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***Toward a Fiqh of Religious Competition:
A Qualitative Study of Negotiating Piety and
Performance in Kerinci's
Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an***

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Abstract

*The Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an (MTQ) brings together two orientations not always aligning: piety, emphasizing devotion to the Qur'an, and competition, entailing public evaluation and recognition. This tension is particularly evident in the organization of the MTQ in Kerinci Regency, where achievement is understood not only as an individual accomplishment but also as a source of regional prestige. This article examines how actors involved in the MTQ understand, justify, and negotiate the relationship between piety and competition. The study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with LPTQ administrators, coaches, participants, religious leaders, and local government representatives, complemented by observation and document analysis. The findings show that the actors do not perceive piety and competition as mutually exclusive orientations. Rather, they develop a form of normative reasoning that positions competition as a *wasilah* (means) for attaining religious goals (*ghayah*), evaluates achievement in terms of *maslahah* and collective benefit, and treats intentions (*niyyah*) as both a moral orientation and a boundary for competitive achievement. Based on these findings, the article proposes the concept of Fiqh of Religious Competition to explain the pattern of normative reasoning through which competitive practices can continue to be understood as part of religious conduct. The concept contributes to contemporary Islamic studies by demonstrating how fiqh reasoning operates contextually to sustain the relationship between piety, performance, and competition in religious life in Indonesia.*

Keywords: *Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an; Piety; Religious Competition; Symbolic Capital.*

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INTRODUCTION

For Indonesian Muslims, the Qur'an is not merely a sacred scripture to be recited and followed as a guide for life, but it is also an object of competition through the *Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an* (MTQ), or Qur'anic recitation competition. In Indonesia, Qur'anic recitation has

undergone a process of festivalization, whereby stage settings, audiences, vocal aesthetics, and competition have become integral elements of the religious experience (Rasmussen, 2010). This process of festivalization brings together two forms of logic unnecessarily operating in harmony: the logic of piety, which is grounded in sincerity and devotion, and the logic of competition, demanding evaluation and public recognition. The question, therefore, is how is the relationship between piety and competition understood and negotiated by the actors involved?

This question becomes increasingly relevant in the context of contemporary Indonesia, where expressions of piety have evolved alongside various social transformations associated with modernization, democratization, and the growing prominence of religious spaces in the public sphere (Pepinsky et al., 2018). Recent studies on the contestation of religious norms in Indonesia demonstrate that religious teachings are interpreted, accepted, implemented, and even contested through contemporary social practices (Mukaromah et al., 2025). While the phenomenon of MTQ festivalization is observed across Indonesia, its local manifestation in Kerinci Regency, Jambi Province, presents a compelling case where competitive performance and regional pride directly intersect. In Kerinci, the tension between piety and competition is particularly acute due to the region's strong socio-religious tradition juxtaposed with a history of persistent competitive stagnation at the provincial level. For many years, Kerinci's low placement in the Jambi Provincial MTQ triggered public critique and a sense of diminished collective prestige. When the local government and the Institute for the Development of Tilawatil Qur'an (LPTQ) instituted structural reforms in 2024 (expanding budgets, establishing systematic Training Centers (TC), and revitalizing coaching networks), the resulting performance improvement was celebrated not only as a religious victory but also as a restoration of regional pride. This dynamic makes Kerinci an ideal locus to examine how local actors negotiate the boundaries between religious devotion, institutional performance, and regional prestige.

The MTQ phenomenon has attracted scholarly attention from a range of perspectives. Several studies within the *Living Qur'an* tradition view the MTQ as a form of social reception of the Qur'an (Darwis et al., 2026), highlighting how the sacred text is presented, practiced, interpreted, and connected to various dimensions of Muslim social life (Adawiyah, 2021; Ariani, 2022). Studies within the same tradition have also situated the MTQ as a form of aesthetic reception of the Qur'an, in which beauty and performative dimensions constitute important aspects of how Muslim communities engage with the sacred text (Awaluddin et al., 2024). Other

studies have approached the MTQ as a social and cultural practice contributing to the formation of Islamic identity, the strengthening of social solidarity, and the reproduction of religious traditions in the public sphere (Ronaldi, 2022).

More than merely an event, the management of the MTQ can be situated within broader debates concerning how religious practices are enacted in the public sphere. Across various Asian contexts, religious rituals no longer function solely as mediums of religious devotion but are increasingly framed as public spectacles (performance) involving patronage, audiences, and diverse social interests (Teeuwen et al., 2023). This perspective helps demonstrate that when religious practices enter the public sphere, they do not necessarily lose their sacred dimension; rather, they continually negotiate the relationship between religious devotion and performative demands. Thus, the issue is no longer whether a particular practice constitutes worship or performance, but rather how these two dimensions are brought together and interpreted by the actors involved.

In this context, James Peacock (2013) argues that religious practices in the public sphere are not necessarily understood exclusively as acts of worship but may also take the form of spectacles. He therefore distinguishes between *congregations*, referring to those who participate as a worshipping community, and *audiences*, referring to those who attend as spectators who appreciate the performative aspects of a religious practice. This distinction demonstrates that a single religious practice may simultaneously encompass both dimensions of religious devotion and public performance without necessarily privileging one over the other.

However, this also raises a further question concerning how the relationship between these two dimensions gains legitimacy within Muslim religious life. In this regard, Talal Asad (1993, 2009) emphasizes that religious practices cannot be understood merely as expressions of universal and ahistorical beliefs; rather, they are always rooted in discursive traditions shaped by particular forms of authority, discipline, and historical processes. From this perspective, the MTQ cannot be understood simply as a competition in Qur'anic recitation, but rather as a practice deriving its legitimacy from a religious tradition that is continually reproduced. At the same time, such legitimacy is produced not only within internal religious spaces but also enacted in the public sphere. Accordingly, the involvement of religious institutions, local governments, the media, and the wider community in organizing the MTQ demonstrates, as Casanova (1994) argues, that religion continues to occupy the public sphere through various forms of expression and social institutions.

In this context, Saba Mahmood (2005) demonstrates that piety is not merely a matter of inner belief but is also cultivated through practices and disciplines performed repeatedly. This argument helps explain why the intensive training of Qur'anic recitation skills prior to the MTQ is understood not simply as the acquisition of technical competence but also as part of a process of religious self-formation. In a similar vein, Charles Hirschkind (2006) demonstrates that auditory practices in Islam play a significant role in shaping the ethical sensibilities and religious dispositions of their practitioners. From this perspective, Qur'anic recitation performances in the MTQ not only generate aesthetic appreciation but are also understood as a medium for cultivating and expressing piety. Yet, viewing the MTQ solely as a means of cultivating piety is insufficient. As a competition, the MTQ brings together participants, coaches, religious institutions, and local governments in the pursuit of recognition and prestige. In this regard, the concepts of field and symbolic capital developed by Bourdieu (1990) and further elaborated by Swartz (1997) help explain how religious competition simultaneously becomes a space for struggles over legitimacy, honor, and symbolic capital.

Nevertheless, these approaches have largely focused on explaining how religious practices are shaped, performed, or contested in social life. Relatively limited attention has been given to how actors normatively justify and negotiate the presence of competition within practices understood as acts of worship. In the context of the MTQ, however, the question of why competition over the Qur'an can be accepted as part of religious devotion is as important as the questions of how such competition is organized and who benefits from it. To provide a clear analytical direction, this study addresses three research questions. First, how do actors involved in the MTQ in Kerinci Regency construct religious legitimacy for competitive Qur'anic recitation? Second, how is competitive achievement transformed into symbolic capital and regional prestige within local socio-political dynamics? Third, through what patterns of normative reasoning do actors negotiate the tension between piety, performance, and prestige? Correspondingly, this article aims to examine the mechanisms of religious authorization in MTQ, analyze the conversion of competitive success into symbolic capital, and articulate the concept of Fiqh of Religious Competition as a living normative framework in contemporary Indonesian Islam. To address this issue, this article argues that the relationship between piety and competition in the MTQ is not understood by the actors involved as two mutually exclusive orientations, but rather as two values continually negotiated through normative reasoning embedded in practice. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Kerinci Regency, this article

proposes the concept of *Fiqh of Religious Competition* to explain how actors justify, regulate, and make sense of religious competition without detaching it from the orientation toward piety. Through this concept, the article not only enriches scholarship on the MTQ but also contributes to broader debates concerning the relationship between piety, performance, and competition in contemporary religious practices.

This study draws on Talal Asad's (1993, 2009) perspective of religion as a *discursive tradition*. From this perspective, religious practices are not understood as expressions of universal and ahistorical beliefs, but rather as traditions that are continually reproduced through processes of interpretation, authorization, and normative justification. Accordingly, the key question in examining the MTQ is not merely whether competition over the Qur'an is consistent with Islamic teachings, but how such a practice gains legitimacy and continues to be sustained as part of Muslim religious life. This perspective enables the study to trace the various arguments, explanations, and justifications employed by actors in understanding the relationship between worship and competition.

However, religious legitimacy alone is insufficient to explain the broader dynamics of the MTQ. As a competition, the MTQ brings together various actors, institutions, and interests oriented toward social recognition and prestige. This dimension of recognition has become increasingly significant amid the growing presence of religion in Indonesia's public sphere, which has been regarded as one of the important features of democratic consolidation in post-Reformasi Indonesia (Afriyanti, 2020). In a different context, Reynolds (2025) demonstrates that religious practices can also constitute an arena of *competitive piety*, in which religious acts are employed to attain recognition, honor, and status within social hierarchies. This finding suggests that piety and competition are not necessarily mutually exclusive; rather, they may become intertwined across diverse socio-religious contexts.

To examine this dimension, this study draws on Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of *field* and *symbolic capital*, as elaborated by Swartz (1997). From this perspective, the MTQ can be understood as a social arena in which individuals, religious institutions, and local governments seek to attain legitimacy, honor, and symbolic standing through achievement. Accordingly, success in the MTQ carries not only religious significance but also generates social value that can be converted into collective, institutional, or individual prestige.

These two perspectives are employed complementarily to understand the MTQ as a practice situated at the intersection of religious legitimacy and symbolic recognition. However,

this study does not stop at explaining how the MTQ is legitimized or contested. Its primary focus is to examine how actors negotiate the various normative demands emerging when piety and competition coexist within the same practice. Based on this analysis, the article proposes the concept of *Fiqh of Religious Competition* as a conceptual framework for understanding how Muslim actors justify, regulate, and make sense of religious competition without detaching it from the orientation toward piety and religious devotion.

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine how actors involved in the *Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an* (MTQ) understand and negotiate the relationship between piety and competition. The research was conducted in Kerinci Regency and relevant competition venues across Jambi Province. The fieldwork involved extended engagement and continuous observation spanning from 2022 to 2024, focusing on key sites of MTQ activity, including local training centers, LPTQ secretariat offices, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), and public competition arenas at both the regency and provincial levels. Primary data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 12 key informants selected via purposive sampling based on their direct structural involvement, coaching experience, or active participation in the MTQ. These informants comprised four LPTQ administrators, three recitation coaches and judges, three active MTQ participants, one prominent religious leader, and one local government official involved in regional administrative support and patronage. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and explored themes such as personal motivations, training discipline, perceptions of victory and prestige, the religious justification of competition, and institutional policies. Data collection was carried out until data saturation was reached, where additional interviews no longer generated new thematic codes or novel normative explanations regarding the negotiation of piety and competition.

To complement the interview accounts, long-term non-participant observation was conducted during regional preparation sessions, intensive coaching camps, and live competition events from 2022 to 2024 to capture the performative demands, institutional dynamics, and public ritual atmosphere. Furthermore, document analysis was performed on LPTQ performance reports, and regional media coverage from 2016 to 2024. Data trustworthiness and analytical validity were established through source and method triangulation, cross-checking interview accounts against observational notes, administrative documents, and historical MTQ performance records. The collected data were analyzed thematically through iterative coding. Initial codes related to syiar, training discipline, regional honor, sincerity (*niyyah*), and public

benefit (*maslahah*) were categorized and interpreted through Talal Asad's perspective on discursive tradition and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field and symbolic capital, culminating in the conceptualization of the Fiqh of Religious Competition.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Legitimizing Competition: MTQ As Religious Practice

For the actors involved in organizing the MTQ in Kerinci Regency, competition is not understood as an end in itself. The narratives articulated by participants, coaches, LPTQ administrators, and local government officials indicate that the primary value of the MTQ lies in the religious functions attributed to it. Competition is accepted not merely for its competitive element but because it is understood as a means of honoring the Qur'an and advancing the propagation of Islam. This finding is consistent with Rasmussen's observation that Qur'anic recitation practices in Indonesia not only embody a performative dimension but also serve as a medium through which piety is displayed and experienced (*performing piety*) (Rasmussen, 2010). In this sense, the legitimacy of the MTQ does not derive from the logic of competition itself but from the process of situating competition within a broader horizon of religious meaning. Religious practices gain legitimacy through discursive traditions that continually reproduce the relationship between social actions and recognized religious values (Asad, 2009).

One of the most dominant justifications articulated in the informants' narratives is that the MTQ serves as a means of *syiar* and Islamic *da'wah*. From their perspective, the primary value of the MTQ does not lie in determining winners but in its capacity to bring the Qur'an into the public sphere and attract public attention to renewed engagement with the sacred text. This justification resembles patterns found in other forms of contemporary piety, in which the visibility of religious activities, whether in physical or digital public spaces, functions as an invitational force encouraging others to participate *berpartisipasi* (Husein & Slama, 2018; Rinaldo, 2008). Accordingly, the organization of the MTQ is viewed as an effort to bring the Qur'an into wider social life through approaches more engaging and accessible to the broader public. One informant, for example, explained that the competition itself is merely a medium for cultivating public interest in the Qur'an, while its primary objective is to foster love for the sacred text. Within this framework, competition is not positioned as an end in itself but as an instrument through which religious messages can reach a wider audience (Gade, 2004).

The emphasis on the function of *syiar* indicates that the actors do not primarily understand the MTQ as a competitive arena but rather as a means of achieving higher-order religious objectives. In this way, the competitive element is not eliminated but repositioned as an instrument serving religious interests (Asad, 2009). The *syiar* narrative functions as a mechanism of legitimation enabling competitive activity to remain understood as part of devotion to the Qur'an (Gade, 2004). From this perspective, the success of the MTQ is measured not solely by the emergence of champions but also by its capacity to increase public participation, broaden engagement with the Qur'an, and animate religious symbols in the public sphere (Rasmussen, 2010). This is reflected in the statement of one informant:

"MTQ is not merely about finding champions. What matters most is how it brings people closer to the Qur'an. If more people attend, children become more enthusiastic about learning to recite the Qur'an, and their love for the Qur'an grows, then that is already a success of the MTQ." (Coach UY, Personal Communication, August 12, 2024).

The quotation demonstrates that the legitimacy of the MTQ is constructed not on the basis of competitive objectives but on the basis of religious *syiar*. In other words, competition is accepted not as an end in itself but as a medium for realizing religious objectives. Following Asad, the legitimacy of religious practices is neither universal nor ahistorical; rather, it is produced through processes of discursive authorization (Asad, 1993, 2009). In Kerinci, MTQ competition is authorized by framing it as a means of *syiar* and religious development that generates *maslahah*. The informant's statement that "what matters most is how it brings people closer to the Qur'an" illustrates this discursive process: the competitive element is not eliminated but repositioned as an instrument serving higher religious purposes. Accordingly, competition acquires the status of part of a tradition of piety rather than an activity that exists outside it.

In addition to being understood as a means of *syiar*, the legitimacy of the MTQ is also constructed through the discourse of religious development. For many informants, the religious value of the MTQ lies not only in the organization of the competition itself but also in the lengthy process preceding it. The MTQ is seen as capable of stimulating a range of Qur'anic learning activities, from basic religious education in *TPQ* and *tahfiz* houses, to Qur'an-based activities in mosques and prayer halls, as well as intensive training in *pesantren* and other religious institutions. From this perspective, competition functions as an instrument motivating communities to study the Qur'an more seriously (Murtadlo & Yuliastutik, 2025). The higher the quality of religious development generated through these processes, the greater the religious

benefits believed to arise from the organization of the MTQ.

This view is reflected in interviews with informants involved in MTQ training and development. They considered that the most significant impact of organizing the MTQ is not merely the emergence of champions but the growth of a culture of Qur'anic learning within the community. The MTQ is believed to encourage parents to send their children to *TPQ*, *tahfiz* houses, and *pesantren*, while also motivating Islamic educational institutions to improve the quality of Qur'anic recitation training and preparation for other MTQ categories. As one informant explained:

"If there were no MTQ, children might not be as interested in learning Qur'anic recitation. Because of the MTQ, they are motivated to practice and improve their recitation of the Qur'an." (Coach UY, Personal Communication, August 13, 2024)

A similar view emerged from other informants who regarded the MTQ as a factor revitalizing Qur'anic learning activities across various religious educational institutions. From their perspective, competition functions as a stimulus that encourages the training and development process to continue on an ongoing basis. Thus, the value of the MTQ lies not merely in the moment of competition itself but in the learning ecosystem that develops around it. Through this logic, competition gains religious legitimacy because it is seen as producing broader benefits for strengthening the Qur'anic tradition within society. Structurally, this reasoning is consistent with the principle of *maslahah* in the Islamic jurisprudential tradition (Auda, 2008).

The importance of training and development is particularly evident in the experience of Kerinci Regency. For many years, the region struggled to compete in the provincial-level MTQ in Jambi and frequently occupied the lower positions in the final standings. This situation often prompted criticism of the weaknesses in the existing training and development system. The situation began to change in 2024, when the local government, together with the LPTQ, undertook a series of improvements, including institutional strengthening, increased training intensity, and the implementation of more structured *training centers*. These efforts were subsequently followed by improved performance by Kerinci Regency in the provincial-level MTQ (Jambiupdate.co, 2024). For the informants, this change demonstrated that achievement does not emerge instantaneously but results from a systematic and sustained process of training and development. In this regard, a community leader in Kerinci Regency remarked, "if the training and development process works well, achievement will follow" (AZ, personal

communication, August 13, 2024).

The findings above demonstrate that competition in the MTQ derives its legitimacy not from its competitive character per se but from a process of discursive authorization positioning it as a means of *syiar* and Qur'anic training and development. By linking the competitive practice to objectives understood to generate *maslahah*, i.e. expanding public engagement with the Qur'an and strengthening traditions of Qur'anic learning, actors incorporate competition into the tradition of piety rather than treating it as an activity external to it. This process is consistent with Asad's Asad conception of discursive tradition (Asad, 1993, 2009) and also illustrates the mechanism of authorization described by Alatas (Alatas, 2019, 2023), whereby a practice acquires Islamic status through its connection to established traditions of reasoning and piety. Structurally, this reasoning is also consistent with the logic of *wasilah* and *maqasid* in *usul al-fiqh*, whereby the value of a means is determined by the ends it serves (Auda, 2008). However, the success of this authorization does not eliminate the fact that achievement continues to carry significant social weight. Precisely because competition has been successfully legitimized in religious terms, achievements within it can subsequently be converted into forms of recognition and prestige, as discussed in the following section.

2. Competing For Prestige: Symbolic Capital In MTQ

Although informants consistently emphasized the functions of *syiar* and training and development in the organization of the MTQ, the field data indicate that competition continues to occupy an important position. The strong attention given to competition results, targets for winning titles, and various efforts to improve performance demonstrates that the MTQ is not understood solely as an arena of religious devotion. In Kerinci Regency, for example, performance at the provincial-level MTQ in Jambi serves as an indicator that is closely monitored by various stakeholders, ranging from LPTQ administrators to local government officials. This condition indicates that, in addition to generating religious value, the MTQ also produces forms of social recognition regarded as valuable to both individuals and the region.

For many years, Kerinci Regency has struggled to compete with other regencies and municipalities in the provincial-level MTQ in Jambi. Its tendency to remain among the lower-ranked regions has been viewed not merely as a matter of technical shortcomings in training and development but also as a source of evaluation and criticism of the performance of various parties involved.

The low level of achievement has even become a subject of public discussion. One resident, writing through a social media account, expressed embarrassment over the region's consistently low ranking: "Every time we participate in the Jambi Provincial MTQ, we always rank last, at the bottom. It's embarrassing..." (JHP, August 30, 2023). Such complaints reflect the fact that MTQ performance is not merely an internal institutional matter but has become an issue touching upon the collective self-esteem of the community. To provide a more systematic overview, the ranking of Kerinci Regency across the seven most recent editions of the Jambi Provincial MTQ is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Kerinci's Ranking in the Jambi Provincial MTQ, 2016–2023

No	MTQ Edition	Year	Host	Ranking	Points	1st Place	2nd Place	3rd Place
1	52	2023	Sarolangun	10/11	3	Jambi	Tanjabbar	Tanjabtim
2	51	2022	S. Penuh	11	0	Jambi	Tanjabbar	Tanjabtim
3	50	2021	Tanjabbar	11	0	Tanjabbar	Jambi	Tanjabtim
4	-	2020	-	-	-	-	-	-
5	49	2019	Bungo	10	2	Tanjabtim	Jambi	M. Jambi
6	48	2018	Batanghari	10	?	Tanjabtim	Jambi	Batanghari
7	47	2017	Tanjabtim	11	?	Jambi		
8	46	2016	Merangin	9	?	Jambi		

(Source: Compiled through media tracking of various sources.)

Table 1 shows that, since at least 2016, Kerinci Regency's highest achievement has been ninth place, which occurred only once, in 2016. Thereafter, Kerinci consistently ranked tenth (twice) and eleventh (four times). Moreover, in 2021 and 2022, Kerinci Regency did not get a single point. This means that, out of a total of 56 delegates sent to compete (28 categories, each divided by gender), none managed to advance to the final round. The absence of finalists reinforces the impression that Kerinci experienced significant stagnation in provincial-level competition.

This situation has prompted various questions and criticisms among local residents. Some have compared the contemporary performance with the period of the early 2000s, when Kerinci

Regency was still able to rank third in 2003–2005. Others argue that the necessary human resources are in fact available but have not been adequately organized. As a result, some Kerinci residents with strong Qur'anic recitation skills have competed as delegates representing other regencies or municipalities and contributed achievements to the regions they represented. These criticisms demonstrate that MTQ rankings have become one of the markers of regional reputation in the public sphere. Repeated failures are not merely interpreted as weaknesses in training and development but also as a loss of symbolic capital that should otherwise accrue to the Kerinci community.

Accordingly, when the local government began to devote greater attention to the MTQ in 2024 through strengthened training and development, increased budgetary support, and the implementation of more systematic *training centers*, the resulting improvement in performance immediately attracted widespread attention. For the informants, this achievement was not merely a victory in a competition but also a symbol of regional progress in the religious sphere. As one informant explained:

“When MTQ performance improves, the community feels proud because it means that our region is being taken seriously. Kerinci can compete with other regions. In fact, we used to win quite often.”
(Coach UY, Personal Communication, August 12, 2024)

These findings demonstrate that achievement in the MTQ carries significance that extends beyond competitive performance itself. Victory generates social recognition that can be converted into honor, reputation, and collective pride. This process of converting achievement into symbolic capital is consistent with other studies in Indonesia demonstrating how religious values can be transformed into sources of legitimacy and collective reputation (Ahmad et al., 2026). In this sense, the MTQ can be understood as an arena in which various actors seek to acquire and maintain symbolic capital. Not only participants but also coaches, religious institutions, local governments, and the wider community are involved in producing and distributing such recognition. The higher the achievements attained, the greater will be the prestige the actors involved can claim. This finding is consistent with other studies in Indonesia showing that symbolic capital in the religious field is not fixed but is produced, converted, and contested by various actors, for example through genealogical practices in *pesantren* communities (Wajdi & Khabibullah, 2025) or through strategies for reproducing authority among *habaib* groups (Shorfana et al., 2025).

From Bourdieu's (1990) perspective, such recognition can be understood as a form of

symbolic capital, namely honor, reputation, and prestige that are socially recognized. Unlike economic or political capital, symbolic capital operates through collective recognition of values regarded as significant within a particular community. In the case of the MTQ, participants' achievements not only bring recognition to the individuals who compete but also strengthen the reputation of the institutions responsible for their training, the local government, and the community they represent. The higher the achievements attained, the greater will be the prestige the actors involved can claim. This finding is consistent with the observation that the religious field in Indonesia often functions as a *field* in which various actors compete for recognition and symbolic authority (Pelletier, 2021).

Interestingly, an orientation toward achievement is not necessarily perceived as opposed to piety. Instead, actors often link victory to successful training and development, the effectiveness of *syiar*, or reverence for the Qur'an. Nevertheless, the data concerning the collective embarrassment caused by the Kerinci Regency delegation's lowest ranking in the provincial-level MTQ, together with the considerable attention given to competitive achievement, demonstrate that the desire for social recognition remains strongly operative. The tension between the pursuit of achievement and the values of sincerity and devotion consequently requires normative reasoning among the actors involved, while also creating room for various forms of negotiation in MTQ practices.

Thus, the MTQ functions not only as an arena for the reproduction of religious values but also as an arena for the production of symbolic capital. The prestige generated does not stand apart from the religious framework; rather, it gains legitimacy through its connection to *syiar*, training and development, and devotion to the Qur'an. This condition makes the relationship between piety and competition impossible to explain simply as a conflict between religious and worldly orientations. Instead, the two are continually negotiated through normative reasoning embedded in practice, as further elaborated through the concept of *Fiqh of Religious Competition*.

3. Toward a Fiqh of Religious Competition

The findings above demonstrate that the MTQ cannot be understood solely as a religious practice or as a competitive arena. On the one hand, actors situate the MTQ within a framework of *syiar* and Qur'anic training and development, thereby granting competition religious legitimacy. On the other hand, the achievements produced through the competition also carry

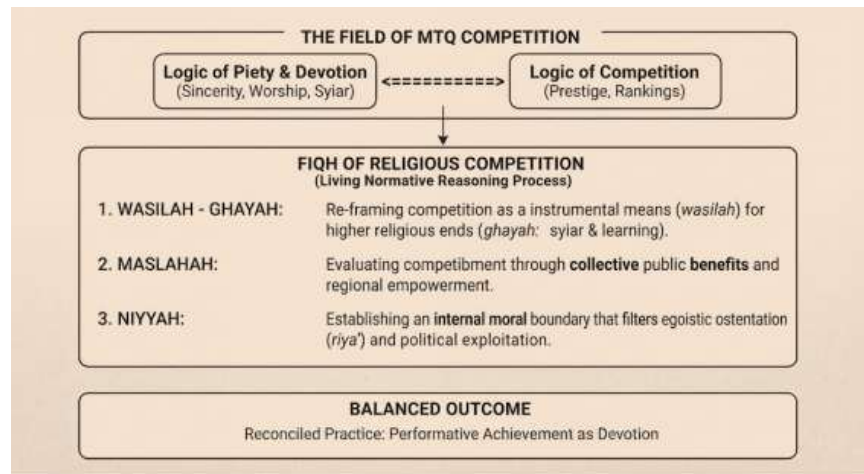
significant symbolic value for participants, training institutions, and local governments. These two orientations are not regarded as mutually exclusive. Rather, actors develop various ways of explaining, justifying, and managing the relationship between them.

Actors do not reject competition, but neither do they accept it as a value-neutral activity. Instead, they develop a set of normative considerations enabling competition to remain understood as part of religious practice. In other words, the meaning of competition in the MTQ is determined not solely by its competitive character but by how practitioners understand and negotiate it.

Based on these findings, this article proposes the concept of *Fiqh of Religious Competition* to explain the patterns of normative reasoning employed by Muslim actors in understanding, justifying, and regulating religious competition. The term *fiqh* is used in this article in a broader sense, referring to a process of understanding and negotiating social action through normative considerations grounded in religious values. In the context of the MTQ, *Fiqh of Religious Competition* refers to a set of modes of reasoning enabling competitive activity to be sustained without losing the religious orientation underpinning its existence.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the concept of *Fiqh of Religious Competition* operates as an analytical framework reconciling two structurally distinct orientations: the logic of piety (oriented toward sincerity, devotion, and *syiar*) and the logic of competition (oriented toward public performance, recognition, and regional prestige). Rather than treating these orientations as mutually exclusive, the framework demonstrates how Muslim actors employ three interconnected normative operations to sustain competitive activity within a religious horizon.

Figure 1. The Analytical Framework of Fiqh of Religious Competition



First, *wasilah-ghayah* provides the teleological orientation by repositioning competition from an end in itself (*ghayah*) into an instrumental means (*wasilah*) for advancing Qur'anic learning and propagation. Second, *maslahah* expands the social valuation of competitive success, connecting individual and regional achievement to collective public benefits and regional honor. Third, *niyyah* acts as an internal moral boundary, continuously regulating individual motivations to prevent the practice from devolving into purely egoistic ostentation (*riya'*) or political instrumentalization. Through the dynamic interaction of these three operations, competitive performance is successfully legitimized and sustained as a form of religious conduct.

Table 2. Normative Operations of *Fiqh of Religious Competition* in MTQ Practice

Normative Operation	Normative Operation		
	Question	Manifestation in MTQ Practice	Function in Negotiation
<i>Wasilah-Ghayah</i>	What is the purpose of the MTQ competition?	The MTQ serves as a means of <i>syiar</i> , Qur'anic training and development, and strengthening the Qur'anic tradition.	Legitimizing competition
<i>Maslahah</i>	What benefits does the MTQ competition generate?	The MTQ is considered to generate <i>maslahah</i> by strengthening Qur'anic training a development and fostering regional pride.	Connecting achievement with collective benefits
<i>Niyah</i>	What is the orientation of the competition (MTQ)?	The MTQ is considered acceptable as long as it is toward devotion, <i>syiar</i> , traing and training and devel, rather, than merely the pursuit of prestige.	Establishing a moral boundary between religious competition and the pursuit of prestige

These three operations demonstrate that *Fiqh of Religious Competition* does not operate

through a single principle. *Wasilah-ghayah* provides direction to the competition, *maslahah* justifies the benefits it generates, while *niyyah* provides both orientation and moral boundaries for those involved. Together, these three dimensions interact in determining whether competition can still be situated within a horizon of religious devotion or has shifted toward the pursuit of prestige.

This conceptualization both intersects with and differs from Reynolds's notion of *competitive piety* (Reynolds, 2025). In his study of Byzantine society, Reynolds demonstrates that religious acts can serve as a medium for competition while simultaneously establishing status within social hierarchies. This perspective helps demonstrate that the relationship between piety and competition is not unique to Indonesian Islamic traditions but can also be found in other religious cultures with longstanding histories of such dynamics. Nevertheless, the findings of this study indicate that the issue confronting MTQ actors extends beyond the fact that religious practice can become an arena of competition. More importantly, it concerns how such competition is continually understood, justified, and constrained through a set of normative considerations grounded in Islamic values. Accordingly, this article proposes the concept of *Fiqh of Religious Competition* not as a replacement for the notion of *competitive piety*, but as a means of explaining the normative mechanisms enabling competitive practices to remain understood as part of religious devotion.

This conceptualization demonstrates that the relationship between religion and competition is not necessarily antagonistic, as is often assumed. In the context of the MTQ, competition is neither eliminated in order to preserve piety nor allowed to proceed without limits. Rather, it is situated within a normative framework enabling achievement, recognition, and prestige to be maintained without relinquishing the religious orientation that underpins them. The findings also demonstrate that piety in the MTQ is understood not merely as an individual inner state but as something collective, embodied, and relational. In this sense, the performative dimension of the MTQ is not a deviation from piety but rather one of the ways in which piety is enacted and negotiated in the public sphere. This perspective is consistent with Teeuwen et al., demonstrating that public religious practices continually bring together elements of piety, performance, and patronage without necessarily undermining their religious legitimacy (Teeuwen et al., 2023).

Fiqh of Religious Competition can be understood as the way Muslim actors manage the tension between *piety* and *performance* through an ongoing process of normative reasoning

embedded in religious and social practice. The use of the term “*fiqh*” here refers to its classical meaning as “*fahm*” (Syarifuddin, 2008), that is, an effort to understand and evaluate human actions within a framework of religious values, rather than merely as a body of formal rules (*ahkam*). Within the tradition of *usul al-fiqh*, such reasoning is concerned not only with the validity of an act but also with the relationship between means (*wasilah*) and ends (*ghayah*), as well as the intention underlying the action (Kamali, 2020). When MTQ actors frame competition as a means of *syiar* and training and development, religioize achievement through collective benefits, and treat intention as a moral boundary, they are effectively engaging in a mode of reasoning consistent with the logic of *fiqh*: evaluating a practice not merely by its form but also by its direction, purpose, and underlying orientation.

The object of conceptualization here is not these categories of *fiqh* considered separately, but rather how actors employ them to bridge two structurally distinct logics: the logic of religious devotion and the logic of competition generating performance and recognition. Accordingly, the novelty of this concept lies in its attention to the reasoning process connecting norms, purposes, and the social consequences of religious competition, rather than in the creation of new normative categories within *fiqh*.

The normative foundation of this process can be traced to the *usul al-fiqh* tradition, which evaluates an action not merely on the basis of its outward form but also according to the relationship between its means (*wasilah*), ends (*ghayah*), and underlying orientation. The legal maxim *li al-wasā'il ḥukm al-maqāṣid* (Suyuti, 1983) affirms that a means is evaluated according to the direction or purpose it serves. A similar logic can be observed in the way MTQ actors assess competition: not merely as a competitive activity but also as a means of advancing higher religious objectives. The emphasis on intention further reinforces the normative character of this reasoning. As articulated in the principle *innamā al-a'māl bi al-niyyāt* (Bukhari, 1973), the value of an action is significantly determined by the actor's underlying intention (Al-Asqalani, 1986). In the context of the MTQ, intention functions as a moral boundary enabling actors to distinguish between competition remaining within the horizon of religious devotion and competition having shifted toward the mere pursuit of recognition.

Furthermore, this reasoning also encompasses negotiations over what is understood as *maslahah*. For the people of Kerinci, *maslahah* lies not only in participation in the MTQ as a form of *syiar* but also in achievements enhancing the reputation of the region. Low rankings are experienced as a collective shortcoming, whereas improved performance is understood as an

Toward a Fiqh of Religious...265-286 (Iskandar, et all)

indicator of successful training and development and the strengthening of the region's religious identity. In *usul al-fiqh*, *maslahah* is not rigidly fixed but may be determined through consideration of social contexts and communal needs, as reflected in the reasoning of *maslahah mursalah* and other context-sensitive considerations of public benefit (Hallaq, 2009). The shift in the meaning of *maslahah* in Kerinci—from mere participation to regional achievement—demonstrates that actors do not simply apply normative categories rigidly but continually adapt their reasoning to the collective aspirations and social realities they encounter.

Thus, *maslahah* in the context of MTQ does not emerge as a fully predetermined normative category but is constituted through actors' assessments of the purposes and social consequences of competitive practice. achievement, regional pride, training and development, and *syiar* may be regarded as forms of *maslahah* insofar as they are understood to support broader religious objectives. Here, *fiqh* does not operate merely as a set of rules applied to social practices but as a process of *fahm* (normative understanding and evaluation) of practices continually evolving. In other words, actors not simply ask whether competition is permissible or whether it contains an element of *riya'* (ostentation), but they also continually assess the purposes for which competition is pursued, the benefits it generates, and the point at which an orientation toward achievement may shift into the pursuit of prestige.

More than merely explaining the religious legitimation of competition, *Fiqh of Religious Competition* demonstrates how religious sensibilities are sustained amid practices structurally competitive and deeply invested in symbolic recognition. This concept offers a way of understanding *fiqh* as living normative reasoning: not merely as a doctrine applied mechanically, but also as a process of understanding and evaluation enabling actors to adapt religious principles to the changing dynamics of social practice.

Nevertheless, a critical inquiry must address whether the Fiqh of Religious Competition operates as a genuinely transformative ethical guide or merely as a post-hoc rationalization for institutional survival, political gain, and local pride. In high-stakes arenas like the MTQ, where municipal budgets, regional prestige, and patronage networks are heavily involved, normative concepts such as *wasilah* and *maslahah* can potentially be instrumentalized to legitimize what is fundamentally political performance. However, empirical findings in Kerinci demonstrate that while political and institutional interests certainly drive the structural mobilization of MTQ, such as increased budgetary allocations and target-driven training centers, the normative reasoning of actors cannot be reduced to mere political utility. For coaches, participants, and local scholars,

the invocation of *niyyah* and *syiar* serves as an active, internal self-regulatory mechanism resisting full secularization or commercialization of the practice. Rather than functioning as a passive mask for political interest, the Fiqh of Religious Competition operates as an ongoing field of moral negotiation where actors continuously realign external competitive demands with internal spiritual orientations.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that the relationship between piety and competition in the Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an is not antagonistic but is continually negotiated through forms of normative reasoning embedded in the practices of the actors involved. Based on findings from Kerinci Regency, this article proposes the concept of *Fiqh of Religious Competition* as a framework for understanding the patterns of normative reasoning enabling religious competition to remain within the horizon of piety. Within this framework, competition is legitimized as a *wasilah*, achievement is religioized by linking it to collective benefits (*maslahah*), while intention (*niyyah*) functions as both an orientation and a moral boundary within practices characterized by symbolic recognition. This concept is not intended to constitute a new legal category but rather to offer a way of understanding *fiqh* as living normative reasoning embedded in social practice. The conceptual contribution of this study lies in explaining how the boundaries between *piety*, *performance*, and *prestige* are negotiated through considerations of purpose, *maslahah*, and intention. From this perspective, religious competition need not be understood as the antithesis of piety but as a practice continually negotiated to remain within the horizon of religious values.

The implications of this study extend beyond the management of the MTQ to the broader design and conceptualization of competitive religious practices. For institutions responsible for organizing and coaching the MTQ, performance targets should be embedded within a developmental framework continuously affirming its religious foundations, ensuring that competitive drive remains bound to sound intention (*niyyah*), public benefit (*maslahah*), and spiritual devotion. At the theoretical level, the proposed *Fiqh of Religious Competition* offers strong analytical transferability beyond the Kerinci context. The interaction among *wasilah-ghayah*, *maslahah*, and *niyyah* provides a viable conceptual framework for examining other performative religious arenas across Indonesia and the wider Muslim world, such as national Qur'anic assemblies, calligraphic and Islamic arts festivals, and competitive Islamic education networks.

Future research can build upon this framework in different socio-political settings to further evaluate how actors negotiate the boundaries between piety, institutional prestige, and religious legitimacy.

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