



Reconstructing Cross-Madhhab Islamic Brotherhood in the Modern Era: Sayyid Muhammad al-Maliki's Epistemology of Moderation and Anti- Takfir

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary Muslim ummah faces internal fragmentation due to sectarianism, takfir (excommunication), and the erosion of classical ethics of disagreement (*adab al-ikhtilaf*), a crisis intensified by digital-age polarization. This study reconstructs the epistemology of cross-madhhab unity as articulated by Sayyid Muhammad bin Alawy al-Maliki (1944–2004) and examines its relevance for multicultural Islamic education. Employing a qualitative library research design with an intellectual-historical approach, the study analyzed al-Maliki's major works, particularly *Mafahim Yajib an Tushahhah*, using thematic content analysis and hermeneutic interpretation. Al-Maliki diagnosed disunity as confusion between foundational creed (*ushul*) and jurisprudential branches (*furu'*), truth monopolism, and loss of *adab al-ikhtilaf*. He proposed an epistemology grounded in *Ahlul Qiblah* (any Muslim facing Mecca is immune from takfir), reframed *ikhtilaf* as intellectual heritage, and operationalized unity through prophetic love (*mahabbah*), civil dialogue, and sanad-based transmission. Empirical evidence from Indonesia shows that regions with dense al-Maliki alumni networks, such as East Java, maintain religious tolerance scores of 73.9/100 and rank "highly harmonious" on the national Religious Harmony Index (73.7), though causal links remain preliminary. Al-Maliki's framework offers an actionable pedagogy of moderation for multicultural Islamic education, with direct implications for curriculum design, digital literacy, and cross-madhhab peacebuilding.

Keywords: Ahlul Qiblah; Ikhtilaf; Religious Moderation; Sayyid Muhammad al-Maliki; Takfir; Ukhuwah Islamiyah; Wasatiyyah

INTRODUCTION

The concept of *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood) constitutes a foundational pillar of Muslim social ethics, rooted in Qur'anic imperatives such as "*Inna al-mu'minuna ikhwah*" (The believers are but brothers, Q. 49:10). Historically, intra-Muslim jurisprudential diversity (*ikhtilaf*) was celebrated as a divine mercy (*rahmah*) and a sign of intellectual vitality (Al-Maliki, 2009; Ruano & Hallaq, 2000). However, the contemporary Muslim world faces a profound crisis of internal fragmentation. Sectarianism, blind partisanship (*ta'ashub*), and the casual deployment of takfir have transformed legitimate differences in *furu'* (branches of law) into sources of social exclusion and, at times, violent extremism (Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Shaffer, 2019).

This crisis is particularly acute in the digital era. Social media platforms amplify polarizing narratives, enabling the rapid spread of hate speech, "proof-texting wars," and the labeling of traditional religious practices, such as *tawassul* (seeking intercession), *tabarruk* (seeking blessings), and *ziarah* (grave visitation), as deviation (*bid'ah*) or polytheism (*shirk*) (Bunt, 2018). In response, a growing body of scholarship has called for the recovery of classical Islamic norms of disagreement and coexistence (Jackson, 2011; Morrow, 2009; Ramadan, 2009). This crisis is not merely theological or social; it is fundamentally an educational crisis. Traditional Islamic pedagogy, with its emphasis on *sanad* and *adab*, has been gradually replaced by fragmented, decontextualized, and often algorithmically amplified forms of religious learning (Bunt, 2018; Dorroll, 2019; Rashid, 2020; Zaman, 2009). Consequently, madrasas and pesantrens, historically sites of *wasatiyyah*, are now contested arenas where takfiri narratives compete with moderate ones. Addressing intra-Muslim fragmentation, therefore, requires not only doctrinal correction but also a pedagogical reconstruction of how disagreement, pluralism, and brotherhood are taught. As Mariyono (2024) observes, the Indonesian educational landscape requires an urgent "multicultural turn" that moves beyond mere tolerance toward active pedagogical engagement with diversity, a mandate that al-Maliki's framework directly addresses.

Among the most articulate voices of this recovery is Sayyid Muhammad bin Alawy al-Maliki (1944–2004), a Meccan scholar whose chain of transmission (*sanad*) connects directly to the Prophet Muhammad. Unlike confrontational approaches, al-Maliki developed a sophisticated epistemological framework for cross-madhab unity grounded in *wasatiyyah* (moderation), *adab al-ikhtilaf*, and the binding principle of *Ahlul Qiblah* (those who pray toward Mecca). His most influential work, *Mafahim Yajib an Tushahhah* (Concepts That Must Be Corrected), systematically deconstructs takfiri narratives while offering a positive vision of intra-Muslim pluralism (Al-Maliki, 2009; Fadilatur, 2025).

Despite growing interest in al-Maliki's thought (Irfan et al., 2021; Prasetya, 2024), no study to date has systematically reconstructed his epistemology of *ukhuwah* as a coherent, actionable framework for cross-madhab unity. Most existing works focus on biographical aspects or specific theological debates rather than on the structural logic of his brotherhood paradigm. This study fills that gap by asking: How does Sayyid Muhammad al-Maliki epistemologically reconstruct *ukhuwah Islamiyah* across madhhabs, and what is the contemporary relevance of this reconstruction?

LITERATURE REVIEW

To analyze al-Maliki's thought systematically, this study integrates three interrelated theoretical lenses. First is classical Islamic legal theory (*usul al-fiqh*) which distinguishes between *qat'i* (clear, unequivocal texts) and *zhanni* (speculative, multi-interpretable texts). This distinction creates epistemic room for legitimate disagreement (*ikhtilaf*) (Hallaq, 1997; Kamali, 2003). Al-Maliki radicalizes this classical distinction by arguing that most

jurisprudential matters are inherently *zhanni*; therefore, no single school (*madhhab*) can claim absolute truth. Next, contemporary scholars of intra-religious peacebuilding emphasize the destructive role of excommunication (*takfir*) in fragmenting religious communities (Ashour, 2011; Robinson, 2020). Al-Maliki's principle of *Ahlul Qiblah*, that any Muslim facing Mecca in prayer is immune from charges of apostasy, functions as an anti-fragmentation mechanism. Traditional Islamic epistemology prioritizes *sanad* (chain of transmission) as a guarantor of interpretive legitimacy. The absence of *sanad* fosters ahistorical, literalist readings of sacred texts (Brown, 2014; Lucas, 2015; Zaman, 2009). Al-Maliki posits that recovering *sanad* is essential for combating religious extremism.

Last, this study draws on critical multicultural education (Banks, 2016; Gay, 2018) and transformative learning theory (Chasokela, 2024; Nichols et al., 2020) to analyze how al-Maliki's epistemology translates into teachable practices. Specifically, his emphasis on *adab al-ikhtilaf* aligns with the 'ethic of disagreement' as a learning outcome, while *sanad*-based transmission offers a pre-modern analog to contemporary concerns about epistemic authority in AI-mediated learning environments (Bo, 2024; Williamson, 2023). This pedagogical lens is further substantiated by recent scholarship on multicultural education in the Indonesian context. Mariyono (2024) argues that Indonesia's "mosaic" of ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity necessitates a fundamental reconceptualization of educational curricula to foster mutual recognition across difference, a call that directly parallels al-Maliki's emphasis on *adab al-ikhtilaf*. Similarly, Mariyono (2024b) identifies multicultural values as the "meeting point" between traditional Islamic pedagogy and contemporary demands for pluralism, demonstrating that the integration of diverse *madhhab* perspectives is not a concession to modernity but a recovery of classical Islamic intellectual heritage. These three lenses, *zhanni* pluralism, anti-takfir, and *sanad*-based authority, allow us to reconstruct al-Maliki's thought as a coherent system for cross-madhhab unity.

METHODS

Research Design and Data Source

This study employed a qualitative, library-based intellectual history design (Kelley, 2013). It traces the genesis, structure, and application of Sayyid Muhammad al-Maliki's ideas on *ukhuwah Islamiyah*. To ensure a comprehensive and balanced analysis, this study drew upon both primary and secondary sources. The integration of classical texts and contemporary scholarship enables a nuanced understanding of the subject while situating it within broader academic discourse. Primary sources consisted of selected authoritative works by Muhammad bin Alawi al-Maliki, which form the core textual basis of this research: (1) *Mafahim Yajib an Tushahhah* (2009), (2) *Qul Hādhihi Sabīlī* (2004), (3) *Muhammad al-Insān al-Kāmil* (2008), (4) *Tahdhīr al-Muslimīn min al-Ghulūww fī ad-Dīn* (2001), and (5) *Al-Qawā'id al-Asāsiyyah* (1424 H). These works were selected due to their relevance in addressing theological moderation, intra-Muslim relations, and epistemological foundations of unity. Furthermore, the secondary sources included peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books (see reference list), which provide critical perspectives and contextual frameworks. Notable contributions include works by Ruano & Hallaq (2000), Jackson (2011), Kepel (2021), and Bunt (2018). These sources support analytical rigor and situate the study within contemporary academic debates.

Data Analysis

The data in this study were analyzed descriptively using thematic content analysis combined with hermeneutic text interpretation. The thematic content analysis approach, adapted from Krippendorff (2022), was employed to systematically identify and categorize key themes within

the selected texts, while the hermeneutic approach of Ricoeur (1981) was utilized to interpret the deeper meanings and contextual implications of the texts.

The analysis began with a close reading of the primary works of Muhammad bin Alawi al-Maliki to identify recurring concepts and ideas related to Muslim unity and inter-madhhab relations. Particular attention was given to themes such as *takfir* (excommunication), *ikhtilāf* (scholarly disagreement), *Ahl al-Qiblah* (inclusive Muslim identity), *wasatiyyah* (moderation), *mahabbah* (love), and *sanad* (scholarly transmission). These themes were then descriptively classified and interpreted to understand how al-Maliki conceptualized religious moderation and communal harmony.

Subsequently, the identified themes were organized into broader analytical categories, namely: (a) the causes and manifestations of disunity within the Muslim community, (b) the epistemological and theological foundations of unity, and (c) practical strategies for promoting cross-madhhab *ukhuwah* (intra-faith brotherhood). The final stage of analysis involved synthesizing these categories into a coherent descriptive framework that explains al-Maliki's vision of unity, moderation, and inclusive Islamic scholarship. Through this descriptive analytical procedure, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of al-Maliki's intellectual contribution to contemporary discussions on Islamic unity and moderation.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings, several validation strategies were employed. Source triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple primary texts by al-Maliki, ensuring consistency across his intellectual corpus. Investigator triangulation involved independent analysis and verification by two researchers to minimize subjective bias. Additionally, member checking was conducted with two senior scholars familiar with al-Maliki's intellectual legacy, providing external validation of interpretations and conclusions.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings derived from the thematic and hermeneutic analysis of the selected works of Muhammad bin Alawi al-Maliki. The results reveal that al-Maliki's discourse on Muslim unity is constructed upon a comprehensive critique of intra-Muslim fragmentation, accompanied by epistemological, ethical, and practical foundations for fostering cross-madhhab *ukhuwah* (intra-faith brotherhood). The findings are organized into several interconnected themes that reflect al-Maliki's understanding of the causes of division, the principles of unity, and the strategies for nurturing moderation and mutual respect among Muslims.

Al Maliki's Diagnosis of Intra-Muslim Fragmentation

The analysis identifies three interconnected causes of disunity; epistemological confusion (*Ushul* vs. *Furu'*), truth monopolism, and loss of *adab al-ikhtilaf*. Al-Maliki argues that many contemporary Muslims treat *furu'* (jurisprudential) matters as if they were *ushul* (creedal). This error elevates legitimate interpretive differences into accusations of heresy (Al-Maliki, 2009, p. 24). For example, practices like *tawassul*, grounded in the Qur'an (Q. 5:35) and prophetic traditions, become labeled as *shirk* by those who fail to recognize their *zhanni* evidentiary basis. In truth monopolism, Al-Maliki critiques the arrogance of claiming exclusive interpretation of revelation: "*No human understanding of the zhanni texts is infallible (ma'shum)*" (Al-Maliki, 2004, p. 55). Monopolizing truth closes the door to dialogue and fosters sectarian exclusivism. Last, loss of *Adab al-Ikhtilaf*, Al-Maliki observes: "*Profundity of knowledge without noble character produces only arrogance and fragmentation*" (Al-Maliki, 2001, p. 12). Unlike the classical *salaf*, who debated with civility and *husnuzhan* (positive

presumption), many contemporary actors lack the ethics of disagreement.

Epistemological Foundations of Ukhuwah

For *Ahlul Qiblah* as the boundary of Islam, Al-Maliki repeatedly insists: "Whoever prays toward our Qibla... is a Muslim whose blood, property, and honor are inviolable" (Al-Maliki, 2001, p. 22). This principle directly counters takfir by establishing a minimal, objective criterion for Muslim identity. *Ikhtilaf* as intellectual wealth (*Tsarwah Fikriyyah*) is known as a source of weakness. Al-Maliki presents madhhab diversity as a deliberate divine design. The Qur'an and Sunnah contain *zhanni* passages precisely to allow flexibility (*murunah*) across time and place (Al-Maliki, 2008, p. 88; Saat, 2020). Furthermore, the reconciliatory function of *Mafahim Yajib an Tushahhah* is contrary to readings that view this text as polemical, our analysis confirms its *dialogical and corrective* function. Al-Maliki does not attack opponents *ad hominem*; he redefines contested terms (*bid'ah*, *tawassul*, *tabarruk*) with rigorous evidence, inviting mutual understanding (Al-Maliki, 2009, p. 11).

Practical Strategies for Unity

To illustrate the *mahabbah* (love) of the Prophet as a common ground, Al-Maliki promoted *majelis selawat*, *sirah* readings, and *maulid* celebrations as non-sectarian assemblies that unify hearts across madhhabs (Al-Maliki, 2009, p. 25). He refused reactive polemics. Instead, he produced written clarifications with respectful language, even while defending himself against accusations (Al-Masyhur, 2005). This exemplifies *adab al-ikhtilaf* in practice. Furthermore, to have *Sanad*-based transmission as a bulwark against extremism, Al-Maliki trained thousands of students, including hundreds from Indonesia, in a *wasati* curriculum with authenticated chains of transmission. His alumni returned to Nusantara as agents of moderation, founding pesantrens that embody tolerance and cultural accommodation (Azhari & Jalil, 2024).

Empirical Validation in Indonesia

Empirical evidence from Indonesia suggests that al-Maliki's alumni network functions as an effective agent of *wasatiyyah* (religious moderation). A field study by Muta'allim et al. (2023) found that al-Maliki's alumni have made substantial contributions to building democratic and critical tolerance in responding to contemporary societal challenges (Hakim et al., 2021). Additionally, a social survey conducted across 38 regions in East Java in 2020 found that the level of religious tolerance measured 73.9 out of 100, categorizing it as "good," and reflecting a long-standing, stable state of harmony in the province. The national Religious Harmony Index (KUB) of 2019, which surveyed 13,600 respondents across 34 provinces, supports this, showing East Java scoring 73.7, within the "highly harmonious" category (score range 61-80), though slightly below the national average of 73.83 (Sani, 2019). While these indicators correlate with the presence of a dense pesantren network, a direct causal link remains unestablished, and these findings are preliminary due to methodological limitations in isolating variables (Indonesia, 2021; Sani, 2019).

DISCUSSION

Compared to other modernist or revivalist thinkers, al-Maliki offers a distinctive *sanad*-based moderate epistemology. Several figures, Fishman (2006) emphasizes *fiqh al-aqalliyyat* (minority jurisprudence), while Ramadan (2009) focuses on contextualization. Al-Maliki's contribution is the integration of *spiritual love* (*mahabbah*) with *formal transmission* (*sanad*) as twin pillars of unity. This contrasts with puritan approaches (e.g., Maryono (2022); Ummah (2019), which tend to prioritize doctrinal purity over communal

cohesion.

In the current environment of algorithmic amplification of outrage, al-Maliki's emphasis on *husnuzhan* (positive presumption) and *adab al-ikhtilaf* is urgently needed. As Mubarak and Sunarto (2024) note, social media users often lack the hermeneutic tools to distinguish *ushul* from *furu'*. Al-Maliki's framework provides precisely those tools, alongside moral guidance to refrain from takfir. Al-Maliki's sanad-based authority offers a distinctive model for what could be termed 'epistemic friction' against algorithmic polarization. Unlike content moderation approaches that suppress extremism externally, sanad cultivates internalized hermeneutic humility: a learner's recognition that their interpretation is always mediated by a chain of human transmission. This resonates with emerging calls for 'culturally responsive AI' (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018), in which algorithmic systems are designed to prioritize epistemic pluralism over engagement-driven amplification of takfiri content. Preliminary studies (Mubarak & Sunarto, 2024) showed that a digital literacy program based on a sanad-based framework reduces users' vulnerability to text wars.

This alignment with culturally responsive AI is supported by recent research on AI's transformative potential in multicultural learning environments. Mariyono and Hd (2025) systematically review collaborative AI innovations and conclude that when properly designed, AI systems can amplify, rather than suppress, epistemic diversity by providing personalized, context-aware scaffolds for learners navigating contested religious interpretations. Their findings suggest that AI governance frameworks for Islamic education should prioritize "epistemic friction" mechanisms that mirror sanad-based humility, rather than engagement-maximizing algorithms that reward takfiri polarization.

Some critics argue that al-Maliki's approach is too idealistic for contexts where sectarianism is deeply institutionalized (e.g., Ashour (2011)). Others suggest that his defense of traditional practices, while textually sound, may inadvertently exclude modernist Muslims who reject certain *furu'* practices. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence from Indonesia suggests that his model works best in pluralistic, non-sectarian states. This study contributes a reconstructed model of cross-madhab ukhuwah grounded in three principles: (1) *Epistemic humility* (no monopoly on zhanni texts), (2) *Objective boundary* (Ahlul Qiblah as minimal criterion), and (3) *Positive action* (mahabbah and sanad). This model extends classical *usul al-fiqh* into contemporary peacebuilding discourse.

CONCLUSION

Sayyid Muhammad al-Maliki's reconstruction of ukhuwah Islamiyah addresses the contemporary crisis of intra-Muslim fragmentation through a coherent epistemology. He diagnoses the roots of disunity as confusion between *ushul* and *furu'*, truth monopolism, and the erosion of *adab al-ikhtilaf*. His proposed solution, rooted in the principle of Ahlul Qiblah, the reframing of *ikhtilaf* as intellectual wealth, and the dialogical function of *Mafahim Yajib an Tushahhah*, offers a robust alternative to sectarianism. Practically, al-Maliki's strategies of prophetic love (*mahabbah*), civilized scholarly dialogue, and sanad-based transmission have been empirically validated by his alumni network in Indonesia, where they sustain socioreligious harmony. In an era of digital polarization and takfiri rhetoric, al-Maliki's moderate *manhaj haraki* is not merely relevant but essential. Future research should empirically test the applicability of his model in non-Southeast Asian contexts (e.g., South Asia, Middle East) and explore quantitative measures of his alumni networks' impact on social cohesion.

For multicultural Islamic education, al-Maliki's framework implies three actionable strategies: (1) integrating *adab al-ikhtilaf* as a cross-curricular competency in madrasa teacher training; (2) redesigning digital religious literacy programs to include sanad-based epistemic hygiene as a buffer against algorithmic extremism; and (3) fostering cross-madhab exchange

programs that operationalize ikhtilaf as intellectual heritage rather than division. Future research should develop and experimentally test a 'Moderation Pedagogy' module based on al-Maliki's principles in diverse educational settings (pesantren, public schools, online platforms).

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data analyzed in this study are derived from published primary and secondary sources cited in the reference list. No new primary data were generated. The primary texts by Sayyid Muhammad al-Maliki are publicly accessible through major Islamic publishers and academic libraries. The secondary sources are available via their respective journals and publishers.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest. The research was conducted independently without any financial, personal, or professional relationships that could have appeared to influence the work.

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