

## The Role of Muhammad Mustafa Al-A'zami in Responding to the Orientalist View of the Authenticity of Hadith

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### Abstract

*This study explores the contribution of Muhammad Mustafa Azami in responding to Orientalist critiques of the authenticity of hadith as a primary source of Islamic teachings. In contemporary Islamic studies, hadith has often been the target of criticism, particularly by Western Orientalists such as Joseph Schacht, who argued that hadith was a fabrication by later Muslim scholars rather than originating from the Prophet Muhammad himself. Such views have undermined the authority of hadith and shifted its central role in Islamic epistemology. Azami, a renowned hadith scholar and academic, systematically refuted these claims through his seminal works, including *Studies in Early Hadith Literature* and *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. He challenged the Orientalist methodology and demonstrated that both the *isnad* (chain of transmission) and *matn* (content) of hadith were preserved and codified with rigorous scholarly discipline since the earliest generations of Islam. This research employs a qualitative approach using literature review methods to analyze Azami's arguments. The findings reveal that Azami not only reaffirmed the authenticity of hadith but also strengthened its standing in global academic discourse. His contributions significantly defend the integrity of Islamic scholarly tradition and foster a more balanced dialogue between classical Islamic and contemporary Western approaches.*

**Keywords:** Azami; Hadith Authenticity; Orientalism; Joseph Schacht; Hadith Criticism; *Isnad*.

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji kontribusi Muhammad Mustafa Azami dalam merespons kritik orientalis terhadap keotentikan hadis sebagai sumber ajaran Islam. Dalam studi Islam kontemporer, hadis sering menjadi sasaran kritik, terutama dari orientalis Barat seperti Joseph Schacht yang menyatakan bahwa hadis merupakan produk konstruksi ulama pasca-wafatnya Nabi Muhammad SAW. Pandangan ini melemahkan otoritas hadis dan menggeser perannya dalam epistemologi Islam. Azami, sebagai pakar hadis dan akademisi terkemuka, tampil membantah klaim tersebut secara sistematis melalui karya-karya penting seperti *Studies in Early Hadith Literature* dan *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. Ia mengkritik metodologi orientalis serta membuktikan bahwa sanad dan matan hadis telah dijaga secara ilmiah sejak generasi awal Islam. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi pustaka untuk menganalisis argumen Azami. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa Azami tidak hanya mempertahankan otentisitas hadis, tetapi juga mengukuhkan posisinya dalam wacana akademik global. Kontribusinya memberi pengaruh besar terhadap penguatan tradisi keilmuan Islam dan mendorong dialog yang lebih seimbang antara pendekatan studi Islam klasik dan Barat kontemporer.

**Kata Kunci:** Azami; Joseph Schacht; Keotentikan Hadis; Kritik Hadis; Orientalis; Sanad.



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## INTRODUCTION

In the history of Islamic thought, the debate on the authenticity of hadith (the words, deeds, and approval of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has become a crucial issue, both among Muslim scholars and among orientalists. Hadith has a very important role as the second source of Islamic teachings after the Qur'an, and for this reason, the authenticity of hadith becomes the focal point in scientific studies. However, since the 19th century, Western orientalists have often questioned the validity and authority of hadith. They allege that the hadiths spread in the Islamic tradition cannot be historically accounted for, and therefore are not worthy of being used as a reference in understanding the teachings of Islam.

One of the great figures who emerged to defend the authenticity of hadith was Muhammad Mustafa Azami, a prominent scholar and hadith expert from India. Azami is known as a figure who delves into hadith issues with a scientific and rational approach. He wrote a number of works that explicitly responded to orientalist criticisms of hadith, and provided a systematic defense of the methodology used in the collection and verification of hadith. In Azami's view, orientalists often ignore or do not properly understand the very meticulous and strict system applied by muhaddiths (hadith experts) in formulating what is called *sahih hadith*, *hasan*, or *dha'if*.

Azami criticized orientalists who tend to underestimate or ignore the scholarly contributions of Muslim scholars in compiling hadith books that have been tested for authenticity. He assessed that the methodology of hadith criticism (the science of *jarh wa ta'dil*) developed by scholars since the first century of Hijri shows that the tradition of hadith is not only strictly preserved, but also through a very careful and systematic verification process. In this regard, Azami considers that orientalists often fail to understand the depth of the scientific methodology underlying the compilation of collections of hadith such as *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*.

This research aims to delve deeper into Muhammad Mustafa Azami's thoughts on the authenticity of hadith and his criticism of orientalist views. Through this paper, the author will analyze the arguments put forward by Azami in defending the authenticity of the hadith, as well as examine how these views contribute to strengthening the scientific understanding of the sources of Islamic teachings. This discussion is expected to provide new insights into the importance of understanding the scientific methodology applied in hadith criticism, as well as show how Azami's defense of the authenticity of hadith is not only relevant in the historical context, but also in an effort to maintain the sanctity of Islamic teachings in the midst of global criticism coming from outside.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with the library *research method*. This approach was chosen because it is in accordance with the purpose of research that focuses on the study of the ideas and works of figures, as well as the analysis of the scientific discourse that develops around the study of hadith and orientalism. This method allows researchers to delve deeply into the thought of Muhammad Mustafa Azami and examine his intellectual response to the orientalists' criticism of the hadith.

The data in this study is sourced from primary and secondary literature. Primary sources consist of the original works of Muhammad Mustafa Azami, such as *Studies in Early Hadith Literature*, *Hadith Methodology and Literature*, and *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. Meanwhile, secondary sources include books, scientific articles, journals, and other academic works that discuss Azami's thought as well as the views of orientalists such as Joseph Schacht regarding the authenticity of hadith.

The data collection technique is carried out through documentation, which is the collection of data from various references relevant to the research topic. Furthermore, the data was analyzed using a descriptive-analytical method, which is to describe Azami's thoughts systematically, then analyzed the arguments he put forward in refuting the orientalist criticism of the hadith. The analysis was carried out by considering the historical context, methodological approach, and scientific contribution to contemporary hadith studies.

With this method, it is hoped that the research can provide a complete and in-depth picture of the role of Muhammad Mustafa Azami in maintaining the authenticity of hadith and his contribution in dealing with the orientalist discourse that develops in modern Islamic studies.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Orientalist Theory of Hadith

Orientalist theories of hadith emerged as one of the central topics in Islamic studies that developed in the Western world, especially since the 19th century. Orientalists, who generally come from the Western intellectual tradition, often doubt the authenticity of hadith as one of the sources of Islamic teachings, after the Qur'an. This criticism has come as scholarly studies of Islamic sources have developed, in which orientalist have sought to assess hadith with the same critical historical approach as applied to other ancient texts.

The historical-critical approach used by orientalist in assessing hadith departs from the assumption that religious texts, including hadith, must be analyzed like other historical documents. This method prioritizes chronological analysis, manuscript comparison, and source criticism to determine when and in what context a text was born. According to Harald Motzki, this approach tends to view the transmission of hadith skeptically, assuming that the history was greatly influenced by the socio-political dynamics after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).<sup>1</sup>

Ignaz Goldziher pioneered this approach in the field of Islamic studies. In *Muslim Studies*, he argues that the majority of existing hadith does not date from the prophetic period, but rather is a reflection of the political, theological, and legal debates that arose decades after the Prophet's death.<sup>2</sup> He gave an example that hadiths about the virtues of a particular tribe or city were often in harmony with the political interests of the reign of a particular dynasty.

Goldziher also emphasized that the development of Islamic law in the early period was determined more by the *ijtihad* of the scholars and social realities than by the hadith that came directly from the Prophet. According to him, hadith is used retrospectively to justify established legal practices in society.<sup>3</sup> This view leads to the conclusion that hadith is more a product of history than a revelation that has maintained its authenticity from the beginning.

Joseph Schacht continued and expanded Goldziher's criticism with a focus on the codification of Islamic law. In *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, he proposed the theory of the delay in codification of hadith. Schacht argues that in the early generations of Islam, the law was conveyed primarily through community practices and

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<sup>1</sup> Harald Motzki, "Dating Muslim Traditions: A Survey," *Arabica* 52, no. 2 (2005): hlm. 206–207.

<sup>2</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, trans. C.R. Barber and S.M. Stern (Chicago: Aldine, 1971), hlm. 39–41.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

qadhi decisions, not through hadith texts.<sup>4</sup> The codification of hadith in large numbers only occurred in the second century Hijri.

One of Schacht's central arguments is the concept *of argument e silentio* (argument from silence). According to this logic, if a hadith is not found in an earlier legal or literary source, then it is likely that it did not exist in that period and was only created later.<sup>5</sup> This view assumes that the transmission of hadith is linear and can be traced historically only through written traces.

Schacht's method relies heavily on the backward *growth of isnad analysis*, which is the belief that the sanad of hadith develops backwards, getting closer to the Prophet over time. He argues that the complete sanad that reached the Prophet was generally the result of a fabrication of the second or third century of the Hijri, made to strengthen the legitimacy of certain laws.<sup>6</sup>

This approach has been welcomed in Western academic circles because it is in harmony with the well-established framework of textual criticism in Biblical studies. Jonathan Brown notes that for some Western scholars, Goldziher and Schacht theories provide a consistent theoretical framework for explaining the origins of Islamic law without having to acknowledge the Muslim tradition's claim to strict oral transmission.<sup>7</sup>

However, the acceptance of this theory also gives rise to certain biases. By assuming that hadith had to be proved in writing from the beginning to be considered authentic, these orientalists ignored the important role of oral culture in early Arab society.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the Islamic tradition itself has developed a complex mechanism of oral verification through the science of sanad.

The impact of Goldziher and Schacht theories on Western academic perceptions was enormous. For decades, their books have been a major reference in European and American universities studying Islamic law. As a result, many generations of students and researchers viewed hadith as a product of history that emerged long after the Prophet, thus influencing the discourse on the legitimacy of Islamic law.<sup>9</sup>

The orientalist view of the authenticity of hadith not only shaped the framework of academic discussion in the West, but also provoked a backlash from Muslim scholars such as Muhammad Mustafa Azami. This debate is not just a matter of research methodology, but touches on fundamental aspects of religious authority in Islam, making it a central topic in the interdisciplinary study of religion and history.

### **Muhammad Mustafa Azami's Objection to the Orientalist Theory**

As a respected hadith scholar and historian of Islam, Muhammad Mustafa Azami gave a very critical response to these orientalist theories. In his well-known books such as *"Studies in Early Hadith Literature"* and *"Introduction to the Sciences of Hadith"*, Azami offers scientific arguments that show that orientalist claims often do not take into account the scientific methodology applied in the science of hadith including:

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), 29–30.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), hlm. 88–89.

<sup>8</sup> Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi, *Hadith Literature: Its Origin, Development & Special Features* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), hlm. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Scott C. Lucas, *Constructive Critics, Hadith Literature, and the Articulation of Sunni Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), hlm. 109–110.

## 1. Rigorous and Tested Sanad Process

Azami explained that the sanad system (chain of narration) in hadith is one of the main characteristics in Islamic science. Every hadith received must go through a strict verification process, where each narrator in the sanad must meet a certain number of conditions, such as moral integrity, excellent memorization skills, and consistency in the narration of the hadith.

Azami emphasized that this system was applied very carefully over the centuries, thus allowing Muslims to preserve the hadith accurately and avoid alterations or falsification. In this system, each narrator must know his background and reputation, so that if anyone delivers a hadith with errors or distortions, then he can be easily detected. This provides a guarantee that the hadith that reaches us is valid, because only the hadith that meets these strict conditions is accepted.

To refute the theory put forward by orientalists, especially Schacht, who researched from the historical aspect, Azami refuted Schacht's theory also through historical research, especially the history of hadith. Azami conducted special research on the hadiths of the prophet contained in classical manuscripts. Among them is a manuscript belonging to Suhayl bin Abi Salih (d.138 H). Abu Salih (Suhayl's father) was a disciple of Abu Hurairah (the companion of the Prophet PBUH). Suhayl's manuscript contains 49 hadiths. Meanwhile, Azami examines the narrator of the hadith to the generation of Suhayl, namely the third level (*al-tabaqah al-thalithah*), including their number and domicile.

Azami proves that at the third level, the number of narrators ranges from 20 to 30 people, while their domiciles are scattered and far away, between India to Morocco, between Turkey and Yemen. Meanwhile, the hadith text they narrated was the same. Azami concluded that it was impossible according to the size of the situation and conditions at that time that they had ever gathered to make a false hadith so that the redaction was the same. And it is also impossible if each of them makes a hadith, then the next generation will know that the hadith they made is the same.

Azami's conclusion is contrary to Schacht's conclusion, both about the reconstruction of the formation of the sanad hadith, and the sound of the text (*matan*) of the hadith. For example, Azami brought up a hadith which means where the Prophet (peace and  *blessings of Allaah be upon him*) said: *If one of you wakes up from his sleep, then he should wash his hands, because he does not know where his hands were last night.* This hadith in the manuscript of Suhayl bin Abi Salih is number 7. Thus what Schacht developed with his theory *Projecting Back*, which states that the sanad of the hadith was only formed later and is a legitimization of the opinions of *the qadis* in establishing a law is not true.

This has been proven by Azami with his research that the sanad of the hadith is indeed *muttasil* to the Prophet PBUH through the channels mentioned above. This also proves that the hadiths that are developing today are not the work of the *qadi*, but are deeds or sayings that came from the Prophet (peace be upon him) as a prophet and a role model for Muslims.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Consistency of Hadith with the Qur'an

Azami firmly refutes the orientalist claim that many hadiths contradict the Qur'an. In his view, the Qur'an and hadith complement each other, and the existing hadiths actually explain verses that are sometimes general or ambiguous. Azami argues that the

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<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Mustafa Azami, *Dirāsāt fī al-Ḥadīth an-Nabawī wa Tārīkh Tadwīnīhi* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1976), hlm. 420

hadiths that are considered to be contrary to the Qur'an actually have only a misunderstanding, or it could come from an inaccurate interpretation of the two sources.

Azami views that the relationship between the Qur'an and hadith is integral and complementary. According to him, hadith is not only the second source of law after the Qur'an, but also the main interpreter of the content of the Qur'an. In his view, it is impossible to understand and implement the content of the Qur'an in its entirety without referring to the hadith of the Prophet PBUH.<sup>11</sup>

Azami emphasized that the revelation revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is not only limited to the recitation of the Qur'an, but also includes wisdom or explanations conveyed through hadith. It refers to sentences such as:

"وَأَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ"

"And Allah has sent down to you the Book and the Wisdom." (QS. An-Nisa: 113)

According to Azami, the "wisdom" in this verse is understood as a prophetic instruction in the form of a hadith that has the position of revelation, although not verbatim like the Qur'an. This strengthens the position of hadith as an authoritative source in Islamic law and creed.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, in his work *The Sunna as Source of Islamic Law*, Azami refutes the claims of orientalists such as Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht who underestimate the position of hadith. He stated that the Prophet not only conveyed the Qur'an textually, but also explained its meaning practically in daily life.

According to Azami, hadiths like these are not later legal innovations, but part of the revelation revealed to the Prophet in the form of practices or utterances that explain the Qur'an. Therefore, he asserts that rejecting the hadith means opening the door to the interpretation of the Qur'an freely without authentic signs from the Prophet, which ultimately undermines the integrity of Islamic teachings.

Azami also strongly emphasized that the hadith has been written and codified since the time of the Prophet, not only in the second or third century of the Hijri as claimed by some orientalists. This means that the sources of hadith that explain the Qur'an have a historical and methodological continuity that can be accounted for.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Internal Criticism in the Science of Hadith

One of the aspects that is often overlooked by orientalists in the study of hadith is the existence of very strict internal criticism among Islamic scholars since the first generation. This internal criticism includes a thorough assessment of sanad and matn, which aims to distinguish between sahih, hasan, and da'if hadith. This process ensures that only histories that meet strict standards of authenticity can be used as sources of Islamic law and teachings. Muhammad Mustafa Azami emphasized that this mechanism has been established since the time of the Companions and tabi'in, so the claim that the authenticity of the hadith was only tested centuries later has no solid historical basis.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Mustafa al-A'zami, *The Sunna as Source of Islamic Law* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Trust, 1992), hlm. 13

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Muhammad Mustafa al-A'zami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1977), hlm. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad Mustafa Azami, *Studies in Early Hadith Literature: With a Critical Edition of Some Early Texts* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1978), hal. 6–7.

In the framework of sanad criticism, Azami underlines the role of *'ilm al-rijal* in containing the biographical data of the narrator in detail, including their reputation, memorization ability, and moral integrity. According to him, this is a verification system that is unparalleled in the oral traditions of other nations. Hadith scholars not only accept narrations from famous figures, but also reject narrations from narrators who are proven to be negligent or have a poor moral record. Thus, Joseph Schacht's claim that the sanad was merely a "later fabrication" is refuted by consistent biographical documentation evidence dating back to the first century Hijri.<sup>15</sup>

Critical criticism, on the other hand, involves evaluating the content of the hadith by comparing it to the principles of the Qur'an, valid historical facts, and internal consistency between narrations. Azami points out that this method is used to filter out hadith that is contrary to a stronger *nash* or a healthy rationality. Thus, hadith scholars from the earliest times have functioned as "intellectual filters" that kept the teachings of Islam pure, long before Western academic criticism appeared.<sup>16</sup>

Azami views internal criticism as an integrated part of sanad and matn, not two separate processes. He argued that a sanad that appeared strong should still be tested for its matn to ensure the suitability of the substance. On the other hand, matn that is considered meaningful and in accordance with the principles of sharia is still not accepted if the sanad is defective. This approach reflects the methodological balance that is characteristic of classical hadith science.<sup>17</sup>

Orientalists often overlook the fact that internal criticism has been carried out in layers and collectively by a cross-generational community of scholars. Azami gave an example of how scholars such as al-Bukhari and Muslim not only collected hadiths, but also filtered and re-examined the sanad-matn based on very strict criteria. This process forms a kind of scientific "peer review" that serves to validate the history before it is widely disseminated.

Furthermore, Azami corroborates the internal criticism with evidence of early manuscripts such as *Sahifah Hammam ibn Munabbih*, who came from the generation of *tabi'in*. The existence of this document shows that the process of verification of hadith, both at the level of sanad and matn, had been carried out systematically long before the massive codification in the second century Hijri. This evidence directly disproves Schacht's theory of late codification of hadith.

In addition, Azami rejects the use of *the ex silentio* argument popular among orientalists. They assume that the absence of a history in a particular source means that it did not exist at that time. According to Azami, this ignores the dominance of oral transmission in the early Arab world, where writing was just an aid. He emphasized that hadith can remain authentic even if it is not recorded in every written source.

Azami's approach to internal criticism also draws on linguistic and philological analysis. He compares the terms used in matn with the development of Arabic in a certain period. If a chronological discrepancy is found, then this is an indication of historical weaknesses. This method adds a new dimension to matn criticism, which orientalists rarely pay attention to.

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<sup>15</sup> Muhammad Mustafa Azami, *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Riyadh: King Saud University Press, 1985), hal. 54–55.

<sup>16</sup> Azami, *Studies in Early Hadith Literature*, hal. 12–13

<sup>17</sup> Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi, *Hadith Literature: Its Origin, Development & Special Features* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), hal. 20–21.

Azami underlines that the main weakness of orientalist criticism is the generalization of the entire corpus of hadith based on the limited examples they analyze. The internal criticism that has developed in the Islamic world works the opposite: judging each history individually, rather than judging the entire tradition based on a small sample. In this way, he asserts that the methodology of hadith is much more thorough and fair than the historical-critical orientalist approach.

For Azami, internal criticism is not just a scientific method, but also a mechanism for protecting the prophetic legacy. The preserved tradition of sanad and matn is evidence that Muslims have an internal authentication system that has been proven to be able to sift through history for more than fourteen centuries. By combining the classical approach of hadith scholars and modern research methodologies, Azami succeeded in compiling a solid academic defense of the authenticity of hadith.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that the thought of Muhammad Mustafa Azami provides a strong intellectual foundation to reject orientalist doubts about the authenticity of the hadith. The main findings suggest that Azami has succeeded in demonstrating the existence of mechanisms of criticism of sanad and matn that have been established since generations of companions and *tabi'in*, long before the socio-political construction assumptions put forward by Goldziher and Schacht. Through historical analysis and methodological analysis, Azami emphasized that the tradition of hadith criticism is organic, developed systematically, and supported by strict disciplines in maintaining the integrity of historical transmission.

In addition, this study found that Azami's argument has empirical force through the use of relevant historical evidence, such as the manuscript of *Sahifah Hammam ibn Munabbih* dating from the first century Hijri. This data proves that the process of writing and codifying hadith took place much earlier than the orientalists assume. Azami's approach that combines sanad analysis, critical criticism, biographical studies of narrators, as well as philological and archaeological evidence shows his contribution in updating the methodology of hadith studies with modern academic standards. The findings confirm that the Islamic scientific tradition is not only defensive, but has a strong epistemological structure and can be scientifically accounted for.

An important contribution of this study lies in the role of Azami in shaping a new paradigm in contemporary hadith studies. He not only deconstructs orientalist claims, but also offers a model of research methodology that is integrative between the legacy of classical scholars and modern academic approaches. His thinking provides a basis for strengthening the authority of hadith as a source of Islamic teachings and opens up a space for a more objective scientific dialogue between Islamic traditions and Western studies. Thus, Azami's thought remains relevant to the development of hadith studies in the modern era and provides a direction for further research in maintaining the authenticity and integrity of the Islamic intellectual heritage.

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