in their estimation since no one believes in the legitimacy of killing any one of them.² It carries an additional intensification of their reproach by citing the crimes of their forebears, indicating that they are spiritually kindred to them in enormity, and alerting the reader that this was not the first crime they committed nor the first prohibition they violated.

It likewise carries confirmation, hyperbolic emphasis, and a refutation of whatever a person might conceivably imagine to be possible in some remote way.³ It "is connected to an elided element that functions as a circumstantial clause modifying the act of their killing, meaning: [their killing being] without right, even in their own belief, just as it is in objective reality." Attributing the act of killing to these very people, even though it was the act of their forebears, is justified by their approval of that act, just as the falsification of scripture, although perpetrated by their religious authorities, is attributed to all who follow in their path.⁴ This is expressed in the imperfective tense, signaling that this matter will continue to recur: that everyone who calls people to God will be killed without right, because the heirs of the prophets inherit from them what befell them.

Al-Baqqā'ī (d. 885/1480) commented on the divergence between the definite and indefinite contexts as follows: "Because this is the context of their assault upon the Qur'an, which is the greatest of the signs, the expression here is more emphatic than in Sūrat Āl 'Imrān, which is itself more emphatic than what preceded it, because this [passage in Al-Baqarah] is combined with a plural of abundance. The indefiniteness of ḥaqq expresses it through a verbal noun implying totality, because the audacity for killing had become for them an established character trait and deeply rooted quality, unlike what preceded."⁵ Indefiniteness was therefore the more appropriate choice.

If one objects: the killing of prophets is in any case without right, so what is the benefit of stating it? The answer is: its benefit lies in the explicit statement of the reprehensible character of their deed, because it is more forceful in expressing its heinousness.

If one further objects: why did God permit the disbelievers to kill the prophets? The answer is: as an honor for the prophets and an elevation of their ranks, just as believers killed in holy struggle (jihād) are elevated.⁶

The plural form "al-nabiyyīn" (the prophets) in Al-Baqarah takes the sound masculine plural, in conformity with what follows it, namely al-ladhīna and al-ṣābi'īn, which are also of that

1 Ibn 'Aṭīyyah, *Al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz fī Tafsīr al-Kitāb al-'Azīz*, 1:89.

2 *Al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz*, 1:484.

3 Abū al-Su'ūd, *Irshād al-'Aql al-Salīm ilā Mazāyā al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, known as *Tafsīr Abī al-Su'ūd*, 1:438.

4 *Ibid.*, 1:438.

5 al-Baqqā'ī, *Naẓm al-Durar fī Tanāsub al-Āyāt wa-al-Suwar*, 2:296.

6 Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī, *Fath al-Raḥmān bi-Kashf mā Yaltabisu fī al-Qur'ān*, 26–27; see also: al-Kirmānī, *Al-Burhān fī Mutashābih al-Qur'ān*, 112.

form; and similarly in Āl 'Imrān, with al-ladhīna, nāṣirīn, and mu'riḍūn, unlike what appears in the two sūrahs of Al-Nisā'.¹

Abū Ḥayyān (d. 754/1344) held that the indefinite form bi-ghayri ḥaqq in Sūrat Āl 'Imrān and the definite form bi-ghayri al-ḥaqq in Al-Baqarah are each appropriate to their respective contexts because the sentence in Āl 'Imrān is cast in the form of a conditional, which is general and admits no particularization; it was accordingly fitting that the negated element be in the indefinite form so as to be general. In Al-Baqarah, however, it came in the form of a narrative about specific, known people.²

Whatever the case may be, the purpose of these verses is to expose the crimes of the Children of Israel, and the killing of prophets was among the greatest of these crimes. The emphatic variation of the qualification "without right" between definiteness and indefiniteness served precisely this end. As for definiteness, it signals that their killing of the prophets was not done by any legitimate right known to them or to others; as for indefiniteness, it signals that their conduct was without any right whatsoever, in an absolute sense.

Thus the denunciation and censure of their deeds in the verse of Sūrat Āl 'Imrān is the more severe. From what has been discussed, it is clear that definiteness in the verse of Sūrat al-Baqarah is more appropriate there, and that indefiniteness in the verse of Sūrat Āl 'Imrān is equally appropriate to its own context.³

Section Two: Definiteness and Indefiniteness of the Word Ḥayāt (Life)

The word al-ḥayāt (life) appears in the definite form in the following verse, where the definiteness gestures toward an exaggeration in esteeming this life and magnifying its importance in the eyes of those who cling to it and toil for it:

"And this worldly life (al-ḥayāt al-dunyā) is nothing but amusement and play; and indeed the abode of the Hereafter is the true life (al-ḥayawān), if only they knew." (Al-'Ankabūt 29:64)

Yet God Most High exposed its true nature and showed that it is confined to amusement and play, depicted in the soul through the passing play of children for a brief hour, after which they disperse.

This contemptible life, in its true reality, is contrasted through a hyperbolic exaltation of the life of the Hereafter: "And indeed the abode of the Hereafter is the true life (al-ḥayawān)," meaning it is the genuine life, since death and annihilation do not visit those who dwell therein, or it is itself life, by way of hyperbole.⁴ God Most High thereby intended to convey the condition of this world, that it affords no one contentment, nor does it remain in a single state; He mentioned its vicissitude, its disintegration, its deceptiveness, that it never becomes pure or complete, and that its condition is perpetual fluctuation and instability. Their condition in this world resembles the condition of amusement and play, and a rational person is therefore obliged to take heed and to seek attainment in an abode whose condition does not

1 *Al-Burhān fī Mutashābih al-Qur'ān*, 112.

2 See: Abū Ḥayyān, *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, 1:339.

3 Fāḍil al-Sāmarrā'ī, *Al-Ta'bīr al-Qur'ānī*, 171.

4 al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqā'iq al-Tanzīl wa-'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta'wīl*, 2:448; and al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī fī Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm wa-al-Sab' al-Mathānī*, 16:21.

fluctuate nor is expected to invert and vanish. Whoever has been deluded by this world with its temptations and its abundant offerings must know that there will come a day when this worldly life will end with all its pleasures and desires, and he will return with his deeds to God in the Hereafter. If the heedless person does not grasp the truth of the inevitable end of his worldly life, he should travel through the regions of the inhabited world and perceive with discernment what became of past nations, and how worldly life brought them to disasters they had not reckoned with, while they persisted in their transgression until God's command came, confirming the inescapable truth that the Hereafter is the abiding life for both parties. As for this world, it is nothing but an abode of action: whoever wastes it in amusement and play has forfeited the Hereafter and its blessings, while whoever invested it and acted in accordance with his Lord's commands has won and attained an eternal life without death.

In contrast to this definiteness, the word *ḥayāh* (life) is rendered indefinite in the context of discussing the Jews who turned away from the divine call:

"And you will surely find them the most desirous of people for life (*ḥayāh*), even more so than those who associate partners with God. One of them wishes he could be granted a life of a thousand years. But it would not save him from the punishment even if he were granted such life. And God is seeing of what they do." (Al-Baqarah 2:96)

The indefinite form here intimates the intense eagerness of those Jews to add to their lives a surplus of existence, however small or devoid of any noble value it might be. The indefinite form evokes the sense of contemptibility and signals a life of debasement and the ferocity of their scramble for it.

Abū al-Su'ūd (d. 899/1493) observed that the semantic function of the indefinite form here is to signal "that what they desire is a particular kind of it, namely, the prolonged life."¹ These are the Jews who were the most desirous of people to live in this world and the most reluctant to face death.²

They are eager to live in it regardless of its value and whatever its quality, even if it be a life of humiliation and degradation without worth, because their ultimate aim is life itself and the accumulation of more of it. This means "a specific, designated kind of life, which is the surplus life. It is as if the verse were saying: you will find them the most desirous of people, however long they have lived, to add to their life in the past and present another life in the future."³

Accordingly, the indefinite form here yields contempt and diminishment for the value of this worldly life, which is characterized by its brevity; however long it endures, it must eventually pass. Furthermore, it reveals the kind of life the Children of Israel prioritized and clung to, even with full awareness of its nature.

ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078) considered that in preferring the indefinite form of *ḥayāh* over the definite form there is "a beauty and grandeur, a delicacy of effect, whose excellence cannot be measured and whose presence with the definite form you would lack,

1 *Irshād al-ʿAql al-Salīm*, 1:132.

2 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl Āy al-Qurʾān*, 1:428.

3 al-Qazwīnī, *Al-ʿIdāh fī ʿUlūm al-Balāghah*, 64.

departing from grace and intimacy toward their opposite."¹ Al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) also found this observation admirable.²

Al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854) stated: "The indefiniteness of ḥayāh is because a specific kind of it is intended, namely, prolonged life. The indefinite marker (tanwīn) may then be for aggrandizement; or it may be for contempt, since the true life is the life of the Hereafter. It may also be that indefiniteness is for vagueness; indeed it has been said that this is the more appropriate reading, meaning: upon a life of indeterminate and unknown extent, from which one may infer their desire for the prolonged life all the more readily."³

Abū Ḥayyān proposed that the construction might involve an elided annexand or attribute, meaning: upon the lengthening of life or upon a long life; though it is evident that no such addition is required.⁴

Al-Rāzī stated: "Indefiniteness indicates perfection and completeness. Note the verse: 'And you will surely find them the most desirous of people for a life' (Al-Baqarah 2:96), meaning: you will find them the most desirous of people for a permanent, complete, unbroken life, because the meaning of 'the most desirous of people' is more desirous than people, and they loathe death because they know what awaits them in the Hereafter of humiliation and prolonged disgrace. The expression with 'most desirous' in the superlative form conveys the extreme urgency of the soul's desire to remain in this world."⁵

One also perceives in the indefinite form of ḥayāh an intimation of whatever measure of life is possible, however insignificant and empty of any noble value; the indefinite form evokes a sense of contempt, and in turn indicates that the Jews are even more desirous of this prolonged life than others of lesser value. The word ḥayāh in this context thus simultaneously conveys two senses: this worldly life and the ferocity of the Jewish clinging to it.⁶ It also contains a rebuke directed at those who associate partners with God, because they have no faith in any consequence and know only this world as their paradise; if one who possesses a scripture and acknowledges requital surpasses them in his eagerness for it, he is all the more deserving of rebuke, since his desire exceeds that of others.

Ibn al-Zamlakānī held in the first verse that the indefinite form of ḥayāh is more apt than its definite counterpart.⁷ The rationale is that the one who lives is he who is desirous, and his desire is not for the original ground of life but for its augmentation. From this perspective, the verse's reading is that they are the most desirous of people, however long their years have stretched, to add to their life another life. The dimension conveyed by the indefinite form of ḥayāh cannot be coherently expressed if it were rendered definite, since definiteness would denote the original, primary ground of life, whereas indefiniteness denotes a specific kind among its types, namely the additional, surplus life.

The Second Verse Concerning ḥayāh

1 *Dalā'il al-I'jāz*, 263.

2 *Ghāyat al-I'jāz fī Dirāyat al-I'jāz*, 177.

3 *Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī*, 1:447.

4 *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, 1:481.

5 *Al-Taḥf al-Kabīr*, 3:176.

6 Ḥasan ʿIyā' al-Dīn 'Itr, *Bayyināt al-Maḥajjah al-Khālīdah*, 253.

7 *Al-Burhān al-Kāshif li-I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, 52.

In the verse: "And in retribution (al-qīṣāṣ) there is life (ḥayāh) for you, O people of understanding, that you may become righteous" (Al-Baqarah 2:179), the indefinite form of ḥayāh stands alone to denote a specific and particular life, distinct from the original life. The reading of this verse is that retribution yields a new, inaugurated life that could not exist apart from it: when a person knows with certainty that if he kills he will be killed, he refrains from killing, so that his own life and that of his potential victim are both preserved through retribution. Ibn al-Zamlakānī held that rendering ḥayāh definite in this context would be inadmissible, lest it lead to the misunderstanding that life in its original sense is obtained through retribution.¹

The two instances of the indefinite form of ḥayāh across these verses carry communicative and semantic dimensions that would not have been available through definiteness. The indefinite form fulfilled new roles that elevated it from the register of generality and ambiguity to a level higher than what definiteness and specificity could accomplish.

Section Three: Definiteness and Indefiniteness of the Word Balad (City/Land)

The word balad (city/land) appears in the definite form in one context and in the indefinite form in another. Both the exegetes and the grammarians noted this alternation and pointed to the distinction between the meaning of the word in the two verses, both in terms of definiteness and indefiniteness and in terms of its grammatical function.

In the case of the definite form al-balad, it functions syntactically as a substitute or an attributive modifier of the first direct object, the demonstrative pronoun, while the meaning (āmin, "safe/secure") functions as the second direct object. In the case of the indefinite form baladan, it functions as the second direct object, and the meaning (āmin) functions as an attribute of the second direct object.^{2 3} Since the grammatical analysis alone cannot reveal the secret of the Qur'anic eloquence in making the expression definite or indefinite, what follows explains the intended meaning in both states through the contextual connection of the two verses.

God Most High says:

"And [recall] when Abraham said: 'My Lord, make this a land of security (baladan āminan) and provide its people with fruits, those among them who believe in God and the Last Day.' He said: 'And as for whoever disbelieves, I will grant him a brief enjoyment; then I will force him to the punishment of the Fire, and wretched is the destination.' And [recall] when Abraham was raising the foundations of the House, and [with him] Ishmael, [saying]: 'Our Lord, accept [this] from us. Indeed, You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.'" (Al-Baqarah 2:126–127)

As for the verse in Sūrat Ibrāhīm, the context is as follows:

"And [recall] when Abraham said: 'My Lord, make this city secure (al-balad āminan) and keep me and my sons away from worshipping idols. My Lord, they have led astray many among the people. So whoever follows me is of me, and whoever disobeys me, then indeed

¹ Ibid., 52.

² al-'Ukbarī, *Al-Tibyān fī I'rāb al-Qur'ān*, 2:42.

³ Ibid., 1:101.

You are Forgiving and Merciful. Our Lord, I have settled some of my descendants in an uncultivated valley near Your sacred House, our Lord, that they may establish prayer. So make the hearts of some people incline toward them and provide for them from the fruits that they might be grateful." (Ibrāhīm 14:35–37)

Al-Rāzī (d. 604/1207) explained the divergence between the definite and indefinite forms in these two sūrahs with two arguments:

The first: that the first supplication was made when the place had not yet been established as a city. It was as if Abraham said: "Make this valley a safe city," since God Most High records him as saying: "Our Lord, I have settled some of my descendants in an uncultivated valley" (Ibrāhīm 14:37). Here he says: "Make this valley a safe city." The second supplication was made when it had already become a city, as if he said: "Make this place, which you have made into a city, one of security and safety," like saying: "I have made this man secure."

The second: that both supplications may have been made after the place had become a city, and "make this a safe city (baladan āminan)" means: make this city a fully realized city, just as one says: "Today was a hot day," where one mentions the category to underscore the quality by way of hyperbole, since indefiniteness indicates intensification. Thus "My Lord, make this a safe city (baladan āminan)" means: make it among those cities complete in security.

As for the verse "My Lord, make this a safe city (baladan āminan)," it contains only a request for security, not a request for intensification. As for "And provide its people with fruits," the meaning is that Abraham supplicated for the sustenance of those who dwell in Mecca to be provided to them, and God answered his prayer so that Mecca became a place to which the fruits of all things were brought. As for "those among them who believe," it is an explicative substitute of "its people," meaning: provide the believers among its people in particular.¹

Al-Anṣārī stated: "If you ask why balad was rendered indefinite here but definite in Sūrat Ibrāhīm, I say: because the first supplication here was made before the place had been established as a permanently secure city, in the first case, and as a safe city, in the second."² The verse of Sūrat al-Baqarah represents the supplication made when Abraham left Ishmael and Hājar in the valley before the building of Mecca and before the Jurhumite settlement there.

The verse of Sūrat Ibrāhīm, however, was made after his return to it and after it had been built.³ That is: the indefinite form baladan in Al-Baqarah is appropriate because Mecca was at that time a valley without any construction; Abraham was asking: "My Lord, make this valley a safe city (baladan āminan)." The proof of this is God's words on Abraham's tongue: "Our Lord, I have settled some of my descendants in an uncultivated valley" (Ibrāhīm 14:37). In the verse of Sūrat Ibrāhīm, the definite form al-balad ("this city") is used after the valley had been transformed into a built settlement, so he referred to it as al-balad and supplicated for its security and tranquility.

Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1372) remarked: "Perhaps the supplication was repeated, and that in Sūrat Ibrāhīm came later. The security requested in it may be the same original security, repeated in

1 *Al-Taḥf al-Kabīr*, 4:51, 50. See also: al-Khaṭīb al-Iskāfī, *Durrat al-Tanzīl wa-Ghurraṭ al-Ta'wīl*, 23–24.

2 *Faṭḥ al-Raḥmān bi-Kaṣḥf mā Yaltabisu fī al-Qur'ān*, 31.

3 Badr al-Dīn Ibn Jamā'ah, *Kaṣḥf al-Ma'ānī fī al-Mutashābih min al-Mathānī*, 105–106.

supplication without the cityhood element out of a desire for its continuance, since it is the primary aim; or because what is customary once cityhood has been established is its continuance after being confirmed, which is unlike the original establishment. Or the security petitioned may be different, such that the first petition was for the basic security that validates habitation, and the second for the well-established, familiar security."

He continued: "You may take 'this city' in that sūrah as a reference to a matter already determined in the mind, as is indicated by 'Our Lord, I have settled' (Ibrāhīm 14:37), and the two supplications then correspond exactly. If you take the demonstrative here as referring to a city that had already come into being, the supplication would have occurred after it became a city, and what is being requested is that it be 'secure' in accordance with what the sūrah contains, without any artificiality; except that it yields intensification, meaning: a fully realized city in security, as if one were to say: 'make it a city known for its security and famous for it, like saying: this day was a hot day.'"¹

Abū Ḥayyān stated: "He called upon Him with the title 'Lord,' annexing it to himself, because of the tenderness of petition contained in that invocation, and because addressing one by the attribute indicative of the acceptance of the petitioner and the granting of his humble supplication."²

"Make" here carries the meaning of "transform," and although it is grammatically an imperative, it is in effect a request and a desire. "This" refers to the valley in which Abraham had supplicated for its inhabitants when he settled them in it, expressed in "in an uncultivated valley near Your sacred House" (Ibrāhīm 14:37), or to the place that had already become a city, which is why he rendered it indefinite by saying "a city (baladan)." When it became a city, the Exalted One placed on Abraham's lips: "My Lord, make this city (al-balad) secure" (Ibrāhīm 14:35), and elsewhere: "I do not swear by this city (al-balad)" (Al-Balad 90:1). This is the case if the supplication occurred twice at two different times.

The definite form is thus a reference to the small, barren tract in which he settled his family; the indefinite form is a reference to the expansiveness of the place, the multitude of its inhabitants, and their diversity.³

The description of balad by the attribute āmin (secure) is either in the sense of possession, meaning: "possessing security," as in the Qur'anic expression "a satisfied life" (ʿīshatun rāḍiyah, Al-Ḥāqqah 69:21), meaning "possessing satisfaction," or in the figurative sense, making the place itself an embodiment of security, just as it is said: "your day is fasting and your night is vigil."⁴

Section Four: Definiteness and Indefiniteness of the Word Qarya (Town/Village)

God Most High says:

1 *Tafsīr al-Qurʿān al-ʿAẓīm*, Ibn Kathīr, 1:208.

2 *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, 1:554.

3 ʿAbd al-Majīd Yāsīn ʿAbd al-Majīd, *Al-Mubīn wa-al-Maʿnā fī al-Āyāt al-Mutashābihāt fī al-Qurʿān al-Karīm*, 401.

4 Sībawayhi, *Al-Kitāb*, 3:382.

"Ask the town (al-qaryah) in which we were and the caravan with which we traveled; and we are indeed truthful." (Yūsuf 12:82)

The word al-qaryah appears in the definite form here because the brothers intended a specific, particular town, namely the land of Egypt in which their brother Joseph (peace be upon him) was present. For this reason, the expression is definite. In the verse where the indefinite form is used (to be discussed below), the devastated towns are many and unspecified; hence the word appears indefinitely.

One also notes that the brothers cast the question upon the town itself while intending its inhabitants.¹ Nothing is more befitting of their psychological state than expressing themselves in precisely this manner. It is as if they were saying: ask the town, its vegetation, its animals, its inanimate objects, its humans and its jinn, and you will find confirmation of the truth of what we say. The full force of this expression is deployed to repel the charge of a scheme against their second brother, Benjamin. Their position is one of extreme vulnerability, and they are innocent of any such accusation; yet they have no evidence but to close the verse with this affirmation: "and we are indeed truthful."²

As for the verse: "And how many a town (qaryah) that was unjust did We shatter, and We produced after it another people" (Al-Anbiyā' 21:11), the word qaryah appears in the indefinite form to denote the universality of the punishment for those who were unjust.

The verse alludes to the severity of God's punishment of towns because of the oppression and unbelief of their inhabitants, and it depicts the intensity of the punishment through the form and resonance of the language, which contributes to bringing the signification close and giving it its full dimensions. The word qaṣamnā (We shattered), with its form, its powerful resonance, its rhythm, and the heaviness of its pronunciation, evokes the image of destruction and annihilation with force and power, and conveys the might of the Creator and His wrath and anger.³

Similarly, the rhythmic effect produced by the word "kam" (how many), sealed by the letter that closes the lips, evokes a quiet surprise in the soul, as if it compresses within itself connotations of contempt, disgrace, and indifference; the word carries in its resonance a tone tinged with a rumbling disapproval.⁴

The rhythm is thus bound to meaning, because meaning is determined by the form and pattern of the expression, and from this form and pattern there arises a rhythm that carries within it the deep connection to meaning. This is what the syntactic construction requires for the purpose of denoting abundance, which the indefinite noun in the genitive case after "kam" fulfills.

Section Five: Definiteness and Indefiniteness of the Word Quwwa (Strength/Power)

1 Ibn Jinnī, *Al-Khaṣā'is*, 2:364.

2 Dr. Ḥāzim Dhanūn Ismā'īl, *Al-Tamyīz fī Kitāb Allāh 'Azza wa-Jall: Dirāsah Naḥwiyyah Dalāliyyah*, 59.

3 'Umar al-Salāmī, *Al-Ijāz al-Fannī fī al-Qur'ān*, 98–99.

4 Ibid., 231. See also: Ḥasan Sharshara, *Al-Binā' al-Ṣawtī fī al-Bayān al-Qur'ānī*, 88.

Regarding the lexical form: quwwa is derived from the root q-w-y, but it has been treated as though it were of the pattern fu‘lah, so the yā’ was assimilated to the wāw out of reluctance to change the ḍammah. It is the antonym of weakness (du‘f), and its plural forms are quwan and qiwan. One says: qawiya al-rajul, and al-ḍa‘īf yaqwā quwwatan, so he is qawī (strong); and qawaytahu, and qāwaytahu fa-qawaythu, meaning: I overcame him. Al-quwwah also refers to a single strand of a rope, or a single layer of the strands of a rope or bowstring, with the plural forms being the same.¹

The definite form al-qawī (the strong) appears in the verse:

"One of the two women said: 'O my father, hire him. Indeed, the best one you can hire is the strong, the trustworthy (al-qawiyy al-amīn).'" (Al-Qaṣaṣ 28:26)

The strength referred to here is of two kinds: the first is physical strength, which Moses (peace be upon him) possessed as a bodily capacity; the second is moral strength, expressed by the word al-amīn (the trustworthy), representing the strength of self-restraint and chastity in his dealings with Shu‘ayb's daughter (peace be upon her), who praised him before her father when she described him as strong after observing his conduct in watering the flock. As for her describing him as trustworthy, this was manifested in his chastity when she spoke with him and then in his accompanying her when he set out for Shu‘ayb.² She inferred his strength and trustworthiness from "his lifting of the stone, drawing the bucket, and turning his gaze downward"³ when her father's message reached him.

The superlative construction uses the word khayr (best), whose original form is akhyar, with the hamzah elided for ease due to frequency of use.⁴ The verb ista‘jara is of the form ista‘ala, with the sīn and tā’ expressing intensification, and the form here denotes adoption of an action, meaning that she requested her father to employ him as a hireling because he was the best in strength and trustworthiness she had observed. She therefore said: "O my father, hire him." The Qur’anic context accordingly "made 'the best hireling you can hire' the subject of predication, making it a noun in this capacity, when it would equally be possible to make al-qawiyy al-amīn the subject of predication, since the two are equivalent in definite status, the reference of the definite article in both the annexed relative pronoun and the article-marked noun being generality in both cases. Preference in initial position was given to the constituent of the sentence that is more important and more deserving of attention, which is 'the best hireling,' since the sentence was constructed in the manner of a causal explanation."^{5 6}

As for the definite article in al-qawiyy al-amīn, it implies restriction. Al-Qazwīnī (d. 739/1338) stated: "The definite article of genus may indicate restriction either by way of hyperbole, to imply the completeness of the meaning in the subject, as in saying: 'Umar is the brave man,' meaning: the perfect in bravery, so that the expression appears as if bravery is found nowhere but in him, since the bravery of others is disregarded as falling short of the degree of perfection."⁷ For this reason, the word was expressed in the form fa‘īl, denoting the

1 *Lisān al-‘Arab*, article "q-w-y", 15:206–207.

2 ‘Abd al-Rahmān Ḥasan Ḥabankah al-Maydānī, *Ma‘ārij al-Tafakkur wa-Daqā’iq al-Tadabbur*, 9:382.

3 al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, 798.

4 Ibn al-Hājib, *Al-Kāfiyah fī al-Nahw*, commentary of Raḍī al-Dīn al-Astarābādī, 3:447.

5 Dr. Muḥammad Khālīd ‘Aḍīmah, *Al-Mughnī fī Taṣrīf al-Af‘āl*, 151.

6 Ibn ‘Āshūr, *Tahrīr al-Ma‘nā al-Sadīd wa-Tanwīr al-‘Aql al-Jadīd*, known as *Al-Tahrīr wa-al-Tanwīr*, 2:105–106.

7 *Al-Īdāh fī ‘Ulūm al-Balāghah*, 198–199.

establishment of both the quality of strength and the quality of trustworthiness in him as stable attributes; these are qualities of material and moral eminence, as if no one else deserves that description.

The indefinite form of quwwah appears in the verse:

"And prepare against them whatever you are able of power (quwwah) and of tethered horses, by which you may strike terror into the enemy of God and your enemy and others besides them whom you do not know, but whom God knows. And whatever you spend in the cause of God will be fully repaid to you, and you will not be wronged." (Al-Anfāl 8:60)

The indefinite form is used and not the definite "al-quwwah," because the intent is to inform Muslims that they must prepare all types of power for their enemy without restriction or limitation. God knows best.

Indefiniteness thus occurs for benefits and is employed for purposes that definiteness cannot fulfill, whether from a linguistic, rhetorical, or semantic standpoint; and all of these draw upon context and upon its correspondence to the demands of the situation. The function performed by the indefinite noun cannot be performed by the definite noun; the indefinite possesses characteristics that spring from the concept of indefiniteness itself.

This passage commands the Muslim community to be prepared; it was a command for all times and all places, encompassing all that is required of preparation and readiness "for the enemies of God who break covenants, as the context requires, or for the disbelievers, as what follows it requires. Preparation (al-i'dād) is the setting aside of something for the time of need."¹

The indefinite form is an expression that is free and liberated from particularization; no limited or determinate matter is understood from it, and it is not intended to denote a specific referent.²

The word quwwah here refers to whatever is a means of acquiring power. The scholars mentioned various explanations; among them, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) interpreted it as archery. When God Most High said "And prepare against them whatever you are able of power (quwwah)," the meaning became: prepare for them whatever you are able to prepare of projectile weapons, encompassing the arrow, the rocket, the cannon, and the atomic bomb. The Prophet's statement (peace and blessings be upon him) that "power is archery"³ does not deny the consideration of other things, just as his statement "the pilgrimage is 'Arafah"⁴ and his statement "repentance is remorse"⁵ do not deny the consideration of what is besides them; rather, they indicate that what is mentioned is the most virtuous and noble element of what is intended.⁶

Therefore, the verse bears the sense that it encompasses everything a person might devise of projectile instruments. Power also includes whatever weapons and other implements it entails; it is a general description of everything by which one is strengthened against the enemy in

1 al-Qannūjī, *Fath al-Bayān fī Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān*, 5:201.

2 *Fī Jamāliyyat al-Kalimah*, 69.

3 *Sunan al-Bayhaqī al-Kubrā*, 10:13.

4 al-Suyūṭī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaghīr fī Aḥādīth al-Bashīr al-Nadhīr*, hadith no. 3167.

5 *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, 1:376.

6 *Al-Taḥfīr al-Kabīr*, 15:185.

warfare, and all that constitutes an instrument of assault and jihād falls within the category of power. All of this is commanded because it belongs to communal obligations (*farā'id al-kifāyāt*).¹ This is the material dimension of power. There is also a moral dimension: the psychological and spiritual preparation of combatants that drives them to fight in battle, which is an essential condition for achieving victory, consolidating power, and defeating the enemy.

The address in the verse is to all believers, and the pronoun in "against them" refers either to those with whom the covenant is broken, or to those who have no recourse in this world as interpreted by those who read it so; it may also refer to all disbelievers who are commanded to be fought at that time, and the command thereafter extended to the community in general with the command to fight all disbelievers.²

The verse therefore enjoins Muslims toward jihād, since therein lies their honor and dignity, and toward preparation against the enemies of God and readiness for them with power, arms, and numbers. This is understood through the Qur'anic text as a command for Muslims regarding preparation for the enemy with power and with *ribāt al-khayl* (tethered horses), which encompasses everything ridden in battle, meaning the expression encompasses all military equipment. "Al-ribāt is the name for horses tethered in the way of God, and it is permissible that they be called *ribāt* from the root of *murābaṭah*, and it may be a plural of *rabīṭ* as *faṣīl* and *fiṣāl*."³

It has also been said that "al-ribāt is the plural of *rabāṭ*, like *kalb* and *kilāb*; and they are not tied up in great numbers unless they are many, which contains a pointer to the encouragement of Muslim assembly. It may also be that *ribāt* is a verbal noun from *rabāṭa*, like *ṣāḥa ṣiyāḥan* and the like, because the verbal nouns of the basic trilateral are not formed by analogy."⁴

Abū Ḥayyān commented that this is "not correct; rather they have analogically formed verbal nouns."⁵ If one wished to make it a verbal noun from *rābaṭa*, it would mean that the tethering of horses and their maintenance is something each person does for the sake of another, so that the believers stand guard each for the other; when each one of them ties a horse for the sake of his companion, a bond of mutual commitment (*ribāt*) has been achieved between them, which is precisely what the verse encourages.⁶

It has also been said: al-ribāt is that by which a leather container and other things are tied, with the plural form *rubāṭ*, similar to *kitāb* and *kutub*; and one says to the afflicted: "God has bound his heart with patience," just as one says: "God has poured patience upon him," meaning: He has inspired him. The *ribāt* built for the poor is a post-classical term, and its analogical plural is *rubāṭ* and *ribāṭāt*. Al-*murābaṭah* is the Muslims' permanent station at the frontier posts to guard them.⁷ It also contains an allusion to gratitude for the grant of victory at Badr, since they had with them therein only two horses; and the specific mention of horses after their inclusion in what preceded it is a pointer to the enormity of their usefulness. *Ribāt*

1 *Faṭḥ al-Bayān fī Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān*, 5:202.

2 *Al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz*, 6:356.

3 *Al-Kashshāf*, 2:232.

4 *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, 6:359.

5 *Al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz*, 4:512.

6 *Al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz*, 6:359.

7 *Faṭḥ al-Bayān fī Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān*, 5:202.

also means maintaining one's station at the enemy's frontier, and tethering horses therein is a preparation against the enemy.¹

The pronoun "bihi" (by it) means "by that which I have commanded you of what is able to be prepared, or of the tethered horses."²

Ibn 'Aṭīyyah (d. 546/1151) pointed to the meaning of tarhābūna (you strike terror), saying: "You alarm and frighten, and al-rahbah is fear."³ It has also been said it means: "You cause an overwhelming, awe-inspiring fear that leads to flight, according to prevailing custom."⁴

It is worth noting that God Most High follows this with two attributes, which, while closely related, diverge in meaning: "the enemy of God and your enemy." By their mention, the reproach is reinforced and the dimensions of their enmity to us are clarified. By these two attributes is meant whoever is near and proximate among the disbelievers, whose enmity is still actively operative; or they may be intended to encompass all disbelievers, or they may refer to the hypocrites, among other interpretations.^{5 6}

This verse thus enjoins Muslims to prepare and to stand ready against God's enemies, in every time and place, with the aim of striking fear into them, deterring them, and subduing them. When preparation and readiness are absent, power and governance over the earth belong to the enemies of God; Muslims then find themselves in a state of weakness, humiliation, and subjugation in all regions of the globe, which is precisely the condition of today: they live in a state of weakness, degradation, and defeat before the enemies of God, and this is due to nothing but their abandonment of God's command, namely jihād in His path, which the verse has urged.

Section Six: Definiteness and Indefiniteness of the Word Nār (Fire/Hellfire)

The definite form al-nār appears in the verse:

"O you who have believed, protect yourselves and your families from a fire (nāran) whose fuel is people and stones, over which are appointed angels, harsh and severe; they do not disobey God in what He commands them but do what they are commanded." (Al-Taḥrīm 66:6)

The indefinite form nāran appears in this verse addressing the believers. The definite form then appears in the verse addressing the disbelievers:

"But if you do not, and you will never be able to, then fear the Fire (al-nār) whose fuel is people and stones, prepared for the disbelievers." (Al-Baqarah 2:24)

The address in the verse of Sūrat al-Baqarah is directed at the hypocrites, who inhabit the lowest depths of the fire that surrounds them; the fire is therefore rendered definite with the article of exhaustive inclusion or of mental familiarity. In the verse of Sūrat al-Taḥrīm, the

1 *Naẓm al-Durar fī Tanāsib al-Āyāt wa-al-Suwar*, 8:314.

2 *Ibid.*, 8:314.

3 *Al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz*, 6:303.

4 *Naẓm al-Durar*, 8:314.

5 The term "ṣāqaba" means: drew near to someone, proximate and adjacent. One says: "a neighboring companion" (jārun muṣāqib).

6 *Al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz*, 6:631.

address is directed at the believers; those among them who are punished by fire will be in a portion of its upper reaches, and it was therefore fitting to render it indefinite to minimize it.¹

Abū Ḥayyān links the context of the two expressions to the chronological order of the revelation of the two sūrahs: nār appeared in the indefinite form in the context of the Meccan Sūrat al-Taḥrīm, and in the definite form in the verse of the Medinan Sūrat al-Baqarah. Sūrat al-Taḥrīm was revealed in Mecca before Al-Baqarah; hence nār appeared indefinite at the beginning of revelation, and was then rendered definite in what was revealed in Medina. He states: "The fire is rendered definite here because it was previously mentioned in indefinite form in Sūrat al-Taḥrīm; that sūrah was revealed in Mecca and this one in Medina. When an indefinite noun has preceded in the discourse, it is mentioned the second time with the article and becomes definite, because it has been mentioned before; and it was qualified by the relative clause, whose content is known to the listener from the prior mention of 'a fire whose fuel is people and stones,' or from having heard it from the People of the Book before the verse was revealed."²

Al-Baqqā'ī held that "the definiteness of the fire and the relative clause of its qualification is because the Qur'an's reports, once it has been established that they are from God, are among the known and certain; they thus fall under the category of treating the ignorant as though they were already knowing, as an alert that what he is ignorant of has been known to no one."³

The definite form al-nār thus refers to something already familiar in the mind, previously mentioned as the indefinite nār in Sūrat al-Taḥrīm. In this alternation there may also be an element of threat and warning to the disbelievers: God Most High intended to strike the ears with the word nār, at times definite and at times indefinite, since there are souls that are admonished by the repetition of warning, which is one of the Qur'an's characteristic rhetorical methods.

Section Seven: Definiteness and Indefiniteness of the Word Layl (Night)

God Most High says:

"O you who wraps himself [in clothing]: Arise [to pray] the night (al-layl), except for a little."
(Al-Muzzammil 73:1–2)

The word al-layl appears in the definite form in this verse, unlike the two following verses in which it will appear in the indefinite form. The reason is that the verse intends to clarify that night is precisely the time for rising in prayer and for the recitation of the Qur'an; moreover, that recitation is distinguished by the time of night because of the stillness of the night and the serenity it brings to the soul. God Most High, knowing that hearing is the window of the soul and the catalyst for emotional and spiritual engagement with the vital religious demands that pertain to this world and the next, did not use the indefinite form, since the matter is known,

¹ *Faṭḥ al-Raḥmān bi-Kaṣḥf mā Yalṭabisu fī al-Qur'ān*, 21.

² *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, 1:249.

³ *Naẓm al-Durar*, 1:185.

and the night prayer (qiyām al-layl) is an obligation upon the Prophet Muḥammad (peace and blessings be upon him) and a recommended practice for his community.

The definite article in al-layl is for exhaustive inclusion (istighrāq), analogous to "every," since the exception following it is evidence that the excepted element is drawn from a universal and comprehensive totality encompassing all its members or parts.

In this definiteness there is a sense that this divine mission is one of seriousness, diligence, and devotion to action in propagation and in private worship.¹ Night was made a time of rest for the human being, but one who is earnest in worship strives without cease, bearing heavy burdens, and takes rest only in the measure of necessity.

The Indefinite Layl in the Verse of al-Isrā'

As for the word laylān in:

"Exalted is He who took His Servant by night (laylān) from al-Masjid al-Ḥarām to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Seeing." (Al-Isrā' 17:1)

it is indefinite to indicate the brevity of the night's duration. Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) stated: "By the word 'by night' (laylān) in the indefinite form, the intent is to minimize the duration of the nocturnal journey, indicating that He took him on the night journey in a portion of the night from Mecca to Syria, a journey of forty nights. The indefinite form in it has signified the meaning of partiality (ba'diyyah), and this is supported by the reading of 'Abd Allāh and Ḥudhayfahmin al-layl (from the night), meaning a part of the night, as in the verse: 'And from [part of] the night, pray with it as additional [worship]' (Al-Isrā' 17:79), which commands rising for prayer in part of the night."²

One notes that the author of al-Kashshāf adduced the reading of 'Abd Allāh and Ḥudhayfahmin al-layl (from the night) as evidence for the partitive function of the indefinite laylān.

Al-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1834) contrasted this with "what happens if you say 'I traveled the night' (sartu al-layl), for that implies the completion of travel throughout the whole of it."³

Al-Zajjāj (d. 311/923) stated that the meaning of "He took His Servant by night (laylān)" is: He caused His servant, meaning Muḥammad (peace and blessings be upon him), to travel by night; and on this interpretation, the bi- prefix implies causation, so that specifying night acquires a meaningful function.⁴

Al-Rāzī stated: "I say: by the word 'by night' (laylān) in the indefinite form, the intent is to minimize the duration of the nocturnal journey, indicating that He took him in a portion of the night from Mecca to Syria, a journey of forty nights; and the indefinite form has signified the meaning of partiality."⁵

1 *Ma'ārij al-Tafakkur*, 1:158.

2 al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf 'an Haqā'iq al-Tanzīl wa-'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta'wīl*, 2:621–622.

3 al-Shawkānī, *Fath al-Qadīr al-Jāmi' bayna Fannay al-Riwāyah wa-al-Dirāyah min 'Ilm al-Tafsīr*, 3:286.

4 al-Zajjāj, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān al-Kabīr*, 3:184.

5 *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, 20:117.

Abū al-Su'ūd stated: "For the purpose of indicating the brevity of the journey's duration, because the indefinite form, by virtue of its nature, indicates partiality with respect to the parts, just as it indicates partiality with respect to the individual members, since when you say 'I traveled by night' (*sirtu laylān*), it indicates the partiality of the time of your travel from the nights just as it indicates its partiality from a single night; unlike if you said 'I traveled the night' (*sirtu al-layl*), which implies that travel consumed all of it, making it a measure for travel rather than a temporal container for it. This reading is supported by the variant reading 'from the night,' meaning a part of it."¹

The indefinite form of *laylān* also carries a sense of aggrandizement, by virtue of the care taken to mention it despite the fact that it is already known from the verb "He took on a night journey" (*asrā*), and by virtue of its not being rendered definite; that is, it is a night of great magnitude by reason of its having been made the time for that magnificent nocturnal journey. The indefinite form here serves the same function as what would otherwise indicate aggrandizement, just as one sees how an explicit expression of aggrandizement was needed in "Indeed, We sent it down during the Night of Decree (*laylat al-qadr*), and what can make you know what is the Night of Decree?" (*Al-Qadr* 97:1–2), where "the Night of Decree" is not rendered indefinite.

The Indefinite *Layālin* in the Verse of al-Fajr

God Most High says: "By the dawn, and [by] ten nights (*layālin 'ashr*)" (*Al-Fajr* 89:1–2). One notes that "ten nights" (*walayālin 'ashr*) appears in the indefinite form among what God has sworn by, to indicate that these are nights distinguished by virtues not found in others. This is because the crescent moon's light may appear until it overcomes the darkness at the beginning of the month, or it may be slender and its light fades into the twilight so that it hardly counts as anything. The ten nights therefore begin sometimes from the first night and sometimes from the second night; for this reason they are rendered indefinite as "ten nights from each month," unlike the definite form used for the word *al-fajr* (the dawn), which has a well-known time.²

Al-Zamakhsharī stated: "By 'ten nights' he intends the ten days of Dhū al-Hijjah. If you ask: why are they indefinite among what God has sworn by? I say: because they are nights distinguished from within the genus of ten nights, being a portion thereof, or distinguished by a virtue not shared by others. If you ask: why were they not rendered definite by the article of familiar acquaintance, since they are known nights? I say: had that been done, the expression would not independently carry the meaning of distinction that the indefinite form yields, and because it is better that the articles be of the same type, so that the speech be furthest from obscurity and riddling."³ The indefinite form of *layālin* (nights) thus indicates great and eminent distinction.

FINDINGS

Based on the contextual analysis of selected representative occurrences of seven recurring

¹ *Irshād al-'Aql al-Salīm*, 4:109.

² *Al-Taḥfīr al-Kabīr*, 31:148; and *Al-Taḥrīr wa-al-Tanwīr*, 14:10.

³ *Al-Kashshāf*, 4:734.

Qur'anic expressions in their definite and indefinite forms, the following principal findings emerge:

:

- i. **Contextual determination of form:** In every case examined, the choice between definiteness and indefiniteness is not arbitrary but is governed with precision by the semantic, rhetorical, and contextual requirements of the passage. The same lexical item, in its definite form, serves one functional purpose; in its indefinite form, it serves an entirely distinct, often richer or more generalized purpose.
- ii. **Definiteness as specification and familiarity:** The definite form (al-) serves to denote a well-known, previously established, or contextually recognized entity. In the case of al-ḥaqq (the right) in Sūrat al-Baqarah, it refers to the recognized, legally sanctioned justification for taking life. In the case of al-nār (the Fire) in Al-Baqarah 2:24, the definite article reflects prior mention of the same entity in the indefinite form. In al-qaryah (the town) in Sūrat Yūsuf, it refers to a particular known city. In al-layl (the night) in Sūrat al-Muzzammil, it encompasses all of the night.
- iii. **Indefiniteness as generalization, intensification, and enrichment:** The indefinite form consistently serves to broaden, deepen, or multiply the semantic scope of the expression. The indefinite ḥaqq in Āl 'Imrān 3:112 indicates the absolute and universal absence of any justification whatsoever; the indefinite ḥayāh in Al-Baqarah 2:96 denotes an indeterminate, surplus existence that the Jews greedily desire beyond their normal lifespan; the indefinite baladan in Al-Baqarah 2:126 signals that the place was not yet a city; the indefinite quwwah in Al-Anfāl 8:60 encompasses all possible forms of military power without restriction; the indefinite nāran in Al-Taḥrīm 66:6 diminishes the extent of the fire for believers; and the indefinite laylān in Al-Isrā' 17:1 indicates the brevity of the nocturnal journey.
- iv. **Classical scholarly consensus on contextual appropriateness:** Across all seven cases, the major Qur'anic exegetes (al-Rāzī, al-Zamakhsharī, Abū Ḥayyān, al-Baqqā'ī, al-Ālūsī, Abū al-Su'ūd, Ibn Kathīr), the rhetoricians (al-Jurjānī, Ibn al-Zamlakānī, al-Qazwīnī), and the modern stylistic scholars (Tamām Ḥassān, Fāḍil al-Sāmarrā'ī) converge in affirming that the Qur'anic alternation between definiteness and indefiniteness is motivated and purposeful. While their explanations differ in detail, they agree on the fundamental principle that the Qur'anic text deploys each form in its most contextually appropriate location.
- v. **Indefiniteness as a rhetorical elevation:** Contrary to the intuitive assumption that the definite form, by virtue of its precision, is always preferable, the analysis demonstrates that indefiniteness often achieves rhetorical effects that definiteness cannot, particularly in contexts of hyperbolic praise or censure, universal negation, intimidation, and spiritual enlargement of meaning.

- vi. **The phenomenon as a Qur'anic stylistic hallmark:** The deliberate and systematic exploitation of the semantic divergence between definiteness and indefiniteness constitutes one of the distinctive stylistic features of Qur'anic discourse, contributing to what the classical scholars recognized as its inimitability (i'jāz).

5. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the phenomenon of definiteness and indefiniteness in recurring Qur'anic vocabulary is a semantically rich and rhetorically purposeful dimension of Qur'anic discourse. Through the analysis of seven representative lexical items (al-ḥaqq, ḥayāt, balad, qarya, quwwa, nār, and layl) across their varying contextual occurrences, it has been established that the Qur'an employs the definite and indefinite forms with a precision that is always calibrated to the immediate thematic, rhetorical, and communicative demands of the context.

The definite form functions primarily to specify, particularize, and direct the reader's attention to a known, recognized entity; it anchors meaning in familiar shared knowledge and restricts signification to a determinate referent. The indefinite form, by contrast, functions primarily to universalize, expand, intensify, or productively vague the meaning of an expression, yielding semantic dimensions, rhetorical effects, and connotative richness that the definite form cannot achieve.

The findings of this study are consistent with the observations of the classical tradition of Arabic rhetoric and Qur'anic exegesis, in which scholars from Ibn al-Zamlakānī and al-Jurjānī to al-Rāzī, al-Zamakhsharī, Abū Ḥayyān, and al-Ālūsī recognized the semantic purposiveness of these grammatical choices. The study brings these scattered insights together into a unified analytical framework, demonstrating their cumulative force as evidence for a systematic Qur'anic stylistic principle.

It may be concluded that definiteness and indefiniteness in the Qur'an are not mere grammatical formalities but are instruments of precision and beauty in the service of the divine message. Each choice between al-ḥaqq and ḥaqq, al-ḥayāt and ḥayāh, al-balad and balad, al-qaryah and qaryah, al-qawī and quwwah, al-nār and nāran, and al-layl and laylān reflects a deliberate rhetorical strategy that enriches the meaning, intensifies the effect, and deepens the theological and moral import of the Qur'anic discourse. This phenomenon stands as compelling evidence of the Qur'an's unrivaled linguistic artistry and its inexhaustible semantic depth, which no other text in the Arabic literary tradition has matched.

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TRANSLITERATION

a. Consonant

Arabic	Latin	Example	
		Arabic	Latin
ء	‘	فَأْرُ	faʿrun
أ	(a,i,u)	أَحْكَام	aḥkāṁ
ب	b	بَابُ	bābun
ت	t	تَمْرٌ	tamr
ث	th	ثَلَاثُ	thalātha
ج	j	جَبَلٌ	Jabal
ح	ḥ	حَدِيثٌ	ḥadīth
خ	kh	خَالِدٌ	khālīd
د	d	دِينٌ	dīn
ذ	dh	مَذْهَبٌ	madhhab
ر	r	رَاهِبٌ	rāhib
ز	z	زَكِيٌّ	zakī
س	s	سَلَامٌ	salām
ش	sh	شَرَبٌ	sharaba
ص	ṣ	صَدْرٌ	ṣodrun
ض	ḍ	ضَارٌ	ḍār
ط	ṭ	طَهْرٌ	ṭahura
ظ	ẓ	ظَهْرٌ	ẓhohr
ع	‘	عَبْدٌ	‘abdun
غ	gh	غَيْبٌ	ghayb
ف	f	فَاتِحَةٌ	Fātihah
ق	q	قَبَسٌ	qabas
ك	k	كِتَابٌ	kitāb

ل	l	لَيْلٍ	layl
م	m	مُنِيرٍ	munīr
ن	n	نِقَابٍ	niqāb
و	w	وَعْدٍ	wa ^c ada
هـ	h	هَدَفٍ	hadaf
ي	y	يُوسُفَ	Yūsuf

b. Short Vowel

Arabic	Latin	Example	
		Arabic	Latin
اَ	a	كَتَبَ	kataba
اِ	i	عَلِمَ	°alima
اُ	u	غَلِبَ	ghuliba

c. Long Vowel

Arabic	Latin	Example	
		Arabic	Latin
اَ ، اِ ، اِى	ā	عَالَمَ ، فَتَى	°ālam , fatā
اِى	ī	عَلِيمَ ، دَاعِي	°alīm , dā°ī
اِى	ū	عُلُومَ ، اُدْعُو	°ulūm , 'ud°ū

d. Diphthong

Arabic	Latin	Example	
		Arabic	Latin
أَوْ	aw	أَوْلَادَ	aulād
أَيَّ	ay	أَيَّامَ	ayyam
إِيَّ	iy	إِيَّكَ	iyyāka