

# The Meaning of *Kāfir* in the Quran: A Study of Thematic Interpretation

Ruslan<sup>1</sup>, Muh Fihris Khalik<sup>2</sup>, Mubarak Bakri<sup>3</sup>, Maskur<sup>4</sup>, Pahrul<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Muslim Indonesia, Indonesia

<sup>2,3,4</sup>Universitas Islam Makassar, Indonesia

<sup>5</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia

majettaruslan@yahoo.com

## Abstract

*This study aims to examine the meaning of the 'kāfir' diction in the Quran thematically. The type of research is a literature review with a thematic interpretation approach. Primary data sources consist of the Quran and the book of interpretation (Tafsir Al-Misbah by M. Quraish Shihab and Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim by Ibn Kaşir). Secondary data sources consist of Arabic dictionaries, books, and journals that discuss the meaning of the 'kāfir' diction. Data were collected using documentation techniques and then analyzed using content analysis techniques. The results show that the meaning of the 'kāfir' diction in the Quran are (1) denying the existence and oneness of Allah, (2) covering up what is haq (true) or batil (false) and blocking others from Allah, (3) denying to the grace that has been given by Allah, and (4) people who make religion a play. Based on the variety of the 'kāfir' diction, it is recommended to Muslim readers not to rush to disbelieve in other Muslims. Because the verdict has social consequences and triggers the birth of a dispute.*

## Keywords

*kāfir*, meaning, Quran, thematic interpretation



## I. Introduction

The plurality of groups in Islam is an interesting phenomenon which shows that the Quran as a source of Islamic teachings provides an opportunity for different opinions. However, there are often distortions in these differences of opinion (Hukmiah & Saad, 2020). Such as the emergence of inclusivity in the group so that they feel that their group is the most right and the others are wrong, even categorized as *kāfir* (unbeliever/infidel/heathen) (Widyawati et al., 2022) (Ruslan, et al., 2022).

The phenomenon of mutual disbelief often becomes a powerful weapon if it is clashed or used in social life (Afifuddin & Burga, 2022). People who bear the title of *kāfir* are indicated that that person is misguided, goes to hell, cannot be made a leader, even his blood is lawful (may be killed) (Widyawati et al., 2022; Sevinç et al., 2018).

The term *kāfir* has suddenly become popular in Indonesia since 2016. This term has become a very sensitive issue after a political figure was deemed to have insulted Islam through his speech which said that many people were being lied to by the term “*kāfir* leader” in QS al-Maidah/5: 51 (Harahap, 2021). This statement invites reactions from many parties, ranging from political figure, scholars, academics, and even ordinary people to comment on the statement (Widyawati et al., 2022; Mudin et al., 2021; Robiah, 2020).

If one examines the derivations of the word *kufr* found in the Quran, it will be seen that not all of these word derivations refer to the meaning of *kufr* (not believing in God)

(Mudin et al., 2021; Hariyadi & Nurhakim, 2016). This derivation of the word *kufr* has many meanings, depending on the approach used in interpreting it (linguistically or contextually) (Farhan & Saputra, 2021; Akbar & Suharjianto, 2018).

Basically, the process of interpreting a word is inseparable from the study of the language of that word (Ruslan & Burga, 2022). In this case, the Quran has its own language in expressing a meaning which is sometimes and sometimes different from the vocabulary understood by Arab society in general (Ibrahim, 2014). Arabic as the language of the Quran is a language that is very rich in derivations and terms. Therefore, every term in the Quran must be truly interpreted by someone who has scientific authority regarding it (Dozan, 2019; Kamarusdiana, 2019).

Based on the phenomena described earlier, it is important to study the meaning of 'kāfir' in the Quran thematically. Theoretically, this study contributes to developing the science of the Arabic language and interpretation. Apart from that, practically, it can be the basis for Muslims to be careful in imposing a *kāfir* verdict on others. Especially if you look at the phenomenon that is currently developing, both groups and individuals can easily pass judgment on other groups as *kāfirs*.

## II. Research Methods

This type of research is a literature review with a thematic interpretation approach. Data was collected using documentation techniques on primary data sources consisting of (1) Al-Quran, namely verses with the *kāfir* word with various derivations. (2) Tafsir Books which discusses the meaning of the *kāfir* word in the Quran, in this case using Tafsir Al-Misbah by M. Quraish Shihab (representation of a contemporary book) Tafsir al-Qur'ān al-Azīm by Ibn Kaşir (representation of a classic book). Secondary data sources consist of dictionaries, books, and journals that discuss the meaning of the word *kāfir*.

The data analysis technique uses content analysis techniques, in which the author examines, analyzes, and understands the meaning of expressions or sentences in a document regarding the meaning and interpretation of the *kāfir* word and then draws conclusions from the study. The conclusions related to this study were communicated and discussed with several Arabic linguists and interpreters in Makassar City as a test of the validity of the data.

## III. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 The Meaning of 'Kāfir' Diction

Linguistically, the word *kāfir* comes from the root word *kafara* (كفر) in Arabic which means to cover or envelop (Munawwir, 1997). In the Big Indonesian Dictionary, the word *kāfir* means a person who does not believe in Allah SWT. Meanwhile *kufr* is an attitude of disbelief in Allah and His Messenger (Tim Pusat Bahasa, 2008).

According to Ibnu Katsir (2002), the term *kāfir* literally means a person who covers something and hides it. Therefore, the night is called *kāfir*, because it covers everything with its darkness. A farmer is also called a *kāfir*, because he buries the seeds of plants into the ground, as mentioned in QS al-Fath/ 48: 29 (Farhan & Saputra, 2021). So, the meaning of *kāfir* diction is someone who covers something and hides it.

In terminology (Islamic terminology), scholars differ on the definition of *kāfir*. According to Ibn Taimiyah, a *kāfir* is not believing in Allah SWT and His Messengers, either accompanied by lying or without lying, or turning away from following Rasulullah

SAW because of envy (hasad) or arrogance, or because he follows lust which turns him away from following the treatise (Ibn Taimiyah, 2003).

According to Ibn Hazm (1987), *kāfir* in religious matters is to deny one of the things that is required by Allah SWT to believe in after the evidence has been established for him, that is, by arriving at the truth to those concerned. Either the denial is by heart alone, by word alone, or by both. Disbelief can occur because he commits an act that according to the Shari'ah can expel the perpetrator from the faith (Ibn Hazm, 1987).

### 3.2 *Kāfir* Categorization

The term *kāfir* is not a term to insult groups who adhere to other religions (non-Muslims). Because in the Islamic perspective, the word *kāfir* is indeed used for those who do not want to accept Islamic teachings. Unwillingness to accept Islamic teachings means that the eyes of his heart are covered (unable) to pay attention to the signs (power) of Allah. He could not hear the verses of Allah. It means if someone really covered his heart about the truth of Islam, he is not sensitive to the signs that exist on this earth, he doesn't even want to listen to advice.

The term *kāfir* in Islam has legal consequences, which are closely related to many *fiqh* (Islamic law) issues with all their legal implications. In the science and discussion of *fiqh*, the categorization of the term *kāfir* appears, including: *kāfir harbi*, *kāfir mu'ahad*, *kāfir musta'man*, and *kāfir dzimmi*. Each of them is certainly treated differently according to *fiqh* law.

#### a. *Kāfir Harbi*

*Kāfir harbi* is any *kāfir* who does not enter into an agreement with the Muslims, whether he is a *mu'ahid* or a *musta'min* or neither (Al-Nabhani, 1994). A *mu'ahid* is a *kāfir* who becomes a citizen of a disbelieving state that has an agreement (*mu'ahidah*) with an Islamic state. *Musta'min* is a person who enters another country with an entry permit (*al-amān*), whether he is a Muslim or a *kāfir harbi* (Al-Nabhani, 1994).

The *kāfir harbi* is further categorized into *kāfir harbi hukman* (*kāfir harbi* in law/de jure) and *kāfir harbi haqiqatan* (*kāfir harbi* in real/de facto). This categorization is based on the nationality of a *kāfir* with a permanent place of domicile. If an Islamic state enters into an agreement with a disbelieving country, its citizens are called *mu'ahidin* (Al-Nabhani, 1994). This country is called *al-dawlah al-mu'ahidah* (a country that has an agreement with an Islamic state). The *mu'ahid* people are classified as *kāfir harbi hukman* because only after the end of the agreement with the Islamic state, he will return to being a *kāfir harbi* like the other (*kāfir harbi fi'lan*) whose country has not entered into an agreement with an Islamic state. The relationship between Muslims and *kāfir harbi hukman* is based on what is contained in the existing agreement texts.

*Kāfir harbi haqiqatan* are citizens and/or a state that does not have an agreement with *Daulah Islamiyah* (Islamic state). His country was called *ad-dawlah al-kāfirah al-harbiyah* (*kāfir harbi* country that fought against Muslims). The country is further divided into two: First, if the country is actually at war with the Muslims, it is called *al-dawlah al-kāfirah al-harbiyah al-muhāribah bi al-fi'li* (a *kāfir harbi* country that is really fighting against the Muslims in a real way). Second, if a disbelieving country is not involved in a real war with the Muslims, it is categorized as *al-dawlah al-kāfirah alharbiyah ghayru al-muhāribah bi al-fi'li* (a *kāfir harbi* country that is not actually involved in a war with Muslims) (Al-Nabhani, 1994).

The legal difference between the two countries is that if a disbelieving country is in the first category, that is, it is actually at war with the Muslim community, then the

principle of interaction is the interaction of war; there should not be any agreements with the *kāfir* countries, for example political agreements (such as diplomatic relations), economic agreements (such as export-import), and so on. Agreements can only exist after there is peace (*al-shulh*). Its citizens are not given permission to enter the Islamic state, unless he comes to hear the *kalamullah* (study of Islam), or to become a *dzimmi* under the auspices of the Islamic state. If a citizen from this disbelieving country continues to enter an Islamic country, not to hear the *kalamullah*, nor to become a *dzimmi*, but rather with the intention to be hostile and to fight against Islam, then his soul and property are lawful, that is, he may be killed or taken prisoner, and his property may be taken (Al-Nabhani, 1994).

Conversely, if it belongs to the second category, namely not currently at war with Muslims, then an Islamic state may enter into an agreement with the *kāfir* country; for example trade agreements and other cooperation. Its citizens are given permission to enter the Islamic state for trade, recreation, medical treatment, study, and so on. His soul and property are not lawful and must be protected. However, if these citizens enter illegally (without the permission of the Islamic state) then the law is the same as citizens who are at war with Muslims (Al-Nabhani, 1994). If the citizen enters with state permission, he may not stay in the Islamic state except for a certain period of time, namely under one year (An-Nabhani, 1994: 233).

#### **b. *Kāfir Mu'ahad***

*Kāfir mu'ahad* are people who make peace with the state or the leadership of the Muslims not to war for the benefit. *Al-mu'ahad* is taken from the word *al-ahdu* (promise), namely *shulhu* (peace agreement) which has been determined and is called *hudnah* (truce). In addition, it is also called *al-muhadanah*, *al-mu'ahadah* (agreement), *al-musalamah* (peace), and *almuwada'ah*. According to Ibn al-Utsaimin (2019), *al-mu'ahad* is anyone from the *kāfir* who has an agreement with the Muslims. At the time of Rasulullah SAW in Medina there were various religions, such as Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and so on. They were united by Rasulullah SAW with the Medina Charter. This type of *kāfir* may not be fought and may have social relations or cooperation with them based on an agreed text.

#### **c. *Kāfir Musta'min***

*Musta'min* is a person who enters another country with an entry permit (*al-aman*), whether Muslim or *kāfir harbi* (An-Nabhani, 1994). If a Muslim enters *Darul Harb* (a disbelieving country), he may not take the property of the *kāfir* in *Darul Harb*, for example by stealing (*al-sariqah*) or seizing (*al-ghashab*). Because, a Muslim is bound by the agreement he made (*al Muslim 'inda syurutihim*).

Just as a Muslim may enter *Darul Harb* (a disbelieving country), a *kāfir harbi* may also enter *Daulah Islamiyah* (an Islamic state). Rasulullah SAW has given security guarantees to the *kāfir* at the time of Fath Makkah. As he said that: "Whoever closes the door of his house, it means he is safe" (hadith narrated by Muslim).

However, if the *musta'min* is a *kāfir harbi* who enters an Islamic country, he is not allowed to stay there for one year. So, entry permits (*al-aman*) are only given—for example—for one month, two months, or more under one year. This is because a *harbi* is allowed to live in Darul Islam without being charged a *jizyah* (tax), while the *jizyah* is collected once a year. That is, *kāfir harbi* may stay without *jizyah* for a maximum of less than one year. If he stayed for more than a year, he was given a choice: to stay permanently and pay the *jizyah* or to leave Darul Islam. If he pays the *jizyah*, it means he becomes *ahl al-dzimah* or a citizen of an Islamic state. If he leaves towards the end of the year, he is not required to pay the *jizyah*.



The law of the *musta'min* is basically the same as the law of *ahl al-dzimah*. If he needs help, for example his life is threatened, the state is obliged to protect him as the state protects *ahl al-dzimah*. If a *musta'min* commits a crime, he will be subject to sanctions as *ahl al-dzimah*, except for drinking *khamr*. This is because *Darul Islam* is a place where sharia laws are applied indiscriminately, both against Muslims, *ahl al-dzimmah*, and *musta'min* (Al-Nabhani, 1994)

#### d. *Kāfir Dzimmi*

*Ahl al-dzimah* is sometimes also called *kāfir dzimmi* or often abbreviated as *dzimmi*. The origin of the word is *al-dzimmah*, which means *al-'ahd*, meaning agreement. *Ahl al-dzimah* is every person who is a non-Muslim and becomes a citizen of an Islamic state (*Daulah Islamiyah*). Islam has explained many laws regarding this *ahl al-dzimah* as explained by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah (1995) in the book *Ahkam Ahl al-Dzimmah*, including:

1. *Ahl al-dzimah* may not be forced to leave their religion to convert to Islam. They are free to adhere to their beliefs and practice worship according to their beliefs.
2. *Ahl al-dzimah* is obliged to pay *jizyah* (tax) to the state. *Jizyah* is collected from *ahl dzimmah* who are male, mature, and capable; not taken from children, women, and the poor. In fact, for those who cannot afford it, for example because they are old or disabled, not only is *jizyah* not obligatory, but there is a state obligation (*Baitul Mal*) to help them. At the time of taking the *jizyah*, the state is obliged to do it properly, it cannot be accompanied by violence or torture. *Jizyah* may not be taken by selling tools or means of livelihood for *ahl al-dzimah*, for example their farming tools or livestock.
3. It is permissible to eat slaughtered meat and marry *ahl al-dzimah* women if they are people of the *Ahlul Kitab*, that is, Christians or Jews. However, if *ahl al-dzimah* are not *Ahlul Kitab*, such as the Zoroastrians, then their slaughter is unlawful for Muslims. Their women cannot be married to Muslim men. Meanwhile, if a Muslim woman marries a *kāfir* man, then the law is unlawful, whether the man is *Ahlul Kitab* or not (Hermanto, 2017).
4. It is permissible to do muamalah between Muslims and *ahl al-dzimah* in various forms such as buying and selling, leasing (*ijarah*), *syirkah*, *rahn* (pawning), and so on. It's just that, when this muamalah is implemented, the principles of Islamic law must be applied (Al-Jawziyah, 1995)

So, *ahl al-dzimah* who are citizens of the Islamic state gets the same rights as other Muslim people. They have the right to be protected, their livelihood guaranteed, and to be treated well in all forms of *muamalah* (social relations). They are equal before rulers and judges. There should not be any discrimination that differentiates them from the Muslim people. The Islamic state is obligated to do justice to them as it does justice to its Muslim people.

### 3.3 Interpretation of the word *Kāfir* in the Quran

In the *Mu'jam Mufharas li Alfaz al-Quran* dictionary it is found that there are six derivations used in the mention of the word *kāfir* in the forms *fi'il madhi* (verb indicating past time), *fi'il mudhari'* (verb indicating present time), *fi 'il amr* (command verb), *isim fa'il* (a noun indicating the person who did it), *masdar* (infinitive), and *al-mubalagah* (an invented noun form indicating emphasis, affirmation, or multiplication of the properties of the object being characterized) (Al-Baqi', 1992). From this search, four meanings of the word *kāfir* in the Quran were found, as follows:

#### a. Denial of the Oneness and Existence of Allah, His Messengers and Denial of the Hereafter

This meaning is shown in QS al-Mā'idah/5: 2.

لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ ۖ وَقَالَ الْمَسِيحُ يَبْنِي إِسْرَءِيلَ أَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ رَبِّي وَرَبَّكُمْ ۚ إِنَّهُ مَنْ يُشْرِكْ بِاللَّهِ فَقَدْ حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ الْجَنَّةَ وَمَأْوَاهُ النَّارُ ۚ وَمَا لِلظَّالِمِينَ مِنْ أَنْصَارٍ

The word *kāfir* in the verse above is taken from the root word which means to cover. The existence of Allah and His oneness is a very clear reality. The evidence has been laid out in the universe and human beings, but some people are reluctant to see and think about the evidence. This reluctance is the same as covering the evidence, so from here someone who does not believe in the proof of the existence and oneness of Allah SWT is called a *kāfir* (Akbar & Suharjianto, 2018; Shihab, 2001).

#### b. Not Grateful for the Blessings and Grace that God has Given

This meaning is shown in QS Ibrahim/14: 7.

وَإِذْ تَأَذَّنَ رَبُّكُمْ لَئِنْ شَكَرْتُمْ لَأَزِيدَنَّكُمْ وَلَئِنْ كَفَرْتُمْ إِنَّ عَذَابِي لَشَدِيدٌ

Allah swt gives His favors and gifts to anyone, but there are people who are reluctant to be grateful for the blessings and gifts that Allah has given. So in this verse the word *kāfir* is defined as a person who does not acknowledge goodness, that is, he is not grateful to Allah SWT (Hariyadi & Nurhakim, 2016).

#### c. Obstructing or Covering Himself and Others From the Path of Allah SWT

This meaning is shown in QS al-Nahl/16: 88.

الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَصَدُّوا عَنْ سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ زَادَنَّهُمْ عَذَابًا فَوْقَ الْعَذَابِ بِمَا كَانُوا يُفْسِدُونَ

Shihab explained that the *kāfir* in the verse are people who persecute themselves, while blocking others from following God's path, namely the peaceful path of goodness and truth (Shihab, 2001).

Efforts to hinder others from the path of Allah such as intimidation and deception, also they constantly want that the path of Allah which is wide and straight become crooked, by trying to find excuses to show their weaknesses and mistakes (Muhdina, 2015).

#### d. Making Religion as a Game

This meaning is shown in QS al-A'raf/7: 50.

وَنَادَىٰ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ أَصْحَابَ الْجَنَّةِ أَنْ أَفِيضُوا عَلَيْنَا مِنَ الْمَاءِ أَوْ مِمَّا رَزَقَكُمُ اللَّهُ ۚ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ حَرَّمَهُمَا عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ الَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا دِينَهُمْ لَهْوًا وَلَعِبًا وَغَرَّتْهُمُ الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا ۚ فَالْيَوْمَ نَنسِفُهُمْ كَمَا نَسُوا لِقَاءَ يَوْمِهِمْ هَٰذَا وَمَا كَانُوا بِآيَاتِنَا يَجْحَدُونَ

The *kāfir* in the verse above is making religion as a game, what it produces is nothing but fun and time-consuming and negligent, that is, activities that please the heart but are less or not important, thus distracting the perpetrators from things that are important or more important and it is all because the life of the world has deceived them (Ummiyah, 2022; Shihab, 2001).

#### IV. Conclusion

The word *kāfir* literally means to cover or envelop. Meanwhile, in terminology, the word *kāfir* means no faith or disbelief in Allah SWT. The word *kāfir* has four meanings in the Quran, namely (1) denying the existence and oneness of Allah SWT, (2) covering up what is *haq* (right) or *batil* (wrong) and blocking others from the path of Allah, (3) denying grace that God has given, and (4) people who make religion a game.

This research recommends the reader not hastily give a verdict of *kāfir* to other people, especially to fellow Muslims. Disbelief occurs in various manifestations, including in the form of inkar sunnah, corruption, theft, cults, and others. Then what needs to be emphasized is that it is not appropriate for someone to take God's authority by making others unbelievers, because the only person who has the right to determine whether or not a person is *kāfir* is Allah SWT.

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