

Practicing Islamic-Based Leadership: Arab Principals' Perspectives

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Article Information

Received: July 12, 2024

Revised: August 10, 2024

Accepted: August 28, 2024

Online: September 09, 2024

Keywords

*Islamic Education,
Islam,
Arab,
School Leaders,
Spiritual Leadership*

ABSTRACT

Although the literature offers various frameworks related to Islamic-based leadership, we argue that these frameworks have not fully encompassed all the preparations that Muslims must undertake for the afterlife. Al-Kaylani (1937–2015) is one of the Islamic philosophers who developed a relational model that connects individuals with the Creator, the universe, fellow human beings, life, and the afterlife. This qualitative study aims to explore the perspectives of Arab school leaders on the extent to which they apply Islamic-based leadership based on Al-Kaylani's relational model, as well as the factors influencing their practices. In this study, 13 school principals shared their perspectives and practices concerning what they refer to as Islamic schools and Islamic education within the Arab context. The findings reveal that the school leaders' understanding of Islamic education varies significantly based on their assumptions, influencing their practices and priorities in school planning and goals. Only one school leader attempted to align their practices with the afterlife. This study encourages researchers and practitioners to explore Al-Kaylani's model further and reimagine Islamic education's meaning in Muslim schools.

INTRODUCTION

Most educational leadership theories are rooted in Western culture, prompting researchers to explore leadership models in other contexts (E. I. Ahmed, 2023; Dimmock, 2020; Hammad et al., 2020). Numerous systematic reviews indicate that countries in the Middle East—especially Arab countries (E. I. Ahmed, 2023; Coleman, 2023; Cruz-González et al., 2021; Hammad & Alazmi, 2022)—have made limited contributions to the development of their educational leadership theories. It highlights the need to address the unique contexts of these nations. Ahmed (2023) underscores the urgency of moving beyond merely staying current with global leadership trends. They argue that Arab scholars should engage critically and creatively with existing scholarship and contribute through innovative thought and rigorous methodologies.

Arab countries share a common language and religion, which shape communication, culture, and education (Husni & Zaher, 2020). Education in these nations often strongly emphasises religion, yet the relationship between religion and leadership remains underexplored. Specifically, the study of Islamic-based leadership (IBL) in educational settings is underrepresented (E. I. Ahmed, 2023; Arar et al., 2022; Samier, 2019). Arar et al. (2022) note a conspicuous absence of IBL studies from Arab researchers

published in international journals, suggesting a missed opportunity to examine how Islamic principles could inform educational leadership.

The lack of deep consideration for Islamic culture and philosophy in leadership studies has been noted by scholars like [Alazmi and Bush \(2024\)](#), who argue that these insights could enrich the dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslim educators in multicultural contexts. Despite the significant contributions of early Muslim scholars such as Al-Ghazali, Zarnuji, and Al-Kaylani, their work remains largely unknown to contemporary school leaders in Arab and non-Arab contexts.

Recent research on Islamic educational leadership is growing, signalling the need for in-depth studies that reexamine education from an Islamic perspective ([Alazmi & Bush, 2024](#); [Samier & ElKaleh, 2019](#)). It is essential to explore both classical and modern contributions of Muslim scholars to understand better the unique educational opportunities that once led to Islam's Golden Age (GA). For example, Al-Kaylani's model, based on nine educational objectives derived from the Quran and Hadith, provides a framework for developing individuals across five domains: the Creator, the universe, humanity, life, and the afterlife ([Hammad et al., 2020](#); [Sellami et al., 2019](#)). This model aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), emphasising equity and preparing individuals for this world and the afterlife, presenting a holistic, futuristic approach to education.

While modern educational leadership theories have been adopted in some Muslim educational systems, little effort has been made to explore how Islamic visions of leadership align with these theories. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the knowledge, beliefs, and practices of Arab school leaders regarding IBL, providing a platform for participants to share their perspectives and experiences. This qualitative research fills a gap by examining how IBL is practised in modern educational organizations within the Arab world, a subject that remains largely unexplored in the existing literature.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach ([Mey, 2023](#)) to explore the perspectives of Arab Muslim school leaders regarding the extent to which their educational practices align with Al-Kaylani's Islamic-based leadership model. Additionally, the study investigates the factors influencing the leadership practices of school principals.

Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive expert sampling, which involves deliberately choosing experts on a specific topic ([Campbell et al., 2020](#)). This method is particularly suitable for investigating new research areas with limited existing evidence, such as the current study's focus. The criteria for selecting participants included substantial experience in education within the Arab context and holding a senior leadership position, specifically as a school principal. These criteria were essential in ensuring the depth and richness of the data collected from participants.

A total of 13 Arab Muslim educators were interviewed, either online via Zoom or in person, depending on their preference. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. The participants, aged between 35 and 58, held at least a bachelor's degree, with two holding PhDs. The sample consisted of eight women and five men with professional experience ranging from 10 to 35 years. Five interviewees worked in primary schools, while eight were from secondary schools.

Semi-Structured Interviews

An interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and the dimensions of Al-Kaylani's model, emphasising relationships with Allah, other humans, the universe, life, and the afterlife. The three researchers collaborated to formulate a list of 20 interview questions to delve into participants' awareness and experiences regarding Islamic-based leadership (IBL) in their schools. Two open-ended questions were also included to explore potential challenges school leaders face.

Examples of interview questions included: "To what extent do you believe that school leaders' practices are linked to Quranic verses and Hadiths?" and "How do you design school activities, and what are the objectives of these activities?" A pilot study was conducted to validate the interview questions, with one online and one face-to-face interview. Feedback from these initial interviews was used to refine the interview guide.

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in Arabic. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The interviews were held in neutral settings away from participants' work environments to reduce potential bias. The researchers ensured confidentiality and built personal rapport with each participant to facilitate a comfortable interview process. All recordings and transcripts were securely stored on the researchers' devices, ensuring privacy.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. In the deductive phase, the core dimensions of Al-Kaylani's model were used to develop initial codes. These dimensions were translated into specific codes that corresponded to the interview questions. The researchers created a preliminary codebook by identifying primary themes, reading transcripts, and precoding the data. This initial coding process involved discussions and revisions among the research team to ensure accuracy and consistency.

Following the deductive coding process, an inductive approach was employed to uncover emerging patterns and connections within the data. The research team met regularly to discuss the codes and identify new themes or subthemes that had not been anticipated. These discussions led to refining the codebook, which was revised and documented twice before finalization. Any overlap in data or themes was resolved through collaborative decision-making, and all revisions were recorded and dated for transparency. Using deductive and inductive methods, the researchers could comprehensively analyse the data, ensuring that both the predefined dimensions of Al-Kaylani's model and new, unanticipated themes were captured in the final analysis.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings based on two major themes: (1) school leaders' beliefs about Islamic-based educational leadership practices and (2) factors affecting school leadership practices.

School Leaders' Beliefs

The interviews revealed that all participants agreed that personal beliefs, understandings, and experiences shape leading educational opportunities based on Islamic principles. However, the degree to which they implemented these beliefs varied. For instance, some participants labelled their schools as "Islamic" based on their vision and programs, but others, like Participant 2, felt constrained by school policies, which limited their ability to implement Islamic-based practices. Participant 5 emphasized that many educators adhere to Western protocols without considering Islamic values, stating:

"I am led by the ethics and values I was raised on and learned from Islam. The idea is that people forget to follow Islam; they duplicate foreign or Western literature. What inspires me most is Islamic literature, culture, values, principles, and instructions." (P5)

Participant 5 clarified that her approach is not dogmatic but rooted in the ethical beauty of Islam. However, she acknowledged a lack of in-depth Islamic knowledge and the inability to issue a *fatwa*:

"Every leader must have the morals of the Islamic religion. Honestly, I am not strictly talking about the Islamic religion. I am talking about the beauty of Islam and its values and principles, which everyone believes in the Qur'an or the Sunnah." (P5)

Interestingly, none of the participants referred to Ministry of Education guidelines, relying instead on personal interpretations of Islamic leadership.

School Leaders' Priorities

While all interviewees acknowledged the importance of connecting their practices to Allah, there was variability in how they achieved this. They indicated that defining school priorities related to Islamic values depended on their awareness and understanding.

Relationship with Allah

All participants agreed on the significance of developing a relationship with Allah through educational practices, as highlighted by Participant 1:

"If the educational institution has a moral and educational dimension of values, I think that the relationship with Allah will be a priority as we educate the next generation." (P1)

However, despite this shared belief, participants differed in how they integrated this relationship into their leadership. For example, Participant 3 described a structured approach to instilling values in school culture:

"At the beginning of every administrative meeting, I talked about the value that is supposed to be taught... We reinforce it through parent meetings and workshops." (P3)

Some interviewees, however, noted challenges, such as an overemphasis on marketing and financial priorities, which could overshadow religious objectives (P9).

Relationship with Other Humans

Participants also reflected on their relationships with teachers and students, with some emphasizing positive interactions, while others, like Participant 5, noted that not all leaders prioritize student relationships:

"Leaders... wouldn't have missed this point, which is the direct relationship between the principal and the students." (P5)

Participants like P1 and P3 highlighted their commitment to building individuals who contribute positively to their communities, reflecting Islamic social justice and philanthropy values. However, concerns about student behaviour, such as bullying, point to gaps in role modelling and the reinforcement of Islamic values (P4).

Relationship with the Universe and the Environment

Participants mentioned various environmental initiatives, such as planting trees and conserving resources, aligning with Islamic sustainability teachings. Participant 6 shared:

"These projects... are always implemented in our school, such as good consumption of water, electricity, reserving trees and planting them." (P6)

However, little mention of more profound connections to Islamic historical practices or the Golden Age contributions to environmental stewardship suggests room for deeper integration of Islamic principles in this area.

Relationship with Life

Participants agreed that guiding students on patience and gratitude is essential, as expressed by Participant 3, who emphasized integrating spirituality into education:

"We reinforce awareness and spiritual connection through Islamic education classes and guidance classes." (P3)

Despite this, there was a notable lack of staff trained in Islamic concepts to guide students comprehensively

Relationship with the Afterlife

Most participants struggled to articulate how they prepare students for the afterlife, with one participant dismissing the topic as "strange." While some, like Participant 4, mentioned involving external experts to address this issue, there was an overall lack of emphasis on preparing students for the afterlife despite its importance in Islamic teachings.

Islamic-Based Educational Leadership Practices

Though participants had varying understandings of Islamic-based educational leadership, many believed their actions reflected Islamic values. Participant 3, for example, saw all her actions as aligned with divine expectations:

"Every action is connected to the satisfaction of Allah... you are rewarded and linked to your responsibility." (P3)

Nevertheless, there was evidence that some schools adopt international value programs without grounding them in Islamic principles (P9). It suggests that school leaders must reflect more deeply on how their beliefs shape their leadership practices and whether these practices align with an Islamic-based framework.

Factors Affecting Their Practices

Several key factors affecting the implementation of Islamic-based leadership were mentioned, such as ministry regulations, curricula, and the political climate. For example, Participant 8 highlighted the constraints posed by overloaded curricula:

"We have a very dense curriculum... the subject is not educationally oriented enough to develop students' personalities." (P8)

Participants also noted the challenges of finding qualified Islamic educators and the lack of professional development programs tailored to Islamic leadership. As Participant 3 observed:

"No training courses that I attended refined me on topics related to values." (P3)

Technological and financial challenges were also raised, with concerns about how Western influences through technology impact students' values and behaviours (P5). These findings are consistent with previous research on Islamic schools, where the lack of resources and training remains a critical barrier to fully realizing Islamic-based educational leadership.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the complexities and challenges faced by Arab Muslim school leaders in implementing Islamic-based educational leadership (IBL) practices. While participants desired to lead schools based on Islamic values, their practices varied significantly. This variation can be attributed to personal beliefs, institutional policies, and external factors such as government regulations and the socio-political environment.

School Leaders' Beliefs and Practices

One of the most significant findings is the diversity of interpretations of Islamic-based leadership. While all participants recognized the importance of Islamic principles in education, there was no consensus on what constitutes Islamic leadership. It aligns with previous studies, which suggest no uniform definition of Islamic educational leadership ([Arar et al., 2022](#); [Zuhri, 2023](#)). Instead, leadership practices are shaped by individual beliefs, experiences, and understandings of Islam, leading to different approaches to integrating Islamic values into school management.

For example, while some leaders actively sought to embed Islamic principles in every aspect of school life, others felt constrained by external factors, such as school policies or the lack of proper training. It echoes findings from [Astrachan \(2020\)](#), who found that religiosity can influence leadership practices in various ways, but its impact depends on individual experiences and interpretations of faith. The absence of formal guidelines or training for Islamic leadership was a recurring theme, underscoring the need for clearer frameworks and professional development opportunities tailored to Islamic contexts.

Priorities in Islamic-Based Educational Leadership

The participants' understanding of integrating Islamic teachings into their leadership practices also varied across the five dimensions of Al-Kaylani's model (relationship with Allah, other humans, the universe, life, and the afterlife). While the relationship with Allah was identified as a priority, the findings revealed inconsistencies in how this was translated into daily leadership practices. For instance, some leaders focused on promoting Islamic values through structured programs, while others acknowledged that practical constraints, such as marketing pressures or financial limitations, often took precedence over religious goals.

Despite its central importance in Islamic teachings, the lack of emphasis on the afterlife was particularly striking. It could reflect a broader trend in modern Islamic education, where the focus is often on preparing students for worldly success rather than spiritual development ([Arar et al., 2022](#); [Astrachan et al., 2020](#)). This finding suggests a need for more comprehensive approaches to Islamic leadership that balance worldly and spiritual goals, in line with Islamic teachings on education and personal development ([F. Ahmed, 2021](#); [Memon et al., 2021](#)).

Integration of Islamic Values with Leadership Practices

Although many participants believed their actions reflected Islamic values, there were discrepancies between their beliefs and leadership practices. Some leaders adopted international value

programs that were not explicitly linked to Islamic principles, suggesting a gap between theory and practice. This finding supports the argument that Islamic-based educational leadership requires more than personal belief; it necessitates a structured, well-defined framework that integrates Islamic teachings with modern leadership practices.

As previous studies have shown, Islamic education aims to develop the whole person, encompassing spiritual, intellectual, and moral dimensions ([Abubakar et al., 2023](#); [K. Ahmed & Elton-chalcraft, 2023](#); [Alkouatli, 2024](#); [Usman et al., 2021](#)). However, the findings of this study suggest that current leadership practices in Arab schools often fall short of this holistic vision. School leaders may need additional support and training to fully align their leadership practices with Islamic principles and foster environments that promote personal and academic growth.

Factors Influencing Leadership Practices

The findings also revealed several external factors that influenced the ability of school leaders to implement IBL practices, such as ministry regulations, curriculum constraints, and the political climate. These findings are consistent with previous research, which has shown that Islamic-based leadership is often constrained by secular education policies and political tensions in many Muslim-majority countries ([Hammad et al., 2023](#); [Mohamed & Morris, 2021](#); [Sellami et al., 2019](#)).

Furthermore, the lack of qualified Islamic educators and the absence of professional development programs specific to Islamic leadership were identified as significant barriers. These challenges highlight the need for ministries of education in Muslim-majority countries to provide better resources and training for school leaders, enabling them to incorporate Islamic values into their leadership practices more effectively.

Implications for Islamic-Based Educational Leadership

The study's findings have several implications for both research and practice. First, they underscore the need for a clearer, more consistent framework for IBL rooted in Islamic teachings but flexible enough to accommodate the diverse contexts of Arab Muslim schools. Such a framework would provide school leaders with the tools they need to navigate the complexities of modern education while staying true to Islamic principles.

Second, there is a need for more structured professional development opportunities that focus on Islamic leadership. Training programs should equip school leaders with the knowledge and skills to integrate Islamic values into their decision-making processes and to create educational environments that foster the holistic development of students.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of addressing the external factors that influence school leadership in Arab Muslim countries. Policymakers should consider the unique challenges Islamic schools face and work to create supportive environments that allow for the implementation of IBL practices.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the perspectives of Arab Muslim school leaders on Islamic-based educational leadership (IBL) and the factors influencing their leadership practices. The findings reveal that while school leaders are committed to embedding Islamic principles into their practices, there is significant variation in how they interpret and implement these values. Personal beliefs, experiences, and institutional constraints are crucial in shaping their leadership approaches, leading to diverse practices across different schools.

The study also highlights several challenges school leaders face in Arab Muslim countries, including a lack of formal training in IBL, the influence of ministry regulations, and the absence of a consistent framework for integrating Islamic principles with modern educational leadership. These challenges often result in a gap between the leaders' beliefs and their actual practices, as external pressures such as financial constraints and secular policies can limit the application of Islamic values in school management.

One key finding is the need for a more structured and comprehensive approach to Islamic-based leadership that balances education's spiritual and worldly aspects, as outlined in Al-Kaylani's model.

School leaders require clearer guidelines and professional development programs that help them navigate these complexities and align their leadership practices with Islamic teachings.

The implications of this study are significant for policymakers, educational institutions, and researchers. There is an urgent need to develop a consistent framework for IBL that can be adapted to the diverse contexts of Arab Muslim schools. Furthermore, ministries of education should provide more targeted support and resources to help school leaders implement Islamic-based practices effectively. Future research should continue to investigate how IBL can be further refined and expanded better to meet the needs of modern Muslim educational institutions.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on Islamic-based educational leadership by providing valuable insights into the beliefs and practices of Arab Muslim school leaders. It also underscores the importance of developing leadership models rooted in Islamic principles and responsive to the contemporary challenges of education.

Funding and Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no funding and conflicts of interest for this research.

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