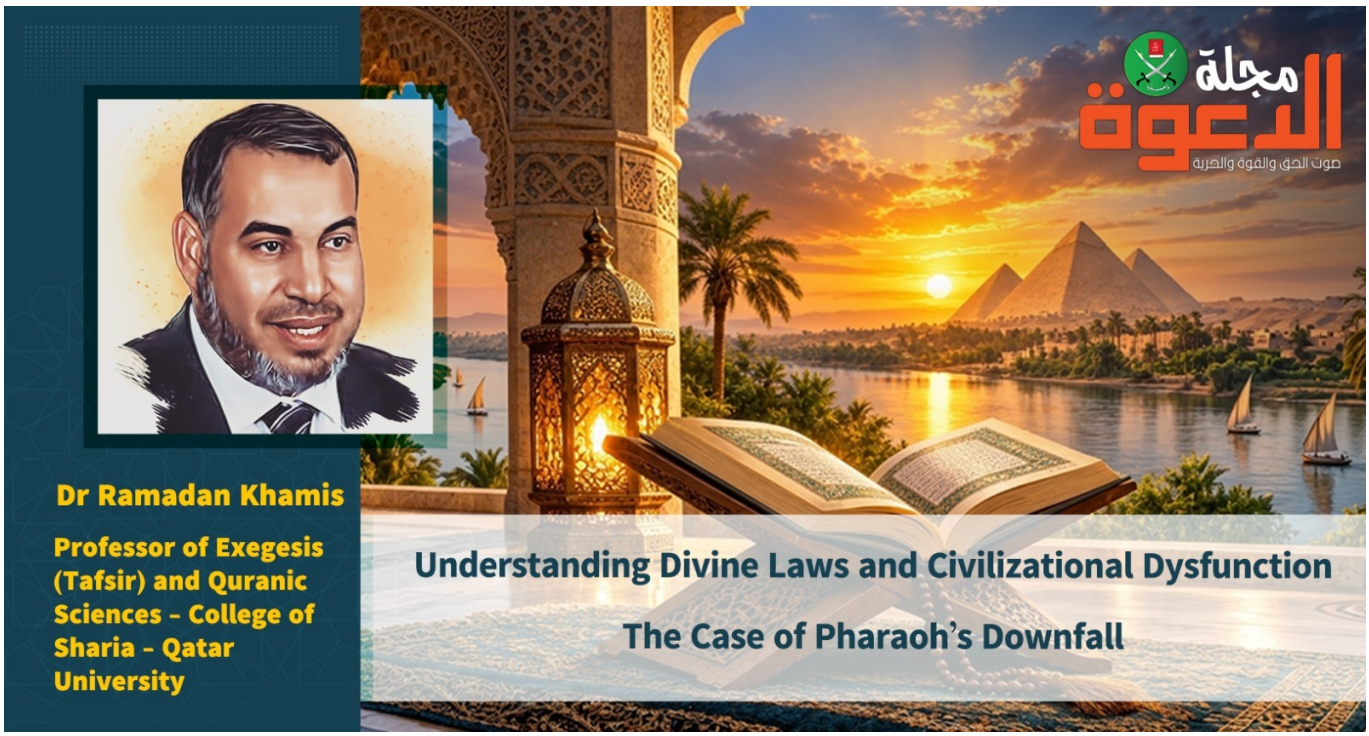
Understanding Divine Laws and Civilizational Dysfunction: The Case of Pharaoh's Downfall



One methodology the Holy Quran employs in its treatment of phenomena and living beings is that it does not present its narratives merely as sermons or descriptive accounts, nor does it confine them to a specific time or place. Instead, it portrays them as dynamic, living, timeless realities that transcend specific eras, locations, and individuals. The Quran focuses on the essential elements that constitute both a cognitive and a practical paradigm. This is one of the secrets behind the enduring relevance of the Quranic message—its applicability to every time and place—and serves as a testament to its miraculous nature and eternal significance.

When the Quran presents the story of Pharaoh, it does not present it as a purely historical anecdote. Rather, it sets out a comprehensive model of the structure of arrogance (isti'la') and corruption (ifsad). The Quran encapsulates this scenario in the words of the Almighty: "Indeed, Pharaoh arrogantly elevated himself in the land and divided its people into subservient groups, one of which he persecuted, slaughtering their sons and keeping their women. He was truly one of the corruptors" (Al¯Qasas: 4).

The verse does not merely recount an isolated incident; it delineates a complete structure: beginning with arrogance, manifesting socially and politically through division, escalating into the subjugation of a group, evolving into organised, coercive oppression, and culminating in the definitive judgement: "He was, indeed, one of the corrupters." Al¯Tabari asserts that the term ('al) (exalted/rose to power) in the Quranic verse signifies tyranny, arrogance, and domination. He explains that the phrase "he divided its people into factions" (ja'ala ahlah shiya'an) means he split them into separate, fragmented groups, while the oppression they endured reached extremes of enslavement, killing, and humiliation. Similarly, Ibn Kathir notes that Pharaoh categorised the people, assigning each group specific roles to serve the interests of his state. He subjected them to profound subjugation—even though they were among the finest people of their era—forcing them into the most menial and degrading labour. He

exhausted them day and night with tasks for his own benefit and that of his subjects, all while slaughtering their sons and sparing their daughters—an act intended to humiliate and debase them.

The question that arises here is: How did Pharaoh's system produce a downward civilisational trajectory? What mechanisms caused this dysfunction to accumulate, ultimately leading to total collapse?

This serves as a gateway to developing an analytical framework for diagnosing civilisational decline—an insight we gain through the study of the *sunan* (the divinely established laws governing the rise and fall of societies). Therefore, the discussion will focus on specific points that, taken together, most clearly demonstrate the impact of understanding the "divine laws" (sunan)—the patterns governing the rise and fall of civilisations—in diagnosing this tyrannical paradigm and its role in the trajectory of decline. I will briefly outline these elements as follows:

(1) The Dysfunction of Power and the Onset of the Downward Trajectory:

The Pharaonic paradigm wielded immense power, which the Holy Quran describes as (awt d) (pegs/pillars), as in the Almighty's words: "and the Pharaoh of mighty structures" (Al-Fajr: 10). This comprehensive Quranic expression conveys the extent of his power and material capability within a civilisation whose enduring legacy has left history in awe and continues to baffle minds with its secrets. However, the Pharaonic paradigm failed to respect this power or direct it toward good; instead, it stemmed from a fundamental distortion in the relationship between power and its intended function.

The Almighty says: " Indeed, Pharaoh arrogantly elevated himself in the land " (Al-Qasas: 4).

"Exaltation" ('uluw) here signifies more than mere possession of power; it denotes the transformation of power into arrogant supremacy. Al-Tabari interpreted this ('uluw) as tyranny, haughtiness, and the subjugation of people. This is a crucial methodological point: the possession of power is not, in itself, a civilizational pathology. The pathology emerges only when power becomes detached from its moral and constructive purpose—shifting from a means to preserve society into a tool for its subjugation. Here, we identify the first element in the civilizational decline and collapse of this model: the misuse of power—a fundamental component of any civilisation—in a manner that contradicts the purpose of reform, instead serving to subjugate and enslave human beings. When power shifts from its intended role of protection and reform to one of arrogance and hegemony, the structure of civilisational deviation—and ultimately collapse—begins to take shape. This sheds light on the Quranic expression: "He acted arrogantly in the land." At the conclusion of the noble Surah, the Quran provides the counterbalancing principle: "That eternal Home in the Hereafter We reserve only for those who seek neither tyranny nor corruption on the earth." [Al-Qasas: 83].

Such is the methodology of the Great Quran: it diagnoses the ailment and prescribes the remedy, enabling the [Muslim] nation to recognise its points of failure and strive towards the foundations of a resurgence and a renewed presence in the world. The prohibition against arrogance and corruption stands in direct opposition to the "Pharaonic" structure. Pharaonic arrogance manifested as haughtiness, tyranny, injustice, and transgression—not merely against human dignity, but even extending to the claim of divinity itself, as the Holy Quran records: "Then Moses showed him the great sign, but he denied and disobeyed Allah , then turned his back, striving against the truth . Then he summoned his people and called out, saying, "I am your lord, the most high!" [An-Nazi'at: 20–24].

The distortion of the function of power leads to arrogance, which in turn initiates the emergence of civilisational

dysfunction.

2) Fragmenting society and turning differences into a tool for control:

Pharaoh did not stop at merely possessing power; he used it to reshape society through division: "And he divided its people into factions" [Al-Qasas: 4]. Pharaoh treated diverse groups in distinct ways: he would slaughter one group, enslave another, and subject a third to torture. He divided them into "factions and categories for the purposes of servitude and exploitation." A mechanism deeper than mere division is at play here. Al-Tahir [ibn Ashur] explains the rhetorical significance of the term (shi'an) (factions/sects)—as opposed to other possible words—note: "It is a rhetorical choice, signifying that he organized the people of the land of the Copts into factions with conflicting allegiances—each faction siding with him while harboring hostility toward the others. This allowed him to set them against one another; by inciting enmity among them, he ensured they would not unite against him—a strategy encapsulated by the adage 'divide and rule.' Such a policy is fitting only for outmaneuvering an adversary or an enemy; it is entirely inappropriate for a ruler governing a unified nation."

He divided them into factions—either groups that would support him in all his schemes of evil and corruption, or groups that would encourage one another in their obedience to him. Alternatively, he categorised them by the nature of their labour, assigning each group a specific task—such as construction, agriculture, excavation, or other arduous forms of toil—while imposing a tribute (jizya) on those he did not employ. He further sowed deep-seated animosity and hatred among these groups to prevent them from ever reaching consensus.

He transformed the society—once composed of cooperative, interlocking elements—into disparate groups unequal in their rights, functions, and proximity to the centre of power. Consequently, the society became incapable of forging an independent collective strength.

It is essential here to distinguish between natural diversity—which does not hinder a civilisation but rather supports and strengthens it—and the kind of political or social fragmentation that turns difference into a tool for weakening society, as it creates divisions based on class, ethnicity, or ideology.
When social disparities shift from functional diversity to a source of disintegration, division has become a tool for weakening collective capacity and perpetuating hegemony—a method employed by tyrants and despots throughout the ages.

It thus becomes clear that sowing division and fragmenting people into factions—as seen in the Pharaonic model—is not merely a by-product of tyranny, but rather a mechanism by which tyranny is produced and sustained.

The noble verses recounting Pharaoh's story reveal that he used media influence against Moses (peace be upon him) and the Children of Israel. He spread rumours and lies among his subjects, aiming to divide them, turn them away from Moses's message, and consolidate his rule. He was aided in this by his inner circle—his (mala') (elite)—who eagerly carried out his commands, sang his praises, and lauded his governance. Pharaoh accused Moses of spreading corruption and urged his people to let him deal with Moses—by killing him. God the Almighty records Pharaoh's words: "And Pharaoh said, "Let me kill Moses, and let him call upon his Lord! I truly fear that he may change your traditions or cause mischief in the land." [Ghafir: 26]. By repeating this claim, he ensured it took root in the minds of his elite, transforming a mere rumour into an accepted "truth"—to the point where they began demanding that he put a stop to Moses, lest he spread corruption in the land!

This is reflected in their words, as cited by God the Almighty: "Are you going to leave Moses and his people free to spread corruption in the land?" [Al-A'raf 127].

Thus, Al-Kawakibi identified the root of the malaise and the source of the affliction, stating: "It has become clear to me that the root of the ailment is political despotism, and its remedy lies in countering it through constitutional consultation (shura). I have reached this firm conclusion—for 'every matter has its settled end'—after thirty years of research… a study that, I believe, encompasses virtually every conceivable cause that might, at first glance, lead a researcher to think they have discovered the root of the problem—or one of its primary origins—only for closer scrutiny to reveal that they have found nothing at all, or that what they identified is merely a branch rather than a root, an effect rather than a cause."
The monopolization of power leads to the disintegration of the social fabric, followed by a weakening of collective resistance, and ultimately, an increased vulnerability to domination.

(3) The Engineering of Subjugation and the Neutralization of Agency:

The next factor in civilizational decline—as exemplified by the Pharaonic model—is the process of (istid'af), meaning the rendering of a group weak or subjugated. Following fragmentation, a more dangerous phase emerges: "divided its people into subservient groups" (Al-Qasas: 4). The Quranic phrasing is highly significant: the use of the present tense (yastad'ifu) implies that the creation of weakness is an intentional, systematic, and ongoing process.

Evidence for this lies in the oppressor's continued exploitation of the people while systematically killing their children. Al-Razi interpreted this (istid'af) as: "He employs them [for his own ends], slaughters their sons, and spares their women."

Al-Baghawi explained that the Quran labels this (istid'af) because the people were rendered incapable of defending themselves against Pharaoh—a state brought about by the killing, enslavement, and humiliation he inflicted on them.

Here, a crucial analytical insight emerges: civilisational weakness is not always a natural or incidental state; it can be the product of a structure that continuously generates such weakness. Recognising this is a vital step towards overcoming it. This leads to a significant diagnostic principle: when a power structure or social framework becomes a mechanism that produces incapacity and the loss of initiative, weakness shifts from a transient condition to an entrenched structure of subjugation.

In this context, (istid'af) becomes more dangerous than direct coercion; it not only prevents action in the present but also actively diminishes the capacity for future action. This applies to many instances in our lives when a nation shifts from being oppressed to being spellbound—much like a dove, which, upon being gazed at by a serpent, becomes paralysed and enfeebled, losing the ability to fly even though it was otherwise capable of doing so.

This point gains particular significance when contrasted with the Mosaic model—which will be discussed in the second section—as the process of resurgence begins at the opposite pole: the restoration of agency, the capacity for liberation, and the subsequent ability to move forward.

(4) The Corruption of Consciousness and the Reproduction of Hegemony:

A key element of civilisational decline is the deliberate corruption of public consciousness, driven by a desire to exert hegemony through the manipulation of opinion and influence. This manifests in the manufacture of distorted public opinion via corrupt media. A reflection on the Pharaonic model—as examined through the lens of the Holy Quran—reveals that control is not sustained by material force alone; rather, it is reinforced by auxiliary means. The Quran describes this dynamic as follows: "And so he fooled his people, and they obeyed him. They were truly a rebellious people." (Az¯Zukhruf: 54).

This verse is highly significant for revealing the nature of the Pharaonic model, as it exposes the cognitive and psychological dimensions of hegemony. Ibn Ashur interprets the phrase "he swayed his people" (fastakhaffa qawmahu) to mean that Pharaoh influenced their minds through deception, prompting them to hasten their ¯obedience to him. He clarifies that this response was not merely a result of coercion; rather, it was rooted in a pre existing corruption within the people themselves. In other words, Pharaoh's appeal to his people—specifically his inner circle (al¯mala')—succeeded because his deceptions took hold of them, prompting them to obey him swiftly, even though they had previously been inclined to follow Moses after witnessing his signs. The term "swayed" (istakhaffa) is used metaphorically here: it describes a transition from a state of contemplation—where they might have considered renouncing their obedience to Pharaoh and grown reluctant to follow him—to a state of hurried compliance, much like an object that suddenly becomes light after having been heavy.

The underlying meaning is that Pharaoh manipulated their intellects, leading them to accept his claims quickly—even though, deep down, they had already accepted the truth of Moses' message after witnessing his obvious signs. The "people" referred to here are a specific group: those present at the gathering where Moses delivered his message—the elite (al¯mala'), who accompanied Pharaoh.

From this profound insight from Ibn Ashur, we observe that these individuals were already predisposed to such regression. This points to two significant conclusions:

First, it reveals a vulnerability in minds that lack a solid, foundational upbringing—a susceptibility to backsliding, retreating, and overreacting to the slightest external stimulus.

Second, it suggests that Pharaoh was well¯practised in this form of manipulation. It was not an isolated or one¯off occurrence; rather, he subjected their minds to systematic, ongoing campaigns, effectively turning their intellects into mere playthings in his hands. Even after the truth was made manifest, the path clearly illuminated, and the evidence presented through undeniable signs, they would still revert to their former state. Thus, we encounter another dimension of pathology: tyranny exerted not only through physical force but also through the subjugation of consciousness. This means that a corrupt system does not merely subjugate bodies; rather, it seeks to reshape perception, rendering submission acceptable—or even justified.

Malek Bennabi articulated this concept as what he termed the "susceptibility to colonization" . In his book *The Conditions of the Renaissance* (Shurut al¯Nahda), he identified this factor and labelled it the "coefficient of susceptibility to colonization."

Ibn Khaldun also drew attention to this phenomenon in the twenty¯third chapter of his *Muqaddimah*, noting that the vanquished are always inclined to imitate the victor—adopting their symbols, attire, beliefs, customs, and way of life.

The Quran also highlights this factor in several instances, including the verse: "Indeed, Allah would never change a

people's state of favour until they change their own state of faith" (Ar-Ra'd: 11).

This is because "a despot imposes himself on the people, compelling them to conform to his will. Under his rule, the state becomes a reflection of his personality—an expression of his ambitions, whims, and desires. The nation's identity is effaced, and its capacity for change and self-correction diminishes. Over time, souls begin to decay, eventually learning to coexist with humiliation."

This stage is far more dangerous than direct coercion, as society may—unconsciously—help sustain the very structure that weakens it.

Addressing this requires containing corruption in all its forms and manifestations. The goal is to shift corruption from the realm of systemic, pervasive, and institutionalised decay to the realm of isolated, individual human error—the kind of mistakes inherent in the human condition, which soon fade without shaping public opinion or fostering a stagnant, toxic atmosphere that serves as a breeding ground for corruption and moral degradation. -Herein lies the role of wise leadership in restoring confidence and instilling in the individual a deep sense of self assurance and faith—a dynamic exemplified by the Mosaic model, which empowers the individual to take up a mission.

(5) The Transformation of Corruption from an Act into a System:

The narrative does not stop at isolated instances; rather, the Quran characterises the entire system, stating: "Indeed, he was among the corrupters" (Al-Qasas: 4).

Here, the precision of the Quranic expression—"he was among the corrupters"—becomes evident; it implies that corruption had become an entrenched attribute within the very structure of his actions. Ibn Atiyyah remarked: "Pharaoh's conduct involved establishing the Copts as ruling masters, while relegating the Children of Israel—the oppressed group—to the status of enslaved subjects. Furthermore, the term *yudhabbihu* ['he slaughters'] is intensified to denote both the gravity and the repetitive nature of the act." It was neither a fleeting occurrence nor an incidental error; it was a calculated, systematic endeavour.

Whenever corruption evolves from an individual behaviour into an intricate, self-perpetuating system, the cost of reform rises; overcoming such an ailment requires altering the very conditions that give rise to it.

(6) The Accumulation of Dysfunction and the Transformation of the Malady into a Civilizational Trajectory:

When we synthesise the aforementioned elements, we do not find isolated ailments but rather an interconnected chain:

First: the distortion of the function of power ("he exalted himself in the land"); the fragmentation of the social fabric ("he divided its people into factions"); the imposition of subjugation ("he oppressed a group among them"); the neutralisation of human agency and the subjugation of the individual ("he slaughtered their sons and spared their women"); the systematic and deliberate corruption of consciousness ("he manipulated his people, and they obeyed him"); and the entrenchment of corruption ("indeed, he was among the corrupters").

The use of the active participle (*mufsid n*—"corrupters") denotes continuity and permanence. Furthermore, its plural form suggests that this is not merely an isolated, individual act, but rather a component of an integrated

system—one with both antecedents and consequences.

Therefore, a civilisational collapse does not begin with the final, definitive fall; rather, it commences when interconnected dysfunctions accumulate, each serving as a catalyst for the next.

(7) From Malady to the Turning Point:

Studying the Pharaonic model is not intended to suggest that any society exhibiting certain signs of arrogance has reached the point of final collapse. Instead, one must distinguish between:

A partial dysfunction, an accumulated dysfunction, a pathological structure, and a downward civilisational trajectory.

¯The most alarming indicator is not merely the presence of a malady, but rather its capacity for self replication—that is the true danger. A state of dysfunction becomes "civilizational" when it shifts from a localized ¯phenomenon to a mechanism capable of generating further dysfunctions—and when a society's internal self correcting mechanisms cease to function.

This highlights the significance of the concept of a "civilizational turning point"—a juncture at which the chain of events can be broken before the cycle of decline runs its full course. This is what history witnessed during the era of the unique, Quran¯inspired generation. A woman could even offer counsel to Umar—right in the mosque ¯courtyard—on the issue of excessive dowries. In the *Sunan* of Sa'id ibn Mansur, it is narrated that Umar ibn al Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him) addressed the people, praised Allah, and said: "Do not set excessive dowries for women. If I hear of anyone giving more than what the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) gave, or what was given to his wives and daughters, I shall confiscate the excess and deposit it into the public treasury (*bayt al¯mal*)." As he descended, a woman from the Quraysh approached him and asked, "O Commander of the Faithful, which is more deserving of being followed: the Book of Allah—the Almighty and Majestic—or your own words?" Umar replied, "The Book of Allah, of course. But why do you ask?" She said, "You just forbade people from setting high dowries, yet Allah the Almighty says in His Book: *and you have given the former even a stack of gold as a dowry , do not take any of it back* [An¯Nisa: 20]." Umar exclaimed, "Everyone is more knowledgeable than Umar!"—repeating this two or three times. He then returned to the pulpit and announced to the people, "I had forbidden you from setting high dowries; now, let every man do as he pleases with his own wealth." In the work *Jami' Bayan al¯'Ilm wa Fadlihi*, it is added that Umar remarked, "A woman was right, and a man [Umar himself] was wrong."

If the problem is "fragmentation," it can be resolved by rebuilding social cohesion and trust.

If the problem is "vulnerability" (or subjugation), it can be resolved by restoring agency—reclaiming self¯confidence and a firm belief in one's capacity for liberation and progress. This is precisely what the Mosaic model illustrates, placing strong emphasis on these concepts.

If the problem is the "corruption of consciousness," reform becomes far more complex, as it requires the reconstruction of the capacity for critical thought. …and thinking.

The longer the delay in implementing corrective intervention—from the point where the flaw originates to its later stages—the higher the cost becomes and the more complex the requirements for such intervention grow.

This principle will serve as a cornerstone of the "jurisprudence of reform priorities," which will be explored in the third section, God willing.

(8) Indicators of a Declining Civilizational Trajectory (Based on Societal Laws):

By examining the "Pharaonic model"—as presented and depicted in the Quran—we can identify several diagnostic indicators of a decline or downward trajectory in a civilisation, as follows:

• The indicator of power–function distortion: Does power become a mere privilege for those who hold it, rather than a responsibility towards society?

• The indicator of social fragmentation: Do differences evolve into mechanisms of polarisation and exclusion?

• The indicator of marginalisation (or "rendering vulnerable"): Do individuals, groups, and society as a whole lose the capacity for initiative and participation?

• The indicator of the corruption of consciousness: Does the capacity for critical thought diminish as the dominant discourse gains the power to manufacture consent?

• The indicator of the obstruction of self–correction: Are institutions capable of acknowledging and rectifying their own errors?

• The indicator of the accumulation of corruption: Are problems addressed at their root, or are they continually reproduced?

Thus, the Pharaonic model is not merely a historical archetype; it serves as a warning system. It is crucial to note that these indicators do not imply an inevitable collapse; rather, they indicate that a society is moving along a trajectory governed by specific societal laws—a trend that must be recognised and corrected.

The practical value of this model does not lie in mapping the figure of Pharaoh onto contemporary individuals or states—a practice that should be avoided on methodological grounds—but rather in identifying the underlying societal mechanisms.

Therefore, instead of labelling a regime as "Pharaonic," we should ask: Does it contain mechanisms of arrogance or domination? Does this power lead to social fragmentation? Does this fragmentation result in the marginalisation of certain groups? And does this marginalisation ultimately stifle the society's capacity for effective action? Furthermore, is the underlying flaw reproduced through the control of consciousness?

In this way, the Quranic narratives are reframed as a diagnostic framework—one that avoids the pitfalls of direct historical projection.

Diagnosing a decline should not focus merely on the final outcome, but rather on the sequence of events that brought it about. The possibility of reform remains as long as the trajectory can be interrupted; the closer an intervention is to the root cause of the flaw, the more effective it will be at altering the course of a civilisation's development.