



## **ULU AL-ALBAB IN THE QUR'AN: MEANING, CHARACTERISTICS, AND ROLE IN SOCIAL CHANGE**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to examine the Qur'anic verses that mention "ulū al-albāb." Using a qualitative research design and content analysis, the primary data were sourced from the Qur'an, while secondary data were collected from tafsir texts and scholarly articles. The findings reveal that "ulū al-albāb" possess profound intellectual and spiritual insight, characterized by knowledge, adherence to divine covenants, maintaining family ties, fear of God, patience, prayer, altruism, and repelling evil with good. These attributes distinguish them from ordinary intelligent individuals. "Ulū al-albāb" are well-suited to lead and implement "dakwah" (Islamic propagation), especially in methods requiring deep understanding and strategic implementation. They are expected to serve as agents of social change by occupying significant positions in societal institutions, leveraging their influence to drive positive transformations. This study highlights the importance of integrating textual and contextual approaches in understanding "dakwah" and the critical role of "ulū al-albāb" in Islamic thought and social change.

**Keywords:** *Ulū al-albāb, Qur'an, Intellectual, Dakwah*

### **Abstrak**

Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji ayat-ayat Al-Qur'an yang menyebutkan "ulū al-albāb." Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif dan analisis konten, data primer diperoleh dari Al-Qur'an, sementara data sekunder dikumpulkan dari teks tafsir dan artikel ilmiah. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa "ulū al-albāb" memiliki wawasan intelektual dan spiritual yang mendalam, ditandai dengan pengetahuan, kepatuhan terhadap perjanjian ilahi, menjaga hubungan keluarga, ketakutan kepada Tuhan, kesabaran, shalat, altruisme, dan menolak kejahatan dengan kebaikan. Atribut-atribut ini membedakan mereka dari individu cerdas biasa. "Ulū al-albāb" sangat cocok untuk memimpin dan melaksanakan dakwah, terutama dengan metode yang membutuhkan pemahaman mendalam dan penerapan strategis. Mereka diharapkan menjadi agen perubahan sosial dengan menduduki posisi penting di lembaga-lembaga sosial, memanfaatkan pengaruh mereka untuk mendorong transformasi positif. Studi ini menekankan pentingnya mengintegrasikan pendekatan tekstual dan kontekstual dalam memahami dakwah serta mengidentifikasi peran krusial "ulū al-albāb" dalam pemikiran Islam dan perubahan sosial.

**Kata Kunci:** *Ulū al-albāb, Al-Qur'an, Intelektual, Dakwah*

## A. Introduction

In the Indonesian translation of the Qur'an, the term “ulū al-albāb” is often interpreted as “people of intellect” or “people who think.” In Indonesian lexicon, terms synonymous with “people of intellect” commonly include “intellectual” or “scholar.” However, from an etymological perspective, these terms have distinct meanings. The term “intellectual” is derived from the word “intellect,” meaning mental capacity. An intellectual is someone who possesses and utilizes mental capacity (thinking) to work or engage in activities. Literally, an intellectual is a person with strong intellect or high intelligence. Intelligence is the cognitive ability or the capacity to think and act rationally. This ability can be inherited or acquired through education in formal institutions or from one's environment (Raharjo, 1996). Typically, an intellectual is an academically educated person.

Meanwhile, “scholar” (cendikiawan) originates from the term “cerdik-cendikia,” which is familiar in Minangkabau culture, meaning smart individuals like teachers and educated people (Raharjo, 1996). In the early days of ICMI (Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association), some Muslim figures adopted the understanding of the term ulū al-albāb to mean scholars. Thus, they interpreted scholars in the same sense as ulū al-albāb, referring to individuals who possess two potentials: the potential to think and the potential to remember (dhikr).

The question arises, can it be accepted that the term “scholar” fully shares the same meaning as ulū al-albāb? The Qur'an repeatedly indicates that not everyone can reach the status of ulū al-albāb. The Qur'an also mentions that ulū al-albāb have specific characteristics, implying that individuals lacking these characteristics cannot be considered ulū al-albāb.

From the explanation of the Qur'anic verses, it is apparent that ulū al-albāb are those who have received divine guidance. Therefore, as chosen individuals, ulū al-albāb have higher religious and moral responsibilities compared to ordinary people. These responsibilities include the obligation to transform bad habits into good ones comprehensively among humankind. Based on this foundational thought, this paper aims to comprehensively examine the Qur'anic verses about ulū al-albāb and al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa nahy 'an al-munkar, as well as the role of ulū al-albāb in upholding al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa nahy 'an al-munkar.

## B. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design utilizing content analysis to explore and interpret the Qur'anic verses related to ulū al-albāb. Primary data are sourced from the Qur'an, focusing on verses that mention ulū al-albāb and related terms, while secondary data are collected from tafsir texts and scholarly articles. The data analysis involves textual analysis to examine the literal meanings and contexts of the verses, contextual analysis to consider historical and situational factors, thematic analysis to identify key characteristics and responsibilities of ulū al-albāb, and comparative analysis to evaluate the applicability of these characteristics to modern-day intellectuals and agents of social change. The study ensures validity and reliability through triangulation and peer debriefing, and adheres to ethical research practices by accurately representing texts and attributing sources.

## C. Results and Discussion

### 1. Ulū al-Albāb in the Qur'an

The term “ulū al-albāb” consists of two words: ulū and al-albāb. The word ulū is frequently used in the Qur'an with various combinations, such as: ulu al-amri (those who possess or hold authority), mentioned in Q.S. An-Nisa'/4: 59; ulu al-'ilm (those who possess knowledge), mentioned in Q.S. Ali 'Imran/3: 17; ulu al-abshar (those who have insight), mentioned in Q.S. Ali 'Imran/3: 13; ulu al-ayyad (those who possess hands or are capable of action), mentioned in Q.S. Shad/38: 43; ulu ba's (those who possess strength), mentioned in Q.S. Bani Israil/17: 5; ulu fadhl (those who possess wealth), mentioned in Q.S. An-Nur/24: 22. Additionally, the Qur'an mentions ulu al-'azmi (those who possess determination and can make decisions despite risks), mentioned in Q.S. Al-Ahqaf/46: 35 as follows:

فَاصْبِرْ كَمَا صَبَرَ أُولُو الْعَزْمِ مِنَ الرُّسُلِ وَلَا تَسْتَعْجِلْ لَهُمْ كَانَهُمْ يَوْمَ يَرَوْنَ مَا يُوعَدُونَ لَمْ يَلْبُثُوا إِلَّا سَاعَةً مِنْ نَهَارٍ ۗ بَلِّغْ فَهَلْ يَهْلِكُ إِلَّا الْقَوْمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ

“So be patient, [O Muhammad], as were those of determination among the messengers and do not be impatient for them. It will be - on the Day they see that which they are promised - as though they had not remained [in the world] except for an hour of a day. [This is] notification. And will [any] be destroyed except the defiantly disobedient people?”

The term ulu al-'azmi in Q.S. Al-Ahqaf/46: 35 refers to God's chosen individuals among His chosen ones, specifically the five selected messengers who overcame significant challenges and trials during their mission to guide humanity. They are Prophet Noah, Prophet Abraham, Prophet Moses, Prophet Jesus, and Prophet Muhammad. This title is only attainable by a few prophets, making it challenging for ordinary people to achieve. However, other titles mentioned in the Qur'an can be attained by individuals who meet certain conditions as described in the respective verses.

Moreover, in Q.S. Thaha/20: 128, God addresses the intelligent ones as ulu al-nuha:

أَفَلَمْ يَهْدِ لَهُمْ كَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا قَبْلَهُمْ مِنَ الْقُرُونِ يَمْشُونَ فِي مَسْكِنِهِمْ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِأُولِي النُّهَى

“Then has it not become clear to them how many generations We destroyed before them as they walk among their dwellings? Indeed, in that are signs for those of intelligence.”

In this verse, al-nuha is the plural form of nuhyah, a term for intellect. It is called so because the intellect prevents individuals from engaging in inappropriate actions, also known as the binding intellect because it restrains people from unworthy deeds (Qardhawi, 2001).

The term ulū (meaning 'possessors') signifies that such attributes are given only to certain people and not to everyone. Thus, individuals who possess something can be considered as those with superiority or excellence (Raharjo, 1996). In sociology, the concept of individuals with superiority or excellence is known as the elite. A minority of wealthy people, rulers, or military personnel with power and superiority in society are called the elite. Similarly, a minority of knowledgeable and influential people due to their superiority are also referred to as the elite.

The word *albab* forming the word *al-lubb*, meaning 'brain' or 'intellect,' with its plural being *al-bab*. *Al-bab* here does not mean the brains or intellects of several people but is possessed by an individual. Thus, *ulū al-albāb* refers to those who possess layered brains, meaning individuals with sharp intellect (Raharjo, 1996).

In the Qur'an, *ulū al-albāb* has several meanings depending on its context: individuals with broad or deep thinking (mind); those with sensitive or delicate feelings (heart); people with sharp or strong intellectual capacity (intellect); those with profound insight (insight); individuals with accurate, precise, or broad understanding (understanding); and those with wisdom, capable of approaching truth with open and fair considerations.

From these various meanings, M. Dawam Raharjo (1996) concludes that *ulū al-albāb* refers to individuals with layered brains and simultaneously sensitive feelings towards their surroundings. Meanwhile, in *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, M. Quraish Shihab explains that *al-Albab* means the essence of something. For instance, a peanut has a shell covering its content. The content is called *lubb*. Thus, *ulū al-albāb* refers to individuals with pure intellects, not clouded by superficial layers that can lead to confusion in thinking, who contemplate God's decrees in hopes of achieving success, while those who reject it experience confusion in their thinking (Shihab, 2001).

Additionally, inspired by the verses discussing *ulū al-albāb*, Harun Yahya explains that *ulū al-albāb* are individuals who can perceive and learn from the signs of God's greatness and feel His presence (Yahya, 2004). In his book "Al-Qur'an Berbicara tentang Akal dan Ilmu Pengetahuan," Yusuf al-Qardhawi writes that *al-albab* is the plural form of *lubb*, meaning essence, the opposite of shell. The Qur'an seems to indicate that humans consist of two parts: the shell and the essence. The physical form is the shell, while the intellect is the essence. According to Imam al-Biqā'i, *al-bab* is the intellect that benefits its owner by selecting the substantial aspect of its shell. According to al-Harali, *al-bab* is the deepest part of the intellect, functioning to grasp God's commands in perceptible matters, just as the outer part of the intellect functions to grasp the realities of creatures; they are individuals who witness their Lord through His signs (Qardhawi, 2001, p. 31).

The Qur'an mentions the term *ulū al-albāb* sixteen times, scattered across ten chapters: Q.S. Al-Baqarah/2: 179, 197, 269; Q.S. Ali 'Imran/3: 7, 190; Q.S. Al-Maidah/5: 100; Q.S. Yusuf/12: 111; Q.S. Ar-Ra'du/13: 14; Q.S. Ibrahim/14: 52; Q.S. Shad/38: 29, 43; Q.S. Az-Zumar/39: 9, 18, 21; Q.S. Gafir/40: 54; and Q.S. Ath-Thalaq/65: 10 (Baqiy, 1997). Among these verses, nine are Makkiyah, and seven are Madaniyyah. Among the Madaniyyah verses, four of them use a calling format:

- 1) Q.S. Al-Baqarah/2: 179: "And there is for you in legal retribution [saving of] life, O people of understanding." Essentially, *qisas* (retribution) is taking the life of a person as a punishment for murder. However, in this verse, *qisas* is described as life. Why is that? This question can only be pondered by *ulū al-albāb*. One life punished through *qisas* can save the lives of others in society, as people will fear committing murder, and it provides peace to the victim's family.
- 2) Q.S. Al-Baqarah/2: 197: "And take provisions, but indeed, the best provision is fear of Allah. So fear Me, O you of understanding." Why is piety the best provision? This question can only be thought of by *ulū al-albāb*. According to al-Biqā'i, the phrase *ya ulū al-albāb* means pure intellect and bright understanding, free from physical bonds, enabling it to grasp the greatness of piety and maintain it (Qardhawi, 2001, p. 31).

- 3) Q.S. Al-Maidah/5: 100: “Say, ‘Not equal are the evil and the good, although the abundance of evil might impress you. So fear Allah, O you of understanding, that you may be successful.’” Ulū al-Albāb are those who pay attention to the quality of things, focusing on what is good, even if it is little, unlike ordinary people who are often drawn to the quantity, regardless of its source or acquisition.
- 4) Q.S. Al-Thalaq/65: 10: “Allah has prepared for them a severe punishment; so fear Allah, O you of understanding who have believed. Allah has sent down to you a message.” This verse explains the value of guidance and directives given to ulū al-albāb. Only ulū al-albāb fear God's punishment intended for disobedient people.

The study of these verses clarifies why ulū al-albāb are often mentioned alongside the root word *zakara*, as essentially only individuals like ulū al-albāb can learn from things that others do not understand, as explained in the above verses.

In several verses, it is evident that ulū al-albāb are frequently paired with the word *zakara* and its derivatives, such as the phrases *wa ma yazzakkru illa ulū al-albāb* (only those of intellect will remember) (Q.S. Al-Baqarah/2: 269 dan Q.S. Al-‘Imran/3: 7); *innama Yatazakkaru ulū al-albāb* (only those of intellect can take heed) (Q.S. Ar-Ra’du/13: 19); *wa liyazakkara ulū al-albāb* (so that those of intellect may take heed) (Q.S. Ibrahim/14: 52); *wa liyatazakkara ulū al-albāb* (so that those of intellect may take heed) (Q.S. Shad/38: 43); *wa zikra li ulū al-albāb* (a reminder for those of intellect); *lazikra li ulū al-albāb* (a lesson for those of intellect) (Az-Zumar/39: 21); and *wa zikra li ulū al-albāb* (a reminder for those who think) (Q.S. Al-Mukmin/40: 54).

*Yatazakkaru* is derived from the word *zakara*, meaning lesson or reminder. The addition of the letter ta in *yatazakkaru* implies that many lessons can be derived by ulū al-albāb. This indicates that, while others can also learn, their capacity for acquiring lessons is not as extensive as that of ulū al-albāb (Shihab, 2001).

Ulū al-albāb is often associated with the act of dhikr (remembrance), which is considered a higher level of thinking than mere thought, as dhikr is a transcendental activity, leading to deeper, higher contemplation and a search for the truth. At this higher level, a thinker does not only see things as they are but also derives wisdom from them. Ulū al-albāb has reached a stage of transcendent thinking, linking everything they see and think about to universal truths (Raharjo, 1996, pp. 564–568).

From the study of the above verses, the following characteristics of ulū al-albāb can be identified (Baqiy, 1997):

- 1) They possess knowledge or are knowledgeable.
- 2) They have a covenant with Allah and do not break it.
- 3) They maintain family ties.
- 4) They fear God because of their sins.
- 5) They are patient in seeking God's pleasure.
- 6) They establish prayer.
- 7) They spend their wealth for the benefit of others.
- 8) They repel evil with good.

Those who meet these criteria will receive guidance from God, and their intellect will always be guided. Their thinking activities will always be directed by their dhikr. Thus, they can achieve the level of ulū al-albāb. Conversely, many intelligent and clever people fail to reach the level of ulū al-albāb because they cannot meet all the above conditions. As a result, it is not uncommon to find intelligent people who follow their desires excessively, are overly focused on worldly needs, frequently engage in hostility,

envy their peers, and are very ambitious in seeking positions that benefit themselves. Such harmful practices can impede intelligent people from becoming *ulū al-albāb*.

## 2. *Ulū al-Albāb and Their Role in Social Change*

Every Muslim is obligated to perform *dakwah* (Islamic propagation) according to their ability. Scholars agree on this obligatory nature, though they differ on whether it is a personal obligation (*wajib ‘ain*) or a communal obligation (*wajib kifayah*). *Wajib ‘ain* means every individual must perform *dakwah* personally, while *wajib kifayah* means *dakwah* can be carried out by a specific group of people, not necessarily by everyone. Determining whether *dakwah* is *wajib ‘ain* or *wajib kifayah* requires consideration of various aspects.

From the perspective of *dakwah* targets (*mad’u*), there are many societal models and characteristics to address. As *mad’u* comprises individuals who continuously grow and develop, ranging from infants to the elderly, *dakwah* must consider these age stages. This consideration directly impacts the delivery of *dakwah* material, methods, and media. Likewise, the social strata, economic capabilities, and educational levels of society need to be considered by the *da’i* (preacher) to determine suitable *dakwah* materials, methods, and media for them.

The Qur'an encourages Muslims to engage in *dakwah* through several means, as stated in Q.S. *al-Nahl*/16: 125:

أَدْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ صَلَّى  
عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِالْمُهْتَدِينَ

“Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best. Indeed, your Lord is most knowing of who has strayed from His way, and He is most knowing of who is [rightly] guided.”

The above verse explains three methods for performing *dakwah*: with wisdom, good advice, and argumentation. According to the author, a *da’i* may choose the most applicable method from these three. The first and second methods might be achievable by everyone, thus making them *wajib ‘ain*, while the third method might only be possible for a specific group of well-educated and experienced individuals, making it *wajib kifayah* for that group.

Additionally, there is a hadith of the Prophet (PBUH): “Whoever among you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; if he cannot, then with his tongue; and if he cannot, then with his heart, and that is the weakest of faith” (H.R. Muslim) (Al-Nawawy, 1981). This hadith also offers three methods of *dakwah*: using hands, tongue, or heart. These methods can be understood textually and contextually.

Textual understanding refers to interpreting the content of a hadith based solely on its text, without considering its context, cause, or target audience, or other related evidence. Thus, a hadith understood textually has a universal instruction (Ahmad, 2005).

Contextual understanding involves interpreting a hadith by considering its context, including the scope of its instructions, the capacity of the Prophet (PBUH) when it occurred, its cause, and its target audience, along with other related evidence. Contextual understanding requires *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). A hadith understood contextually may have universal or specific, temporal, and local applications (Ahmad, 2005).

Therefore, understanding the hadith of the Prophet (PBUH) requires a holistic approach, utilizing theories from various disciplines, including social sciences like sociology, anthropology, psychology, and history. This comprehensive understanding is essential for the contextual application of Islamic teachings, demanding suitable approaches that align with scientific development and societal conditions (Ahmad, 2005).

Textually, *biyadihi* (with his hand) in the above hadith refers to a human limb used for various actions, while *lisan* (tongue) refers to an organ used for tasting. The heart is a vital organ producing bile, storing sugar as glycogen, forming and breaking down specific proteins, neutralizing toxins, and destroying old red blood cells. Psychologically, the heart represents emotions.

Contextually, the hand in the hadith can be interpreted as power, the tongue as advice that can be delivered orally or in writing through various media, and the heart as the ability to distinguish between good and evil, feeling affection or aversion towards something.

Contextually, preventing evil with the heart is considered the weakest form of faith. Thus, according to the author, *dakwah* with the heart is *wajib 'ain*, while *dakwah* with the tongue and hand is *wajib kifayah* for a group of Muslims, as the latter two methods can only be performed by specific, trained individuals. The question arises: who is capable of performing this *wajib kifayah*?

In line with the topic of this writing, the author suggests that *ulū al-albāb* are the most suitable individuals to employ *dakwah* methods that others cannot. The rationale is that *ulū al-albāb* are a group of individuals who think and remember (perform *dhikr*), allowing them to contemplate higher levels in approaching the truth. They are also sensitive, critical, and socially responsible individuals, thus committed to acting for the greater good.

*Ulū al-albāb* are expected to become agents of social change. Therefore, several steps must be taken by *ulū al-albāb* to achieve positive social transformation. They need to occupy significant positions in social institutions, such as political, educational, advocacy, and governmental organizations capable of making policies. Essentially, social change for the better can only be achieved by leveraging political power and elite influence in society. Without holding such positions, it is difficult for anyone to implement these changes.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The term “*ulū al-albāb*” in the Qur'an refers to individuals possessing profound intellectual and spiritual insight. This term extends beyond the common Indonesian interpretations of “intellectual” or “scholar,” which primarily emphasize cognitive abilities. *Ulū al-albāb* is associated with a higher level of thinking that integrates both intellect and spiritual remembrance (*dhikr*), enabling individuals to derive deep wisdom from their experiences and observations. The characteristics of *ulū al-albāb* include being knowledgeable, upholding their covenant with Allah, maintaining family ties, fearing God due to their sins, and exhibiting patience in seeking God's pleasure. They also establish prayer, spend their wealth for the benefit of others, and repel evil with good. These attributes ensure that their intellect is continuously guided by divine remembrance, distinguishing them from ordinary intelligent individuals who may not fulfill all these criteria. Regarding their role in social change, every Muslim is obligated to perform *dakwah* (Islamic propagation). Scholars agree on its obligatory nature but differ on whether it is a personal obligation (*wajib 'ain*) or a communal obligation (*wajib kifayah*).

Ulū al-albāb, with their intellectual and spiritual qualities, are well-suited to lead and implement dakwah effectively, especially in methods requiring deeper understanding and strategic implementation. They are expected to serve as agents of social change by occupying significant positions in various societal institutions, leveraging their influence to drive positive transformations.

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