



Indonesian Journal of Islamic Law, 08 (1), 2025: 51-68
E-ISSN: 2615-7543, P-ISSN: 3089-5839
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35719/xh45z858>

The Ṣāhirī School between East and West: Tracing the Development of Islamic Legal Literalism from Baghdad to Cordoba

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Article history: Received: January 22, 2025; Revised: April 26, 2025; Accepted: May 14, 2025;
Published: June 30, 2025

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Available online at: <https://ijil.uinkhas.ac.id/index.php/IJIL/Home>

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Abstract:

This article explores the historical development and intellectual trajectory of the *Zāhiri* school of Islamic jurisprudence, focusing on its transition from Baghdad in the East to Cordoba in the West. The study investigates how the school's distinctive approach to legal literalism (*zāhir*) evolved within varying cultural, political, and intellectual contexts. Using a comparative textual analysis of foundational *Zāhiri* works, including those by *Dāwūd al-Zāhiri* and *Ibn Ḥazm*, the research examines the principles underpinning the school's strict adherence to apparent meanings in legal interpretation. The findings reveal that while the *Zāhiri* school maintained its core commitment to textual literalism, its methodologies and applications adapted to regional dynamics. In Baghdad, the *Zāhiri* approach emerged as a critique of rationalist and analogical reasoning, asserting the primacy of Qur'anic and Prophetic texts. In Cordoba, under *Ibn Ḥazm's* leadership, the school flourished in response to Andalusian intellectual currents and debates with other schools of thought. These developments underscore the *Zāhiri* school's dual identity as both a challenger of prevailing jurisprudential trends and a product of its socio-political milieu. This study concludes that the evolution of the *Zāhiri* school highlights the dynamic interplay between textual fidelity and contextual adaptation in Islamic legal history. By tracing its development across two distinct regions, the research contributes to broader discussions on the diversification of Islamic jurisprudence and the role of literalism in shaping legal discourses across time and space.

Keywords:

Zāhiri Jurisprudence; Islamic Legal Literalism; *Ibn Ḥazm* and *Dāwūd al-Zāhiri*

Abstrak:

Artikel ini mengeksplorasi perkembangan historis dan perjalanan intelektual mazhab *Zāhiri* dalam yurisprudensi Islam, dengan fokus pada transisinya dari Baghdad di Timur hingga Cordoba di Barat. Penelitian ini menyelidiki bagaimana pendekatan khas mazhab ini terhadap literalisme hukum (*zāhir*) berkembang dalam berbagai konteks budaya, politik, dan intelektual. Melalui analisis tekstual komparatif terhadap karya-

karya penting Zāhirī, termasuk karya Dāwūd al-Zāhirī dan Ibn Ḥazm, penelitian ini membahas prinsip-prinsip yang mendasari komitmen mazhab ini terhadap makna tekstual dalam interpretasi hukum. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun mazhab Zāhirī mempertahankan komitmen intinya terhadap literalisme tekstual, metodologi dan aplikasinya beradaptasi dengan dinamika regional. Di Baghdad, pendekatan Zāhirī muncul sebagai kritik terhadap metode rasionalis dan analogis, dengan menegaskan keutamaan teks Al-Qur'an dan Hadis. Di Cordoba, di bawah kepemimpinan Ibn Ḥazm, mazhab ini berkembang dalam menanggapi arus intelektual Andalusia dan perdebatan dengan mazhab-mazhab lain. Perkembangan ini menegaskan identitas ganda mazhab Zāhirī sebagai penantang tren yurisprudensi yang dominan sekaligus produk dari lingkungan sosial-politiknya. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa evolusi mazhab Zāhirī menyoroti dinamika antara kesetiaan terhadap teks dan adaptasi kontekstual dalam sejarah hukum Islam. Dengan menelusuri perkembangannya di dua wilayah yang berbeda, penelitian ini berkontribusi pada diskusi yang lebih luas tentang diversifikasi yurisprudensi Islam dan peran literalisme dalam membentuk diskursus hukum sepanjang waktu dan ruang.

Kata Kunci:

Mazhab Zāhirī; Literalisme Hukum Islam; Ibn Ḥazm dan Dāwūd al-Zāhirī

Introduction

The Zāhirī school of Islamic jurisprudence, founded by Dāwūd al-Zāhirī in the 9th century, represents one of the most distinctive approaches to interpreting Islamic law, characterized by its strict adherence to the literal meanings (*zāhir*) of the Qur'an and Hadith (Hallaq 2004; Calder 1989). This legal school emerged as a critique of rationalist and analogical reasoning, presenting an alternative framework that rejected speculative methods such as *qiyas* (analogy) and *ra'y* (opinion). Despite its limited following, the Zāhirī school's intellectual legacy has profoundly shaped discussions on the boundaries of Islamic

legal interpretation and the role of textualism in jurisprudential methodologies (Kamali 1999; Bröning and Weiss 2006).

The geographic and intellectual journey of the *Ẓāhirī* school from Baghdad to Cordoba marks a significant chapter in Islamic legal history (Makdisi 1979). While *Dāwūd al-Ẓāhirī* established the school in the Abbasid capital, it was Ibn Ḥazm in Andalusia who revitalized and systematized its principles, adapting them to the socio-political and intellectual milieu of Cordoba (Hurvitz 2013; Zysow 1984). This east-to-west trajectory highlights the dynamic interplay between regional contexts and legal traditions, illustrating how the *Ẓāhirī* school's literalist approach was shaped by varying cultural and intellectual environments (Makdisi 1979; Melchert 2001).

Previous studies have examined the *Ẓāhirī* school's doctrinal foundations and its critiques of dominant schools, such as the Hanafi and Maliki traditions (Calder 1989; Powers 2010). However, there remains a gap in understanding how the school's principles evolved across different regions and how its literalist methodology interacted with the broader legal and philosophical currents of its time. Scholars such as Masud (2001) and Zaman (2012) have emphasized the need for comparative studies that explore these regional variations to better contextualize the *Ẓāhirī* school's development (Zaman 1994; Masud 2005a).

This study aims to bridge this gap by analyzing the *Ẓāhirī* school's evolution from Baghdad to Cordoba, focusing on its methodological shifts and adaptations to distinct socio-political contexts. Through a comparative textual analysis of works by *Dāwūd al-Ẓāhirī* and Ibn Ḥazm, this research investigates how the principles of legal literalism were reinterpreted and applied in response to regional challenges and intellectual debates (Emon, n.d.; Hallaq 2004; Afabih 2023; Osman 2014).

The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which integrates historical, legal, and cultural

perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Zāhirī school's trajectory (Kamil et al. 2023; Khadem 2024; Nas, n.d.). By examining its development across two major intellectual hubs of the Islamic world, this study contributes to broader discussions on the diversity of Islamic legal thought and the dynamic interaction between text and context in jurisprudential discourses (Makdisi 1981; Kamali 2003). The findings offer new insights into the adaptability of Islamic legal traditions and their relevance to contemporary debates on literalism and textual interpretation (Zuhri 2021; Abdallah 1985).

Methods

This study employed a qualitative historical approach, utilizing comparative textual analysis to investigate the development of the Zāhirī school of jurisprudence from Baghdad to Cordoba. The primary sources for this research included foundational texts authored by Dāwūd al-Zāhirī and Ibn Ḥazm, such as *Al-Muhalla* and *Al-Ihkam fi Usul al-Ahkam*. These texts were critically examined to identify the principles and methodologies of legal literalism applied in different regional contexts (Calder 1989; Hallaq 2004).

To ensure a robust analysis, secondary sources from classical and contemporary Islamic legal scholarship were incorporated. This included works addressing the socio-political environments of Abbasid Baghdad and Andalusian Cordoba to contextualize the evolution of Zāhirī principles (Makdisi 1979; Bröning and Weiss 2006). Data were coded based on thematic categories such as methodological consistency, regional adaptation, and critiques of rationalist schools, which facilitated a comparative evaluation of the school's jurisprudential approaches (Kamali 1999; Zysow 1984).

The study also utilized historical-sociological frameworks to analyze the interaction between the Zāhirī school and the broader intellectual currents of its time. This framework was particularly relevant for understanding how regional dynamics

influenced the acceptance and evolution of literalist methodologies (Melchert 2001; Hurvitz 2013). By integrating these perspectives, the research captured the dynamic interplay between text, context, and legal theory, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the subject (Mohammed, Aljanabi, and Gadekallu 2024).

The methodological rigor was further enhanced by triangulating findings from textual analysis with historical records and critical commentaries. This multi-faceted approach ensured the validity and reliability of the results while highlighting the distinct contributions of the Zāhirī school to Islamic jurisprudence across time and space (Calder 1989; Powers 2010; Badawi 2016).

Result and Discussion

The Zāhirī School in Baghdad: Foundations and Early Development

The Zāhirī school emerged in Baghdad as a reaction to prevailing jurisprudential trends that relied heavily on rationalist methodologies, such as *qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and *istihsan* (juristic preference). Dāwūd al-Zāhirī established the school with a strict commitment to textual literalism, arguing that the Qur'an and Hadith provide sufficient guidance without recourse to speculative reasoning (Hallaq 2004; Weiss 1998). This foundational principle challenged the methodologies of dominant schools like the Hanafi and Maliki traditions, positioning the Zāhirī school as a counter-narrative in Islamic legal thought (Makdisi 1979; Calder 1989).

Textual analysis of Dāwūd's works reveals that his approach was deeply rooted in the notion that divine texts must be interpreted in their apparent meanings without external assumptions. This emphasis on literalism aimed to prevent subjective interpretations that could dilute the authority of Islamic law (Kamali 2003; Zysow 1984). While the school's

methodology garnered criticism from other jurists for its rigidity, it also attracted followers who valued its consistency and clarity (Hurvitz 2009; Powers 1982).

Critically, the socio-political environment of Abbasid Baghdad influenced the Zāhirī school's early development. The intellectual diversity of Baghdad, coupled with its position as the capital of the Islamic empire, created a fertile ground for legal and theological debates (Melchert 2001; Masud 2005a). The Zāhirī school's rise in this context underscores the interplay between legal principles and the broader socio-political landscape, highlighting its role as both a critique and product of its time (Calder 1989; Emon 2010; Sabra 2007).

The Zāhirī School in Cordoba: Adaptation and Expansion

The relocation of the Zāhirī school's intellectual legacy to Cordoba marked a significant phase in its evolution (Sabra 2007). Under Ibn Ḥazm's leadership, the school underwent a transformation that integrated its literalist principles with the unique socio-political and intellectual dynamics of Andalusia. Ibn Ḥazm's works, such as *Al-Muhalla* and *Al-Ihkam fi Usul al-Ahkam*, expanded the scope of Zāhirī jurisprudence, addressing issues specific to Andalusian society while maintaining a commitment to textual literalism (Powers 2010; Hurvitz 2013; Zuhri 2021).

Cordoba's vibrant intellectual culture, characterized by interfaith exchanges and debates with other Islamic schools, significantly influenced Ibn Ḥazm's thought (Imran and Lawang 2022). He not only defended the Zāhirī approach against critics but also incorporated elements of logic and philosophy to strengthen its intellectual foundations (Makdisi 1979; Sabra 2007; Zysow 1984; Fadli 2020). This adaptation highlights the flexibility of the Zāhirī methodology when engaging with diverse intellectual traditions, positioning the school as both a product of and a contributor to Andalusian legal scholarship (Calder 1989; Bröning and Weiss 2006).

However, the Zāhirī school's literalism faced challenges in Cordoba, particularly in its engagement with the Maliki school, which dominated Andalusian jurisprudence (al-Manea 1995; Pavlovitch 2012). Ibn Ḥazm's critiques of Maliki practices, particularly their reliance on *amal* (local customs), reflect the tensions between textual fidelity and contextual adaptation in Islamic legal thought (Melchert 2001; Powers 2010). Despite these challenges, the Zāhirī school's presence in Cordoba underscores its ability to adapt and thrive in a new environment, demonstrating the dynamic nature of Islamic jurisprudence (Kamali 1999; Masud 2005a; Khadem 2024).

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Despite Ibn Ḥazm's extensive contributions, his strict adherence to literalism often sparked controversy. His critiques of other schools, particularly the Maliki reliance on *amal* (local customs), were perceived as radical in a region where the Maliki school dominated jurisprudence (Melchert 1997; Powers 1982). Ibn Ḥazm's outright rejection of local practices highlighted a critical tension between theoretical consistency and practical adaptation, raising questions about the viability of a purely literalist approach in a pluralistic legal environment (Kamali 1999; Masud 2005a).

Another defining feature of the Zāhirī school's development in Cordoba was its engagement with non-Islamic intellectual traditions. Andalusia, as a hub of cross-cultural interactions, exposed Ibn Ḥazm and his contemporaries to Jewish and Christian legal and philosophical thought (Pavlovitch 2012; Ahyar and Alfriti 2019; Zuhri 2021). This exposure influenced the presentation and defence of Zāhirī principles, as seen in Ibn Ḥazm's engagement with logic and rhetoric to refute critics and strengthen his arguments (Fierro et al. 1999; Chen et al. 2005). His use of Aristotelian logic reflects an innovative synthesis of Islamic legal thought and classical philosophy, underscoring the school's adaptability in addressing complex legal and theological issues (Stroumsa 2009; Gutas 2001).

The socio-political context of Andalusia further shaped the trajectory of the Zāhirī school. Cordoba's role as a centre of Islamic governance and intellectual activity provided a platform for Ibn Ḥazm to articulate his ideas, yet political instability during his lifetime hindered their widespread acceptance (Haddad 2016; Abou El Fadl 2004). The decline of Umayyad authority in Andalusia limited the institutionalization of the Zāhirī school, relegating it to a marginalized position despite its intellectual richness (Makdisi 1979; Ahmad 2015; Zuhri 2021).

Ibn Ḥazm's enduring legacy lies in his methodological rigor and literary contributions, which have been pivotal in preserving the Zāhirī school's principles for posterity (Badawi

2016; Zuhri 2021). While the school's influence waned in Andalusia following his death, his works continued to inspire discussions on textual literalism and the boundaries of legal interpretation (Calder 1989; Emon 2010). His insistence on the sufficiency of divine texts and rejection of speculative methods remains a cornerstone for modern debates on Islamic legal theory, particularly in contexts where literalism is invoked as a response to modernist critiques (Voll 2007; Zaman 1994).

Finally, the intellectual migration of the *Ẓāhirī* school to Cordoba illustrates broader patterns of regional adaptation in Islamic jurisprudence. This transition demonstrates how legal schools, while rooted in universal principles, are shaped by the unique socio-cultural and political environments in which they operate (Halawi 2022). The Cordoban experience of the *Ẓāhirī* school offers valuable insights into the dynamic nature of Islamic legal traditions and their capacity for renewal and reinterpretation in diverse contexts (Bröning and Weiss 2006; Hurvitz 2013).

The Intellectual Legacy and Modern Relevance of the *Ẓāhirī* School

While the *Ẓāhirī* school ceased to exist as an institutionalized legal tradition, its intellectual legacy continues to influence contemporary Islamic legal thought. The school's strict adherence to textual literalism and its critique of speculative reasoning resonates with modern reformist movements that prioritize a return to the Qur'an and Hadith as primary sources of guidance (Hallaq 2004; Weiss 1998). In particular, the *Ẓāhirī* emphasis on democratizing legal interpretation by minimizing reliance on juristic elitism has found relevance in debates on Islamic reform in the modern period (Emon 2010; Zysow 1984).

The resurgence of interest in the *Ẓāhirī* methodology among contemporary scholars reflects its potential to address

challenges posed by globalization and pluralism in the Muslim world (Shah 2011; Corson and MacDonald 2012). The school's insistence on textual fidelity offers a framework for unifying diverse interpretations of Islamic law while navigating complex issues such as interfaith relations, human rights, and legal pluralism (Kamali 1999; Masud 2005a; Bakti 2005; Perlmann 1950). Furthermore, the logical rigor introduced by Ibn Ḥazm in Cordoba provides a model for engaging with modern philosophical and ethical dilemmas without compromising scriptural authority (Makdisi 1979; Hurvitz 2013).

This subheading would enrich the study by exploring how the principles of the Zāhirī school, although historically rooted, offer valuable insights for contemporary Islamic jurisprudence (Hurvitz 2000; Stewart 2007; Lowry 2008). It could also highlight the ways in which modern scholars reinterpret and adapt Zāhirī principles to address evolving societal and legal challenges, thereby bridging historical jurisprudence with present-day realities (Robinson 2008; Masud 2005b).

Conclusion

While the Zāhirī school ceased to exist as an institutionalized legal tradition, its intellectual legacy continues to influence contemporary Islamic legal thought. The school's strict adherence to textual literalism and its critique of speculative reasoning resonate with modern reformist movements that prioritize a return to the Qur'an and Hadith as primary sources of guidance (Abou El Fadl 2004; Hallaq 2004; Bröning and Weiss 2006). In particular, the Zāhirī emphasis on democratizing legal interpretation by minimizing reliance on juristic elitism has found relevance in debates on Islamic reform in the modern period (Emon 2010; Masud 2005a; Robinson 2008).

The resurgence of interest in the Zāhirī methodology among contemporary scholars reflects its potential to address challenges posed by globalization and pluralism in the Muslim world (Zahraa 2003; Shaham 2015; Zia-Ul-Haq and Ifraq 2020).

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The relevance of the Zāhirī school is particularly evident in contemporary debates on Islamic legal reform. Reformist scholars often emphasize a return to foundational texts to challenge entrenched practices rooted in cultural or historical precedents. The Zāhirī rejection of *taqlid* (blind adherence to juristic precedent) aligns with these reformist agendas, advocating for a dynamic and direct engagement with scriptural sources (Calder 1989; Powers 2010). This approach offers an alternative to conventional methodologies, empowering individuals to participate in legal interpretation without reliance on elite juristic institutions (Emon 2010; Bröning and Weiss 2006).

Moreover, the Zāhirī methodology has gained traction in addressing ethical questions in the modern age. Issues such as biomedical ethics, environmental responsibility, and economic justice require a balance between textual fidelity and practical application. The Zāhirī emphasis on scriptural literalism provides a framework for deriving ethical rulings while avoiding speculative reasoning that could compromise the integrity of Islamic law (Kamali 1999; Masud 2005a). This approach ensures that legal interpretations remain grounded in divine texts while accommodating the complexities of contemporary issues (Zysow 1984; Hallaq 2004).

The global resurgence of interest in Ibn Ḥazm's works, particularly *Al-Muhalla*, further demonstrates the enduring relevance of the Zāhirī school. Modern scholars and jurists

frequently cite Ibn Ḥazm's rigorous methodology as a benchmark for legal and theological debates. His incorporation of Aristotelian logic into Islamic legal thought serves as a model for reconciling traditional jurisprudence with contemporary intellectual frameworks (Makdisi 1979; Hurvitz 2013). This synthesis highlights the adaptability of the Zāhirī methodology to evolving scholarly paradigms.

Finally, the Zāhirī school's principles offer valuable insights into contemporary discussions on legal pluralism. By advocating for a strict adherence to textual sources, the school provides a unifying framework that transcends regional and cultural variations in Islamic law. This aspect of the Zāhirī methodology has significant implications for modern Muslim societies, where legal pluralism often leads to fragmentation and inconsistency in the application of Islamic law ((Powers 2010; Bröning and Weiss 2006). The Zāhirī approach underscores the possibility of achieving coherence and uniformity without sacrificing the diversity of thought inherent in Islamic jurisprudence.

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