



### ISTINBĀṬ AL-AḤKĀM IN CLASSICAL SUNNI JURISPRUDENCE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE FOUR MADHHABS

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**Abstract.** The discourse on istinbāṭ al-aḥkām the derivation of Islamic legal rulings remains central to understanding how Islamic law maintains its relevance across time and context. This study explores istinbāṭ al-aḥkām as a dynamic epistemological framework within classical jurisprudence, focusing on how the four major Sunni jurists Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik ibn Anas, Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Syāfi'ī, and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal constructed distinct yet complementary methodologies in applying revelation to social realities. Employing a qualitative library-based approach, the research analyzes primary classical sources such as al-Risālah and al-Muwatta', alongside modern interpretations by Kamali, Auda, and Aziz, through a comparative-descriptive method. Data were collected through textual documentation and analyzed through content and comparative synthesis to identify the distinctive reasoning patterns of each imam. The findings reveal that the four imams shared common sources of law al-Qur'ān, al-Sunnah, ijmā', and qiyās but diverged in methodological emphasis: Abū Ḥanīfah through rational-analogical reasoning (*istiḥsān*), Mālik through communal practice and maṣlaḥah, al-Syāfi'ī through linguistic textualism, and Aḥmad through transmitted authenticity. This diversity demonstrates that istinbāṭ al-aḥkām functions as a plural yet unified system of reasoning, balancing revelation, reason, and context. The study concludes that methodological plurality in uṣūl al-fiqh strengthens, rather than fragments, Islamic jurisprudence, ensuring its adaptability and ethical coherence across changing times and conditions.

**Keyword:** istinbāṭ al-aḥkām, Islamic jurisprudence, uṣūl al-fiqh, legal methodology, Sunni schools of law

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#### A. Introduction

Islamic law (*al-fiqh al-islāmī*) stands as one of the most comprehensive intellectual systems in human history, encompassing both spiritual and worldly aspects of life. It draws its legitimacy from two primary sources al-Qur'ān and al-Sunnah which together provide the moral and legal foundations of Muslim society. Yet, while revelation is divine and immutable, human life is dynamic and continuously shaped by cultural, economic, and technological change. This dynamic tension between divine permanence and social

transformation has necessitated a disciplined interpretive process known as *istinbāṭ al-aḥkām*, literally “*the extraction of legal rulings*” It is through *istinbāṭ* that jurists (*fuqahā'*) interpret revelation and derive normative judgments (*aḥkām shar'īyyah*) that can address emerging issues across different times and contexts (Aziz, 2025; Kamali, 2005).

In essence, *istinbāṭ al-aḥkām* serves as the intellectual bridge between divine revelation and human experience. It transforms the transcendent values of *sharī'ah* into applicable norms governing acts of worship (*'ibādah*), social interaction (*mu'āmalah*), and public ethics. The Qur'an legitimizes this process in several verses, particularly Qur'an 4:59 and 4:83, which command believers to refer disputed matters back to God, the Messenger, and those “who can draw correct conclusions (*yastanbiṭūnahu*)” from revelation. The prophetic tradition of Mu'ādh ibn Jabal where the Prophet approved his reliance on *ijtihād* in the absence of textual evidence further illustrates that *istinbāṭ* is not merely permissible but a continuation of prophetic reasoning (Abu Zahrah, 1999). Thus, *istinbāṭ* is both a theological duty and a methodological discipline that ensures the dynamism of Islamic law.

The necessity of *istinbāṭ* arises from the reality that explicit legal texts in the Qur'an and Sunnah are limited, while the scope of human affairs is limitless. Classical scholars estimated that only a few hundred verses deal directly with legal rulings, whereas the majority of revelation provides general moral principles. Without *istinbāṭ*, Islamic law would risk becoming static and disconnected from lived realities. Through *istinbāṭ*, divine law remains timeless and adaptable, capable of addressing new circumstances while preserving its moral essence (Miswanto, 2019).

The development of *istinbāṭ al-aḥkām* reached its intellectual maturity through the efforts of the four great Sunni jurists: Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik ibn Anas, Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Syāfi'ī, and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. Each of these imams lived in distinct sociopolitical settings that shaped their interpretive orientations. Abū Ḥanīfah's rational-analogical reasoning reflected the cosmopolitan context of Kūfah, a center of intellectual pluralism. Mālik ibn Anas, living in Madīnah, privileged communal practice (*'amal ahl al-Madīnah*) as a living extension of the Prophet's Sunnah. Al-Syāfi'ī, who studied under both Iraqi and Medinese scholars, codified *uṣūl al-fiqh* into a systematic discipline in al-Risālah, harmonizing textual and rational approaches. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, a student of al-Syāfi'ī, represented the culmination of the textualist tradition, emphasizing strict adherence to ḥadīth and transmitted authority (Aziz, 2025; Zainuddin, 2023a; Zein, 2013) Adriyani et al., 2023).

Their collective works embody the intellectual richness and methodological plurality of Islamic jurisprudence. While they differed in emphasis ranging from Abū Ḥanīfah's rationalism to Aḥmad's conservatism they shared the same epistemic commitment: to uncover God's intent (*maqṣūd al-sharī'ah*) through disciplined reasoning. *Istinbāṭ* represents the essence of *ijtihād* a creative engagement of the intellect with revelation guided by spiritual humility (Kamali, 2005). This creative tension between text (*naṣṣ*), reason (*'aql*), and context (*wāqi'*) continues to define the vitality of Islamic law.

The literature on *istinbāṭ al-aḥkām* spans both classical and modern periods. Classical scholars such as al-Ghazālī in al-Mustaṣfā and al-Syāṭhibī in al-Muwāfaqāt positioned *istinbāṭ* as a process that must serve the higher objectives of *sharī'ah* (*maqāṣid al-syarī'ah*), including the protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property (Monawer et al., 2023). In the modern era, *Istinbāṭ* through a systems theory approach, arguing that legal derivation should reflect the complexity and interconnectedness of human life (Ishaq et al., 2025). *Uṣūl al-fiqh* remains relevant as a dynamic framework for

addressing contemporary legal challenges (Mas'ud et al., 2025). These scholarly contributions reveal that *istinbāt al-aḥkām* is not confined to classical jurisprudence but continues to evolve as a living methodology for Islamic legal thought.

Recent scholarship demonstrates that Islamic legal methodology (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) is actively evolving to address contemporary global challenges through innovative interpretive frameworks. Jauhari & Abdul Ghoni (2025) propose reconstructing classical *uṣūl al-fiqh* principles to engage complex modern realities including globalization, ethical finance, and humanitarian crises, repositioning the discipline as dynamic rather than static (Jauhari & Ghoni, 2025). Hartanto & Lubis (2024) advocate for contextual *fiqh* that integrates classical Islamic principles with modern developments, particularly addressing migration, digital economy challenges, and technological advancements like cryptocurrencies through interdisciplinary engagement (Hartanto & Lubis, 2024). Rikardo & Sucipto (2026) emphasize *uṣūl al-fiqh*'s crucial role in maintaining methodological consistency while ensuring Islamic law's relevance across changing social contexts through systematic *ijtihād* frameworks (Rikardo & Sucipto, 2026). Prayogi et al. (2025) examine *fiqh*'s adaptation to digital transformation, highlighting how scholars address online transactions, artificial intelligence in finance, and social media ethics while balancing technological advancement with core Islamic principles (Prayogi et al., 2025). These studies collectively demonstrate that *uṣūl al-fiqh* functions as a continuously evolving framework capable of responding to emerging global issues.

Despite this extensive literature, there remains a gap in comprehensive comparative studies that integrate the methodologies of the four imams within a unified epistemological framework. Previous works often focus on individual *madhhab* doctrines rather than exploring their interconnections and shared epistemic foundations. For instance, (Anang & Hasibuan, 2025) examined the role of *istiḥsān* and *qiyās* in the Ḥanafī school as mechanisms for contextual legal adaptation, while (Fathurrahman & Muhajirin, 2024) analyzed Imam Mālik's application of *maṣlaḥah mursalah* in formulating principles of fair pricing within *Sharī'ah* markets from the perspective of economic equilibrium and social justice. Studies on the Shāfi'ī school have primarily focused on al-Syāfi'ī's systematic construction of legal methodology and the hierarchical arrangement of legal sources within *uṣūl al-fiqh* (Yaqin, 2021). Similarly, recent scholarship on Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal has highlighted his commitment to textual authority and his reliance on transmitted traditions as the foundation of legal reasoning (Zainuddin, 2023a). Yet few studies attempt to synthesize these diverse methodologies as parts of a coherent intellectual continuum. Previous studies in *Istinbāth Journal* have examined the application of *Qawā'id Fiqhiyyah* and *maqāṣid*-based reasoning in contemporary Islamic law; however, limited attention has been given to synthesizing the epistemological structures of the four Sunni *madhhab*s within a unified framework of *istinbāt al-aḥkām* (Jalili, I., & Syukri, 2025).

This study addresses that gap by presenting a comparative analysis of *istinbāt al-aḥkām* across the four Sunni imams. It argues that methodological plurality in Islamic law is not a sign of division but a manifestation of epistemological diversity within a shared framework of divine guidance. Each imam's method reflects a unique response to context: rational flexibility in Abū Ḥanīfah, communal continuity in Mālik, textual systematization in al-Syāfi'ī, and ethical conservatism in Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. Together, they exemplify Islam's capacity to balance revelation and reason while maintaining unity in purpose and principle.

The objectives of this study are threefold: *first*, to define and contextualize *istinbāt al-aḥkām* within Islamic legal theory; *second*, to explore how the biographical and

intellectual backgrounds of the four imams shaped their approaches to legal derivation; and *third*, to analyze their *mashādir al-aḥkām* (sources), *manāhij al-istinbāt* (methods), and selected illustrative cases through comparative synthesis. Using a qualitative library-based method, the study examines primary jurisprudential texts alongside modern analyses to construct a coherent epistemological map of classical Islamic reasoning.

By integrating classical thought with modern methodological reflection, this research contributes to the revitalization of *uṣūl al-fiqh* as a living science. It offers a conceptual bridge between traditional juristic frameworks and the ethical imperatives of contemporary society. In doing so, it reaffirms *istinbāt al-aḥkām* as the central mechanism through which Islamic law remains dynamic preserving divine constancy while engaging human change. The strength of Islamic jurisprudence lies not in its uniformity but in its intellectual adaptability (Auda, 2007). Recent studies published in *Istinbāth Journal* also emphasize that Islamic legal reasoning continues to evolve through *maqāṣid*-oriented approaches that connect classical jurisprudence with contemporary socio-economic realities (Rois & Salahuddin, 2021). Through *istinbāt*, Islamic law continues to evolve as a moral and legal civilization capable of addressing the complexities of the modern world. Unlike previous studies that examine individual *madhhab* methodologies separately, this study synthesizes the epistemological structures of the four Sunni schools within a unified comparative framework of *istinbāt al-aḥkām*.

## B. Method

### Design

This study adopts a qualitative library research approach that focuses on textual, conceptual, and comparative analysis of classical and contemporary Islamic legal sources. The research design is descriptive-analytical, aiming to explore how *istinbāt al-aḥkām* (derivation of legal rulings) is defined, constructed, and applied by the four major Sunni jurists Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik ibn Anas, Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Syāfi'ī, and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal.

The library research approach was chosen because it allows a deep investigation into normative, epistemological, and methodological reasoning within the textual tradition of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, emphasizing the interpretation of ideas rather than empirical measurement (Zed, 2004; (Kamali, 2005)).

### Data Sources

The study draws on two main types of data sources:

1. **Primary Sources:** These include foundational works in Islamic jurisprudence, such as *al-Risālah* by al-Syāfi'ī (2008), *al-Muwaṭṭa'* by Mālik ibn Anas, *Musnad Aḥmad* by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (Al-Mawardi, 2010), and *al-Mabsūṭ* by al-Syaibānī, representing the intellectual legacy of Abū Ḥanīfah (Abu Zahrah, 1999). These texts provide firsthand insights into the epistemological and methodological constructions of legal reasoning formulated by the four imams.
2. **Secondary and Contemporary Sources:** These include interpretive and analytical works that contextualize classical jurisprudence in modern frameworks. Key references are Auda's (2007) *Maqāṣid al-Syarī'ah as Philosophy of Islamic Law*, Kamali's (2005) *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, (Zein, 2013) *Arus Pemikiran Empat Mazhab*, and (Aziz, 2025) *Imām al-Syāfi'ī: Ḥayātuhu wa 'Aṣruhu wa Fikruhu*. These are supplemented by contemporary journal articles, such as (Zainuddin,

2023a) Adriyani, Ayudiya, and Mahasin (2023), which discuss the evolution of *ijtihād* methodology in Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's jurisprudence.

### Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted through a systematic documentation process, which involved identifying, reading, and extracting relevant materials from classical manuscripts, authoritative books, and journal publications. The researcher constructed a coding framework to organize the extracted data into four main analytical categories:

1. *Istinbāt al-Aḥkām*: Definition and Method
2. Biographical Overview of the Four Imams
3. *Istinbāt al-Aḥkām* of the Four Imams: Sources, Methods, and Illustrative Cases

### Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using content analysis (*taḥlīl al-mawḍū'āt*), focusing on extracting themes and methodological concepts from textual evidence. Following the stages proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) and applied by Islamic studies scholars such as (Kamali, 2005), the process involved:

1. Data reduction: filtering only the most relevant information in accordance with the four coding categories;
2. Categorization: organizing findings into thematic units that reflect each imam's approach to legal reasoning;
3. Interpretation: connecting textual findings with the epistemological framework of *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *maqāṣid al-syarī'ah*; and
4. Synthesis: integrating the analytical results into a coherent comparative model of *istinbāt al-aḥkām*.

This approach allows the study to highlight both the internal diversity of Islamic legal thought and its overarching methodological unity, providing an academic bridge between classical jurisprudence and modern Islamic legal discourse.

### Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor and reliability of interpretation, the study applies the trustworthiness framework developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), consisting of four key criteria:

1. Credibility, achieved through cross-referencing and triangulation between classical texts and modern interpretations to ensure interpretive accuracy;
2. Transferability, ensured by providing rich contextual and historical descriptions that allow the analytical findings to be applied to broader discussions in Islamic legal theory;
3. Dependability, maintained through consistent documentation and transparent analytical procedures across all stages of research; and
4. Confirmability, established by grounding interpretations directly in textual evidence and avoiding personal bias, ensuring that all conclusions are academically verifiable.

This methodological framework guarantees that the comparative study of *istinbāt al-aḥkām* is both epistemologically grounded in Islamic tradition and analytically consistent with modern standards of qualitative research.

## C. Result and Discussion

### Istinbāṭ al-Aḥkām: Definition and Method

The term istinbāṭ al-aḥkām linguistically originates from the Arabic root nabṭa al-mā', meaning "to extract water from the ground." Metaphorically, it signifies a deep intellectual process of deriving hidden meanings or uncovering legal rulings from the divine sources of sharī'ah. In Islamic jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), istinbāṭ refers to the systematic effort to extract *aḥkām shar'īyyah* (legal rulings) from detailed evidences (*adillah tafṣīliyyah*), namely the Qur'ān, the Sunnah, *ijmā'* (consensus), and *qiyās* (analogy). *Istinbāṭ* is the intellectual heart of *uṣūl al-fiqh* the process that transforms divine revelation into applicable human law (Abu Zahrah, 1999). The contemporary application of collective maqāṣid-based *ijtihād* also demonstrates how istinbāṭ al-aḥkām functions as a dynamic mechanism for legal adaptation in modern Muslim societies (Jailani, 2017).

The theological foundation of istinbāṭ is explicitly established in the Qur'ān. In Sūrah al-Nisā' [4]:59, Allah commands believers:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ فَإِن تَنَازَعْتُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ فَرُدُّوهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَالرَّسُولِ إِن كُنْتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ

*"O you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you believe in Allah and the Last Day."* (Qur'an 4:59)

This verse forms the epistemological core of istinbāṭ, affirming that every matter of law must ultimately return to divine authority either directly through revelation or through reasoned interpretation consistent with it.

Another crucial textual basis is Sūrah al-Nisā' [4]:83:

وَإِذَا جَاءَهُمْ أَمْرٌ مِنَ الْأَمْنِ أَوْ الْخَوْفِ أَذَاعُوا بِهِ وَلَوْ رَدُّوهُ إِلَى الرَّسُولِ وَإِلَى أُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْهُمْ لَعَلِمَهُ الَّذِينَ يَسْتَنبِطُونَهُ مِنْهُمْ

*"And when there comes to them news of security or fear, they spread it about. But if they had referred it to the Messenger or to those of authority among them, then those who can draw correct conclusions (yastanbiṭūnahu) from it would have known [the truth]."* (Qur'an 4:83).

This verse explicitly legitimizes istinbāṭ as the intellectual process by which qualified scholars (*ahl al-'ilm*) derive judgments from revelation.

The Prophetic tradition also confirms this principle through the ḥadīth of Mu'ādh ibn Jabal, who, when appointed as judge in Yemen, declared that he would first judge by the Qur'ān, then by the Sunnah, and if he found no text, he would use his own *ijtihād*. The Prophet ﷺ approved, saying: *"Praise be to Allah who has guided the messenger of His Messenger to what pleases Him."* (Abu Dāwūd, Sunan, no. 3592).

The need for istinbāṭ arises from the limited number of explicit legal texts in comparison to the endless variety of human experiences. Scholars estimate that only around 200 to 500 verses of the Qur'ān directly concern legal rulings, while the rest provide general moral and spiritual guidance (Ansory, 2018; (Miswanto, 2019)). Hence, istinbāṭ ensures that divine law remains dynamic, responding to the evolving realities of human life while remaining grounded in revelation.

Methodologically, *istinbāt al-aḥkām* functions through several epistemic modes, each reflecting the balance between textual authority (*naṣṣ*), rational analysis (*‘aql*), and moral purpose (*maqāṣid*).

1. *Bayānī* (Textual-Linguistic Method):

This approach emphasizes textual analysis and linguistic precision. The interpreter derives rulings directly from textual indicators (*dalālāt al-alfāz*), examining grammatical forms such as *‘ām-khās*, *muṭlaq-muqayyad*, and *amr-nahy* to uncover normative meaning (Muzaidi, 2010; Hasyim, 2018).

For instance, the command *aqīmū al-ṣalāh* (“establish prayer”) in Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]:43 implies obligation (*wujūb*), while *lā taqrabū al-zinā* (“do not approach adultery”) in Q.S. al-Isrā’ [17]:32 implies prohibition (*taḥrīm*).

The bayānī method safeguards doctrinal purity and textual integrity, ensuring that human interpretation remains anchored in revelation.

2. *Ta’līlī* (Causal-Rational Method):

This method identifies the effective cause (*‘illah*) underlying a legal ruling and applies it to new cases through analogy (*qiyās*). It is the logic of extending the law from the known to the unknown. For example, the prohibition of *khamr* (wine) in Q.S. al-Mā’idah [5]:90 is extended to narcotics because both share the same ‘illah intoxication (*iskār*) (Fuad, 2000; Komarudin, 2022).

Through *ta’līlī* reasoning, *istinbāt* achieves universality, ensuring that Islamic law remains relevant to evolving realities without departing from its revelatory foundations.

3. *Istislāḥī* (Teleological-Maqāṣidī Method):

The *istislāḥī* approach, grounded in *maṣlaḥah mursalah* (unrestricted public welfare), focuses on preserving the higher objectives of *sharī’ah* religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property. Al-Ghazālī (1993) and al-Syāḥibī (2003) emphasized that all divine rulings aim to secure human welfare (*jalb al-maṣāliḥ*) and prevent harm (*dar’ al-mafāsīd*).

Hence, contemporary issues such as organ transplantation, digital contracts, and Islamic finance are addressed by aligning their legal reasoning with *maqāṣid al-sharī’ah* rather than literalist reading alone (Auda, 2008; Kamali, 2005).

4. *Tawfīqī* (Reconciliatory Method):

When textual evidences appear contradictory, scholars apply *jam’u wa al-tawfīq* (harmonization), *nasakh* (abrogation), or *tarjīḥ* (preference) to maintain coherence and unity in law (Miswanto, 2019).

This method demonstrates that *istinbāt* is not only about deduction but also about integration ensuring harmony among the textual corpus of Islamic law. In general, the typology of *istinbāt* methods can be seen in the following table:

**Table 1. Typology of Istinbāt Methods in Islamic Jurisprudence**

Method Type	Epistemological Basis	Key Instruments	Representative Scholars / Applications	Analytical Focus
Bayānī (Textual-Linguistic)	Authority of al-Qur’ān and al-Sunnah	Dalālāt al-alfāz, grammar, qiyās lafzī	Al-Syāfi’ī, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal	Derivation of rulings through linguistic and textual precision

Ta'līlī (Causal-Rational)	Identification of 'illah (effective cause)	Qiyās, istihsān, sadd al-ḍarī'ah	Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik ibn Anas	Extension of rulings through reasoning and analogy
Istislāhī (Teleological-Maqāṣidī)	Realization of maṣlaḥah (public welfare)	Maṣlaḥah mursalah, maqāṣid al-syarī'ah, 'urf	Al-Ghazālī, Al-Syāḥibī	Alignment of law with ethical and social objectives
Tawfīqī (Reconciliatory)	Harmony between apparently conflicting texts	Jam'u wa al-tawfīq, nasakh, tarjīḥ	Ibn Ḥazm, Al-Juwaynī	Integration and consistency of revealed evidence

Source: synthesized from (Kamali, 2005), (Auda, 2007), (Abu Zahrah, 1999), and (Miswanto, 2019).

Collectively, these methods demonstrate that *istinbāṭ al-aḥkām* is not a singular act of reasoning but a multilayered epistemological system rooted in both divine authority and rational inquiry. It functions as a dynamic mechanism through which Islamic law transcends the temporal limits of its original revelation, continuously addressing new realities while preserving the timeless principles of justice (*'adl*), mercy (*raḥmah*), and wisdom (*ḥikmah*).

### Biographical Overview of the Four Imams

The intellectual history of Islamic jurisprudence is profoundly shaped by four major Sunni jurists Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik ibn Anas, Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Syāfi'ī, and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal whose legal methodologies (*manāḥij al-istinbāṭ*) became the foundational pillars of the four classical schools of law (*madhāhib*). Each imam lived in a distinct sociocultural context and responded to different epistemological challenges, which together produced a rich spectrum of Islamic legal reasoning that continues to influence Muslim thought to this day.

#### 1. Imām Abū Ḥanīfah (80–150 H / 699–767 CE)

Abū Ḥanīfah al-Nu'mān ibn Thābit, the founder of the Ḥanafī school, was born in Kūfah, Iraq, a city known for its vibrant intellectual debates and exposure to diverse social realities. Raised in an environment of commercial and scholarly activity, Abū Ḥanīfah combined sharp rational reasoning with deep scriptural knowledge. His early training under scholars such as Ḥammād ibn Abī Sulaymān and his encounters with theological controversies, particularly with the Khawārij and Murji'ah, strengthened his commitment to reasoned deliberation (*ra'y*) guided by revelation (Abu Zahrah, 1999)

Abū Ḥanīfah's fiqh reflects his concern for the practicality and adaptability of Islamic law. He introduced *istihsān* (juristic preference) as a method to deviate from strict analogy (*qiyās*) when equity and public welfare demanded it, thereby emphasizing the moral spirit of the law over literal application. This rational-analogical approach gave the Ḥanafī school its hallmark flexibility in dealing with new circumstances (Rizapoor & Rahimi, 2023). His students, including Abū Yūsuf and Muḥammad al-Syaibānī, later systematized his ideas, transforming his thought into a coherent jurisprudential school that became the most widespread in the Muslim world.

2. Imām Mālik ibn Anas (93–179 H / 711–795 CE)

Mālik ibn Anas, known as Imām Dār al-Ḥijrah, was born and lived in Madīnah, the cradle of prophetic tradition and early Islamic scholarship. His work *al-Muwattaʿa* a comprehensive collection of ḥadīth and juristic opinions illustrates his dual reliance on textual transmission and communal practice (*ʿamal ahl al-Madīnah*). For Mālik, the practice of the people of Madīnah represented a living embodiment of the Sunnah, as they inherited and practiced the Prophet’s teachings across generations (Rakib & Alwi, 2022).

Mālik’s legal methodology prioritized the preservation of communal harmony and social welfare (*maṣlaḥah*). He adopted *maṣlaḥah mursalah* (unrestricted public benefit) and *sadd al-ḍarīʿah* (blocking the means to harm) as legitimate tools of reasoning, enabling the law to remain contextually responsive. His caution toward speculative analogy and his preference for continuity with the Prophetic legacy gave rise to a jurisprudence characterized by equilibrium between tradition and social necessity. Mālik’s approach represents a sociological and pragmatic understanding of revelation, rooted in lived communal experience rather than abstract theorization (Kamali, 2005).

3. Imām Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Syāfiʿī (150–204 H / 767–820 CE)

Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Syāfiʿī is widely regarded as the founder of the science of *uṣūl al-fiqh*. Born in Gaza and educated in both Madīnah and Baghdad, al-Syāfiʿī synthesized the rationalist tendencies of Iraq with the traditionalist rigor of Madīnah. His monumental treatise *al-Risālah* codified the first systematic methodology of *istinbāt al-aḥkām*, establishing the hierarchy of sources: al-Qurʾān, al-Sunnah, *ijmāʿ*, and *qiyās* (Aziz, 2025).

Al-Syāfiʿī vehemently rejected *istiḥsān* and unrestricted *maṣlaḥah*, arguing that such subjective reasoning could lead to arbitrary law-making. Instead, he insisted that every legal ruling must have a textual or rational basis firmly rooted in the *naṣṣ* (revealed text). His linguistic and hermeneutical precision elevated jurisprudence from mere casuistry to a disciplined legal science. As (Zein, 2013) notes, al-Syāfiʿī’s intellectual project provided Sunni Islam with a unified epistemology, bridging revelation and rational inquiry within defined methodological limits.

4. Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (164–241 H / 780–855 CE)

Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, a student of al-Syāfiʿī, stands as the epitome of textual conservatism and devotion to prophetic tradition. His magnum opus, *Musnad Aḥmad*, compiles over 30,000 ḥadīth, reflecting his lifelong commitment to the authenticity and preservation of prophetic knowledge. Living during the period of the *Miḥnah* (inquisition) under the Abbasids, Aḥmad became a symbol of intellectual integrity and resistance against political coercion (Zainuddin, 2023a)(Adriyani et al., 2023).

Methodologically, Aḥmad prioritized ḥadīth evidence over rational analogy, even preferring weak (*ḍaʿīf*) reports to speculative reasoning when no sound alternative existed. His cautious application of *qiyās* and his reliance on *fatāwā aṣ-ṣaḥābah* (the opinions of the Prophet’s companions) highlight his deep humility before the revealed text. As Hasan Abu Thalib (1990) explains, his approach combined fidelity to the textual corpus with an ethical consciousness that sought to preserve the purity of divine intent. Though textualist, Aḥmad’s jurisprudence also accommodated limited public interest (*maṣlaḥah*) in areas of necessity (*ḍarūrah*), showing that even his conservatism was grounded in spiritual balance and moral awareness.

## Istinbāth al-Aḥkām of the Four Imams: Sources, Methods, and Illustrative Cases

The four Sunni imams Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik ibn Anas, al-Syāfi'ī, and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal share the same divine foundations of Islamic law yet diverge in their interpretive methodologies. Their istinbāth al-aḥkām represents distinct epistemological articulations of how revelation, reason, and context interact in the process of deriving legal rulings. This section elaborates on each imam's sources, methods, and illustrative cases that best demonstrate the spirit of their jurisprudence.

### 1. Imām Abū Ḥanīfah (80–150 H): Rational-Analogical Flexibility

#### Sources

Abū Ḥanīfah prioritized al-Qur'ān and al-Sunnah as the ultimate sources of law but applied rigorous standards for accepting ḥadīth. He required that transmitted traditions be widely known and practiced by the Companions (*ṣaḥābah*) to avoid weak or isolated reports. When direct textual evidence was lacking, he employed *ijmā'* (consensus), *qiyās* (analogy), *istiḥsān* (juristic preference), and *'urf* (custom) as legitimate secondary sources (Abu Zahrah, 1999; Kamali, 2005).

#### Methods

His methodology (*manhaj*) was deeply rational yet rooted in revelation. Through *istiḥsān*, Abū Ḥanīfah departed from strict analogy when literal application produced hardship or inequity, embodying the *maqāṣid al-syarī'ah* principle of facilitating ease (*taysīr*) and preventing harm (*raf' al-ḥaraj*). He viewed *ra'y* (reasoned opinion) not as opposition to revelation, but as a disciplined extension of it (Rizapoor & Rahimi, 2023).

#### Illustrative Case

One example is his permissibility of *waqf al-nuqūd* (cash endowment). While traditional jurists limited *waqf* to immovable property, Abū Ḥanīfah argued that as long as the perpetual benefit (*dawām al-manfa'ah*) was maintained, the substance of the law was fulfilled. This reasoning based on *istiḥsān* demonstrates his pragmatic orientation that prioritized ethical objectives over formality (Mustafa Kamal et al., 2019).

### 2. Imām Mālik ibn Anas (93–179 H): Tradition and Public Interest

#### Sources

Mālik's hierarchy of sources included al-Qur'ān, al-Sunnah, *ijmā'*, and notably, *'amal ahl al-Madīnah* (the practice of the people of Madīnah). He considered this communal practice to be a living Sunnah, representing the Prophet's applied guidance across generations. He also legitimized *maṣlaḥah mursalah* (unarticulated benefit) and *sadd al-ḍarī'ah* (blocking the means to harm) as secondary sources when no direct text existed (Rakib & Alwi, 2022; Kamali, 2005).

#### Methods

Mālik's method integrates textual authority with social realism. His istinbāth prioritized stability and communal consensus over speculative logic. By adopting *maṣlaḥah mursalah*, he recognized the role of human welfare in lawmaking while maintaining fidelity to prophetic precedent. He also used *sadd al-ḍarī'ah* to prevent potential harm arising from permissible acts, reflecting a preventive jurisprudence grounded in ethical foresight (Auda, 2007).

#### Illustrative Case

A famous example is Mālik's rejection of the *ḥadīth on khiyār al-majlis* the right to cancel a sale before parting because such a practice was not observed among the people of Madīnah. For him, living practice held greater authority than isolated textual reports, illustrating his belief that the continuity of the Prophet's community embodied the truest interpretation of the Sunnah (Yusuf & Hasan, 2020).

### 3. Imām Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Syāfi'ī (150–204 H): Textual Systematization

#### Sources

Al-Syāfi'ī formalized the hierarchy of sources: al-Qur'ān, al-Sunnah, *ijmā'*, and *qiyās*. He rejected *istiḥsān* and unrestricted *maṣlahah mursalah*, fearing that subjective reasoning might compromise the objectivity of divine law (Aziz, 2025; Zein, 2013). For him, the linguistic and structural coherence of revelation provided sufficient grounds for legal derivation.

#### Methods

His methodology emphasized textual-linguistic analysis (*bayānī* approach). In al-Risālah, he developed rules of *dalālāt al-alfāz* (indications of textual meaning), including distinctions between *'ām-khāṣ* (general-specific), *amr-nahy* (command-prohibition), and *muṭlaq-muqayyad* (absolute-qualified). Al-Syāfi'ī sought to ensure that *istinbāt* remained within the boundaries of divine speech and not personal conjecture. His codification transformed Islamic law into a consistent and rationally verifiable science (Kamali, 2005).

#### Illustrative Case

Al-Syāfi'ī's insistence on delivering *zakāt al-fiṭr* in the form of staple food rather than money demonstrates his literalist commitment. He based this ruling on the Prophet's specific wording *ṣā'an min ṭa'ām* (a measure of food) in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (no. 1504), arguing that the Prophet's explicit text leaves no room for substitution (Aziz, 2025). This reflects his belief that *naṣṣ* (textual form) carries inherent legal authority beyond human reinterpretation.

### 4. Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (164–241 H): Textual Conservatism and Ethical Restraint

#### Sources

Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's sources prioritized al-Qur'ān and al-Sunnah, followed by *fatāwā aṣ-ṣaḥābah* (opinions of the Companions). He accepted *ḥadīth ḍa'īf* (weak traditions) over *ra'y* or analogy, provided they were not fabricated. *Qiyās* was used sparingly, only when absolutely necessary, reflecting his deep reverence for transmitted evidence (Zainuddin, 2023a) (Adriyani et al., 2023).

#### Methods

His *istinbāt* method reflects an epistemology of humility and piety. Aḥmad viewed revelation as complete and self-sufficient; human reasoning was valid only within its textual limits. His methodology combined strict textual adherence with moral consciousness, ensuring that legal reasoning never overshadowed prophetic guidance (Hasan Abu Thalib, 1990).

#### Illustrative Case

In the issue of ritual purity, Aḥmad ruled that water licked by a cat remains pure, citing a weak *ḥadīth* in Sunan Abī Dāwūd (no. 75): "It is one of those who frequent among you." He prioritized the transmitted text over speculative health reasoning, emphasizing reliance on prophetic authenticity. His approach epitomizes epistemic submission (*ta'abbud*) and faithfulness to transmitted tradition (Zainuddin, 2023a) (Adriyani et al., 2023).

**Table 2. Sources and Methods of *Istinbāt al-Aḥkām***

Imam	Primary Sources	Secondary Principles	Methodological Features	Illustrative Example
Abū Ḥanīfah	<i>al-Qur'ān, al-Sunnah, ijmā', qiyās</i>	<i>Istiḥsān, 'urf</i>	Rational-analogical reasoning	<i>Waqf al-nuqūd</i> (cash endowment)

			emphasizing equity and flexibility	
Mālik ibn Anas	<i>al-Qur'ān, al-Sunnah, ijmā', 'amal ahl al-Madīnah</i>	<i>Maṣlaḥah mursalah, sadd al-darī'ah</i>	Sociological realism, communal authority, and moral equilibrium	Rejection of <i>khiyār al-majlis</i>
Al-Syāfi'ī	<i>al-Qur'ān, al-Sunnah, ijmā', qiyās</i>	Rejection of <i>istiḥsān</i> and unregulated <i>maṣlaḥah</i>	Textual-linguistic rigor and systematic hierarchy of sources	<i>Zakāt al-fiṭr</i> must be food, not money
Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal	<i>al-Qur'ān, al-Sunnah, fatāwā aṣ-ṣaḥābah</i>	Acceptance of ḥadīth ḍa'īf, limited qiyās	Textual conservatism and ethical restraint	Purity of water licked by a cat

Synthesized from (Aziz, 2025), (Kamali, 2005), Auda (2007), (Zein, 2013), and (Zainuddin, 2023a) Adriyani et al. (2023).

### Contemporary Relevance of Classical Istinbāt Methodologies

Contemporary Islamic jurisprudence faces unprecedented challenges in addressing modern complexities while maintaining its foundational principles. Research demonstrates that modernity has facilitated the expansion of istinbāt methods and strengthened focus on maqāṣid al-sharī'ah, encouraging more contextual and dynamic interpretation of Islamic texts (Arlati et al., 2026). Islamic law (fiqh) remains significantly relevant when examined through dynamic, maqāṣid-oriented, and interdisciplinary approaches, particularly in addressing digital advancements, biotechnology, and environmental changes (Takwim, A., Farah, F. F. Y. ., Risma, D. E. ., & Mildawati, 2025). Contextual fiqh offers a flexible framework that integrates classical Islamic principles with modern social, economic, and technological developments, providing adaptable legal solutions for migration, digital transactions, and family law (Hartanto & Lubis, 2024). Contemporary fiqh serves as a bridge between classical jurisprudence and modern needs, developing more flexible interpretations while respecting basic principles and maintaining core Islamic values (Suryantoro, 2025). This transformation emphasizes collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches to ijtihad for addressing complex ethical challenges.

Contemporary Islamic jurisprudence demonstrates significant adaptability in addressing modern economic and technological challenges through classical legal methodologies. The Hanafi school's rational approach, particularly through qiyās (analogical reasoning) and istiḥsān (juristic preference), provides flexible frameworks for contemporary issues. Abū Ḥanīfah's methodology integrates textual sources with considerations of justice, social needs, and public interest (maṣlaḥah), enabling responses to modern contexts lacking direct classical precedent (Anang et al., 2025). Islamic economic jurisprudence maintains relevance in digital business, fintech services, and collective investments by upholding core principles of trust, transparency, and justice while adapting to contemporary dynamics (Putri et al., 2025). Qiyās effectively addresses legal and ethical challenges from technological advancements, though integration with other principles like maṣlaḥah and istiḥsān is necessary for adaptive decisions (Sabri, 2024). Islamic jurisprudence remains relevant to modern issues through maqāṣid al-sharī'ah and contemporary ijtihad, though practical application gaps persist in policy and technology regulation (Takwim, A., Farah, F. F. Y. ., Risma, D. E. ., & Mildawati, 2025).

Mālik ibn Anas's maṣlaḥah-oriented methodology demonstrates a significant capacity for addressing contemporary social and ethical challenges through its emphasis on public welfare and societal stability. The principle of maṣlaḥah mursalah allows Islamic law to respond to modern realities that are not explicitly regulated within classical legal texts, particularly in areas such as economic development, environmental sustainability, humanitarian protection, and public health ethics while remaining consistent with the broader objectives of sharī'ah (Rahmawati & Satrio, 2024). Through this approach, legal reasoning is directed not merely toward literal textual compliance, but toward the realization of substantive justice and collective benefit within society. Mālik's positioning of maṣlaḥah as an independent legal consideration within ijtihād further illustrates the adaptive character of the Mālikī school in responding to changing social conditions and public interests (Ikhsan, Muhammad, Iskandar, 2021). In contemporary Islamic economic discourse, the application of maṣlaḥah mursalah has also provided contextual legal solutions capable of balancing individual and collective interests within the normative boundaries of Islamic ethics (Marisa Rizki, Moh Bahrudin, 2024). Moreover, the integration of maqāṣid al-syarī'ah into contemporary legal reasoning demonstrates how Mālik's methodology continues to support the flexibility of Islamic jurisprudence in addressing modern issues such as democracy, human rights, technological transformation, and digital society (Prayiani & Hasibuan, 2026). Furthermore, the principle of sadd al-ḍarī'ah reinforces the preventive dimension of Mālik's jurisprudence by restricting actions that may indirectly lead to social harm, moral corruption, or environmental destruction, thereby illustrating that the Mālikī approach prioritizes the preservation of long-term human welfare and social equilibrium within an increasingly complex global context.

Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) continues to evolve in response to digital transformation while maintaining its foundational principles. Digital technologies have reshaped religious authority and fatwa-issuing methods, leading to phenomena such as online fatwas and AI muftis that require methodological reconstruction to preserve fiqh's relevance without compromising Sharia principles. This transformation has given rise to digital-maqāṣidī fiqh, emphasizing public benefit (maṣlaḥah) and adaptability to technological innovation (Soehardin et al., 2025). Kaedah fiqhiyah (jurisprudential principles) play a vital role in addressing contemporary challenges including digital transactions, electronic contracts, and artificial intelligence, demonstrating their dynamic and contextual nature while preserving normative Sharia values (M. Abror et al., 2025). Modern fiqh increasingly integrates maqāṣid al-sharī'ah with contemporary ijtiḥād to tackle complex ethical issues in biotechnology, environmental changes, and digital economics (Takwim, A., Farah, F. F. Y. ., Risma, D. E. ., & Mildawati, 2025). Imam Syafi'i's systematic legal methodology, based on hierarchical sources and practical frameworks, remains foundational for contemporary Islamic legal development (Umar et al., 2025).

Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's jurisprudential methodology demonstrates the enduring importance of textual authority and transmitted knowledge within Islamic legal reasoning, particularly in preserving the authenticity and credibility of religious interpretation. His strong reliance on ḥadīth as the primary basis of legal derivation shaped the development of ḥadīth-oriented fiqh and established his reputation as a fuqahā' muḥaddithīn whose commitment to transmitted authority continues to influence contemporary Islamic legal discourse (Zainuddin, 2023b). Beyond methodological rigor, Aḥmad's refusal to compromise scholarly principles under political pressure during the Miḥnah illustrates the ethical dimension of intellectual integrity within Islamic scholarship. In the contemporary digital era, where religious information circulates

rapidly through online media and social platforms, the Ḥanbalī emphasis on textual authenticity and scholarly discipline remains increasingly relevant for regulating Islamic discourse and preventing the spread of misinformation. Conservative approaches grounded in textual authority continue to provide important normative foundations for Islamic education and religious guidance in modern Muslim societies (Kusno et al., 2025). At the same time, the digitalization of religious texts and online dissemination of Islamic content present serious challenges to traditional mechanisms of authentication, particularly regarding sanad verification and the reliability of transmitted religious knowledge (Susanti et al., 2025). Furthermore, contemporary scholarly debates surrounding the legal and epistemological authority of Musnad Aḥmad demonstrate that questions of textual authenticity, legal probative value, and transmitted evidence remain central to Islamic jurisprudence in the modern period (Sedick & Esack, 2014). Consequently, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's methodology offers a significant epistemological model for maintaining scholarly accountability, authenticity, and ethical restraint within contemporary Islamic legal interpretation and digital religious authority.

The methodological diversity among the four Sunni madhabs reflects adaptive responses to distinct geographical, political, and cultural contexts rather than doctrinal fragmentation (Fitria et al., 2024). Each school developed unique approaches: Hanafi emphasized flexible legal interpretation, Maliki prioritized Medinan practices, Shafi'i systematically utilized hadith, and Hanbali strictly followed authentic traditions (Vinda Nurul Hidayatul Aiman & Mukhsin, 2025). This diversity demonstrates that Islamic law is inherently dynamic and contextual, allowing adaptation across time and place while maintaining foundational unity (Aiman & Mukhsin, 2025). Juristic disagreement (*ikhtilaf*) emerges from divergent epistemic commitments regarding textual authority, legal causation, and public interest, alongside methodological distinctions in legal reasoning (Ridwansah & Solehudin, 2025). Contemporary Islamic legal thought has expanded *istinbāṭ* methodologies, strengthened focus on *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, and encouraged contextual interpretation to address modern challenges (Arliati et al., 2026). This pluralistic framework enables Islamic jurisprudence to balance doctrinal continuity with interpretive flexibility, ensuring continued relevance in contemporary society.

#### D. Conclusion

The study of *istinbāṭ al-aḥkām* across the four Sunni imams Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik ibn Anas, al-Syāfi'ī, and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal reveals the intellectual breadth and dynamism of Islamic legal reasoning. Although each imam operated within different historical and sociocultural contexts, their methodologies collectively demonstrate that *istinbāṭ* is not a static process, but a living epistemological enterprise that mediates between divine revelation and human understanding.

The findings indicate that *istinbāṭ al-aḥkām* functions as both a theological necessity and a methodological discipline. Theologically, it ensures the continuity of divine law amid changing human realities, as commanded in Qur'an 4:59 and affirmed through the practice of *ijtihād* in prophetic tradition. Methodologically, it manifests in multiple interpretive modes *bayānī* (textual-linguistic), *ta'līlī* (causal-rational), *istislāḥī* (teleological), and *tawfīqī* (reconciliatory) each of which preserves the balance between revelation (*naṣṣ*), reason (*'aql*), and moral purpose (*maqāṣid*).

Comparatively, the study highlights distinct yet complementary orientations among the four imams. Abū Ḥanīfah embodies rational-analogical flexibility through *istiḥsān* and

qiyās, emphasizing justice and practicality. Mālik ibn Anas represents sociological realism by grounding law in communal practice and *maṣlaḥah mursalah*. Al-Syāfi'ī institutionalized textual-linguistic precision, establishing the hierarchy of sources and codifying the science of *uṣūl al-fiqh*. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, meanwhile, preserved textual authenticity and ethical restraint through his prioritization of ḥadīth and transmitted authority.

Despite methodological differences, all four shared an unwavering commitment to safeguarding the divine intent of *sharī'ah* an intent aimed at realizing justice (*'adl*), mercy (*rahmah*), and wisdom (*ḥikmah*).

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to understanding *istinbāt al-aḥkām* as a plural yet unified epistemological system, where diversity in method strengthens rather than divides Islamic jurisprudence. It affirms that methodological plurality (*ikhtilāf manhajī*) is not a weakness but a reflection of Islam's adaptive intellectual tradition one that sustains relevance across time, geography, and circumstance.

Future research could expand this inquiry by applying the comparative framework of *istinbāt* to emerging fields such as Islamic bioethics, environmental jurisprudence, and digital finance. Such extensions would demonstrate how classical epistemologies, when interpreted through *maqāṣid al-syarī'ah*, can inform contemporary legal challenges. In this way, *istinbāt al-aḥkām* continues to serve as a bridge between revelation and reason, offering a timeless model of jurisprudential creativity grounded in divine guidance.

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