The Criteria of an Ideal Leader in QS. Al-Baqarah: 247: An Analysis of Ibn Kathir's Tafsir and Its Relevance to Modern Leadership

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Abstract

Leadership is a vital element in societal and governmental life. In Islam, the concept of leadership is firmly rooted, as reflected in the Qur'an, specifically in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 247. This verse narrates the appointment of Talut as the leader of the Israelites, based on two primary qualifications: extensive knowledge and physical strength. This study aims to analyze the personality traits of a leader based on this verse, using the tafsir *Al-Qur'anul Adzim* by Imam Ibn Kathir as a primary reference. This research employs a qualitative-descriptive method with a library research approach. The primary sources used include Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 247, and the tafsir *Al-Qur'anul Adzim* by Imam Ibn Kathir. Secondary sources consist of books, journals, and articles related to the concept of leadership in Islam. The findings reveal that the main criteria for an ideal leader in the Islamic perspective include extensive knowledge encompassing both religious and general sciences, as well as physical readiness demonstrated through endurance, courage, and the ability to face challenges. Moreover, *amanah* (trustworthiness) emerges as a fundamental principle that includes responsibility, justice, and moral integrity. In the modern context, these values are highly relevant in the process of selecting and developing leaders to address the complexities of contemporary challenges. This study contributes to the leadership literature by highlighting that the Qur'an provides examples of criteria for selecting leaders and offers a new perspective on ideal leadership.

Keywords: Ideal leader criteria, Ibn Kathir's tafsir, Leadership in Islam, Modern leadership relevance, QS al-Baqarah: 247

Abstrak

Kepemimpinan merupakan elemen penting dalam kehidupan bermasyarakat dan bernegara. Dalam Islam, konsep kepemimpinan memiliki landasan yang kokoh, salah satunya termuat dalam Al-Qur'an Surat Al-Baqarah Ayat 247. Ayat ini menceritakan penunjukan Thalut sebagai pemimpin Bani Israil, yang didasarkan pada dua kualifikasi utama: ilmu yang luas dan tubuh yang perkasa. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kepribadian seorang pemimpin berdasarkan ayat tersebut melalui pendekatan tafsir Al-Qur'anul Adzim karya Imam Ibnu Katsir. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif-deskriptif dengan pendekatan studi kepustakaan (*library research*). Sumber primer yang digunakan adalah Al-Qur'an Surat Al-Baqarah Ayat 247 dan kitab tafsir Al-Qur'anul Adzim karya Imam Ibnu Katsir. Sementara itu, sumber sekunder berupa buku, jurnal, dan artikel terkait konsep kepemimpinan dalam Islam. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kriteria utama seorang pemimpin ideal dalam perspektif Islam meliputi ilmu pengetahuan yang luas, yang mencakup ilmu agama dan ilmu umum, serta kesiapan fisik yang ditunjukkan melalui ketahanan, keberanian, dan kemampuan menghadapi tantangan. Selain itu, amanah menjadi prinsip fundamental yang mencakup tanggung jawab, keadilan, dan integritas moral. Dalam konteks modern, nilai-nilai ini relevan dalam proses seleksi dan pembinaan pemimpin untuk menghadapi kompleksitas tantangan zaman. Penelitian

ini berkontribusi pada literatur kepemimpinan bahwa Al Qur'an telah memberikan contoh kriteria dalam memilih pemimpin dan pandangan baru kepemimpinan yang ideal.

Kata Kunci: Kriteria pemimpin ideal, Tafsir Ibnu Katsir, Kepemimpinan dalam Islam, Relevansi kepemimpinan modern, QS Al-Baqarah: 247.

Introduction

Leadership plays a vital role in achieving progress, justice, and social stability across communities and nations. In the Islamic worldview, leadership—referred to as *imāmah*, *khilāfah*, or *ulūl-al-amr*—is not merely a position of authority, but a sacred trust that demands moral integrity and spiritual accountability. It is an obligation to serve rather than a privilege to dominate (Dozan & al-Basir, 2020). However, in the contemporary socio-political reality, leadership is often determined by popularity, wealth, or political interest rather than moral character, competence, or knowledge—leading to inefficiency and growing public distrust in leadership structures (Muliyanty et al., 2022).

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According to Prof. M. Quraish Shihab, ideal leadership should be grounded in three key pillars: faith (*īmān*), knowledge (*ʿilm*), and righteous action (*ʿamal*). These pillars reflect the essence of the Qur'anic concept *ahsani taqwīm* in QS At-Tīn: 4, which emphasizes a harmonious relationship between human beings, God, society, and nature (Suharnia Wati et al., 2021; ejournal.aripafi.or.id). The story of Luqman (QS Luqman: 13–19) further reinforces these principles by highlighting virtues such as monotheism, patience, and moral responsibility—core attributes of ethical leadership (Firmansyah et al., 2021).

Despite a growing body of literature on Islamic leadership, most studies remain focused on general ethical dimensions or prophetic models without offering detailed exegetical insight into specific Qur'anic narratives. One such narrative—often overlooked—is the

appointment of Ṭālūt as leader in QS Al-Baqarah: 247. The verse recounts how Ṭālūt was divinely appointed to lead Bani Isra'il, even though his community objected to his lack of noble lineage and wealth. The Qur'an, however, affirms his qualification based on two key traits: ʿilm (knowledge) and quwwah (physical strength).

This Qur'anic case offers rich insights into the theology of leadership, as interpreted in *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ʿAẓīm* by Ibn Kathīr. He emphasizes that leadership should be rooted in preparedness, commitment, and trustworthiness, not in material status (Ibnu Katsir, 2002; Ibnu Katsir, 2013). Fatma et al. (2025) demonstrate that the people's rejection of Ṭālūt was based on tribal and economic bias, which the Qur'an corrects by foregrounding meritocratic values. The similarly reveals that the divine choice of Ṭālūt served as a moral lesson for society to prioritize substance over appearance.

Dozan and al-Basir (2020) identify three essential traits of Qur'anic leadership: courage (*mujāhid*), intellectual competence (*ʿālim*), and willingness to sacrifice (*mutāḍy*), all of which are embodied by Ṭālūt. These insights are corroborated by other scholarly, which argue that true leadership in Islam combines both ethical and strategic capabilities. Fauzi et al. (2024) add that justice is a central theme in both Ibn Kathīr's and Sayyid Quṭb's interpretations of Qur'anic leadership, reinforcing that justice is not a peripheral virtue but a foundational one.

The research problem addressed in this study is: How does QS Al-Baqarah: 247, particularly through the exegesis of Ibn Kathīr, define the core attributes of ideal leadership in Islam, and how can these be contextualized in response to modern leadership failures?

This research question arises from a critical discrepancy between normative Islamic ideals and existing leadership practices. While Islamic teachings emphasize that leadership should be based on knowledge, physical and moral strength, and trustworthiness (ʿilm, quwwah, and amānah), the reality often shows that leaders are chosen based on superficial qualities such as popularity, wealth, or lineage. Although many contemporary studies highlight the importance of ethical leadership, they seldom engage deeply with QS Al-Baqarah: 247 as a foundational Qur'anic reference, nor do they provide a comparative analysis between classical *tafsīr* and modern leadership issues.

This study lies in its exegetical depth and contextual relevance. Unlike previous research that treats leadership in general ethical terms, this article provides a focused *tafsīr*-based analysis of QS Al-Baqarah: 247 using *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, contextualized with socio-political issues of leadership legitimacy and public trust today. It fills a gap by highlighting

the theological criteria for leadership in Islam—namely ʿilm, quwwah, and amānah—and evaluating their applicability in contemporary Muslim society.

Therefore, this study aims to (1) analyze the Qur'anic narrative in QS Al-Baqarah: 247 through the lens of Ibn Kathīr's *tafsīr*, (2) identify and elaborate the three core leadership traits presented therein, and (3) assess the relevance of these traits in addressing current leadership crises. This research offers both a normative framework and a practical contribution to Islamic leadership discourse rooted in scriptural authenticity and moral clarity.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using a thematic (mawḍūʿī) tafsīr analysis method. The type of research was descriptive-analytical, aimed at systematically examining the leadership values contained in Surah Al-Baqarah [2]:247 based on the classical exegesis *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ʿAẓīm* by Imam Ibn Kathīr. The data analyzed in this study consisted of textual content from the Qur'an and its interpretation, particularly focusing on the characteristics of Ṭālūt's leadership as presented in the verse. The data sources included primary sources—the Qur'an and the tafsir by Ibn Kathīr—as well as secondary sources such as scholarly articles, journals, and books relevant to Qur'anic leadership studies (Desi Lestari et al., 2022; Baidan, 2001).

Data collection was carried out through a literature review, focusing on collecting, organizing, and critically reading classical and contemporary references related to the topic. The data analysis technique employed thematic interpretation to identify and categorize key leadership traits, namely ʿilm (knowledge), quwwah (strength), and amānah (trust), as emphasized in the verse and its tafsir. The strength of this method lies in its ability to deeply explore Qur'anic meanings and relate them to ethical and contemporary leadership discourse. However, a limitation of this approach is its reliance on textual sources without empirical validation, which may restrict the applicability of findings to real-world leadership contexts. Nonetheless, this method ensured a focused and in-depth understanding of Islamic leadership principles grounded in authoritative tafsir literature.

Results and Discussion

A. Qur'anic Perspective on Leadership and Its Criteria

1. Leadership Terminology and Its Meanings in the Qur'an

In the Qur'an, the concept of leadership is expressed through various terms such as *khalīfah*, *imām*, and *ulū al-amr*, each carrying specific meanings and contextual roles

(Muzammil, 2017). First, *Khalīfah* refers to the role of human beings as stewards or successors on earth, entrusted with the responsibility to preserve and manage nature in accordance with divine guidance (Dede & Mahmud, 2023). As stated in Surah al-Baqarah [2]:30: "And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed, I will make upon the earth a khalīfah.'" This verse affirms the role of humans as entrusted leaders responsible for wise governance of the earth (Suharnia Wati et al., 2024).

Second, the term *Imām* denotes someone who serves as a guide or leader in religious and social contexts. In Surah al-Anbiyā' [21]:73, Allah says: "And We made them leaders, guiding by Our command." According to Muhammad Abduh, as cited in the Tafsir of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia, the position of *imām* in this verse refers to prophets and messengers chosen by Allah to lead humanity (Indonesia, 2004).

Third, *ulū al-amr* refers to those in authority or leaders within a society who are responsible for upholding justice and the law. Surah al-Nisā' [4]:59 states: "O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you." This verse emphasizes the importance of obeying just and accountable leaders in executing their responsibilities.

From these different terms, it can be concluded that leadership in the Qur'anic perspective is a divine trust granted to individuals who are expected to guide, direct, and establish justice in society. A leader must embody traits such as justice, trustworthiness, and the ability to set a good example.

2. Qur'anic Leadership Qualities in the Story of Ṭālūt (Surah al-Baqarah [2]:247)

Surah al-Baqarah [2]:247 narrates the story of the Israelites and their request for a king. The verse reads:

> *"Their prophet said to them, 'Indeed, Allah has appointed Ṭālūt as your king.' They said, 'How can he have kingship over us while we are more worthy of kingship than him and he has not been given any measure of wealth?' He said, 'Indeed, Allah has chosen him over you and has increased him abundantly in knowledge and stature. And Allah gives His sovereignty to whom He wills. And Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing.'"*

According to *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm* by Imam Ibn Kathīr, this verse provides significant insight into the characteristics required for leadership in Islam ("Terjemah Tafsir Ibnu Katsir," 2024). Ibn Kathīr explains that after Prophet Samuel (*Shamwīl*) was sent to the Israelites, they demanded a king to lead them in battle. However, the selection of a leader, as explained by the prophet, was not based on lineage or wealth but on divine choice.

Allah appointed Ṭālūt as king despite his lack of noble lineage or material wealth, which signifies that true leadership is not based on social class or riches, but on inner qualities. Ibn Kathīr emphasizes that key leadership criteria include knowledge, physical strength, and piety. He notes that Ṭālūt was chosen for his intellectual capability, physical fitness, and obedience to Allah—traits deemed essential for facing challenges and guiding the community.

This interpretation highlights the Qur'anic message that effective leadership is grounded in a combination of moral integrity, intellectual competence, and physical ability, rather than superficial attributes like social status or wealth (Nizaruddin, 2022).

B. Assessing Divine Standards of Leadership in the Story of Ṭālūt

Al-Baqarah verse 247 emphasizes that Ṭālūt was chosen as a leader because of his physical strength and depth of knowledge. In this context, physical strength should not be interpreted merely as a bodily attribute but rather as a symbol of resilience and preparedness—qualities necessary for leading in times of war and societal conflict (von Clausewitz, 2008). This interpretation is affirmed in *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, which underlines that the selection of Ṭālūt was a divine decision, not a result of social consensus or inheritance (Terjemah Tafsir Ibnu Katsir, 2024). In Islamic leadership tradition, this illustrates that eligibility for leadership requires both external competence and internal readiness to shoulder collective responsibility.

The Qur'anic emphasis on knowledge and strength as leadership criteria aligns with contemporary leadership theories such as *Transformational Leadership*, which assert that a leader must inspire, mobilize, and elevate their followers toward collective goals (Northouse, 2013). A leader's role is not only administrative but also pedagogical and spiritual—shaping ethical direction while navigating complex societal dynamics. Recent research from Islamic contexts confirms this, finding that transformational leadership rooted in Islamic values enhances organizational commitment and staff performance (Sulaiman et al., 2024).

Further, the integration of spiritual intelligence into leadership has been shown to strengthen resilience and ethical orientation, reflecting what Ṭālūt embodies—a leader with both physical and moral fortitude (Arham et al., 2024). Leaders who cultivate spiritual intelligence demonstrate higher resilience in crises, aligning with Qur'anic principles of strength (*al-qawiyy*) and trustworthiness (*al-amin*) as they guide their communities (Arham et al., 2024).

Research in Islamic educational settings suggests that Muslim leaders who model prophetic and servant leadership positively influence job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviors (Santoso, 2023; Ifani & Kartiwi, 2024). These leadership styles resonate

with Ṭālūt's dual role as a warrior and scholar—leading not by authority alone but by example and service.

Empirical literature also indicates that transformational leadership enhances innovation and organizational performance when combined with Islamic ethical frameworks (Karimi et al., 2023; Sulaeman, 2020). This supports the Qur'anic model that knowledge and strength are not just symbolic but functional assets in navigating complex, modern environments.

Finally, qualitative studies among Islamic school principals highlight how leadership grounded in knowledge, justice, and integrity—echoing Ṭālūt's qualities—leads to better organizational outcomes and higher social trust (Triyantoro et al., 2024; Kurniawan et al., 2024). These findings suggest that the Qur'anic criteria remain relevant and operational when properly implemented in contemporary organizational contexts.

Public discourse also warns that modern secular leadership often lacks these foundational virtues (Reddit discussion, 2023), further affirming that the divine criteria outlined in 2:247 remain essential benchmarks for effective leadership.

C. Reevaluating Contemporary Leadership through Qur'anic Ethics

The narrative of Ṭālūt in *Surah Al-Baqarah* verse 247 offers critical insights into the divine parameters of leadership—specifically emphasizing strength and knowledge as prerequisites for just and effective governance. In the field of Quranic and Tafsir studies, such findings can contribute significantly to the discourse on Islamic leadership models, especially when contextualized within modern socio-political realities. The application of these Qur'anic values in analyzing contemporary leadership provides a valuable framework for assessing ethical governance beyond traditional theological boundaries (Al-Attas, 2021; Ismail, 2020).

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan serves as a compelling example of a leader whose religious identity, strategic governance, and resilience reflect aspects of Ṭālūt's character. His political rise and commitment to re-Islamization and economic reform in Turkey resonate with the Qur'anic model of leadership grounded in competence rather than lineage (Junaidi, 2016; Bell, 2021; Domo et al., 2018). This example challenges the notion that modern leadership is purely secular and illustrates the enduring relevance of Qur'anic values in political ethics. Erdoğan's leadership can also be linked to the concept of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah in governance, where public welfare (maṣlaḥah) is central (Yusoff & Al-Sharif, 2022).

Similarly, Sheikh Hasina's leadership in Bangladesh underlines how strength and justice—central in Qur'anic leadership—are not gender-bound. Her policies on education

reform, women's empowerment, and anti-corruption initiatives align with the Qur'anic ideal of inclusive and morally grounded governance (Ruhullah & Qodir, 2020). From a tafsir perspective, her example reinforces the view that leadership legitimacy in Islam is based on merit and ethical capacity, not gender or lineage (Fakih & Wardani, 2023).

Another pertinent case is Dr. Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, the former President of Mauritius and a renowned scientist. Her emphasis on transparency, education, and sustainable development shows how leadership grounded in knowledge aligns with the Qur'anic vision of intellectual and ethical integrity. The integration of scientific insight and public service echoes Ṭālūt's combination of mental and moral competence (Kamaruzzaman & Salim, 2022). Tafsir scholars may draw from her example to reframe interpretations of knowledge (ʿilm) in the Qur'an—not as abstract theory but as a transformative force in society (Ali & Zainuddin, 2021).

King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud's Vision 2030 further illustrates how Islamic leadership can address modern challenges while maintaining a religious framework. His reform agenda—which includes economic diversification and youth empowerment—reflects strategic thinking akin to Ṭālūt's divine appointment during national turmoil. His leadership underlines the Qur'anic principle that governance must balance religious ethics with pragmatic innovation (Hassan, 2020; Alsulami, 2023).

From a broader academic perspective, these case studies demonstrate how Tafsir studies can transcend exegetical boundaries and offer relevant critiques on political leadership and moral authority. Integrating the Ṭālūt paradigm into contemporary analysis fosters a dynamic approach in Tafsir studies, especially in understanding governance, justice, and ethics in the Muslim world. Moreover, it encourages a reevaluation of traditional commentaries (tafsir turāthi) to engage more directly with lived realities (Abdullah & Nisa, 2022).

Future research could focus on comparative studies between Qur'anic leadership models and non-Islamic ethical frameworks, exploring intersections that promote global ethical governance. Additionally, studies might analyze how tafsir literature responds—or fails to respond—to modern political phenomena, particularly in Muslim-majority countries. Such contributions would not only enrich the field of Quranic studies but also strengthen its practical application in public discourse and policymaking (Azmi & Hamid, 2021; Karim & Fauzi, 2023).

In conclusion, the leadership model of Ṭālūt as derived from Al-Baqarah 247 is not only a theological archetype but a timeless ethical construct. Through a critical engagement

with modern examples, this study affirms the relevance of Qur'anic paradigms in guiding contemporary leadership. This reinforces the potential of tafsir as a transformative discipline capable of engaging meaningfully with societal, political, and moral questions in the modern era.

Conclusion

This study found that the Qur'anic concept of leadership is grounded in spiritual integrity, justice, intellectual competence, and trustworthiness. Qur'anic figures such as Ṭālūt and Prophet Sulaymān exemplify these principles through their actions and decisions, which reflect prophetic leadership values. These findings affirm the relevance of Qur'anic values to contemporary leadership theories such as authentic and transformational leadership, which emphasize vision, role modeling, and empowerment.

Theoretically, this research enriches the discourse on Islamic leadership by clarifying the connection between revealed teachings and modern leadership approaches. Practically, the findings offer a foundational reference for developing leadership training models based on Qur'anic values, applicable in various sectors including education, governance, and religious organizations.

Future studies are encouraged to explore the implementation of Qur'anic leadership principles within specific socio-cultural contexts and to examine community responses to leadership models rooted in spiritual values.

In sum, this article contributes to the advancement of Islamic leadership studies by offering an integrative approach that bridges revelation-based insights and contemporary theory, while also promoting ethical leadership in modern life.

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