

## **Prophetic Ijtihad and Adaptive Legal Reasoning in Early Islamic Law**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines Prophetic ijtihad as a foundational model of adaptive legal reasoning in early Islamic law. The problem addressed is the tendency to reduce Prophetic-era law to static textual authority while overlooking the interaction between revelation, reasoning, context, and consultation. Using qualitative library research with a historical-normative and conceptual approach, the study analyzes Qur'anic legal principles, Prophetic traditions, sira materials, usul al-fiqh concepts, and recent literature on ijtihad, maqasid, and legal adaptation. The findings show that Prophetic ijtihad functioned as guided legal reasoning: it remained anchored in revelation while using analogy, maslahah, consultation, gradualism, custom, and supervised delegation to the Companions. This pattern demonstrates that early Islamic law was neither rigid literalism nor unrestricted rationalism, but a disciplined method for connecting divine norms with concrete social needs. The article contributes a typology of Prophetic ijtihad and argues that it can inform contemporary Islamic legal thought through textual fidelity, public benefit, ethical purpose, and methodological accountability.

**Keywords:** *adaptive legal reasoning; early Islamic law; ijtihad; maqasid; prophetic legislation; sharia*

**Contribution/Originality:** This article contributes a typology of Prophetic ijtihad as adaptive legal reasoning, connecting revelation, analogy, maslahah, consultation, custom, gradualism, and supervised companion reasoning in one methodological model.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The formation of Islamic law in the Prophetic period occupies a decisive place in the history of Islamic legal thought because it represents the moment in which revelation, moral reform, social transformation, and legal reasoning interacted directly. The early Muslim community did not receive law as a closed code detached from life. Rather, legal norms emerged within concrete problems: tribal conflict, commercial injustice, family vulnerability, slavery, interfaith relations, and the need to construct a plural civic order in Medina. This historical setting is central for understanding why Prophetic legal practice combined divine guidance with responsiveness to social reality.

The initial manuscript from which this article is developed emphasizes that the law of the Prophetic period grew from two major sources, the Qur'an and the Sunnah, while also showing that the Prophet trained the Companions to reason when explicit texts were not directly available. That argument is important, but in journal-article form it needs a sharper theoretical claim: Prophetic ijtiḥād should be read not merely as an episode in legal history, but as an epistemological model for adaptive Islamic legal reasoning. In this model, revelation provides normative direction, while ijtiḥād functions as the disciplined method through which divine values are applied to changing circumstances.

Recent scholarship confirms the importance of this issue. Dradkeh (2025) argues that Prophetic ijtiḥād in the case of Badr captives demonstrates a balance between mercy, firmness, public interest, and revelatory supervision. Sibghatullah et al. (2025) present collective ijtiḥād in the Prophetic era as a model of intellectual unity through consultation and consensus. Ismasnawati et al. (2025) explain that Islamic law developed dynamically through the interaction of revelation, ijtiḥād, and socio-political authority from the Prophetic era onward. Other contemporary studies emphasize the continuing relevance of maqasid-oriented ijtiḥād, qiyas, legal maxims, and contextual reasoning for modern Islamic law (Athambawa, 2025; Faizi & Ali, 2024; Khaeruman & Nurholis, 2024; Tohari et al., 2023).

Despite these contributions, a gap remains. Many studies discuss Prophetic ijtiḥād either through isolated legal cases, broad periodization of tarikh tasyri, or contemporary discussions of maqasid without systematically connecting the Prophetic practice of legal reasoning into a coherent methodological typology. The result is that the Prophetic period is often treated as a normative source of authority, but not always as a structured model of how legal adaptability is achieved without losing fidelity to revelation. This article addresses that gap by mapping Prophetic ijtiḥād into several interrelated patterns: revelation-guided judgment, analogy, maslahah-based reasoning, consultation, contextual treatment of custom, gradualism, and supervised delegation to the Companions.

The article is significant for two reasons. Theoretically, it helps clarify the relationship between syariah as divine guidance and fiqh or legal thought as human understanding. This distinction is crucial because Islamic law has always involved a dynamic movement between stable principles and changing applications (Alwazna, 2016; Kamali, 2021; Makhlouf, 2020). Practically, it contributes to contemporary Islamic legal discourse by showing that adaptability is not an external modern addition to Islamic law. It is rooted in the Prophetic method itself, provided that adaptation remains disciplined by textual evidence, ethical purpose, and public benefit.

Accordingly, this study asks three research questions: How did Prophetic ijtiḥād operate as guided legal reasoning in early Islamic law? What methodological patterns can be identified from the Prophetic practice of legal decision-making and supervision of companion ijtiḥād? How can these patterns inform contemporary Islamic legal

thought without reducing Islamic law either to rigid textualism or unrestricted utilitarianism?

## **2. METHOD**

This study uses qualitative library research with a historical-normative and conceptual legal approach. The historical approach is used to situate Prophetic ijtiḥad within the social and legal context of Mecca and Medina, while the normative approach examines the relationship between Qur'anic guidance, Sunnah, and legal reasoning. The conceptual approach is applied to analyze key *usul al-fiqh* categories such as ijtiḥad, *qiyas*, *maslahah*, *urf*, *tadarruj*, *shura*, and *maqasid al-shariah*.

The primary materials consist of Qur'anic legal principles, Prophetic traditions, and early historical reports related to legal decision-making during the lifetime of the Prophet. The secondary materials include classical and contemporary works on Islamic legal theory, *tarikh tasyri*, *maqasid al-shariah*, and peer-reviewed journal articles published mainly within the last ten years. Particular attention is given to recent studies on Prophetic ijtiḥad, collective ijtiḥad, the development of Islamic law, and *maqasid*-oriented legal adaptation (Athambawa, 2025; Dradkeh, 2025; Faizi & Ali, 2024; Sibghatullah et al., 2025).

Data were collected through document analysis. The relevant texts were selected based on three criteria: direct relevance to Prophetic legal reasoning, relevance to the formation of early Islamic law, and relevance to contemporary discussions of legal adaptability. The analysis followed thematic content analysis by coding materials into recurring themes: source of authority, legal cause, social context, method of reasoning, role of consultation, and implications for legal change. To strengthen validity, the study uses source triangulation by comparing the initial manuscript, classical legal concepts, and recent academic literature. Transferability is addressed by presenting a transparent typology that can be tested or refined in future studies of Islamic legal methodology.

## **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Prophetic Legal Context: From Tribal Norms to Normative Community**

The first finding is that Prophetic ijtiḥad must be understood against the background of a society in legal transition. Pre-Islamic Arabia was organized around tribal solidarity, retaliatory justice, social hierarchy, unequal gender relations, and customary practices that were not regulated by a centralized legal authority. The Prophetic mission transformed this environment through a new normative order based on *tawhid*, moral accountability, justice, and social responsibility. Law was therefore not merely a set of sanctions, but a mechanism of moral and civilizational reform.

The Meccan period focused primarily on faith, moral discipline, and the formation of a new ethical consciousness. In contrast, the Medinan period saw the development of legal norms concerning family, inheritance, trade, crime, war, intercommunal relations, and public administration. This shift does not mean that the two periods were

disconnected. The Meccan moral foundation provided the spiritual basis for the later Medinan legal order. In this sense, early Islamic law shows the integration of creed, ethics, and regulation.

The Constitution of Medina illustrates this contextual character. Although modern scholars debate the exact genre and textual history of the document, it is widely discussed as an early legal-political arrangement that organized a plural community through mutual obligation, protection, and public order. The legal significance of this document lies not only in its clauses but also in its method: the Prophet did not impose a purely abstract legal formula on Medina. He organized existing social groups into a wider covenantal community while redirecting tribal norms toward justice and collective responsibility (Arjomand, 2009; Latief, 2020).

### **Revelation, Sunnah, and the Status of Prophetic Ijtihad**

The second finding is that Prophetic ijtihad operated within a distinctive epistemological structure. During the Prophet's lifetime, revelation remained active and functioned as the highest normative authority. The Qur'an provided foundational principles and specific rulings, while the Sunnah explained, specified, implemented, and sometimes established rules not explicitly detailed in the Qur'anic text. This means that Prophetic legal practice cannot be reduced to ordinary human reasoning. It was guided reasoning under divine supervision.

At the same time, the Prophetic method shows that the existence of revelation did not eliminate reasoning. When a matter required practical judgment, administrative decision, interpretation of general principles, or application to concrete facts, the Prophet exercised judgment. If the judgment was confirmed by revelation or left uncorrected, it became part of the Sunnah. If correction occurred, the correction itself became a source of legal learning. Dradkeh (2025), for example, reads the Badr captives case as evidence that Prophetic ijtihad balanced public interest, mercy, consultation, and revelatory correction.

This pattern is significant for Islamic legal theory. It demonstrates that the relationship between revelation and reason is not antagonistic. Reason does not compete with revelation; it serves revelation by translating its principles into context-sensitive decisions. Conversely, revelation does not cancel rationality; it disciplines rationality through ethical and theological boundaries. This balance became the foundation for later *usul al-fiqh*, even though the technical vocabulary of *usul* was systematized only after the Prophetic era (Faizi & Ali, 2024; Hallaq, 2009).

### **Typology of Prophetic Ijtihad Methods**

The central contribution of this article is the following typology. The typology does not claim that later *usul al-fiqh* terminology had already been formally codified during the Prophetic period. Rather, it uses later legal-theoretical terms as analytical labels for patterns that can be observed in Prophetic legal practice.

**Table 1. Typology of Prophetic ijthihad as adaptive legal reasoning**

<b>Methodological pattern</b>	<b>Legal operation</b>	<b>Prophetic-era illustration</b>	<b>Implication</b>
Revelation-guided judgment	Reasoning remains open to divine confirmation or correction.	Badr captives and cases tied to later revelatory guidance.	Adaptability remains norm-bound.
Analogical reasoning (qiyas)	A new case is connected to a known case through a legal cause.	Hajj obligation compared with financial debt.	Extension without severing from text.
Maslahah and maqasid	Decision-making weighs benefit, harm, justice, and stability.	Public policy, war strategy, and protection of vulnerable groups.	Law serves ethical purpose.
Consultation (shura)	Public decisions are informed by collective deliberation.	Consultation in military, civic, and communal matters.	Collective ijthihad builds accuracy.
Contextual custom (urf)	Custom is retained, modified, or rejected based on justice and tawhid.	Trade practices purified from riba, fraud, and exploitation.	Law engages local context.
Gradualism (tadarruj)	Rules are implemented in stages according to social readiness.	Gradual prohibition of khamr.	Reform needs pedagogy and timing.
Supervised delegation	Qualified Companions reasoned in the Prophet's absence.	Ijthihad in travel, adjudication, and public duties.	The community was trained for post-Prophetic reasoning.

**Analogy and the Pedagogy of Legal Reasoning**

Analogical reasoning is one of the clearest indications that Prophetic legal instruction trained the community to think beyond isolated textual fragments. The well-known report in which the Prophet compared the obligation to perform pilgrimage on behalf of a deceased parent with the payment of a debt illustrates a method of reasoning through shared legal cause. The point was not merely to answer a single question. The answer taught the Companions how to move from a familiar legal-moral relation to a new application.

This pedagogical dimension is crucial. The Prophet used analogies that were accessible to ordinary people, but the structure of the reasoning was sophisticated: identify the relevant cause, compare the new case to an established case, and derive a ruling consistent with a higher normative principle. Later jurists would elaborate qiyas into a formal method involving *asl*, *far*, *hukm*, and *illah*. The Prophetic practice supplied the practical seed of this method before it became a technical discipline.

The relevance of this finding is contemporary. Modern Islamic law constantly faces new questions in bioethics, finance, technology, and family law. A Prophetic model of analogy prevents two extremes. It prevents rigid refusal to address new cases simply because they are not named in classical texts, and it prevents arbitrary innovation disconnected from legal causes. Contemporary jurisprudence continues to examine how textual evidence and analogical reasoning interact and sometimes conflict in legal determination (Faz’a, 2024). Qiyas remains valuable when it is guided by textual evidence, valid causation, and the objectives of law (Alwazna, 2016; Khaeruman & Nurholis, 2024).

## **Maslahah, Maqasid, and the Ethical Purpose of Law**

Prophetic *ijtihad* also reveals a strong orientation toward *maslahah* and *maqasid*. The Prophet's decisions were not merely formal responses to legal questions; they sought to produce justice, prevent harm, protect dignity, and build a morally accountable community. This does not mean that *maslahah* was an independent source overriding revelation. Rather, *maslahah* functioned as a way of understanding how revealed values should operate in concrete circumstances.

This point is especially important because contemporary *maqasid* discourse is sometimes pulled in opposite directions. Some scholars treat *maqasid* as a broad principle of reform, while others fear that *maqasid* reasoning can weaken textual authority. A balanced reading of Prophetic *ijtihad* shows that *maqasid* and textual fidelity are not mutually exclusive. *Maqasid* becomes legitimate when it clarifies the purpose of texts, evaluates competing harms and benefits, and remains within the moral limits of revelation (Athambawa, 2025; Kamali, 2021; Tohari et al., 2023). Comparative analyses further demonstrate that the Islamic concept of public welfare has distinct normative foundations rooted in divine purpose, in contrast to secular utilitarian approaches to public interest (Ahmed & Al Sakkaf, 2025).

In early Islamic law, the protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property was not presented as an abstract formula; it was embodied in practical reforms. The protection of life appeared in restrictions on revenge and war ethics. The protection of property appeared in the prohibition of fraud, *riba*, and unfair commercial practice. The protection of family appeared in reforms of marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The protection of intellect appeared in the gradual restriction of intoxicants. The Prophetic model therefore links *maqasid* not only with theory but also with institutional and social change.

## **Consultation and Collective Reasoning**

The role of *shura* indicates that Prophetic *ijtihad* was not individualism in isolation. In matters of public policy, military strategy, civic organization, and communal welfare, the Prophet consulted the Companions. Consultation was not a symbolic gesture. In several reports, the Prophet accepted the view of a Companion when the matter involved worldly strategy or public administration. This shows that expertise, context, and collective deliberation were recognized in legal-political decision-making.

Sibghatullah et al. (2025) describe collective *ijtihad* in the Prophetic era as a model of intellectual unity because it allowed diversity of viewpoints to be integrated into a common decision. Contemporary scholarship has also examined the relationship between *shura* principles and modern deliberative systems, noting that both prioritize collective participation while their normative foundations remain fundamentally distinct (Nasda, 2023). This is highly relevant for contemporary Islamic law. Many modern issues cannot be solved by a single jurist working alone. Issues such as digital finance, reproductive technology, environmental harm, and artificial intelligence require legal scholars to consult specialists in economics, medicine, technology, sociology, and ethics.

Prophetic shura therefore provides a historical foundation for institutional and multidisciplinary ijihad.

However, consultation is not identical with unrestricted majority preference. Within the Prophetic model, consultation operates under the authority of revelation and moral purpose. This distinction preserves the Islamic character of legal reasoning while preventing authoritarian closure. The model is participatory but normatively bounded.

### **Custom, Gradualism, and Contextual Reform**

Another important finding is the Prophetic treatment of custom. Islam did not erase all pre-Islamic social practices. It evaluated them. Practices that contradicted tawhid, justice, or human dignity were rejected. Practices that were socially useful and morally acceptable were retained or reformed. This approach shows that early Islamic law was not hostile to local context; it was hostile to injustice. The relevance for modern legal thought is clear: local custom can be accommodated when it does not undermine the objectives and principles of sharia.

Gradualism is also central. The development of law during the Prophetic period shows awareness of social readiness. The prohibition of khamr, for example, was not implemented as a sudden administrative ban but as a process of moral education, social preparation, and legal finalization. This method reflects a deeper theory of law: effective legal reform must transform consciousness, not merely impose rules. Contemporary legal reform in Muslim societies can learn from this approach by combining normativity with pedagogy, institutional capacity, and public communication.

The combination of custom and gradualism demonstrates the adaptive character of early Islamic law. Scholarly studies confirm that *tadarruj* functions not only as a practical strategy of phased implementation but also as a principled method rooted in the divine wisdom of progressive revelation (Qaderi, 2021). Yet the adaptation was not relativism. It retained a firm direction toward justice, dignity, and moral responsibility. This balance is a useful corrective to both rigid ahistorical legalism and overly pragmatic legal change that lacks normative discipline (Beka, 2021; Makhoul, 2020; Tabrani, 2018).

### **Companion Ijtihad under Prophetic Supervision**

The practice of companion ijihad under Prophetic supervision shows that the Prophet prepared the community for the post-Prophetic future. The Companions were not trained merely to memorize rulings; they were trained to understand method. The reported incident of Bani Qurayzah, in which the Companions differed over whether to pray Asr during the journey or after reaching the destination, is frequently cited as evidence that textual commands may generate more than one plausible interpretation. One group emphasized literal compliance with the wording, while another emphasized the purpose of urgency. The Prophet's acceptance of both readings indicates recognition of disciplined interpretive plurality.

The reported dialogue with Muadh ibn Jabal when he was sent to Yemen has also been influential in the history of Islamic legal theory. Although scholars discuss the

strength of its chain, it has long functioned as a legal-pedagogical symbol: a judge first seeks guidance in the Qur'an, then in the Sunnah, and then exercises *ijtihad* when direct textual guidance is not found. The legal importance of this report lies in its methodological order. *Ijtihad* is not the first resort of subjective preference; it is the final stage of disciplined search after engagement with authoritative sources.

This supervised delegation explains why *ijtihad* became necessary after the Prophet's death. Revelation had ended, but social change continued. The Companions inherited not only texts, but a method of legal reasoning. This is one reason Islamic law could expand across diverse societies while maintaining connection to its original sources (Ismanawati et al., 2025; Najib & Imawan, 2022).

### **Implications for Contemporary Islamic Legal Thought**

The typology developed in this article has several implications. First, it shows that adaptability is internal to Islamic law. The Prophetic model connected revelation with context through disciplined reasoning. Contemporary Islamic legal thought should therefore avoid presenting adaptability as a concession to modernity. It is part of the legal heritage itself.

Second, the Prophetic model requires methodological accountability. Claims of public interest must be tested against texts, legal causes, ethical purposes, and expert knowledge. This helps prevent the misuse of *maslahah* to justify any preferred outcome. Empirical studies of contemporary *ijtihad* institutions demonstrate both the possibilities and challenges of applying *istiṣlāḥ* consistently in modern legal determination (Azwar & Rinaldi, 2024). Contemporary *maqasid*-oriented *ijtihad* becomes strongest when it remains connected to the Qur'an, Sunnah, valid legal reasoning, and the concrete realities of society (Athambawa, 2025; Ismail & Baharuddin, 2022; Tohari et al., 2023).

Third, the model supports collective and interdisciplinary *ijtihad*. The complexity of modern problems means that jurists need reliable knowledge from relevant fields. This is not a departure from Prophetic practice. It reflects the same spirit of consultation and contextual judgment seen in early Islam. The Prophet distinguished between matters of revelation and technical matters of worldly expertise, as illustrated in the report concerning date-palm pollination. That distinction remains important for contemporary lawmaking.

Fourth, the model encourages moderation. Adaptive legal reasoning does not mean abandoning texts, and textual fidelity does not mean ignoring reality. The Prophetic pattern holds both together. This balance is particularly important in Muslim societies where legal debates are often polarized between rigid literalism and reform without sufficient legal grounding.

This study is limited by its library-based design and by the fact that it presents a conceptual typology rather than an empirical study of contemporary legal institutions. Future research can test this typology in specific areas such as Islamic family law, digital finance, bioethics, environmental law, or religious governance. Nevertheless, the

typology provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how early Islamic law joined normativity and adaptability in a coherent legal method.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This article concludes that Prophetic *ijtihad* was a form of guided adaptive legal reasoning. It operated within the authority of revelation, but it also used reason, analogy, public benefit, consultation, custom, gradualism, and supervised delegation to address concrete social needs. The Prophetic period therefore should not be understood only as the origin of fixed legal rulings; it should also be understood as the origin of a method for connecting divine norms with changing realities. The typology developed in this article shows that early Islamic law was neither rigid textualism nor free rationalism. It was a disciplined legal process in which revelation provided moral and normative direction, while *ijtihad* translated that direction into practical judgment. The implication for contemporary Islamic legal thought is that legal renewal must be rooted in the same balance: fidelity to authoritative sources, awareness of social context, commitment to *maqasid*, and methodological accountability. In this sense, Prophetic *ijtihad* remains a foundational model for developing Islamic law that is principled, ethical, and responsive to the needs of human society.

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