Two passages are here under discussion: Sura 42:32 aljawārī fī lbahri ka-l'a'ālām and 55:23 aljawārī lmunša'ātu (variant reading lmunšā'ātu) fī lbahri ka-l'a'ālām. Among European language translations we find 'a'ālām rendered as "landmarks" (Bell and Arberry), "banners" (Dawood), "Wegzeichen" (Paret), "repères" (Blachère) and "montagnes" (Montet). It is only the last of these that corresponds strictly to the interpretation of classical tafsīr, which seems to be unanimous in glossing the word as jībāl.

Quranic similes are not far-fetched. But it is necessary, as it is with the similes of pre-Islamic poetry, to have a clear and vivid picture of what the words meant for an Arab of the sixth and seventh centuries: once one does that, the simile will be seen to have a quite startlingly effective impact.

Now it is true that "banners" gives, to modern ears at least, a vivid and effective picture. But I think it must fail to convince because of lack of ancient evidence. Some commentators on Labid's Mu'allaqa gloss 'a'ālām there as rāyāt (though in fact I myself doubt the correctness of that interpretation), and it is not easy to think that some authorities would not have done so for the Quranic passages, if it had sounded to them at all probable.

Turning to the other interpretations, it behoves us, if we are fully to appreciate the simile, to strive for a very distinct picture of what is intended and where the point of similarity with ships lies. At the outset I would argue that any comparison between ships and mountains in point of sheer size must be excluded. To us, looking from the dockside at the hull of the Queen Elizabeth, "mountain" might indeed spring at once to mind. But the ships of the Prophet's day were quite small, and to call them "huge as mountains" would be a hyperbole wholly uncharacteristic of the Quran. I feel pretty sure that "landmarks", "Wegzeichen" and "repères" are on the right lines: but we need a much clearer idea than these vague and general words give of what the word would convey to an ancient Arab, and also to see how those interpretations can be harmonized with the traditional gloss "mountains".

For the bedouin, an 'ālam was pre-eminently a cairn of stones set up in the desert as a guide for travellers (or as a tribal boundary mark,
which is what I believe the ‘alam of Labid to have been), or a prominent natural feature serving the same purposes. The concept of the guidecairn has for me a particular vividness from something within my own experience. The centre of the stretch of Dartmoor between Chagforn and Lydford is occupied by a high plateau of peat bog, which from a distance seems quite smooth, but close by proves to be cut up by a bewildering maze of intricately winding trenches six feet or more deep; once involved in these one almost immediately loses sense of direction. To obviate the difficulty, in the middle of the last century, a local farmer laid a paved track leading through the maze by the directest possible route. This alone, however, would have been of little use, because it would have been impossible when approaching the plateau to spot the beginning of the path against the seemingly featureless sweep of the plateau horizon. Two stones have therefore been placed, one at each end of the path: these are quite small, barely three feet high, yet they are carefully sited so that from a distance of half a mile or so they show up precisely on the horizon. When one has learnt the trick of spotting these stones and making for them, it is quite easy to cross this stretch of the moor. For anyone who has seen this, there is an immediate and vivid visual analogy with a ship seen far out at sea, breaking the otherwise featureless sweep of the horizon. If we bear this sort of thing in mind, our appreciation of the Quranic simile is greatly enhanced.

In the case of a natural feature used for the same purpose, it is likely to be the peak of a far distant mountain just visible over the line of a closer horizon. It is here that we can find a point of contact with the traditional gloss jibāl. As so often happens when one is attempting to give a lexical definition, the two terms are only partially congruous: some ‘ālām were in fact mountain peaks, though not every ‘alam was a mountain nor every mountain an ‘alam.

Two quotations from ancient poetry are cited in support of the gloss jibāl. One, unattributed, is not particularly conclusive: 1 ka-annahū ‘alamūn fi ra’sīhi nārun “as though he were an ‘alam surmounted by a beacon-fire”, where all that is required to give point to the simile is that the ‘alam should be conspicuously sited. But in the phrase quoted from Jarir,2 ‘idhū qaṭa‘na ‘alamūn bādā ‘alamūn “when they journey past one ‘alam another shows up”, it seems pretty clear

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2 Ibid., vol. 27, p. 70.