

Fatalistic Reconsideration Towards the Voluntaristics of Muslims in the Qur'an: A Study of the Thought of Shakīb Arsalān

Miftahur Rahman | PTIQ University, Jakarta | Indonesia

*Correspondence: Miftahrahman9@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the thought of Syakīb Arsalān regarding the reconsideration of fatalistic attitudes toward voluntarism from the Qur'anic perspective. The decline of Muslims historically has been largely caused by the dominance of fatalistic attitudes arising from misunderstandings of the concept of destiny. This fatalism generates passive, apathetic, and surrendering attitudes that inhibit the development of knowledge, politics, and the social life of Muslims. By contrast, the Qur'an firmly rejects absolute determinism and affirms the principle of voluntarism that places human beings as active subjects in determining their fate through effort, striving, and collective responsibility. This study employs library research methodology with a thematic (maudhu'i) exegetical approach. The primary sources are Arsalān's work *Limādhā Ta'akhhara al-Muslimūn wa Limādhā Taqaddama Ghayruhum* and Qur'anic verses related to striving, fate, and social change, complemented by interpretations from classical and modern exegetes. The findings indicate that Arsalān's thought is consistent with the *kasb* theological doctrine and exegetes' views on the active role of humans. The integration of Arsalān's thought with Qur'anic solutions produces a paradigm of Muslim revival that balances faith in destiny and the praxis of diligent effort.

Keywords: Syakīb Arsalān, Fatalism, Voluntarism, Al-Qur'an, Islamic Revival

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INTRODUCTION

In the history of Islamic civilization, the rise of the ummah has become one of the main themes that Muslim scholars continue to discuss. This phenomenon is a serious concern, especially during the decline of Muslims which is marked by weaknesses in various aspects, such as political, social, economic, and intellectual. During those times, Muslims experienced a very significant downturn, thus inviting fundamental questions about how Muslims can rise again and restore their glory as pioneers of world civilization.

The issue of *free will* and fatalism is still relevant to be studied today because these issues are closely related to human attitudes. People who have liberal tendencies in lifestyle are certainly more likely to achieve a more established life than those who follow a fatalist attitude (Nasution, 1986). Fatalism, in the context of Muslims, is often understood as the belief that everything is determined entirely by destiny so that human effort has no significant influence

on outcomes. The Qur'an affirms that Allah changes the fate of a people if they themselves try to change their situation (QS. al-Ra'd [13]: 11).

History records that in times of decline, some Muslims were trapped in a narrow interpretation of destiny that tended to resemble *the Jabariyyah* understanding. Syakīb Aṣṣalān in his work *Limādhā Ta'akkhara al-Muslimūn wa Limādhā Taqaddama Ghayrhum* emphasizes that one of the causes of the decline of the ummah is a misunderstanding of destiny that kills the fighting power. According to him, *pseudo-religious fatalism* has been used by some rulers to maintain *the status quo* and silence criticism, thus exacerbating the deterioration of civilization (Aṣṣalān, 1973).

As opposed to fatalism, there is a concept of voluntarism that emphasizes human free *will* in determining the course of his life, and that individuals are responsible for the choices and actions he takes. Islam provides a wide space for voluntarism, by emphasizing that human beings have an active role in determining their fate, certainly within the limits of Allah's will. The Word of Allah in QS. al-Ra'd [13]:11 which states that Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change their own circumstances is textual evidence that social change requires the active participation of human beings (al-Rāzī, 1981).

Previous research tends to separate the analysis of the thought of reformers with the interpretation of Qur'anic verses, so that the strategic value of Aṣṣalān's ideas has not been maximized in strengthening the progressive paradigm of religion (Kusnadi, 2018). Studies that integrate Aṣṣalān's thought into the study of Qur'anic interpretation are still minimal. This research is here to fill this gap by analyzing textually and hermeneutically how Aṣṣalān reconstructs the concept of destiny and endeavor from the perspective of the Qur'an, comparing the reconstruction with classical positions (*Jabariyyah*, *Qadariyyah*, *kasb*), and examining the relevance of Aṣṣalān's rhetoric to the contemporary context.

The purpose of this research is to examine Aṣṣalān's thought as an effort to reconsider the fatalistic understanding, analyze his views on the fatalistic tendencies of Muslims, examine the concept of voluntarism in the perspective of the Qur'an, and discover the implications of his thinking on the revival efforts of Muslims in the modern era.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a descriptive-analytical qualitative research method with a library *research* approach. The *maudhu'i* (thematic) tafsir approach is applied to collect and analyze verses related to the themes of effort, destiny, and social change comprehensively by considering their socio-historical context.

The primary data sources in this study consist of two main components. First, Syakīb Aṣṣalān's work entitled *Limādhā Ta'akkhara al-Muslimūn wa Limādhā Taqaddama Ghayrhum*, which discusses the causes of the decline of Muslims and offers a solution to the resurrection. Second, verses of the Qur'an that are relevant to the research theme, especially QS. al-Najm [53]:39, QS. al-Ra'd [13]:11, and QS. al-Ankabūt [29]:69. Secondary sources of data are the classical commentaries of al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Rāzī, and al-Quraish Ṭubī, as well as modern commentaries from Ibn 'Āsyūr, Sayyid Qutb, and M. Quraish Shihab. In addition, relevant journals, dissertations, and contemporary research are also used.

Data collection techniques are carried out through literature studies with tracing and analysis of relevant literature materials. Data were collected through an in-depth study of primary and secondary sources. The data analysis technique applied is content *analysis* with an inductive approach to understand the symbolic messages in the document, especially the works of Aṣṣalān and the interpretations used. A comparative analysis was also carried out between the interpretation of Aṣṣalān and the interpretation of classical and modern mufasssīr to map similarities and differences in interpreting the principles of the Qur'an related to efforts and social change.

RESULTS

Fatalism and Voluntarism in an Islamic Theological Perspective

Fatalism is a philosophical and theological view that believes that all events that occur in this world have been predetermined by absolute force or will, so that humans have no role or power in determining the course of their lives (Solomon, 1993). In this framework, whatever man does is considered not to change the end result that has been destined. In the context of Islam, the fatalistic view is often associated with *the Jabariyyah* group who believe that human beings have no free will at all, and that all their actions are manifestations of the will of Allah alone (Nasution, 1986).

The results of the study of Islamic theological schools show four main positions regarding the relationship between destiny and human will. First, the *Jabariyyah school* which affirms the doctrine of determinism emphasizes that all human actions occur due to coercion (*jabr*) by the will of Allah so that human beings in essence do not have effective freedom to determine their actions. Al-Baghdadi noted that *the Jabariyyah* is a group that denies the existence of free will in human beings (al-Baghdādī, 1998). Second, the *Qadariyyah school of Qadariyyah*, which is contrary to *Jabariyyah*, emphasizes the absolute freedom of man in determining his actions and rejects the assumption that all human deeds have been determined by the will of Allah (Nasution, 1986). Third, the *Ash'ariyyah school* which seeks to find a middle ground through the concept of *kasb* (acquisition), where Allah creates all actions, but humans acquire their actions through will, thus providing space for moral responsibility (al-Ash'arī, 2005). Fourth, the *Maturidiyyah school* of view that human beings have the will and ability to choose, but these choices are within the scope of destiny and the knowledge of Allah, so that human beings are real actors (*fa'il haqiqi*) of their actions (al-Māturīdī, in Nasution, 1986).

From the study of the verses of the Qur'an, it is found that Islam consistently rejects fatalism that denies the will and responsibility of man. Some key verses that affirm the principle of voluntarism include QS. al-Kahf [18]:29 which affirms the freedom of man's will in choosing between faith and disbelief; QS. Fussilat [41]:46 which states that every deed of man has a direct impact on himself; QS. al-Ra'd [13]:11 which affirms that Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change the condition of themselves; and QS. al-Najm [53]:39 which states that man only obtains what he has earned. These verses show that the Qur'an does not promote an absolute deterministic view, but strikes a balance between divine destiny and human responsibility (Shihab, 2002).

Shakīb Aarsalān's Thoughts on Fatalism and Voluntarism

Shakīb Aarsalān (1869–1946) was a modern Muslim thinker born in Choueifat, Lebanon, to a noble family. He was educated in Beirut and Damascus, where he studied linguistics, history, literature, and interpretation. In his youth, Aarsalān was deeply inspired by the thoughts of figures such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh who encouraged the revival of Muslims through *ijtihad* and social reform (Cleveland, 2000). He is widely known as a politician, historian, and writer who actively voiced the idea of Pan-Islamism and resistance to colonialism, even earning the title of *Amirul Bayan* among Muslim scholars and intellectuals.

Aarsalān's critique of fatalism is one of the most fundamental dimensions of his thought. In his work *Limādhā Ta'akbhara al-Muslimūn wa Limādhā Taqaddama Ghayruhum*, he stated that the decline of Muslims is not due to religious teachings, but because the ummah abandons the active spirit of learning and *ijtihad* and is trapped in pessimism, inferiority, and quick despair (Aarsalān, 1973). He criticized Muslims who misuse the concepts of *qadha* and *qadar* to legitimize regression, because many people use destiny as an excuse not to try, even though Islamic teachings actually oblige humans to strive and be responsible for their choices and actions.

Aarsalān identified a number of internal causes of the decline of Muslims which included abandoning knowledge and the spirit of *ijtihad*, the loss of the ethic of hard work and discipline, and the weak unity of the ummah due to divisions caused by sectarian and political fanaticism. He wrote explicitly in his work that the chronic diseases that afflict Muslims in this era are ignorance and laziness (Aarsalān, 1973). Furthermore, he pointed out that the Europeans did not precede the Muslims except by hard work, in fact they had taken much of the good morals and teachings of Islam and applied them, while the Muslims abandoned them so that they were left behind (Aarsalān, 1973).

In order to answer the problem of fatalism, Aarsalān offered the concept of voluntarism which became the foundation for the idea of revival that he called for. First, Islam is understood as a religion of action, not a religion of blind surrender. Aarsalān emphasized that adversity, laziness, or ignorance are not Allah's irreversible destiny, but the consequences of the negligence and inactivity of Muslims themselves. He wrote that fate is not an excuse for the weak, but the secret of courage in the hearts of warriors (Aarsalān, 1973). Second, education, knowledge, and *ijtihad* are seen as the main means of revival. Aarsalān emphasized that Muslims will not rise unless they combine religious science and world science (Aarsalān, 1973). Third, Aarsalān's voluntarism is collective, not only calling for individual transformation, but also demanding the active role of scholars, intellectuals, and rulers in the project of revival.

Aarsalān uses a large number of Qur'anic verses as a theological argument to reject fatalism and revive the work ethic. The verses he used include QS. at-Taubah [9]:105, QS. Jonah [10]:41, QS. Muhammad [47]:33, QS. al-Ahqaf [46]:19, QS. Fatir [35]:10, QS. an-Nahl [16]:111, QS. ar-Rum [30]:41, and QS. az-Zalzalah (99):8. The entire verse is directed at affirming the close relationship between human deeds and their reward, thus refuting the attitude of effortless surrender that takes refuge behind the word destiny.

The relevance of Aṣṣalān's thought to the Qur'an can be seen from three main points of convergence. First, regarding the change of fate that depends on effort, Aṣṣalān made QS. al-Ra'd [13]:11 as the most central theological foundation. Al-Rāzī in *Maḥatib al-Ghayb* explains that this verse shows that Allah's deeds in making changes are delayed after the deeds of the servant (al-Rāzī, 1981). Second, related to the seriousness that invites divine guidance, the verse QS. al-'Ankabūt [29]:69 affirms the principle of seriousness as the main condition for the coming of divine guidance. Ibn Kathīr explained that the meaning of jihad in this verse is not limited to war, but includes jihad with knowledge, charity, and efforts to improve society (Ibn Kathīr, 1999). Third, regarding the rejection of the pretext of fate for laziness, QS. al-Jumu'ah [62]:10 is the argument that Islam rejects the pretext of destiny as an excuse for laziness. Al-Maraghī explained that this verse contains the teaching of the balance of life between worship and worldly endeavors that complement each other (al-Marāghī, 1946).

Comparative Analysis of Fatalism and Voluntarism

The comparison between fatalism and voluntarism results in a fundamental difference in the view of man's position before fate. From the philosophical aspect, fatalism emphasizes absolute determination and lowers the role of human will so that individuals tend to be passive, while voluntarism emphasizes will as the main principle so that individuals still have the capacity to choose, act, and be responsible. From the theological aspect, extreme fatalism emphasizes divine determination so that human moral responsibility is reduced, while voluntarism balances God's will and human freedom while maintaining the principles of monotheism and God's justice. From a moral and ethical aspect, fatalism has the potential to weaken ethical awareness because human actions are considered to have no effect on the final outcome, while voluntarism asserts moral responsibility and encourages individuals to do good and prevent evil. From the social and psychological aspects, fatalism tends to lead to passivity, dependence on fate, and decreased social initiative, while voluntarism encourages awareness of social responsibility, motivation, and active participation in societal change (Fischer, 2006; Nasution, 1986).

This difference in approach also appears in Islamic tafsir and philosophical texts. Ibn 'Ashur in *al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir* is more inclined to a moderate approach by emphasizing that Allah does know and govern all things, but man is given the ability to choose within the limits determined by God's law (Ibn 'Āsyūr, 1984). Contemporary thinkers such as Fazlur Rahman have also criticized the deterministic view that he believes arose due to a legalistic reading of revelation. He emphasized that revelation contains not only laws, but also ethical principles that demand personal responsibility, and this only makes sense if the human will is recognized (Rahman, 1982).

DISCUSSION

Reconsideration of Fatalism in the Framework of Interpretation and Thought of Aṣṣalān

The findings of this study confirm that Aṣṣalān's thinking on the reconsideration of fatalism towards voluntarism has a strong theological foundation in the Qur'an. Aṣṣalān does

not reject the concept of *qadar* as a whole, but rather returns the understanding of the ummah to the doctrine of *proportional ikhtiyyar* as emphasized in the *Ahlussunnah* tradition. This approach is an epistemological deconstruction of the excessive *interpretation of Jabariyyah*, not a rejection of the concept of destiny itself.

Arsalān's idea is in line with the view of the great mufasssirs about the relationship between destiny and effort. Al-Rāzī in *Mafatih al-Ghayb* affirms that true tawakkal must be preceded by effort, and that tawakkal that comes before effort is reprehensible laziness (al-Rāzī, 1981). Quraish Shihab interprets the verse about tawakkal as an invitation to balance careful planning and inner dependence on Allah (Shihab, 2002). These views consistently support the voluntarist position championed by Arsalān.

Muhammad Abduh's thought in *al-'Urwah al-Wusqa* together with Jamaluddin al-Afghani provides an important historical context that the *understanding of qada'* and *qadar* has been distorted into fatalism, even though the understanding actually contains dynamic elements that made Muslims in the classical era able to spread Islam to Spain and create a high civilization (Abduh and Rida, 1990). It is this distortion that Arsalān criticizes and is the subject of reconsideration in this study. Thus, the idea of Arsalān is a continuation of the renewal project that had been started by previous generations.

Harun Nasution (1986) shows that the dominance of fatalistic thinking in the history of Islam results in the stagnation of the ummah, while rational-ethical thinking that gives human freedom opens up space for revival. These findings reinforce the relevance of Arsalān's critique of fatalism. Meanwhile, Kusnadi (2018) revealed that the influence of *Jabariyyah theology* in Muslim society tends to give rise to a mindset of total surrender to destiny so as to weaken work ethic, educational motivation, and the spirit of development of the ummah. Arsalān correctly identified the root of this problem long before these contemporary studies.

Arsalān Voluntarism and Its Implications for the Revival of the Ummah

The voluntarism formulated by Arsalān stems from the belief that human beings have the freedom and responsibility to change their destiny through awareness, knowledge, and hard work. This concept has four interrelated pillars. The first pillar is the rejection of fatalistic and passive attitudes. The second pillar is the mastery of science and educational reform that integrates the religious and secular dimensions. The third pillar is the unity of the people and the solidarity of the faith that transcends ethnic and national boundaries. The fourth pillar is political independence from colonialism as a condition for the implementation of reform agendas.

The concept of active tawakkal developed by Arsalān was fundamentally different from Sufistic quietism, which he saw as weakening the vitality of the ummah. For him, the correct tawakkal must go through two stages, namely maximum effort through planning, strategy, resource collection, and hard work; then the complete surrender of the results to Allah with the realization that the final control is in His hands (Arsalān, 1973). This model is in line with the hadith of the Prophet narrated by al-Tirmidhi about the command to tie a camel before making a camel a hat.

William L. Cleveland (2000) describes Aṣṣalān as one of the few early Arab intellectuals who attempted to combine religious beliefs with historical awareness that socio-political change required human action, not just prayer. Rachid Ghannouchi interprets Aṣṣalān's voluntarism as an Islamic liberation theology that empowers Muslims to view change as a divine obligation, not a passive wait (Ghannouchi, 1993). These assessments show that Aṣṣalān's contribution goes beyond the historical context of the colonial period and remains relevant to the discourse of contemporary Muslim revival.

Albert Hourani (1983) described Aṣṣalān as a reform preacher and political thinker who believed that Islam was not at odds with progress and modernity. Ismail Raji al-Faruqi and AbdulHamid AbuSulayman through the concept of *Islamization of Knowledge* emphasized that the integration between religious science and modern science is the key to building a progressive and civilized Islamic society (al-Faruqi and AbuSulayman, 1989). This idea is in line with Aṣṣalān's call about the need to combine religious science and world science as the foundation of revival.

Theological and Social Implications

The theological implications of this study show that the reconsideration of the fatalistic understanding towards voluntaristion is not just an academic issue, but has a direct impact on the lives of Muslims. First, theologically, this research reinforces the view that faith in destiny should give birth to optimism and fighting spirit, not a debilitating attitude of resignation. Quraish Shihab in *Tafsir al-Misbah* emphasizes this view (Shihab, 2002), and Sayyid Qutb through his work *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* adds that the verses of destiny must be understood proportionately so as not to be manipulated into a pretext to perpetuate oppression or laziness (Qutb, in Ibn Kathir, 1999).

Second, socially, this study confirms that psychological fatalism has an impact that goes beyond the personal realm. Excessive resignation can be contagious and form a collective culture that is reluctant to change and tends to maintain the *status quo* (Seligman, in Ancok, 1994). In the long term, societies with high levels of fatalism are at risk of social and economic stagnation due to the lack of motivation to transform. Aṣṣalān identifies these social mechanisms precisely in the historical context of the 20th century and offers solutions through collective voluntarism.

Third, this research has implications for the development of thematic interpretation studies (*maudhu'i*) that relate the text of the Qur'an to contemporary social issues. As emphasized by M. Quraish Shihab, the thematic approach in tafsir allows the Qur'an to be understood in relation to issues such as social justice, democracy, and the progress of the ummah (Shihab, 1996). Fazlur Rahman in *Islam and Modernity* states that fatalistic understandings should be avoided because they are contrary to the dynamic principles of Islam that are in line with the development and progress of society (Rahman, 1982).

CONCLUSION

This research yielded four main conclusions. First, Shaykh Aṣṣalān's thought proved to be the basis for a valid theoretical reconsideration of the fatalistic understanding towards

the voluntaristic paradigm. Aرسالān does not reject the concept of *qadar* in Islam, but rather returns the understanding of the ummah to a proportionate balance between divine destiny and human endeavor as emphasized in the *Ahlussunnah tradition*

Second, according to Aرسالān, the decline of Muslims is not caused by Islamic teachings, but by the abuse of the concept of destiny as a legitimacy of laziness, ignorance, and inactivity. His criticism of fatalism is constructive because it is accompanied by the offering of concrete solutions through the pillars of voluntarism which include education, work ethic, *ijtihad*, and the unity of the people.

Third, fatalistic phenomena in Muslims are not singular, but have theological (*Jabariyyah*), philosophical, psychological, and socio-cultural dimensions. All of these dimensions have an impact on weak motivation, a decline in work ethic, and social stagnation. The voluntaristic paradigm of the Qur'an reflected in the verses of the effort is a comprehensive antithesis to all dimensions of fatalism.

Fourth, Aرسالān's view shows significant conformity with the interpretation of classical and modern mufasssirs of the Qur'anic verses about effort and social change. Mufasssirs such as al-Rāzī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn 'Āsyūr, and Quraish Shihab consistently affirmed that faith in destiny does not negate the active role of man, but rather is an encouragement to strive to the fullest. Thus, the integration of Aرسالān's thought with the Qur'anic solution resulted in a paradigm of the awakening of the ummah that was balanced between faith in destiny and the praxis of hard work.

This study recommends that similar comparative studies be further developed by integrating the perspectives of Muslim thinkers from various geographical backgrounds, particularly the Southeast Asian context. The relevance of Aرسالān's thought to the challenges of contemporary Muslims, such as globalization, technological acceleration, and inter-civilizational competition, needs to be studied in more depth and contextually.

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