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The Formation of Classical Islamic Law: Tracing the Development of Legal Sources, Methodologies, and Madhhabs

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Abstract

ABSTRACT
Classical Islamic law represents the foundation of Islamic legal thought and has significantly influenced the development of Islamic jurisprudence from the formative period to the present. Understanding its historical formation is essential for explaining the evolution of Islamic legal methodology and its contemporary relevance.
This study aims to analyze the historical formation of classical Islamic law by examining the development of legal sources, methods of legal reasoning (istinbāṭ), and the emergence of the major Islamic legal madhhabs.
This research employs a normative legal research design using a library research approach. Historical and conceptual approaches were applied to examine primary sources, including the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical turāth literature, as well as secondary academic publications on Islamic legal history and uṣūl al-fiqh. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively using a descriptive-analytical method.
The findings reveal that classical Islamic law developed progressively from the Prophetic period through the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, the Umayyad Dynasty, and reached methodological maturity during the Abbasid period. The expansion of legal sources from the Qur'an and Sunnah to ijmāʿ, qiyās, istiḥsān, and maṣlaḥah mursalah, together with the emergence of the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafiʿi, and Hanbali madhhabs, established a comprehensive legal tradition characterized by methodological diversity and intellectual dynamism.
The historical formation of classical Islamic law demonstrates that Islamic jurisprudence evolved through the interaction of revelation, juristic reasoning, and socio-political realities. This methodological legacy continues to provide a significant foundation for addressing contemporary legal challenges within the framework of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah.addressing the challenges of modern society.

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Introduction

Islamic law constitutes one of the world's most influential legal systems, characterized by a long and complex historical development. Its existence is not merely understood as a set of religious norms derived from divine revelation but also as the result of the intellectual endeavors of Muslim scholars in responding to various social issues that emerged within Muslim societies. From a historical perspective, Islamic law underwent a gradual process of formation beginning during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and eventually reached

methodological maturity during the classical period through the emergence of various madhhabs (schools of Islamic jurisprudence) and the development of the science of Uṣūl al-Fiqh (Sya'roni & Zubaidi, 2026). Consequently, the study of the historical formation of classical Islamic law is essential for understanding the epistemological and methodological foundations of Islamic law, which continue to serve as primary references in contemporary Islamic legal practices (Almurni dkk., 2024).

One of the most fundamental intellectual achievements of the classical period was the systematization of the principles of Islamic legal reasoning through the discipline of *Uṣūl al-Fiqh*. This intellectual development was pioneered by Imām al-Shāfiʿī in *Al-Risālah*, a work widely regarded as the first systematic exposition of Islamic legal methodology (Anshori & Abdurrahman, 2025a). In *Al-Risālah*, al-Shāfiʿī established a coherent hierarchy of legal sources by emphasizing the authority of the Qur'an, the Sunnah, *ijmāʿ*, and *qiyās*, while simultaneously providing methodological guidelines for legal deduction (*istinbāṭ*). His contribution laid the epistemological foundation upon which subsequent jurists developed more sophisticated theories of Islamic jurisprudence (Al-Shāfiʿī, 2002). The practical foundations of Islamic jurisprudence had, however, begun to emerge even before the codification of *Uṣūl al-Fiqh*. Imām Mālik's *Al-Muwaṭṭaʾ* illustrates the integration of Prophetic traditions, the legal opinions of the Companions, and the established practices (*ʿamal*) of the people of Madinah as complementary sources of legal authority. This approach demonstrates that classical Islamic law evolved through the interaction between textual evidence and lived legal traditions rather than through literal textual interpretation alone (Mālik ibn Anas, 1985).

Historically, the sources of Islamic law during the Prophet's era were primarily based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah, which served as the principal foundations for resolving legal matters. However, as Islamic territories expanded and new legal issues emerged that were not explicitly regulated by textual sources (naṣṣ), the Companions and subsequent generations of scholars began to develop various methods of legal reasoning. This development gave rise to the practice of ijtihād, which later evolved into systematic legal methodologies through concepts such as ijmāʿ (consensus), qiyās (analogical reasoning), istiḥsān (juristic preference), maṣlaḥah mursalah (unrestricted public interest), and other methods of legal deduction (istinbāṭ). These developments ultimately laid the foundation for the emergence of Uṣūl al-Fiqh as the theoretical framework governing the process of Islamic legal reasoning and adjudication (Maulidia, 2024).

The development of classical Islamic law was also marked by the emergence of various legal madhhabs, each characterized by distinct methodological approaches. The Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali madhhabs evolved within diverse social, political, and geographical contexts, resulting in different patterns of legal reasoning and interpretation. These differences did not signify substantive disagreement regarding the fundamental principles of Sharīʿah; rather, they reflected the intellectual richness and flexibility of Islamic law in responding to the diverse circumstances of Muslim communities. Indeed, the tradition of ikhtilāf (juristic disagreement) that developed among these madhhabs became one of the factors that enriched the corpus of Islamic law and enabled legal adaptation to changing circumstances across time and place (Suryantoro, 2025). Beyond the methodological diversity of the *madhhabs*, classical Islamic legal thought gradually developed a broader understanding of the objectives underlying Islamic legislation. Although the formal theory of *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* reached its maturity in the writings of Abū Isḥāq al-Shāṭibī, its conceptual foundations had already appeared in the legal reasoning of earlier jurists such as al-Juwaynī, al-Ghazālī, and al-ʿIzz ibn ʿAbd al-Salām. They consistently emphasized that Islamic law seeks to realize benefit (*maṣlaḥah*) and prevent harm (*mafsadah*) in human life through the protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property (Al-Ghazālī, 1997; Al-Shāṭibī, 1997).

Consequently, the historical development of classical Islamic law should not be understood merely as the evolution of legal rules or juristic opinions (Nurjanah dkk., 2026). Rather, it

represents the gradual construction of an integrated legal philosophy that combines textual fidelity with rational inquiry and public welfare. This philosophical dimension explains the resilience of classical Islamic jurisprudence and its continued relevance in addressing contemporary legal issues (Najib, 2023). Although numerous studies have examined Islamic law, most have focused primarily on normative aspects or on individual madhhabs in a fragmented manner. Comprehensive studies that integrate the development of legal sources, legal methodologies, and the formation of madhhabs within a single historical framework remain relatively limited. Yet, these three dimensions constitute fundamental and interconnected elements in the historical formation of classical Islamic law. Therefore, this study seeks to examine historically the development of Islamic legal sources, the evolution of legal methodologies, and the emergence of Islamic legal madhhabs as the principal foundations underlying the formation of classical Islamic law (Shidqiah dkk., 2025).

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Islamic legal history, existing studies tend to examine either the historical evolution of individual *madhhabs*, the development of legal methodologies, or contemporary legal reform as separate fields of inquiry. Comparatively fewer studies integrate the historical development of Islamic legal sources, the institutionalization of *Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, the emergence of the *madhhabs*, and the evolution of *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* within a unified historical framework grounded in both classical *turāth* literature and contemporary scholarship (Azhary dkk., 2025). This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of how classical Islamic legal thought developed into a coherent intellectual tradition that continues to shape contemporary Islamic jurisprudence (Baedah dkk., 2026).

Based on the foregoing discussion, the study of the historical formation of classical Islamic law is important not only for understanding the development of Islamic law in the past but also for identifying the methodological foundations that continue to shape contemporary Islamic legal thought. The process of legal formation that unfolded from the era of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to the emergence of the major madhhabs demonstrates a dynamic intellectual tradition involving the development of legal sources, methods of legal reasoning, and scholarly constructions of legal thought in response to social transformations across different historical periods. Accordingly, this study focuses on three principal questions: (1) how did the sources of Islamic law develop during the formative period of classical Islamic law; (2) how did methods of legal istinbāṭ evolve from the Prophetic era to the period of methodological maturity in classical Islamic law; and (3) how did the major Islamic legal madhhabs emerge and develop, and what contributions did they make to the formation of the classical Islamic legal tradition?

Material & Methods

This study employs a normative legal research design using a library research approach, with a particular emphasis on the historical examination of the development of classical Islamic law (Shidqiah et al., 2025). The research adopts both historical and conceptual approaches. The historical approach is employed to trace the formation of Islamic law from the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) through the development of the major *fiqh madhhabs* during the classical period. Meanwhile, the conceptual approach is used to examine the evolution of Islamic legal sources, methods of legal *istinbāṭ*, and the construction of legal thought that emerged throughout different historical periods (Suryantoro, 2025).

The research is based exclusively on documentary and library materials consisting of primary and secondary legal sources. The primary legal materials include the Qur'an, Hadith, classical works of Muslim scholars in the fields of *fiqh* and *Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, as well as classical literature concerning the historical development of Islamic legal *madhhabs*. In addition, authoritative classical *turāth* works, including *Al-Risālah* by Imām al-Shāfiʿī, *Al-Muwaṭṭaʾ* by Imām Mālik, *Al-Mustaṣfā* by al-Ghazālī, and *Al-Muwāfaqāt* by al-Shāṭibī, are employed as primary references for examining the evolution of Islamic legal methodology. Secondary legal

materials comprise books, peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports, and academic publications relevant to the history of Islamic law and the development of classical Islamic legal thought (Ibrahim, 2013). As a normative library-based study, the principal research instrument is the researcher, supported by a systematic documentation framework for identifying, selecting, classifying, and interpreting relevant legal and historical literature. The documentation instrument was used to collect and organize data from both classical *turāth* sources and contemporary academic publications according to the research objectives.

The research was conducted through several stages. First, relevant classical and contemporary literature concerning the history of Islamic law, legal sources, methods of *istinbāṭ*, and the development of Islamic legal *madhhabs* was identified and collected. Second, the collected materials were classified according to the historical periods under examination, namely the Prophetic era, the period of the *Khulafāʾ al-Rāshidūn*, the Umayyad dynasty, the Abbasid dynasty, and the formation of the major *madhhabs*. Third, the literature was critically examined to identify the evolution of legal sources, legal methodologies, and juristic thought. Finally, the findings were synthesized to construct a comprehensive historical account of the formation of classical Islamic law.

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively using a descriptive-analytical method (Satori, 2020). The analysis involved describing the historical development of Islamic law across different periods and subsequently examining the interrelationship between the development of legal sources, methods of legal *istinbāṭ*, and the emergence of Islamic legal *madhhabs*. The analysis further explored how these methodological developments contributed to the formation of the classical Islamic legal tradition and continue to influence contemporary Islamic legal thought. This study focuses specifically on the historical formation of classical Islamic law from the Prophetic period to the establishment of the four major Sunni *madhhabs*. The discussion is limited to the evolution of Islamic legal sources, methods of legal reasoning (*istinbāṭ*), and the institutional development of Islamic legal schools within the Sunni legal tradition. Contemporary legal issues are discussed only insofar as they illustrate the continuing relevance of classical Islamic legal thought. Since this research relies exclusively on documentary sources, it does not include empirical data, field observations, interviews, or quanlitative analysis.

Results and Discussion

The formation of classical Islamic law represents one of the most significant intellectual phenomena in Islamic civilization, giving rise not only to a system of legal norms but also to a methodological and philosophical scholarly tradition. This historical process merits serious examination as it demonstrates how divine revelation, human reasoning, and socioeconomic realities dynamically interacted to shape a legal tradition capable of enduring for more than fourteen centuries. What renders this inquiry increasingly relevant is the recognition that methodological diversity, often misinterpreted as fragmentation, actually reflects the adaptability and intellectual richness of Islamic law itself. From the divergent approaches between the rationalistic Hanafi school and the tradition-based Maliki school, to the methodological systematization by al-Shāfiʿī and the textual rigor of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, the classical legal tradition offers valuable lessons on how a legal system can maintain its normative authority while remaining responsive to changing circumstances. The discussion in this chapter will examine three principal dimensions of the classical Islamic legal tradition, namely legal sources, methods of istinbāṭ, and legal schools, with the aim of revealing not only its historical architecture but also its methodological relevance for contemporary Islamic legal thought.

1. The Development of Sources in the Formative Period of Classical Islamic Law

Understanding the historical formation of classical Islamic law requires a clear conceptual distinction between Sharīʿah, fiqh, and Islamic law. Although frequently used interchangeably in contemporary discourse, classical Muslim jurists consistently differentiated these concepts

according to their respective epistemological foundations and legal functions. Sharīʿah refers to the divine guidance revealed by Allah through the Qur'an and the Sunnah, which classical scholars regarded as absolute, immutable, and universal because its authority originates directly from divine revelation. Al-Shāfiʿī, in *Al-Risālah*, emphasized that every legal judgment must ultimately derive its legitimacy from revelation, either explicitly through textual evidence (naṣṣ) or through valid legal reasoning grounded in revelation (Al-Shāfiʿī, 2002). This foundational principle establishes that Sharīʿah constitutes the normative foundation upon which all Islamic legal reasoning is constructed (Kamali, 2003; Hallaq, 2009).

By contrast, fiqh represents the human understanding and interpretation of Sharīʿah. Unlike divine revelation, fiqh is the product of scholarly reasoning (ijtihād) and is therefore subject to intellectual diversity and historical development. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī defined fiqh as knowledge of practical legal rulings derived from detailed evidences through qualified legal reasoning (*Al-Mustaṣfā*). This definition indicates that fiqh is inherently dynamic because it reflects juristic efforts to apply divine principles to changing social realities (Al-Ghazālī, 1997; Khallaf, 2008; Abu Zahrah, 2011). The dynamic nature of fiqh explains why legal opinions (fatāwā) evolved over time and varied across regions, as jurists continuously reinterpreted legal sources in light of new circumstances while remaining committed to the foundational principles of Sharīʿah.

The term "Islamic law," meanwhile, has evolved in modern legal scholarship to refer to the entirety of norms, principles, and rules derived from Sharīʿah and developed through fiqh scholarship. In the contemporary academic context, Islamic law is understood as a legal system that encompasses both normative aspects derived from divine revelation and practical aspects resulting from scholars' interpretations of Islamic legal sources. Thus, Islamic law not only reflects the divine will contained in Sharīʿah but also demonstrates the intellectual dynamics that have evolved through fiqh as a result of human ijtihad (Hallaq, 2005; Vikør, 2019). This comprehensive understanding positions Islamic law as an integrated legal tradition that combines revelation-based principles with human intellectual effort.

The historical development of these sources demonstrates several distinctive characteristics that differentiate Islamic law from other legal traditions. First, Islamic law combines divine authority with human intellectual effort. Whereas Sharīʿah derives from revelation, its practical application depends upon juristic interpretation through ijtihād. This dual structure enables Islamic law to maintain doctrinal continuity while simultaneously adapting to changing historical circumstances (Kamali, 2003). Second, Islamic law possesses a methodology-based legal system rather than a purely code-based system. Classical Muslim jurists developed sophisticated methodologies for legal reasoning before comprehensive legal codification emerged. Consequently, legal legitimacy depended primarily upon the soundness of methodological reasoning rather than upon statutory enactment. This explains why different madhhabs frequently produced varying legal opinions while remaining equally authoritative within Sunni legal tradition (Hallaq, 2009). Third, Islamic law is flexible and adaptive (murūnah). This flexibility is evident in the mechanism of ijtihad, which allows scholars to develop legal rulings in accordance with the needs of society and the changing times without having to abandon the fundamental principles of Sharīʿah. The existence of methods such as qiyās, istiḥsān, maṣlaḥah mursalah, and sadd al-dharīʿah demonstrates that Islamic law possesses methodological tools that enable continuous legal renewal (Anshori & Abdurrahman, 2021; Haika, 2013). Fourth, Islamic law is oriented toward the public interest (maṣlaḥah). All provisions of Islamic law are fundamentally aimed at promoting the welfare of humanity and preventing harm. This principle later evolved into the theory of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah, which identifies the protection of religion, life, reason, lineage, and property as the primary objectives of Islamic law (Opwis, 2017; Muhid dkk., 2026). Fifth, Islamic law is characterized by a balance (tawāzun) between rights and obligations, between individual interests and the interests of society, and between worldly and otherworldly aspects. This

characteristic demonstrates that Islamic law is oriented not only toward social order, but also toward the achievement of justice and comprehensive well-being for all humanity (Vikør, 2019). This balance reflects the holistic nature of Islamic jurisprudence, which recognizes that legal norms must serve both spiritual and material dimensions of human existence.

This flexibility is closely associated with the realization of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah. Classical jurists consistently maintained that legal interpretation should not merely replicate textual formulations but should also preserve the higher objectives intended by divine legislation. Al-Shāṭibī argued that every legal ruling ultimately serves the realization of human welfare (jalb al-maṣāliḥ) and the prevention of harm (darʾ al-mafāsid), making maqāṣid the philosophical foundation underlying the entire structure of Islamic jurisprudence (Al-Shāṭibī, 1997). Consequently, methodological diversity among the madhhabs should be understood not as legal fragmentation but as different juristic pathways toward achieving the same objectives of Sharīʿah (Jefry dkk., 2025). Finally, the adaptive nature of Islamic law explains its remarkable continuity across more than fourteen centuries. While social, political, and economic conditions changed dramatically from the Prophetic era to the Abbasid period and beyond, the methodological framework established by classical jurists enabled Islamic law to remain relevant without abandoning its normative foundations. This balance between textual fidelity and contextual reasoning remains one of the defining characteristics of the classical Islamic legal tradition and continues to inform contemporary Islamic legal discourse.

2. The Evolution of Legal Istinbāṭ from the Prophetic Era to Methodological Maturity

The historical formation of classical Islamic law evolved through a continuous interaction between divine revelation, juristic reasoning (ijtihād), and changing socio-political circumstances. The development of Islamic law from the Prophetic period to the emergence of the classical madhhabs illustrates how Islamic jurisprudence gradually transformed from a revelation-based legal system into a sophisticated intellectual tradition supported by systematic legal methodologies. This evolutionary process demonstrates that legal reasoning (istinbāṭ) was not a static phenomenon but developed progressively in response to new challenges and intellectual developments.

a. The Prophetic Period

The formative stage of Islamic law began during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), when legal authority rested exclusively upon divine revelation. The Qur'an constituted the principal source of law, while the Sunnah functioned as its practical explanation and implementation. During this period, legal rulings were delivered directly by the Prophet, leaving little room for independent legal speculation because revelation continuously provided normative guidance (Qur'an 4:59). Nevertheless, the Prophetic period also witnessed the earliest forms of legal reasoning. When explicit revelation had not yet addressed a particular issue, the Prophet occasionally exercised reasoned judgment that was subsequently confirmed or corrected through revelation. The Prophet's instruction to Muʿādh ibn Jabal before sending him to Yemen established a methodological hierarchy consisting of the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and personal ijtihād when no explicit textual evidence was available. Although the authenticity of this narration has been debated, classical jurists consistently regarded it as an important illustration of the legitimacy of legal reasoning within Islamic jurisprudence (Al-Shāfiʿī, *Al-Risālah*).

From the perspective of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah, legal rulings during the Prophetic era consistently aimed to establish justice, remove hardship, and preserve public welfare. Legal obligations concerning worship, commerce, family relations, and criminal justice reveal that Islamic legislation was designed not merely as a collection of legal commands but as a comprehensive system intended to safeguard religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property. These objectives later became the theoretical foundation of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah developed by classical jurists (Akbar dkk., 2024). The Prophetic period thus established the foundational principles that would guide subsequent legal development.

b. The Era of the Khulafāʾ al-Rāshidūn

Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Islamic law entered a new stage characterized by the increasing importance of ijtihād. Since revelation had ceased, the Companions assumed responsibility for resolving unprecedented legal issues arising from the rapid territorial expansion of the Islamic state. The first four caliphs relied primarily upon the Qur'an and the Sunnah but increasingly employed collective consultation (shūrā), consensus (ijmāʿ), analogical reasoning (qiyās), and public interest (maṣlaḥah) whenever explicit textual evidence was unavailable. Their legal decisions established practical precedents that profoundly influenced later juristic methodology.

Among the most significant examples was the decision of Abū Bakr to compile the Qur'an following the Battle of Yamāmah. Although no explicit prophetic instruction existed regarding such compilation, the initiative was justified on the grounds of preserving revelation for future generations. Similarly, ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb suspended the implementation of the prescribed punishment for theft during a severe famine, arguing that extraordinary social conditions eliminated criminal responsibility. He also postponed the distribution of conquered agricultural lands in Iraq to preserve long-term public welfare instead of immediate private ownership. These decisions demonstrate that the Companions recognized the importance of considering social context and public welfare in legal reasoning, establishing important precedents for later jurists.

c. The Umayyad Period

The Umayyad dynasty (661–750 CE) represented a transitional phase in the institutional development of Islamic law. The rapid expansion of Islamic territories introduced new administrative, commercial, and judicial challenges that required increasingly systematic legal responses (Budiman dkk., 2026). Regional centers of legal scholarship gradually emerged in Madinah, Makkah, Kūfah, Basrah, Damascus, and other cities. Differences in local customs, access to Prophetic traditions, and social conditions produced distinct methodological tendencies among Muslim jurists (Amaranti dkk., 2025).

The scholars of Madinah generally emphasized the authority of Prophetic traditions and the established practice (ʿamal ahl al-Madīnah) of the people of Madinah, believing that the city's legal customs most faithfully preserved the Prophet's teachings. This methodological orientation later became the defining characteristic of the Maliki school (Embrizal & Ridha, 2025). In contrast, the scholars of Kūfah faced comparatively fewer authenticated traditions and therefore relied more extensively upon reasoned judgment (ra'y) and analogical reasoning (qiyās). These intellectual tendencies eventually shaped the methodological foundations of the Hanafi school. Thus, methodological diversity emerged not because of theological disagreement but because jurists confronted different historical realities, documentary resources, and legal challenges. As Wael B. Hallaq argues, the geographical diversity of Islamic legal scholarship constituted one of the principal factors underlying the formation of multiple legal traditions within Sunni Islam (Hallaq, 2005).

d. The Abbasid Period

The Abbasid period (750–1258 CE) marked the intellectual maturity of classical Islamic law. During this era, Islamic jurisprudence evolved into an independent scholarly discipline supported by sophisticated methodologies, extensive legal literature, and well-established educational institutions (Asmawi, 2024). One of the most significant developments was the codification of Uṣūl al-Fiqh through the pioneering work of Imām al-Shāfiʿī. In *Al-Risālah*, he systematically organized the hierarchy of legal sources, defining the authority of the Qur'an, the Sunnah, ijmāʿ, and qiyās while establishing methodological principles governing legal deduction (istinbāṭ) (Al-Shāfiʿī, 2002). This work transformed Islamic legal reasoning from a predominantly practical activity into a coherent scientific discipline.

Simultaneously, the compilation of major Hadith collections by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasāʾī, and Ibn Mājah significantly strengthened the evidentiary basis of Islamic law. The availability of authenticated Prophetic traditions enabled jurists to formulate legal opinions upon a more reliable textual foundation than had previously been possible. Equally important was the maturation of legal philosophy. Al-Juwaynī introduced a systematic understanding of legal objectives, which was subsequently refined by al-Ghazālī through his formulation of the five essential necessities (al-ḍarūriyyāt al-khams). Al-Shāṭibī later developed these ideas into a comprehensive theory of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah, arguing that every legal rule ultimately seeks to realize human welfare (jalb al-maṣāliḥ) and prevent harm (darʾ al-mafāsid) (Al-Juwaynī, 1997; Al-Ghazālī, 1997; Al-Shāṭibī, 1997).

Consequently, the Abbasid period should be regarded not merely as an era of legal codification but as the period during which Islamic law achieved both methodological sophistication and philosophical maturity. The integration of textual authority, juristic reasoning, and the objectives of Sharīʿah established the enduring intellectual framework upon which subsequent Islamic legal thought has continued to develop. A critical analysis reveals that differences in legal methodology were shaped less by doctrinal disagreement than by variations in historical context, access to legal evidence, intellectual traditions, and socio-political environments. From the perspective of maqāṣid, methodological plurality represents the adaptive capacity of Islamic jurisprudence rather than fragmentation of legal authority. This historical reality explains why classical Islamic law remained sufficiently flexible to respond to diverse societies while preserving its normative coherence.

3. The Emergence, Development, and Contributions of the Major Islamic Legal Madhhabs

The emergence of the classical Islamic legal madhhabs represents one of the most significant milestones in the history of Islamic jurisprudence, demonstrating the maturation of Islamic legal methodology through systematic scholarly reasoning (ijtihād). Rather than reflecting fragmentation within Islamic law, the formation of the madhhabs demonstrates the development of coherent legal methodologies capable of addressing increasingly complex legal issues arising from the expansion of Islamic civilization (Maula & Tsaqofi, 2024). The establishment of the four major Sunni madhhabs—Hanafi, Maliki, Shafiʿi, and Hanbali—was not merely the product of individual scholarly achievement but emerged within distinct intellectual, geographical, and political environments that influenced the development of its legal methodology. Consequently, methodological diversity should be understood as a natural outcome of differing historical contexts rather than as contradictory interpretations of Islamic law (Saifuddin dkk., 2025).

a. The Hanafi Madhhab

The Hanafi madhhab was founded by Abū Ḥanīfah al-Nuʿmān ibn Thābit (699–767 CE) in Kūfah, Iraq. Kūfah was characterized by rapid commercial development, ethnic diversity, and relatively limited access to authenticated Prophetic traditions compared with Madinah. Consequently, Abū Ḥanīfah developed a methodology that emphasized rational legal reasoning (ra'y), qiyās, and istiḥsān whenever explicit textual evidence was unavailable (Yogie & Qadraini, 2025; Makruf dkk., 2025). Although later scholars occasionally criticized the extensive use of ra'y, Abū Ḥanīfah regarded rational reasoning as indispensable for preserving the objectives of Islamic law under changing social conditions. His methodology therefore reflected a careful balance between textual authority and practical legal necessity rather than unrestricted personal opinion. The Hanafi approach illustrates that legal flexibility may serve the broader objectives of Sharīʿah, particularly in commercial transactions, public administration, and judicial practice. The Hanafi school's reliance on reason and analogy enabled it to address new legal issues arising from the complex commercial and administrative needs of the expanding Islamic empire.

b. The Maliki Madhhab

The Maliki madhhab developed in Madinah under the leadership of Imām Mālik ibn Anas (711–795 CE). Unlike the Iraqi legal tradition, the scholars of Madinah possessed extensive access

to Prophetic traditions and regarded the established practice (ʿamal ahl al-Madīnah) of the people of Madinah as an authoritative expression of the Sunnah. Imām Mālik's *Al-Muwaṭṭaʾ* demonstrates this methodological orientation by combining Prophetic traditions, Companion opinions, and established communal practices into an integrated legal framework. Furthermore, the Maliki school developed the doctrine of maṣlaḥah mursalah, recognizing that legal rulings should preserve public welfare whenever no explicit textual prohibition exists. This methodology reflects an early practical realization of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah, in which legal interpretation seeks to protect the common good while remaining faithful to revealed sources. The Maliki approach was particularly influential in North Africa, Spain, and West Africa, where its emphasis on custom and public welfare proved adaptable to diverse social contexts.

c. The Shafiʿi Madhhab

The Shafiʿi madhhab occupies a unique position in the history of Islamic law because its founder, Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (767–820 CE), systematized the discipline of Uṣūl al-Fiqh. In *Al-Risālah*, he established a coherent hierarchy of legal sources consisting of the Qur'an, Sunnah, ijmāʿ, and qiyās, thereby providing Islamic jurisprudence with a unified methodological framework (Saputri dkk., 2025). Al-Shāfiʿī rejected excessive dependence on both unrestricted rational reasoning and local customary practices. Instead, he argued that legal reasoning should remain firmly grounded in authentic textual evidence while allowing analogical reasoning only within clearly defined methodological boundaries. His contribution fundamentally transformed Islamic jurisprudence from a collection of juristic opinions into a systematic legal science. For this reason, many scholars regard *Al-Risālah* as the foundational text of classical Uṣūl al-Fiqh. The Shafiʿi school's methodological balance and systematic approach made it particularly influential in Egypt, Southeast Asia, and other regions where its principles provided a coherent framework for legal reasoning.

d. The Hanbali Madhhab

The Hanbali madhhab, founded by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (780–855 CE), emphasized strict adherence to the Qur'an, authentic Sunnah, and the legal opinions of the Companions. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal exercised considerable caution in employing analogical reasoning and preferred transmitted evidence whenever available (Coulson, 2011). His legal methodology developed partly as a response to theological controversies during the Abbasid period, particularly debates concerning rational theology (kalām) and state intervention in religious doctrine. Consequently, the Hanbali school became strongly associated with textual fidelity while nevertheless recognizing limited forms of ijtihād when supported by authentic evidence. Contrary to common assumptions, the Hanbali school did not reject legal reasoning altogether. Rather, it insisted that rational reasoning remain subordinate to revealed evidence and the objectives of divine legislation. The Hanbali approach, though initially less influential, gained prominence through the later work of scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, who developed more sophisticated methodologies while maintaining textual fidelity.

Table 1. Comparative Characteristics of the Four Classical Sunni Madhhabs

Aspect	Hanafi	Maliki	Shafiʿi	Hanbali
Founder	Abū Ḥanīfah	Mālik ibn Anas	Al-Shāfiʿī	Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal
Primary Region	Iraq (Kūfah)	Madinah	Egypt & Iraq	Baghdad
Primary Sources	Qur'an, Sunnah, Qiyās	Qur'an, Sunnah,	Qur'an, Sunnah, Ijmāʿ, Qiyās	Qur'an, Sunnah, Athār

Aspect	Hanafi	Maliki	Shafiʿi	Hanbali
		ʿAmal Ahl al-Madīnah		
Dominant Method	Ra'y, Qiyās, Istiḥsān	Maṣlaḥah, Custom	Systematic Uṣūl al-Fiqh	Textual Interpretation
Position on Qiyās	Extensive	Moderate	Systematic	Limited
Position on Istiḥsān	Accepted	Limited	Rejected	Generally Rejected
Position on Maṣlaḥah	Moderate	Extensive	Conditional	Limited
Methodological Orientation	Rational	Tradition–Public Interest	Methodological Balance	Textual
Contemporary Influence	Civil & Commercial Law	Public Policy	Judicial Methodology	Textual Jurisprudence

e. Critical Analysis of Methodological Differences

The methodological diversity among the classical madhhabs should not be interpreted as evidence of legal inconsistency but rather as a reflection of differing historical contexts and intellectual priorities. Four principal factors explain these differences. First, geographical variation significantly influenced access to legal sources. Jurists in Madinah possessed abundant Prophetic traditions and therefore relied heavily upon transmitted evidence, whereas scholars in Iraq encountered fewer authenticated reports and consequently developed more sophisticated methods of analogical reasoning (Khori dkk., 2025). Second, socio-economic conditions shaped legal methodology. Iraq's rapidly expanding commercial environment generated numerous legal questions unknown during the Prophetic period, encouraging Hanafi jurists to employ qiyās and istiḥsān more extensively than their counterparts in Madinah.

Third, political circumstances also contributed to methodological development. During the Abbasid period, increasing interaction between jurists and political authorities encouraged greater systematization of legal doctrine while simultaneously motivating some scholars, particularly Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, to preserve the independence of religious scholarship from state influence. Fourth, differences in epistemological orientation played a decisive role. While all jurists accepted the authority of revelation, they differed regarding the relationship between textual evidence and rational reasoning. These differences did not concern the legitimacy of Sharīʿah itself but rather the most appropriate methodology for discovering divine intent (Adrian & Ariani, 2025).

From the perspective of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah, however, these methodological variations ultimately pursued the same objective: the realization of justice (ʿadl), mercy (raḥmah), wisdom (ḥikmah), and public welfare (maṣlaḥah). Al-Shāṭibī emphasized that legal diversity should always be evaluated according to its capacity to preserve the higher objectives of Islamic law rather than according to methodological preferences alone (*Al-Muwāfaqāt*). Accordingly, the plurality of

classical madhhabs should be regarded as one of the greatest intellectual achievements of Islamic civilization. Their methodological diversity enabled Islamic law to adapt to varying social, cultural, and political contexts while preserving its essential normative foundations.

f. Relevance of Classical Islamic Legal Thought to Contemporary Islamic Law

Although classical Islamic law emerged more than a millennium ago, its methodological foundations continue to shape contemporary Islamic legal discourse. Modern legal challenges—including Islamic finance, biomedical ethics, environmental protection, constitutional governance, digital commerce, and artificial intelligence—cannot be addressed solely through literal textual interpretation. Rather, they require contextual legal reasoning grounded in the methodological legacy developed by classical jurists. Among the most significant contributions of classical jurisprudence is the theory of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah. Contemporary scholars such as Ibn ʿĀshūr, Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, Jasser Auda, and Mohammad Hashim Kamali have further developed this framework, emphasizing that Islamic law should be interpreted in accordance with its higher objectives rather than merely its literal formulations. This approach enables Islamic jurisprudence to remain responsive to contemporary social transformation while preserving its normative foundations (Suryantoro, 2025). The historical experience of methodological plurality among the classical madhhabs also provides valuable lessons for contemporary legal reform. Rather than viewing legal diversity as a source of fragmentation, modern Islamic legal scholarship increasingly recognizes methodological pluralism as an intellectual resource capable of addressing diverse legal contexts within an interconnected global society. The classical tradition serves as an indispensable foundation for contemporary ijtihād, providing both methodological principles and historical precedents for addressing new legal challenges.

This study is limited to the historical development of classical Sunni Islamic law from the Prophetic period through the consolidation of the four major Sunni madhhabs. It does not examine the development of Shiʿi legal traditions, regional schools that did not survive institutionalization, or comparative interactions between Islamic law and other legal systems. Furthermore, this research relies exclusively on documentary analysis of classical turāth literature and contemporary academic publications. Consequently, it does not incorporate empirical investigation concerning the practical implementation of classical legal methodologies within modern Muslim societies.

Future research should extend the present study by examining the historical development of Islamic legal thought beyond the Sunni tradition, including Jaʿfarī, Zaydī, and Ibāḍī jurisprudence. Comparative studies between classical Islamic legal methodologies and contemporary constitutional, international, and human rights law would also contribute to a deeper understanding of Islamic legal development. Further interdisciplinary research integrating legal history, philosophy, sociology, and political science is recommended to explore how the principles of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah may inform responses to emerging legal issues such as digital governance, biotechnology, environmental sustainability, and artificial intelligence. Such studies would strengthen the continuing relevance of the classical Islamic legal tradition in addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the historical formation of classical Islamic law was a gradual and dynamic process shaped by the interaction between divine revelation, juristic reasoning (ijtihād), and the socio-political realities of Muslim societies. Regarding the first research question, the findings reveal that the sources of Islamic law evolved progressively from reliance on the Qur'an and the Sunnah during the Prophetic period to the incorporation of ijmāʿ, qiyās, istiḥsān, and maṣlaḥah mursalah in subsequent periods. This development enabled Islamic law to respond to emerging legal issues while maintaining fidelity to the fundamental principles of Sharīʿah. Concerning the second research question, the study finds that methods of legal istinbāṭ became increasingly systematic through the establishment of Uṣūl al-Fiqh, particularly during the Abbasid

period, thereby providing a coherent methodological framework for Islamic legal reasoning. With respect to the third research question, the study shows that the emergence of the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafiʿi, and Hanbali madhhabs reflected methodological diversity rather than legal contradiction. Differences among these schools were primarily shaped by variations in social, political, geographical, and intellectual contexts, yet all remained committed to realizing the objectives of Sharīʿah through disciplined ijtihād. Consequently, the diversity of the madhhabs should be understood as an intellectual asset that enriched the Islamic legal tradition. The findings further indicate that the defining characteristics of classical Islamic law—namely the centrality of ijtihād, the authority of the ʿulamāʾ, the codification of fiqh, and the dynamic relationship between law and political authority—established a durable epistemological foundation that continues to influence contemporary Islamic legal thought. These methodological legacies remain highly relevant for addressing modern legal challenges within the framework of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah.

Despite these contributions, this study is limited to the historical development of the classical Sunni legal tradition and is based exclusively on normative and library research. Future research should broaden the scope by incorporating comparative analyses of Sunni and Shiʿi legal traditions, examining the practical application of classical legal methodologies in contemporary legal systems, and exploring the role of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah in addressing emerging issues such as digital governance, artificial intelligence, environmental sustainability, and global human rights discourse. Such studies will contribute to a deeper understanding of the continuity and adaptability of Islamic law in responding to the legal and social challenges of the modern world.

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Author Contribution Statement

MK and CS conceptualized the research and developed the theoretical framework. MK conducted data collection and performed the literature review, analyzed primary and secondary sources including classical fiqh texts and contemporary policy reports. CS wrote the original draft and reviewed and edited the manuscript for intellectual content. All authors approved the final version for publication.

AI Disclosure Statement

The authors used a large language model (ChatGPT by OpenAI) during the preparation of this work solely for the purpose of refining sentence structures, improving grammatical flow, and enhancing overall readability. No AI tool was used for generating research ideas, analyzing fiqh texts, formulating legal conclusions, identifying sources, or citing references. After using the tool, the authors thoroughly reviewed and edited all content as needed and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the content of this publication. All references cited in this manuscript have been verified against their original sources.

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