The meaning of the term “khalifa” has been studied by several modern scholars for almost a century now.1 This is quite understandable in view of the importance of this term in Islamic history, institutions, political theory, law and theology. Most of these scholars noted that the term occurs in various forms in the Qurʾān, and some of them, notably Rudi Paret and W. Montgomery Watt,2 made this occurrence the starting point of their research. This, in turn, led them to study the Muslim exegetical literature about “khalifa”—now already much over a millennium old. The results of their investigations were more often than not complementary rather than contradictory. But this was not unexpected. After all,
if the aims of scholars differ, what they see in the same material is likely to be different too. Paret, in his capacity as a Qurʾān translator, hoped to come to some kind of “neutral” but “homogenous” understanding of what the term meant in the Qurʾān in its various forms (nominal as well as verbal) and he consequently did not spell out his “supporting authorities” from the medieval period. Watt, as a historian on the other hand, wanted to exhaust all the possibilities of the meaning of the term in the Qurʾān, in order to see how these possibilities compared with the Umayyad Caliphs’ claim that they were “khulafāʾ Allāh”—God’s caliphs. This led him not only to conduct a thorough philological examination of the root *kh.l.f* in Arabic but also to study and cite the major exegetical authorities on the subject from the first until the tenth Hijri centuries.

In the present paper my aim is still different. I am not concerned with a “neutral”, “homogenous” or “exhaustive” understanding of the meaning of the term “khalīfa” as it appears in the Qurʾān. My purpose is “exegetically historical” and for that reason it is confined to the earliest era of Islam, not ranging beyond the Umayyad period. What I would like to determine is the following: How did the early Muslim exegetes, living under the Umayyads, understand the Qurʾānic term “khalīfa” in their own time and place, when they were governed by caliphs who, in one way or the other, and at different points in their rule, not only declared themselves as God’s *khalīfas* but also cited at least one Qurʾānic *khalīfa*-verse in support of their declarations? Did they also make the connection between the political reality and the Divine Word? And, if so, how? Or did they not? And, again, if so, why? It is hoped that such a study might shed light on how a small but significant sector of Islamic society intellectually functioned during the Umayyad period, a period about which we know little definite in character.

Once defined, my aim confined the material to be examined, since the period in question is one in which the literary output in general was limited and only very few of the exegetical works

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3 The subject has been thoroughly discussed by Crone and Hinds in *God’s Caliph* (see n. 1).