

FUTURES IN THE QUR'AN

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What does the Qur'an have to say about studying and exploring alternative futures? In certain circles, the question itself is regarded as somewhat out of the ordinary if not downright blasphemous. The future is the domain of the Unseen; it belongs to God. Any attempt to predict the future is to play God. In other circles, the future is all about 'prophesy' – witness the sheer number of tomes dedicated to this phenomenon with titles like *The Prophecies of the Holy Qur'an*, *Israel and the Prophecies of the Holy Qur'an*, and *The Prophecy and Warnings Shines Through the Mystifying Codes of the Holy Qur'an*. Most of this is mindboggling, irrational material that serves as psychotherapy for a decaying culture. Its basic function is to drain the believers of all agency and turn religion – or more specifically theology – into a toxic brew.

A true appreciation of how the Qur'an talks about the future, and how it encourages a systematic study of futures, has been conspicuously lacking for a very simple, but powerful, reason: commentaries and interpretations of the Qur'an have followed a centuries old set pattern. Key Qur'anic terms relating to the future have been given certain meanings at the expense of other potential meanings, and both classical and the modern commentators have firmly stuck to those meanings. For example, the unseen (*ghayb*), can refer to the Hereafter; it is God – 'the One who knows the seen and the unseen'. But *ghayb* also means 'the unknown', that which is currently absent and not visible but which can indeed be present and be visible in the distant time horizon. When we approach and read the Qur'an from a futures perspective we discover that it is the book of futures par excellence. By its content and context, it is thoroughly oriented towards the futures.

Muslims believe that the Qur'an was revealed to take them out of a corrupt present, the time of Prophet Muhammad, and guide them towards

brighter and more just futures. The Qur'an describes itself as 'Divine Guidance' (*hudā*) or 'spiritual light' (*nur*) to those 'who are conscious' - *muttaqīn* – about their futures as well as the futures of the worlds (2:3, 16:54, 45:11, 20:123). The plural form for these terms in the Qur'an is highly significant (68:52, 12:104, 21:107). Even in conventional theology, the future in the Qur'an is not singular but plural. The Qur'an provides guidance to 'people of faith' and prepares them for the *akhirah* – the final future or the Hereafter, next world and other world as Muslims repeatedly translate and understand this term. This is actually quintessential of Islamic worldviews in which a human being has the gift of life on this world in order to make a difference through ethical excellence and selfless commitment to the betterment of all humanity, eventually leading, by the grace of God, to a 'blissful hereafter'. But the Hereafter can also be 'hellish' (42:7) if a path of moral corruption and evil deeds is followed. So even when the basic tenets of faith are concerned, future is not singular.

I would argue that the fundamental orientation of the Qur'an is undeniably futuristic. There are numerous verses that directly highlight the significance of futures. There are verses that encourage visioning, there are verses that present various scenarios as tools of reflection, and there are even verses that can be seen as 'backcasting' – a planning method that starts from a given future and works backwards to identify policies and actions – with a little use of the imagination.

Consider, for example, the following verse: 'O you who believe! Be aware of God, and let every soul reflect what it has forwarded for tomorrow, and be aware of God. God knows all the details of your deeds' (59:18). There are several important features in this verse. First, it comes in the form of command. God is asking, indeed demanding, from the believers to reflect on the future. Future in this verse is described as tomorrow (*al-ġadd*); one of many different terms used for futures, confirming the Qur'anic tendency to speak about future in plural. Second, the very verb used in the verse is also telling. God orders the believers to reflect (*naẓara*) on the future; the choice of the verb focuses the believers' mind towards a precise action: reflection. *Naẓara* does not refer only to regular thinking but more detailed and sophisticated elaboration, or, if you like, theories about futures. Indeed, the word for theory in Arabic is exactly *nazar*; *ilm al-nazar* – knowledge of theory – is used in Arabic to

define the science of sophisticated reflection, and is frequently used in Islamic philosophy. As such, God is demanding from the people of faith to deeply reflect on and ponder what futures may bring, what consequences and opportunities they may usher, and what actions we may need to avoid or tackle the consequences and what we ought to make of the opportunities. One may ask: why is this degree of intellectual gravity and systematic rigour needed when it comes to the future? One answer can be given from the general perspective and context of the Qur'anic approach: the ultimate future (*akhirah*) is the apex of all our futures so what happens in the immediate, near and far futures also has an impact on our ultimate future. How our actions impact futures we consciously or unwittingly shape, what we leave behind for futures generations, has ultimate bearing on how we shape our *akhirah*. So God is asking the believers to seriously think about the future consequences of their actions in the present. People of faith are invited to reflect upon all the futures that at the end of the road merges into the final one – *akhirah*. Third, what the verse says about *taqwa*, normally translated as God consciousness, is equally exciting and revealing. This verse is among many in the Qur'an in which believers are asked to be cognisant and constantly aware of God (*tawqā*). *Taqwa* is truly the highest state that people of faith should strive for and it is clearly designated as sublime nobility in the eyes of God (49:13). In 59:18, *taqwa* is firmly bound to the notion of the future. People of faith, the verse is implying, should strive to constantly remember God, keep Him on their minds and act and behave accordingly. They can achieve *taqwa* by deep reflection (*naẓar*) about futures and what they do and contribute to the future. So reaching the sublime status of *taqwa* lies through the study and exploration of the future: in order to be 'aware of God', you have to act to ensure that your current actions do not harm the future and *reflect what you have forwarded for tomorrow*. It is important to note that the dictum on reflection on futures is situated between two demands to be aware of God: the second 'be aware of God' intensifies the message of the verse which can be summed up, after examining all its context, as the following divine advice: in order to reach the pinnacle of spiritual nobility you are obliged to have your own theory/philosophy of the future.

This perception of the future as intellectual and spiritual obligation of the believer is reinforced in a number of verses, such as:

'the future *belongs to those who are aware/conscious*' (7:128).

'These are some stories from the past that we reveal to you. Neither you, nor your people knew them before this. So be patient. The future *belongs to the mindful/awake*' (11:49).

'Did he look into the future, or did he receive a promise from the Most Merciful?' (19:78).

The verses, relating to the future, have their respective contexts and meanings; and they use different descriptions in Arabic (*ʿāqiba*, *ḡayb*, etc.). But their general gist is the same: you have to be awake to future possibilities!

The basic semantic unit of the Qur'an is sign (*āya*), usually translated as verse. The Qur'an is a cluster of divine signs in the form of sentences or verses as this Arabic term is most commonly understood. Nevertheless, divine signs are not confined only to one form or one place. Rather, we are surrounded by them. God's signs are everywhere, emanating from Him. As the Qur'an says:

'We will show them our signs on the horizons, and in their very souls, until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth. Is it not sufficient that your Lord is witness over everything?' (41:53).

The main message of this verse is that futures are imbued with signs and signals. One of the most important tasks for people of faith is to expect, detect and try to recognise these future signs. This was a common feature of prophets, who envisioned a better and just future, as the chosen ones among the believers. Actually, visioning the future is presented as an important characteristic of notable individuals or main actors in the Qur'an. One can find a number of examples but I will focus on the story of Khidr and Prophet Musa, told in 18: 62-82.

In Islamic tradition Khidr is seen as a prophet, a messenger, even an angel. But the Qur'an describes him as a 'Servant of God':

‘a man to whom We had granted Our mercy and whom We had given knowledge of our own’ (18: 65).

Moses meets Khidr ‘where two seas meet’ and asks to accompany him in his journeys to gain from his knowledge and experience. The Servant of God replies:

‘You will not be able to bear with me patiently’ (18: 67).

Moses insists.

‘How could you be patient in matters beyond your knowledge?’ (18:68), Khidr asks.

But Moses is persistent; and promises to be patient. The two travel and come across a boat. The Servant of God makes a hole in the boat.

Moses is shocked: ‘how could you make a hole in it? Do you want to drown its passengers?’.

The Man reminds Moses: ‘did I not say that you will not be able to bear with me patiently?’

They travel further and meet a boy. The Servant of God kills him. Moses is stunned and cries out in dismay:

‘what a terrible thing to do?’ (18:74).

He is reminded once again of his promise. Then they proceed to a town where they ask for food but are denied hospitality. They come across a crumbling wall. Khidr repairs the wall. Moses says:

‘if you had wished you could have taken payment for doing that’ (18: 77).

The Servant of God now declares:

'this is where you and I part company' (18: 78). He explains the meaning of things to Moses:

the boat belonged to some needy people and I damaged it because I knew that coming after them was a king who was seizing every (serviceable) boat by force. The young boy had parents who were people of faith, and so, fearing he would trouble them through wickedness and disbelief, we wished their Lord would give them another child – pure and more compassionate – in his place. The wall belonged to two young orphans in the town and there was buried treasure beneath it belonging to them. Their father had been a righteous man, so your Lord intended them to reach maturity and then dig up their treasure as a mercy from your Lord. (18: 79-82)

The Khidr narrative is clearly meant to be read as an allegory. But it is important to note that the knowledge (*ilm*) that he possessed was based on reasoning (*rušd*) (18:66). On their journey, Moses could not understand Khidr's reasoning and found his actions troubling. He was looking at these events solely from the perspective of the present; as such, his assessment turned out to be shallow and wrong. In contrast, Khidr was reading the signs or 'sounding the future'; his actions were based on deep and sophisticated future visioning which ultimately resulted in promoting justice. Classical commentators predominantly focussed on the origins of Khidr, whether he was a prophet or an angel, and issues related to Musa's self-assumption of his knowledge. Those issues have metaphysical importance but the striking point of this story lies in refined crystallisation of present/future orientation of two notable actors in Qur'anic narrative. Khidr is doubtlessly depicted as a man deeply engaged in the process of decoding future signs. His reasoning is future oriented; he is meticulously reading possible tomorrows and his actions are based on his understanding how the future will unfold. He is positioned in the Qur'an as *Magister Magnus* to those who represent the spiritual elite in Qur'anic narrative. The essence of the story is obvious: the future matters more than just spiritual concerns.

This point is well illustrated in the 2017 Turkish science fiction film, *Bugday* (Gain), directed by Semih Kaplanoglu. The film is set in a post-apocalyptic world where genetically modified food has destroyed all crops, much of the earth's surface is contaminated, and the vast majority of

people are kept outside the deadly electromagnetic zapping towers that protect a select few from unwanted intruders. Inside the enclave, Professor Erol Erin and his teams work effortlessly to try and save humanity from the catastrophic crop failures. Erin discovers that a potential solution may lie in the contentious theory of ‘genetic chaos’ proposed by the rogue scientist Cemil Akman, who has disappeared. Erin sets out to find Akman, travelling to the barren regions outside the city borders. When Erin eventually finds Akman, he turns out to be a Khidr-like figure. The two go on a journey where Erin becomes the unquestioning student of Akman. Here, the film takes on a metaphysical turn, perhaps in a nod to classical mystical interpretations, with much discussion of guilt and ego, visions and dreams. However, it is noteworthy that the film depicts the enigmatic Khidr/Akman as a scientist who had foreseen the consequences of his research in genetic engineering through rational means. As the Qur’an tells us later on in the same chapter, even though you may think you are doing good work, your efforts may be misguided (18:103).

Given that the notion of futures subtly pervades the text of the Qur’an, it is not surprising that it contains various ideas which could be seen as equivalent to contemporary concepts in futures studies. Consider, for example, the notion of scenarios. The Qur’anic versions are designed as sophisticated guidelines for the people of faith to prepare themselves for different futures while remaining within ethical boundaries. Some of these scenarios are embedded into the stories of prophets and prominent individuals portrayed in the Qur’an. Other possible scenarios have perennial character and potential because they are not limited to particular time horizons. Scenarios in the Qur’an regularly begin with the word ‘perhaps’ or *asā*. Here are three examples:

They said, ‘We were persecuted before you came to us, and after you came to us.’

He said, ‘Perhaps your Lord will destroy your enemy, and make you successors in the land; then He will see how you behave’ (7:129).

Say, ‘Perhaps some of what you are impatient for has drawn near’ (27:72).

'Perhaps God will restrain the might of those who disbelieve' (4:84).

These verses are challenging believers to think about potential futures, which might be very unpredictable, desirable, unexpected and sometimes even unthought ones. Close reading of these verses reveals an exceptional narrative play that beg certain natural questions. In the first and the third verse, the scenario is partially fixed as if God is asking: What is the rest of the scenario if all your wishes and prayers are answered without any effort or contribution from you? Have you ever envisaged how you would rule the world? Have you thought about future outcomes and have you prepared for them? The second verse raises the question: what are you going to do if 'what you are impatient for' actually happens? Are you prepared for this eventuality? But, of course, 'what you are impatient for', could equally be an optimistic or pessimistic, good or a bad, scenario. So you are required to think clearly about what you may impatiently desire from your future.

The Qur'an also contains scenarios which we can describe in the language of postnormal times theory as 'unthought futures' that are often expressed in the mode of God's will (*sawfa*). These challenge the inertia, the feeling of self-sufficiency and sense of moral superiority of the believers. Emblematic examples can be found in chapters 5 and 56. Here is an example: 'We have decreed death among you, and We will not be outstripped. In replacing you with your likes, and transforming you into what you do not know' (56:60-61). If ripped out of its context, the messages of this verse appears to foreshadow a *Westworld* scenario. But essentially what we are being told is that the believers do not have a monopoly on God's affection; they can be written out of the future, if it is God's will. But that outcome depends on how the believers themselves act, behave and shape their future.

What I find particularly fascinating is how the Qur'an utilises backcasting to force the reader to think creatively about the future. In a number of places the Qur'an talks of catastrophic events or the fate of a community in the Hereafter. Scenes from calamities that befall a community are than unravelled in series of previous steps/phases/processes that eventually lead to the final phase. In some places the Qur'an describes the fate of a people in the Hereafter followed by whole sequence of the situations that

preceded their afterlife misfortune. The afterlife of the wicked are contrasted with the blessed who are portrayed in their everlasting joy. Images of their bliss are followed by the series of their noble actions that – along with God’s mercy – led them to this sublime state. The classical commentators transformed the message of these verses into eschatology concerned largely with descriptions of Heaven and Hell, End of Days and such like. But the point to note is that the Qur’an is talking in these verses, which are about future events and the Hereafter future, in the *past* tense. They may or may not allegorically describe particular ultimate futures, but they certainly suggest that all futures are embedded in a web of past and present actions. You are invited to reflect how you arrived in the present; and then think about the future you desire and how you will navigate your way towards it. In some cases, the Qur’an suggests, people can retrace – or backcast if you like – their actions, readjust their moral and ethical coordinates, and then move towards more just futures:

‘Corruption has appeared on land and sea, because of what people’s hands have earned, in order to make them taste some of what they have done, so that they might return’ (30:41).

‘We scattered them into communities on earth. Some of them righteous, and some of them short of that. And We tested them with fortunes and misfortunes, so that they may rewind their actions’ (7:168).

The second verse continues to talk about future generations who did not learn the lessons of previous generations and ‘took the fleeting gains of this lower world’ – or, placed their own interests above those of the coming generations. If you continue on this path, continue to ignore future consequences of your actions, allow the destructive trends to endure, you reach a point from which there is no return:

‘Deaf, dumb, blind. They will never return’ (2:180).

It is a pity, I think, that both classical and modern Muslim scholars look at the future oriented verses in the Qur’an solely in terms of eschatology. But we can read the Qur’an with contemporary eyes, bringing our own

fresh thought to our engagement with the Sacred Text. We do not, for example, have to read the opening verses of Chapter 30 – ‘The Byzantines’ – as ‘a prophesy’ or ‘miracle of the Qur’an’ as it is so often portrayed. These verses mention the heavy defeat of the Christian Emperor, Heraclius (610–641) and victory of Persians king Khosrow II (570–630) in 614. They go on to announce – predict – a big comeback of Heraclius’ army in the near future, which actually took place around 628: ‘The Byzantines have been defeated in [their] nearest land. They will reverse their defeat with a victory in a few years’ time’ (30:2-2-3). We can take this verse as a prediction that came true. There is no need to build an enormous eschatological edifice around it. What we do need to do is to examine the verse in the full light of history and see what lessons it could contain. The initial defeat of the Byzantines was viewed by the Meccan pagans, the enemies of the then fledgling Muslim community, as a victory for paganism. The Muslims were disheartened. The victory of Persians was so massive that it was out of the question that Byzantines could come back in the Middle East as a major power. That was frustrating for the first generation of Muslims in Mecca whose horizons of the futures were almost shut down. The Qur’an consoles them by pointing out that the fortune of the Byzantines would be reversed. The Byzantines came back – in the form of a ‘black swan’ as the postnormal futurists like to say. In turn, the Muslims themselves became a ‘black swan’: from being an outlier in a remote desert they defeated the Roman empire. What we learn is that outliers cannot be ignored; they have the potential to transform the future!

The opening verses are followed by a long passage that invite the reader to reflect on the signs of God – ‘the heavens and the earth and everything between them’; travel around the world and witness the diversity of people and languages, examine the rise and fall of civilisations, and marvel at the rich flora and fauna and the complex ecology of the planet. This, the Qur’an is saying, is the abode of your terrestrial journey; conserve it and you conserve your futures. Those who perished before you. ‘God did not wrong them; they wronged themselves’ (30:9)

I hope I have convinced the believers that the Qur’an has a great deal to say about the future; and, in the Qur’an, it is always in the plural – futures. My interpretation of some of the verses differs from most of the canonical medieval exegesis of the Qur’an – or, rather, fills in the gap that have been

left untouched for quite some time for many reasons. The main one being the rigid approach to the Qur'an and its classical interpretation that is sacralised and universally adopted with rare efforts to update, deconstruct or gain a fresh appreciation. But a reading of the Qur'an from a futures perspective, with full appreciation of the context, reveals a plethora of new insights. There is little doubt that the Qur'an regards thinking, studying, and exploring alternative futures systematically and seriously as an intellectual responsibility of the highest order for the Muslim community. 'Do the people of these towns', the Qur'an asks, 'feel secure that Our punishment will not come upon them by night, while they sleep [intellectually inert, unprepared for the future]? (7:97).