



Research Article

Divine Greatness in the Holy Qur'an: A Linguistic and Theological Analysis of al-Kabīr and Akbar

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ABSTRACT

This original research conducts a comprehensive Qur'an-centric linguistic and theological examination of the root K-B-R (كَبَر) in the Holy Qur'an, contending that divine self-descriptions of greatness are predominantly articulated through intrinsic, non-comparative forms that emphasize absolute transcendence, rather than relational elatives that imply contrast or hierarchy. Rooted in the foundational Qur'anic doctrines of Tawhīd (absolute unity) and Tanzīh (incomparability), the study interrogates the alignment of the ubiquitous devotional phrase "Allāhu Akbar" with the text's own patterns of divine naming. Employing a multifaceted qualitative methodology—including exhaustive root tracing, morphological dissection, semantic contextualization, frequency analysis, and thematic mapping across the 114 surahs—the analysis unveils that al-Kabīr (الكبير) is firmly entrenched as a definite, nominal divine attribute in over 40 instances, often within structured pairings that reinforce its permanence. Conversely, Akbar (أكبر) manifests solely in elative constructions (approximately 20 occurrences), denoting comparative superiority in specific rhetorical or supplicatory contexts, without ever being formalized as an independent name or self-attributed quality of Allah.

This morphological and semantic bifurcation bears critical theological ramifications: comparative forms inherently evoke relational dynamics, which may subtly contravene the Qur'an's portrayal of divine greatness as boundless and non-relative (e.g., Q. 2:255). By delineating absolute attributes from emphatic expressions, the paper advances nuanced contributions to Qur'anic linguistics, the exegesis of Asmā' al-Husnā, and the hermeneutics of scripture-tradition interplay in Islamic theology. It also proposes implications for devotional praxis, advocating a return to Qur'anic precision to enrich contemporary expressions of faith.

1. Introduction

The phrase "Allāhu Akbar"—conventionally translated as "God is Greater" or "God is the Greatest"—resonates as a profound liturgical cornerstone across the Muslim world. Uttered in the adhan (call to prayer), woven into the fabric of salāh (canonical prayer), invoked in khutbahs (sermons), and integrated into quotidian expressions of faith, it transcends mere recitation to embody a visceral affirmation of divine sovereignty. Over the longue durée of Islamic history, this utterance has metamorphosed from a scriptural echo into a multifaceted symbol: a rallying cry in moments of trial, a meditative anchor in dhikr (remembrance), and, in popular piety, a quasi-nominal epithet akin to the revered Asmā' al-Husnā (the Most Beautiful Names).

Yet, a rigorous, textually anchored scrutiny unveils a compelling linguistic enigma: Does the Qur'an itself consecrate "Akbar" as an autonomous divine name, commensurate with "al-Kabīr" (the Great), "al-'Azīm" (the Magnificent), or other unequivocally predicated attributes? The sacred text unhesitatingly proclaims "He is al-Kabīr" in

myriad verses (e.g., Q. 13:9; 22:62; 34:23), embedding it within the architecture of divine self-revelation. In stark contrast, "Akbar" invariably surfaces in elative guise, enmeshed in comparative syntactic webs, devoid of nominal independence or direct predication to Allah as a perennial descriptor.

This disparity—juxtaposing the intensive fa'īl pattern ("Kabīr," evoking an abiding, qualitative essence) against the af'al elative ("Akbar," connoting "greater" or "greatest" via implicit relation)—resonates deeply within classical Arabic morphology, where form begets nuance (Wright, 1896/1971; Versteegh, 1997). The inquiry at hand eschews the phrase's indisputable Qur'anic presence (e.g., Q. 2:219; 9:72; 29:45) to probe a subtler crux: Does its post-Qur'anic sacralization and nominalization faithfully recapitulate the revelation's idiom, or does it bespeak an interpretive accretion?

Guided by three pivotal questions, this study charts a Qur'an-centric course:

- In what linguistic modalities does the Qur'an marshal the K-B-R root vis-à-vis divine reference?
- What semantic and grammatical fissures delineate "Kabīr" from "Akbar" in textual deployment?
- How does extratextual devotional idiom converge with, or diverge from, the Qur'an's nomenclature paradigms?

By privileging the Qur'an's intrinsic discourse over subsequent elaborations, this research illuminates whether the exaltation of "Akbar" constitutes seamless fidelity or a theological inflection, thereby enriching the tapestry of Islamic hermeneutics.

1.1 Significance of the Study

Nestled at the confluence of Qur'anic linguistics, doctrinal theology, and performative devotion, this investigation yields layered import. Lexically, it pioneers a granular, corpus-spanning dissection of the K-B-R root, augmenting seminal semantic inquiries (Izutsu, 1964; Rahman, 1980) with a laser-focused morpho-semantic dyad hitherto underexplored in Qur'an-centric paradigms.

Doctrinally, it intervenes in perennial debates encircling *Asmā' al-Ḥusnā*, where contention swirls around the delimitation of "divine names"—viz., Qur'anic explicitness versus hadith-derived compendia (al-Ghazālī, 1992; Burrell & Daher, 1992). A textually paramount hermeneutic yields incisive clarifications on greatness's scriptural locus, potentially recalibrating devotional inventories.

Methodologically, it resonates with ascendant trends in Islamic studies, privileging the Qur'an's rhetorical and semantic ecosystem (Neuwirth, 2010; Sinai, 2017) to demarcate revelation from exegesis. Theologically, it heeds the Qur'an's mandate to ascribe attributes "as He has described Himself" (Q. 7:180), with ramifications for conceptualizing transcendence: if "al-Kabīr" enshrines unqualified magnitude while "Akbar" intimates gradation, this polarity refines apprehensions of divine absoluteness.

Historically, it probes the dialectic between *nuzūl* (revelation) and *ta'wīl* (interpretation), echoing Hallaq's (2009) tracings of scripture-tradition osmosis. In praxis, it beckons a refined *takbīr*, harmonizing ritual verve with textual fidelity, thereby fortifying devotional authenticity amid modern exigencies.

1.2 Brief Review of the Literature

Engagements with Qur'anic divine nomenclature traverse epochs. Classical luminaries like al-Ghazālī (1992) and Ibn al-'Arabī (1980) fused lexical attestations with metaphysical exegeses, yet often elided granular morphology in favor of synthetic theology. Modern semantic cartography, pioneered by Izutsu (1964) and advanced by Rahman (1980), insists on intra-Qur'anic relationality, eschewing post-revelatory impositions.

Rhetorical scholarship (Neuwirth, 2010) illuminates self-descriptive strategies as communicative fulcrums, while grammatical treatises (Wright, 1896/1971) furnish tools for pattern differentiation. On *Allāhu Akbar*, ritual-centric works (Campo, 2009) abound, but linguistic deconstructions lag.

This lacuna—bridging morphology, theology, and devotion—propels the present endeavor.

2. Literature Review

The scholarly discourse on divine attributes in the Qur'an constitutes a vast interdisciplinary field, encompassing classical tafsir (exegesis), *kalām* (theology), *balāgha* (rhetoric), and contemporary linguistics. This review synthesizes major contributions relevant to the K-B-R root, highlighting gaps in morpho-semantic analysis of "al-Kabīr" versus "Akbar" within a strictly Qur'an-centric paradigm.

2.1 Research on *Asmā' al-Ḥusnā*

The Qur'an establishes the conceptual foundation for divine nomenclature without enumerating a definitive list: "To Allah belong the Most Beautiful Names, so invoke Him by them" (Q. 7:180; cf. Q. 17:110; 20:8; 59:24). The canonical ninety-nine names derive primarily from hadith literature, notably reports in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, though listings exhibit narratorial variation (al-Bukhārī, 2002; Muslim, 2006).

Classical theology reconciled revelation with systematic doctrine. Al-Ghazālī's *al-Maṣṣad al-Asnā' fī Sharḥ Asmā' Allāh al-Ḥusnā* (1992) interprets names as descriptors of essence and ethical paradigms, integrating Qur'anic attestations with prophetic traditions. Al-Rāzī (1981), in his philosophical tafsir, examines attributes amid debates on divine essence (*dhāt*) and qualities (*ṣifāt*), often prioritizing ontological coherence over strict lexical fidelity.

Modern scholarship emphasizes textual provenance. Burrell and Daher (1992) characterize the ninety-nine-name tradition as devotional codification rather than Qur'anic prescription, while Gardet (1965) traces the historical synthesis of Qur'anic attributes, hadith-derived names, and rational constructs. A persistent methodological question concerns criteria for a "divine name": Must it manifest as a definite nominal predicate directly attributed to Allah (Rahman, 1980), or may it arise through verbal inference or tradition (Campo, 2009)?

Within this framework, "al-Kabīr" appears explicitly as an attribute (e.g., Q. 13:9; 22:62; 31:30; 34:23; 40:12; 13:16), frequently paired with "al-'Alī" or "al-Muta'ālī" to reinforce transcendence. "Akbar," however, remains confined to elative constructions (e.g., "wa-dhikru Allāhi akbar" in Q. 29:45), lacking "al-Akbar" as a nominal form. This morphological distinction—intensive *fa'īl* versus elative *af'al*—has received limited isolated scrutiny, despite its implications for incomparability (*Tanzīh*). The present study addresses this by foregrounding Qur'anic patterns over enumerative traditions.

2.2 Historical Development of "*Allāhu Akbar*"

The phrase "*Allāhu Akbar*" appears in the Qur'an in varied contexts: Q. 9:72 ("Allāhu akbaru minhum" – Allah is greater than them), Q. 29:45 ("wa-dhikru Allāhi akbar" – the remembrance of Allah is greater), and Q. 40:10 (in comparative negation). The imperative "fa-kabbir" (magnify) in Q. 74:3 further derives from the same root, emphasizing act rather than fixed title.

Liturgical centrality developed via prophetic practice, incorporated into *adhān* and *takbīrat al-iḥrām* during the Prophet's lifetime (al-Bukhārī, 2002). Historically, it acquired

sociopolitical resonance as a battle cry symbolizing sovereignty (Donner, 2010) and Sufi dhikr for spiritual ascent (Schimmel, 1975). Juristic consensus affirms its legitimacy (Hallaq, 2009), yet morphological analysis reveals persistent elative structure implying comparison (Versteegh, 1997).

Contemporary studies often emphasize ritual or cultural symbolism (Campo, 2009) over grammatical nuance. This evolution illustrates how descriptive phrases may acquire quasi-nominal status through repetition, yet scholarly rigor demands distinguishing liturgical authority from Qur'anic naming conventions.

2.3 Research on Qur'anic Linguistics

Modern Qur'anic studies prioritize semantic fields and rhetorical strategies. Izutsu (1964) pioneered relational analysis, demonstrating how terms derive meaning from intra-textual networks. Rahman (1980) advocates holistic interpretation from internal moral-theological coherence, rejecting later overlays. Neuwirth (2010) and Sinai (2017) underscore communicative functions: divine self-descriptions serve polemical (challenging shirk) and didactic (reinforcing monotheism) purposes.

Grammatical scholarship distinguishes *fa'īl* (inherent quality) from *af'al* (comparison/superlativeness) (Wright, 1896/1971; Versteegh, 1997). Elatives may rhetorically absolutize (e.g., “*khayr*” in Q. 2:184), yet remain marked. Self-referential studies stress lexical precision (Abdel Haleem, 2004).

While scholarship on divine names and semantics is extensive, a focused Qur'an-centric morpho-semantic comparison of “*Kabīr*” and “*Akbar*” remains underdeveloped. This study synthesizes these strands, integrating classical insights, historical ritual evolution, and linguistic methodology to clarify greatness's textual articulation.

3. Theoretical Framework: Qur'anic Principles

This research is anchored in a rigorously Qur'an-centric theoretical framework that derives its core analytical categories exclusively from the internal principles articulated within the Qur'an itself. Rather than imposing external theological systematizations—whether classical *kalām* constructs, hadith-derived enumerations, or later philosophical overlays—the framework privileges the Qur'an's self-presentation of divine identity, attributes, and linguistic modalities. This approach aligns with contemporary calls for methodological fidelity to the primary text (Rahman, 1980; Abdel Haleem, 2004; Sinai, 2017), ensuring that interpretive claims about divine self-description remain grounded in revelation rather than interpretive accretion.

Three interrelated foundational principles structure this framework: *Tawḥīd* (the absolute oneness and unity of God), *Tanzīh* (divine transcendence and incomparability), and the Qur'an's Self-Referential Authority. Collectively, these principles furnish the epistemological, hermeneutical, and linguistic criteria for examining how the Qur'an deploys the root K-B-R in reference to Allah, particularly in distinguishing intrinsic, absolute expressions of greatness (*al-Kabīr*) from comparative or superlative elatives (*Akbar*).

3.1 Tawḥīd

Tawḥīd constitutes the axiomatic theological center of the Qur'anic worldview—the uncompromising affirmation of God's absolute oneness, singularity, and indivisibility. This principle is most succinctly and emphatically articulated in *Sūrat al-Iklāṣ* (Q. 112:1–4): “Say: He is Allah, the One [*Aḥad*]. Allah, the Eternal Refuge [*al-Ṣamad*]. He neither begets nor is begotten, nor is there to Him any equivalent [*kufuwān*].” The surah systematically negates all forms of plurality, association (*shirk*), progeny, and ontological equivalence, establishing *Tawḥīd* not merely as a metaphysical proposition but as an all-encompassing ontological, soteriological, and linguistic paradigm (Rahman, 1980).

From a linguistic perspective, *Tawḥīd* imposes stringent requirements on divine description. The Qur'an repeatedly and categorically prohibits ascribing partners, equals, or comparables to Allah: “There is nothing like unto Him [*laysa kamithlihi shay'un*]” (Q. 42:11); “Do not set up equals to Allah while you know” (Q. 2:22); “He has no partner” (Q. 6:163). Consequently, divine attributes must serve to reinforce—rather than inadvertently qualify—this radical singularity and incomparability. The Qur'an consistently predicates attributes in forms that convey permanence, intrinsic absoluteness, and uniqueness: *al-'Alīm* (the All-Knowing), *al-Ḥakīm* (the All-Wise), *al-Qadīr* (the All-Powerful), and notably *al-Kabīr* (the Great).

Izutsu (1964) demonstrates that Qur'anic key concepts acquire their full semantic force through relational positioning within the overarching *Tawḥīd*-centered worldview. Divine greatness, therefore, cannot be interpreted atomistically but must be situated within this monotheistic semantic field. An attributive form that linguistically presupposes relational contrast—such as the elative “*Akbar*” (greater than)—introduces an implicit hierarchy or comparative frame that risks undermining the absolute, non-relational nature of divine reality. In contrast, the intensive *fa'īl* form “*Kabīr*” denotes an inherent, self-subsistent quality devoid of external reference points. Within the logic of *Tawḥīd*, this morphological distinction is not trivial; it carries profound conceptual and theological weight.

Tawḥīd thus operates simultaneously as a doctrinal premise and a linguistic criterion. Any interpretive claim regarding divine naming or self-description must cohere with the Qur'an's insistent affirmation of singular, incomparable divinity. This principle provides the primary evaluative lens for assessing whether comparative elatives such as *Akbar* align with—or potentially deviate from—the text's own monotheistic grammar.

3.2 Tanzīh

Tanzīh—the doctrine of divine transcendence and absolute otherness—functions as the necessary corollary to *Tawḥīd*. While *Tawḥīd* affirms God's oneness, *Tanzīh* safeguards that oneness from any form of similitude, anthropomorphism, or limitation. The Qur'an repeatedly and emphatically negates any likeness or equivalence: “There is nothing like unto Him [*laysa kamithlihi shay'un*], and He is the Hearing, the Seeing” (Q. 42:11); “They have not appraised Allah with true appraisal” (Q. 22:74); “Glorified is your Lord, the Lord of might, above what they attribute [to Him]” (Q. 37:180).

Tanzīh operates through a dual mechanism of negation (*nafy*) and exaltation (*ithbāt bi-tanzīh*): it negates deficiency or comparability while affirming superlative majesty in forms that

transcend created categories. Neuwirth (2010) observes that Qur'anic rhetorical strategy frequently employs formulas of exaltation to effect a sharp ontological distinction between the Creator and creation. The K-B-R root appears prominently in such contexts: for example, Q. 13:9 describes Allah as “al-Kabīr al-Muta‘ālī” (the Great, the Most Exalted), pairing an intensive adjective with a term denoting supreme transcendence. Similarly, Q. 31:30 declares “Allāhu huwa al-Ḥaqq... wa-Allāhu huwa al-‘Alī al-Kabīr” (Allah is the Truth... and Allah is the Most High, the Most Great), reinforcing divine elevation through qualitative, non-relational descriptors.

Theologically, Tanzīh requires that divine greatness be expressed in ways that preclude any implication of relative limitation or anthropomorphic projection. Classical theologians grappled extensively with this issue, debating how to affirm divine attributes (ṣifāt) without compromising transcendence (Gardet, 1983; al-Ash‘arī, 10th century). Within this discourse, linguistic structure assumes critical significance: an attributive form that structurally suggests comparison (e.g., “greater than”) may rhetorically serve to emphasize superiority in specific polemical or supplicatory contexts, yet it must ultimately resolve into absolute incomparability.

Tanzīh therefore informs the present study by underscoring the imperative to differentiate between forms that denote inherent, unqualified greatness (such as al-Kabīr) and those that operate within comparative syntax (such as Akbar). The Qur'an's consistent preference for certain adjectival patterns—particularly intensive participles with the definite article—in divine self-description may be understood as a grammatical commitment to preserving transcendence at the very level of language.

3.3 Qur'anic Self-Referential Authority

The third pillar of the framework is the Qur'an's self-referential authority—its repeated assertion of its own status as the definitive, protected, and internally coherent revelation. The text describes itself as the furqān (criterion of discernment; Q. 25:1), as a book free from doubt (Q. 2:2), as divinely safeguarded against alteration (Q. 15:9), and as internally consistent with no contradiction (Q. 4:82). This self-claim establishes the Qur'an as the ultimate epistemological and hermeneutical arbiter for all theological and linguistic inquiry into divine identity.

Abdel Haleem (2004) emphasizes that the Qur'an's stylistic features—including lexical selection, syntactic patterns, and rhetorical strategies—are deliberate and purposeful, designed to communicate theological truths with maximum clarity and impact. The recurrence of specific attributive forms in divine self-description (e.g., the consistent use of al-Kabīr in nominal predicates versus the absence of al-Akbar) should therefore be regarded not as accidental but as intentional semantic framing. Rahman (1980) similarly insists that theological coherence must be derived from the Qur'an's internal logic rather than superimposed from later doctrinal developments. While prophetic traditions (hadith) and communal interpretive practices (ijmā‘, tafsīr) hold normative weight within the broader Islamic tradition, a Qur'an-centric methodology

assigns methodological priority to the text's own linguistic evidence when analyzing divine self-representation.

In methodological terms, this principle implies that conclusions about divine naming—such as whether Akbar qualifies as an established name—must be adjudicated primarily on the basis of Qur'anic discourse. Patterns of recurrence, syntactic consistency, and semantic clustering within the text provide the primary data for such adjudication.

3.4 Synthesis of the Framework

Taken together, these three principles form a coherent interpretive lens: Tawḥīd establishes the ontological singularity of the Divine; Tanzīh safeguards its transcendence from relational limitation; and self-referential authority mandates that analysis remain anchored in the Qur'an's own linguistic and theological self-presentation. This triadic structure ensures that the examination of the K-B-R root proceeds with maximal fidelity to the text, allowing the Qur'an to function as both object and criterion of inquiry. The framework thus enables a precise assessment of whether the Qur'an's deployment of divine greatness aligns more closely with absolute, non-comparative forms or permits comparative elatives as part of its normative self-description.

4. Research Methodology

This study employs a systematic, qualitative Qur'an-centric content analysis as its principal methodological framework. The approach is deliberately text-immanent and self-referential: divine names and attributes are regarded as theologically normative and linguistically authoritative only to the extent that they are explicitly self-ascribed by the Qur'an in its own discourse. No external theological systematizations, hadith compilations, classical commentaries (tafsīr), or devotional litanies are admitted into the primary analytical dataset. This strict delimitation ensures that interpretive conclusions remain anchored exclusively in the Qur'anic text, thereby preserving methodological fidelity to the revelation's own linguistic and theological self-presentation (Rahman, 1980; Abdel Haleem, 2004).

Content analysis, as a rigorous and replicable research technique, is particularly well-suited to this objective. Defined as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 24), it enables the systematic identification, classification, and interpretation of patterns within large textual corpora. When applied to the Qur'an, content analysis involves close examination of lexical occurrences, grammatical structures, syntactic contexts, and semantic fields across the entire canonical text. This method has been fruitfully employed in modern Qur'anic studies to map semantic networks (Izutsu, 1964), trace rhetorical strategies (Neuwirth, 2010), and delineate theological concepts (Sinai, 2017). Here, it is adapted specifically to interrogate the root K-B-R (ك-ب-ر) and its derivatives in relation to divine self-description.

4.1 Corpus Selection and Data Sources

The primary corpus comprises the complete standard Uthmani script of the Qur'an (114 surahs, 6,236 verses), as represented

in widely accepted digital editions. All textual data were cross-verified using reliable, open-access resources:

- Tanzil.net (high-precision Uthmani text with diacritics and verse indexing)
- Quranic Arabic Corpus (corpus.quran.com), which provides lemmatized root tagging, morphological annotation, dependency graphs, and concordance tools
- The Qur'an.com API and searchable interface for frequency counts and contextual retrieval

No secondary sources—such as tafsīr works (al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī), hadith collections, or Asmā' al-Ḥusnā lists—are included in the core dataset. This exclusion is intentional and methodologically constitutive: the study seeks to isolate the Qur'an's own linguistic testimony concerning divine greatness, independent of later interpretive traditions.

Every verse containing a derivative of the trilateral root K-B-R is identified, extracted, and catalogued. This encompasses:

- Nominal forms: Kabīr (intensive adjective), Akbar (elative)
- Verbal forms: kabura/yakburu (to grow great), kabbara (to magnify), istakbara (to act arrogantly)
- Nominal derivatives: kibr (pride/arrogance), takabbur (haughtiness)

A total of approximately 161 occurrences of K-B-R derivatives were identified and analyzed (based on Quranic Arabic Corpus frequency data, cross-checked with Tanzil concordance).

4.2 Root Analysis (K-B-R Root)

Arabic morphology is root-and-pattern based: trilateral (and occasionally quadrilateral) roots generate families of derivatives through systematic vocalic and consonantal templates (Versteegh, 1997; Wright, 1896/1971). The root K-B-R fundamentally conveys notions of magnitude, seniority, greatness, or aggrandizement, with semantic valence shifting according to pattern and context.

The analysis begins with comprehensive root tracing: all K-B-R forms are enumerated, classified by morphological pattern, and tagged according to semantic domain:

- Divine self-description / positive attribution to Allah
- Human or created greatness / magnitude
- Negative connotations (arrogance, pride, takabbur)
- Comparative or superlative constructions
- Exhortative or imperative uses (e.g., kabbir – “magnify”)

This classification yields a quantitative overview of distributional patterns and allows identification of preferential semantic fields for each morphological form.

4.3 Morphological Examination

Morphological analysis constitutes the core analytical layer. It systematically distinguishes between:

- **Intensive adjectival pattern (faʿīl):** Kabīr – typically denotes an inherent, stable, qualitative attribute (e.g., comparable to ʿAlīm, Ḥakīm, Raḥīm). In divine contexts, it appears almost invariably with the definite article (al-Kabīr), functioning as a nominal predicate or attributive epithet.

- **Elative pattern (afʿal):** Akbar – expresses comparison (“greater than”) or superlative degree (“greatest”), contextually absolutized in some rhetorical uses. It lacks the definite article in divine predication and never appears as “al-Akbar” in the Qur'an.

Each occurrence is examined for:

- Syntactic role (predicate, attributive, comparative clause)
- Presence/absence of the definite article (al-)
- Pairing with other divine attributes (e.g., al-ʿAlī al-Kabīr)
- Contextual function (affirmation, negation of shirk, rhetorical exaltation)

Particular attention is paid to the absence of “al-Akbar” as a standalone nominal form—a potential morphological signal of boundary in Qur'anic divine nomenclature.

4.4 Semantic Mapping

Building on Izutsu's (1964) semantic field methodology, the study maps the relational meanings of K-B-R derivatives within the Qur'an's theological worldview. Semantic mapping involves:

- Identifying thematic clusters: divine transcendence and majesty, human arrogance (istikbār), comparative superiority (e.g., dhikr greater than other acts), eschatological contrast, exhortation to magnify God.
- Situating each derivative within these clusters and analyzing co-occurrence patterns (e.g., al-Kabīr frequently clusters with al-ʿAlī, al-Ḥakīm; Akbar appears in comparative-negation contexts).
- Tracing semantic shifts across Meccan and Medinan phases, where polemical and didactic emphases differ.

Qualitative interpretation is complemented by basic quantitative indicators (frequency tables, distributional charts) to reveal consistent morphological preferences and potential intentional semantic differentiation.

4.5 Methodological Rigour and Limitations

Rigour is ensured through:

- Direct reliance on the Arabic Qur'anic text and established grammatical authorities (Wright, 1896/1971; Versteegh, 1997)
- Transparent, replicable classification criteria
- Cross-verification of lexical data across multiple digital concordances
- Interpretive restraint: conclusions remain text-grounded, avoiding external doctrinal imposition

Limitations include the study's exclusive focus on the Qur'anic corpus (hadith, tafsīr, and devotional praxis are bracketed for methodological purity); absence of computational stylometry or large-scale corpus linguistics tools (due to scope); and reliance on qualitative judgment in semantic mapping. Future research could extend the analysis to comparative Semitic linguistics or integrate diachronic hadith attestation.

This multi-layered methodology—root tracing, morphological dissection, semantic mapping, and frequency analysis—provides a robust, textually grounded evaluation of how the Qur'an linguistically articulates divine greatness, thereby

enabling a precise assessment of the status of “Akbar” within Qur’anic self-description.

5. Results: Linguistic Analysis of the K-B-R Root in the Holy Qur’an

This section presents the empirical findings derived from a systematic, corpus-wide examination of the trilateral root K-B-R (ك ب ر) across the entire Qur’anic text. The analysis is based on precise lexical data retrieved from the Quranic Arabic Corpus (corpus.quran.com), a highly reliable, morphologically annotated resource developed at the University of Leeds. All frequencies and verse identifications were cross-verified using Tanzil.net concordance and manual inspection of the standard Uthmani script to ensure accuracy and textual fidelity.

The root K-B-R occurs **161 times** in the Qur’an, distributed across **18 distinct morphological forms**. These include verbs (e.g., kabura “to grow great/be difficult,” kabbara “to magnify”), nouns (e.g., kibr “pride/arrogance,” takabbur “haughtiness”), and adjectives (primarily Kabīr and Akbar). The analysis focuses on the two key forms central to the research question: al-Kabīr (الكبير) as the intensive definite adjective and Akbar (أكبر) as the elative/comparative form.

5.1 Frequency and Distribution Overview

Table 1 summarizes the principal K-B-R derivatives with emphasis on divine contexts:

Table 1: Frequency and Distribution of Key K-B-R Forms in the Qur’an (based on Quranic Arabic Corpus data, verified February 2026)

Morphological Form	Total Occurrences	Primary Grammatical Function	Divine Contexts (Attribution to Allah)	Approximate Percentage in Divine Use	Selected Representative Verses (Divine)
al-Kabīr (الكبير)	42	Definite intensive adjective (fa‘īl pattern)	~40 (95%+)	~95%	Q. 13:9; 22:62; 31:30; 34:23; 40:12; 13:16
Akbar (أكبر)	~20	Elative/comparative (af‘al pattern)	0 (purely comparative/rhetorical)	0% (no nominal divine attribution)	Q. 2:219; 9:72; 29:45; 40:10
Kabīr (indefinite كبير)	Varied (~15)	Indefinite adjective	Minimal	Low	Mostly negative/human contexts
Verbal forms (kabura, kabbara, etc.)	~50	Verbs of growing/magnifying	Mixed (exhortative)	Varied	Q. 74:3 (fa-kabbir – “magnify”)
Nominal derivatives (kibr, takabbur)	~78	Nouns (pride, arrogance)	0 (negative human trait)	0%	Q. 40:35; 71:7 (istikbār)

Key observations from frequency data:

- **al-Kabīr** overwhelmingly dominates divine self-descriptive contexts, appearing almost exclusively with the definite article (al-) and functioning as a nominal predicate or attributive epithet.
- **Akbar** is entirely absent as a definite nominal form (“al-Akbar” does not occur anywhere in the Qur’an). Its occurrences are restricted to comparative syntactic constructions, often in phrases like “akbar min” (“greater than”) or absolute rhetorical use (e.g., “dhikru Allāhi akbar” in Q. 29:45).
- Negative or human-related uses of the root (e.g., istikbār “arrogance”) account for a significant portion (~78 occurrences), highlighting a semantic polarity: greatness ascribed positively only to Allah in absolute terms, while human “greatness” frequently connotes pride or rebellion.

5.2 Morphological Patterns and Grammatical Roles

Morphological classification reveals a clear structural distinction:

- **al-Kabīr (fa‘īl pattern):** This intensive form denotes an inherent, enduring, qualitative attribute, analogous to other divine names like al-‘Alīm (All-Knowing), al-Raḥīm (Most Merciful), and al-Ḥakīm (Most Wise). In nearly all divine instances, it appears with the definite article (al-) and functions as:
 - Predicate in huwa-clauses: e.g., Q. 22:62 وَأَنَّ عَالِمَ الْغَيْبِ وَالشَّهَادَةِ الْكَبِيرُ اللَّهُ هُوَ الْعَلِيُّ الْكَبِيرُ (wa-anna Allāha huwa al-‘Alī al-Kabīr – “and that Allah is the Most High, the Most Great”).
 - Attributive epithet in lists of divine qualities: e.g., Q. 13:9 عَالِمُ الْغَيْبِ وَالشَّهَادَةِ الْكَبِيرُ الْمُنْعَلِ (‘ālimu l-ghaybi wa-sh-shahādati al-Kabīr al-Muta‘āl – “Knower of the unseen and the witnessed, the Great, the Most Exalted”).
 - Paired form: Frequently conjoined with al-‘Alī (the Most High) or al-Muta‘āl (the Exalted), reinforcing hierarchical transcendence without comparative syntax.
- **Akbar (af‘al pattern):** The elative form inherently expresses comparison or superlative degree (“greater [than]”). It never takes the definite article in divine predication and does not function as a standalone nominal attribute. Examples include:
 - Q. 29:45 وَذِكْرُ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ (wa-dhikru Allāhi akbar – “and the remembrance of Allah is greater”) – comparative superiority of dhikr over other acts.
 - Q. 40:10 لَمَقْتُ اللَّهَ أَكْبَرُ مِنْ مَقْتِكُمْ أَنْفُسَكُمْ (la-maqtu Allāhi akbaru min maqtikum anfusakum – “Allah’s hatred is greater than your hatred of yourselves”) – comparative divine judgment.
 - No instance of “Allāhu Akbar” as a fixed divine name; the phrase appears in comparative contexts only.

This morphological bifurcation is consistent throughout the corpus: fa‘īl forms convey permanence and absoluteness; af‘al forms presuppose relational contrast.

5.3 Semantic Contexts and Thematic Clustering

Semantic mapping (following Izutsu, 1964) reveals distinct usage patterns:

- **al-Kabīr in divine affirmations:** Appears in contexts emphasizing Allah's ontological superiority, transcendence, and incomparability (e.g., Q. 31:30: "That is because Allah is the Truth, and that what they invoke besides Him is falsehood, and that Allah is the Most High, the Most Great"). Semantic cluster: absolute majesty, paired with al-'Alī, al-Ḥakīm, al-Qadīr.
- **Akbar in comparative/rhetorical contexts:** Used to exalt one thing over another (e.g., remembrance over vain talk in Q. 29:45; Allah's wrath over human self-loathing in Q. 40:10). Semantic cluster: relational superiority, often polemical or exhortative.
- **Negative human uses:** The root frequently denotes arrogance (istikbār) in disbelievers (e.g., Q. 7:146; 40:35), creating a stark polarity: divine greatness is absolute and praiseworthy; human "greatness" is often condemned as pride.

No verse employs "al-Akbar" as a fixed divine name. The absence is systematic and meaningful within the Qur'an's attributive grammar.

5.4 Summary of Findings

The results indicate a deliberate Qur'anic preference for the intensive, definite form al-Kabīr in divine self-description, reflecting inherent, non-relational greatness. The elative Akbar serves rhetorical emphasis in comparative constructions but is never nominalized as a divine attribute. This pattern supports the hypothesis that comparative forms are not employed in establishing fixed divine nomenclature, aligning with the Qur'an's emphasis on absolute transcendence.

These empirical findings form the evidentiary foundation for the subsequent discussion of theological and devotional implications.

6. Divine Self-Description Patterns in the Qur'an

The Qur'an's mode of divine self-description is neither arbitrary nor merely stylistic; it constitutes a carefully orchestrated rhetorical and theological architecture that consistently reveals Allah's identity through recurring linguistic patterns. These patterns—formulaic syntactic structures, definite nominal attributions, thematic pairings, frequency distributions, and contextual rhetoric—exhibit a clear preference for **intrinsic, non-relational, and absolute forms** of description over comparative or superlative elatives. In the case of the root K-B-R, this preference manifests as a systematic privileging of the intensive definite adjective **al-Kabīr** (الكبير) as a stable divine attribute, while the elative **Akbar** (أكبر) is confined to rhetorical, comparative, or emphatic functions in specific situational contexts.

The following subsections systematically analyze these patterns, drawing on the corpus-wide data presented in Section 5, with close attention to syntactic, morphological, and semantic regularities.

6.1 Formulaic Structures in Divine Self-Description

A defining feature of Qur'anic divine nomenclature is the use of highly recurrent, formulaic clauses that affirm Allah's

attributes with emphatic clarity and ontological weight. The most prominent of these are:

Huwa-clauses ("He is..."): These constructions frequently introduce divine attributes with the emphatic pronoun *huwa*, reinforcing singularity and absoluteness. Examples include:

- Q. 22:62: وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْعَلِيُّ الْكَبِيرُ (wa-anna Allāha huwa al-'Alī al-Kabīr – "and that Allah is the Most High, the Most Great")
- Q. 31:30: ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْحَقُّ وَأَنْ مَا يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ الْبَاطِلُ (dhālika bi-anna Allāha huwa l-ḥaqqu... wa-anna Allāha huwa l-'Alī al-Kabīr – "That is because Allah is the Truth... and Allah is the Most High, the Most Great")

In these clauses, al-Kabīr functions as a nominal predicate, presented as an inherent and unqualified quality of the divine essence. No comparable *huwa*-clause exists with Akbar.

Predicate affirmations without huwa: Direct nominal predication occurs in statements such as Q. 34:23: وَهُوَ الْعَلِيُّ الْكَبِيرُ (wa-huwa l-'Alī al-Kabīr – "and He is the Most High, the Most Great"), or Q. 13:16: وَهُوَ الْعَلِيُّ الْكَبِيرُ (repeated pattern). These structures consistently employ definite intensive forms, avoiding any comparative syntax.

These formulaic patterns recur across both Meccan and Medinan periods, serving didactic (teaching monotheism) and polemical (contrasting Allah with false deities) functions.

6.2 The Role of the Definite Article and Nominal Stability

The definite article (al-) is a critical marker of nominal stability and permanence in Qur'anic divine nomenclature. al-Kabīr appears **almost exclusively with al-** in divine contexts (approximately 95% of its occurrences), functioning as a stable attributive epithet or predicate:

- Q. 40:12: قَالِيَوْمَ لَا يَمْلِكُ مِنْكُمْ نَفْعٌ وَلَا ضَرٌّ وَإِنَّا لَكُمْ لَمِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ (...inna Allāha huwa l-'Alī al-Kabīr – "...indeed, Allah is the Most High, the Most Great")

The definite article signals that the quality is not contingent or comparative but essential and unqualified. In contrast, **Akbar never takes the definite article** in divine predication: no verse contains "al-Akbar" as a fixed epithet. Its occurrences remain indefinite and syntactically embedded in comparative clauses (e.g., "akbar min..." or absolute rhetorical use in Q. 29:45). This morphological absence is systematic and meaningful: it delineates a boundary in Qur'anic divine naming, reserving definite nominal forms for attributes that are revealed as permanent and non-relational.

6.3 Pairing, Thematic Clustering, and Rhetorical Function

Divine attributes rarely appear in isolation; they cluster thematically to convey a balanced, multifaceted portrait of the divine essence:

Thematic pairing: al-Kabīr is frequently conjoined with al-'Alī (the Most High) in six verses (Q. 13:9; 22:62; 31:30; 34:23; 40:12; 13:16), creating a rhythmic emphasis on vertical transcendence and ontological magnitude. Other pairings include al-Ḥakīm (Most Wise), al-Qadīr (All-Powerful), and al-

Muta‘āl (Most Exalted), reinforcing majesty without relational hierarchy.

Rhetorical function of elatives: Akbar serves emphatic, contrastive purposes:

- Q. 29:45: وَذِكْرُ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ (wa-dhikru Allāhi akbar – “and the remembrance of Allah is greater”) — superiority of dhikr over ritual acts.
- Q. 40:10: لَمَقْتُ اللَّهَ أَكْبَرُ مِنْ مَقْتِكُمْ أَنْفُسَكُمْ (la-maqtu Allāhi akbaru min maqtikum anfusakum – “Allah’s hatred is greater than your hatred of yourselves”) — divine judgment over human self-loathing.

These uses are rhetorical and situational, not nominative. They emphasize relational superiority in specific argumentative or supplicatory contexts, but do not establish Akbar as a fixed divine name.

6.4 Frequency and Distribution Insights

Quantitative patterns reinforce qualitative distinctions:

- al-Kabīr appears in divine affirmations in ~95% of its occurrences, distributed across both Meccan (polemical emphasis) and Medinan (legal/ethical contexts) surahs.
- Akbar is limited to ~20 occurrences, predominantly in comparative constructions, with no concentration in divine self-descriptive formulas.
- Negative uses of the root (istikbār, kibr) cluster in condemnations of arrogance (e.g., Pharaoh’s takabbur in Q. 28:39), creating semantic polarity: divine greatness is absolute and praiseworthy; human “greatness” is condemned.

6.5 Theological and Rhetorical Implications

These patterns are not incidental but theologically coherent. They align with Tawhīd by employing absolute, non-relational forms that affirm inherent greatness without implied hierarchy. They uphold Tanzīh by preserving linguistic transcendence (intensive definite forms avoid comparative limitation). Rhetorically, elatives like Akbar serve situational emphasis—negating rivals, exalting worship, or contrasting creation—without entering the fixed nomenclature of divine attributes.

In sum, the Qur’an’s self-descriptive grammar systematically favors nominal, intrinsic expressions (al-Kabīr) for divine greatness, while reserving elatives for rhetorical effect. This linguistic architecture invites believers to approach devotional language with fidelity to the text’s own modes of revelation.

7. Discussion

The empirical results reveal a consistent Qur’anic preference for the intensive definite form al-Kabīr in divine self-description, while confining Akbar to comparative, rhetorical, or situational functions. This morphological and semantic distinction is not accidental but reflects deliberate theological and linguistic design.

Theologically, the pattern safeguards Tawhīd and Tanzīh. Absolute forms (al-Kabīr) affirm greatness as an intrinsic, non-relational quality of the divine essence, free from any implication of gradation or external reference. Comparative

elatives (Akbar), by contrast, presuppose a relational frame (“greater than...”), which could subtly undermine the absoluteness of divine reality. While rhetorical use of Akbar powerfully negates human claims or exalts worship (e.g., Q. 29:45), its confinement to such contexts prevents it from entering the stable nomenclature of divine attributes.

Devotionally, the widespread elevation of “Allāhu Akbar” to quasi-nominal status in ritual and popular piety is understandable: its repetitive invocation across centuries has transformed a comparative phrase into an experiential affirmation of transcendence. Yet, from a Qur’an-centric perspective, this development represents an interpretive extension rather than direct replication of the text’s linguistic idiom. The phrase remains potent precisely because of its comparative force—it declares Allah’s superiority over all rivals—but it does not function as a fixed name equivalent to al-Kabīr, al-Raḥmān, or al-‘Alīm.

Methodologically, the findings underscore the value of prioritizing Qur’anic internal evidence over later enumerative traditions. The absence of “al-Akbar” as a nominal form is not a textual lacuna but a meaningful boundary, reflecting the Qur’an’s commitment to incomparability at the grammatical level. This precision invites contemporary scholarship and practice to re-evaluate how devotional formulas relate to scriptural foundations.

Limitations include the study’s exclusive focus on the Qur’anic text (hadith and tafsīr are bracketed); future research could explore intertextual dynamics or comparative Semitic linguistics. Nonetheless, the results support the conclusion that the Qur’an articulates divine greatness intrinsically and absolutely, reserving comparative forms for rhetorical emphasis rather than nominative establishment.

8. Conclusion

This Qur’an-centric linguistic and theological analysis of the root K-B-R demonstrates that divine self-descriptions of greatness are articulated predominantly through intrinsic, absolute, and non-relational forms, most notably the intensive definite adjective **al-Kabīr**. This form is embedded in stable nominal predicates, formulaic huwa-clauses, and thematic pairings that consistently affirm Allah’s inherent majesty and transcendence. In contrast, the relative **Akbar** appears exclusively in comparative or superlative constructions, serving rhetorical, situational, or emphatic functions without ever being formalized as an independent divine name.

The morphological and semantic distinction carries significant implications: comparative forms inherently evoke relational contrast, which risks subtly conflicting with the Qur’an’s portrayal of divine greatness as boundless, non-relative, and incomparable (Tawhīd and Tanzīh). By privileging intrinsic attributes in divine self-revelation, the Qur’an safeguards the absoluteness of the divine essence while employing elatives to powerfully negate rivals, exalt worship, or contrast creation with Creator.

Devotionally, the phrase “Allāhu Akbar” remains profoundly efficacious as an affirmation of transcendence and sovereignty. Its ritual centrality and emotional resonance are beyond dispute. Yet, fidelity to the Qur’an’s own linguistic precision suggests

that its comparative morphology be understood as emphatic rather than nominative. Recognizing this nuance does not diminish the takbīr's spiritual power; rather, it enriches it by aligning devotional practice more closely with the revelation's deliberate idiom.

Ultimately, this study reaffirms the Qur'an's self-referential authority as the primary criterion for understanding divine attributes. By distinguishing inherent from comparative expressions of greatness, it contributes to a more textually grounded theology and invites believers and scholars alike to engage the sacred text with renewed linguistic and hermeneutical sensitivity—fostering deeper coherence between revelation and lived faith in an era of both continuity and change.

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