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THE MECCA CONNECTION: SAYYID AL-MĀLIKĪ'S METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGE TO LATE SAUDI SALAFISM

Moh. Akib

UIN Syekh Wasil, Kediri, Indonesia

Corresponding author: Moh. Akib, email: akibmuslim@gmail.com

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Abstract: This article examines the epistemic conflict between Sayyid Muḥammad 'Alawī al-Mālikī and Saudi Arabian institutional Salafism through the lenses of authority, methodology, and state power. This essay demonstrates that al-Mālikī employed an adaptive epistemic strategy instead of overt resistance, thereby contesting the linear assumption that traditional religious authority is inherently supplanted by the modern nation-state. This study investigates the Malikis' reformation of Salafism by shifting the locus of orthodoxy from doctrinal consistency to methodological legitimacy, emphasizing the *Manhaj al-Salaf fi Fahm al-Nuṣūṣ*. This study employs discourse analysis to argue that Saudi fatwas serve as instruments of epistemic discipline, transforming methodological disputes into a framework for state-sanctioned orthodoxy. Al-Mālikī countered the monopolization of Salafism by leveraging transregional academic networks, sanad-based authority, and intellectual cosmopolitanism, particularly in Mecca. The principal findings indicate that the al-Mālikī initiative redefined *Manhaj al-Salaf* as a dynamic, interpretative framework grounded in historical pluralism and analytical precision, rather than dismissing Salafism or compromising institutional authority. This study contributes to the discourse on the interplay between religion and the state by identifying adaptive resilience as the primary form of non-state religious authority within a centralized political framework and conceptualizing fatwa as an epistemic regime.

Keywords: Saudi Salafism; Salafi *Manhaj*; Religious Authority; Epistemic Discipline; Islamic Intellectual History.

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Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, there were many religious conflicts in Saudi Arabia.[1] These conflicts were often perceived as an intellectual struggle between conservative Riyadh-ism and a relatively weak political opposition.[2] This overly simplified story does not do a good job of showing the more complicated conflicts in Mecca, where a cosmopolitan system that has been around for hundreds of years is being absorbed and destroyed.[3] In this revamped center of Islamic symbolism, people like Sayyid Muḥammad b. ʻAlawī al-Mālikī (d. 2004) were not just "debating theology."[4] It is both the result and the last defender of a "Mecca Connection," which is a network of power that comes from the Prophet's ancestry (*sayyid*), the Ḥaramayn's knowledge transmission (*isnād*), and contact with the diverse Sunni mainstream around the world.[5]

Prior research characterized him as a "liberal hadith scholar" or a "victim of fatwas,"[6] but such a viewpoint is as reductive as perceiving the Berlin Wall merely as a pile of stones. The context from which he speaks and the social capital that allows his voice to be heard despite the overwhelming pressure from the state are more important than just what he supports (like *tawassul*).[7] If you do not

[1] Besnik Sinani, "Post-Salafism: Religious Revisionism in Contemporary Saudi Arabia," *Religions* 13, no. 4 (2022): 340.

[2] Maythem Al-Janabi, "Contemporary Islamic Political Idea: The Clash of Reformist Spirit and Extremist-Radical Mentality," *Journal of Globalization Studies* 12, no. 1 (2021): 61–78.

[3] Svetlana Kirillina, "In Search of Lost Time: The Congress of the Islamic World in Mecca (1926)," *ISTORIYA* 14, no. 10 (132) (2023).

[4] Mohammad Rindu Fajar Islamy, "Tracing the Roots of Radicalism and Terrorism: Muhammad b. Alawi Al-Maliki's Thought Related to Extremism Discourse," *Religió: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 11, no. 2 (2021): 223–241.

[5] Muhid Muhid, Muhammad Khoirur Roziqin, and Andris Nurita, "Pengaruh dan Metode Pensyarahan Hadis Sayyid Muhammad b. Alawi al-Maliki," *Medina-Te: Jurnal Studi Islam* 19, no. 1 (2023): 77–91; Ahmad Rifai et al., "Transformasi Peran Mekah dalam Dinamika Kebudayaan Islam di Nusantara: Studi Komperatif," *El-Mujtama: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat* 5, no. 1 (2025): 503–514.

[6] Ahmad Azaim Ibrahimy, Muhammad Amanullah, and Muntaha Artalim Zaim, "Al-Sayyid Muḥammad b. ʻAlawī al-Mālikī wa Khaṣāʾiṣu Manhajih al-Fiqhī," *Lisan al-Hal: Jurnal Pengembangan Pemikiran dan Kebudayaan* 18, no. 2 (2024): 263–281; Mashail Haydar Ali, "The Traditionalist Salafis' Perspective and Discourse on Militant Jihād," *Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2019): 109.

[7] Zachary Wright, "The Sufi Shaykh of Ibn ʻAbd al-Wahhāb? An Overview of the Writings of the Madinan Ḥadīth Scholar Muḥammad Ḥayāt al-Sindī," *Journal of*

take the "Mecca Connection" into account when analyzing, you will always get things wrong because it makes it seem like there is a strict argument between "Salafi and Sufi."[8]

Recent literature on Saudi Arabia, including al-Rasheed's pioneering study on state consolidation, Lacroix's examination of internal Salafism tensions, and DeLong-Bas's analysis of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's concepts, significantly improves our knowledge about the geopolitics of religion.[9] However, these investigations often encounter "epistemic locus blindness."[10] They did not describe Mecca as a place with its own rules of power when they discussed the fighting; instead, they described it as a point on a map. Studies of the Haramayn acknowledge their historical cosmopolitanism, yet they frequently argue that modernity and the Saudi state have erased it.[11] Because of this assumption, they did not see how adaptable networks like al-Mālikī's are. On the other hand, studies on al-Mālikī himself usually end up being theological "back-and-forth" discussions that look at works like *Manhaj al-Salaf fī Fahm al-Nuṣūṣ* as abstract arguments that do not connect to the knowledge production workshop where he grew up.[12] We lack a comprehensive interpretation that regards these polemics as indicative of the conflict between two logics of authority: the genealogical-transnational authority em-

Islamic Studies 37, no. 1 (2026): 54–83; Itzchak Weismann, "The Politics of Popular Religion: Sufis, Salafis, and Muslim Brothers in 20th-Century Hamah," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37, no. 1 (2005): 39–58.

[8] Taufiqurrahman, "The Quranic Text Approach: A Review of Watt and Crone's Theses on the Emergence of Islam," *Canonia Religia* 1, no. 1 (2023).

[9] Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 87–112, 134–160; Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 1–18, 61–92, 133–168; Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 29–55, 89–117.

[10] Joseph E. B. Lumbard, "Islam and the Challenge of Epistemic Sovereignty," *Religions* 15, no. 4 (2024): 406.

[11] Simon Mabon and Edward Wastnidge, "Transnational Religious Networks and Geopolitics in the Muslim World," *Global Discourse* 9, no. 4 (2019): 593–603; Abbas Jong, "The Post-Secular Cosmopolitanization of Religion," *Religions* 16, no. 3 (2025): 334.

[12] Sinani, "Post-Salafism," 340.

anating from Mecca and the state-bureaucratic authority based in Riyadh.[13]

This paper examines al-Mālikī's conceptualization of *Manhaj al-Salaf* as an intellectual strategy through which a historically grounded form of Sunni authority associated with Mecca was articulated under the increasingly centralized Saudi religious order of the late twentieth century. The study uses the term "Mecca Connection" as an analytical concept rather than as a pre-existing historical category or a synonym for Mecca's cosmopolitanism. It refers to the historically constituted configuration of religious capital through which scholarly authority associated with Mecca was transmitted, legitimized, and reproduced across regions. Three dimensions constitute this configuration: pedagogical capital, particularly the scholarly sanad cultivated through the Ḥaramayn; genealogical capital associated with al-Mālikī's claimed descent from the Prophet; and transregional network capital linking scholars, institutions, and circles of learning across the Ḥaramayn, Ḥaḍramawt, Egypt, and the Levant. These dimensions are analytically distinct but historically interconnected, and their combination shaped al-Mālikī's methodological orientation and capacity to sustain religious authority under conditions of institutional centralization.[14]

This article argues that the dispute between the Malikis and the official Salafi authorities regarding *Manhaj al-Salaf* was not a matter of orthodoxy versus deviation but rather a contention between two legitimate assertions of historical authenticity, employing "Mecca Connection" as the primary analytical framework. This article achieves three objectives: (1) methodological deconstruction to show that al-Mālikī's articulation is a crystallization of the Ḥaḍramaut-Mecca method, which includes madzhabs and is communal, protecting itself from the bureaucratic and literal Riyadh-Medina methodology; (2) contextual discourse analysis that shows disqualification strategies in official fatwas, specifically attempts to undermine the legitimacy of al-Mālikī's global networks, cosmopolitan-

[13] Murtala Ibrahim, "A Geopolitical Intervention in African Religious Studies: Global Salafi and Shia Identities in the Neighbourhoods of Jos, Nigeria," *Utambuzi: Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa and Its Diaspora* 8, no. 1 (2025): 47–59.

[14] Naveed Sheikh, "Making Sense of Salafism: Theological Foundations, Ideological Iterations, and Political Manifestations," in *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Politics and Ideology*, ed. Jeffrey Haynes (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

ism, and chains of transmission; and (3) a remapping of geo-epistemology that repositions 20th-century Mecca as an epistemic battleground where the "Mecca Connection" endures as a resource for developing counter-orthodoxy.

This study employs a contextual critical discourse analysis to thoroughly examine the primary work of al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf fī Fahm al-Nuṣūṣ*.[15] There are three steps that are all connected in the process: The first is an internal text analysis that outlines the argumentation structure, key conceptual definitions (like *al-Salaf* and *al-Manhaj*), and legitimation strategies through its classical references[16]; the second is an external contextual analysis that reads the text intertextually alongside official refutation fatwas (like *al-Lajnah al-Dā'imah* or *al-Fawzān*) and traces the network map of intellectual lineages (*sanad*) it references to map the "Mecca Connection";[17] and the third is an interpretive synthesis that explains the treatise's role as a counter-narrative that uses the framework of Salafism to defend the Ḥaramayn's multicultural tradition.[18] This approach facilitates researchers' analysis of texts as epistemic strategies in the contestation of authority, rather than merely as dogma.[19]

Building on this conceptualization, the article's central contribution is to demonstrate that the Mecca Connection enabled Sunni authority to be reformulated and sustained within, rather than simply outside, the increasingly centralized Saudi religious order. Al-Mālikī's *Manhaj al-Salaf* is therefore examined as the methodological language through which these inherited resources were articulated in contemporary theological debates, while institutional rulings and

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[15] M. Z. F. Nordin, "'Ilm al-Tafsir and Critical Discourse Analysis: A Methodological Comparison," *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies* 15, no. 1 (2015): 129–142.

[16] Nurullah Ardıç and M. M. Karagözoğlu, "Genre Analysis and Religious Texts: A Methodological Model of Ḥadīth Commentary," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 36, no. 2 (2025): 163–218.

[17] Muh Khamdan, Wiharyani, and Nadiah Abidin, "Ideological Contestations of Salafism and Moderatism in Indonesia's Hijra Movement: Critical Discourse Analysis," *Al-'Adalah* 27, no. 2 (2024): 101–124; Moh. Akib, "The Integration of Sanad in the Contextual Interpretation of the Qur'an: A Maqasid-Based Perspective," *Al-Muhafidz: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* 5, no. 2 (2025).

[18] Muhammad Nazir Alias et al., "Scientific Approach as the Basis for the Formation of *Maqāṣid al-Shari'ah* Concept and Principles: A Comparative Study," *Malaysian Journal of Syariah and Law* 12, no. 2 (2024): 350–363.

[19] Ardıç and Karagözoğlu, "Genre Analysis and Religious Texts."

restrictions on religious communication provide evidence of the conditions under which such authority operated. The study consequently shifts attention from a binary opposition between Saudi religious authority and its supposed opponents toward the internal reorganization of Sunni authority under institutional centralization. The case demonstrates how inherited religious capital could be reorganized into a recognizable form of Sunni authority within a changing political and religious environment.

Redefining Inclusive Sanad-Based Salafi Methodology

In what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the struggle of classification,[20] al-Mālikī's participation in *Manhaj al-Salaf fī Fahm al-Nuṣūṣ* can be considered a calculated epistemological move.[21] The meaning of *Manhaj al-Salaf* acts as symbolic capital that establishes the legitimacy of religious authority, and this conflict is occurring not only at the level of doctrinal disputes but also within the religious field. *Manhaj al-Salaf* has been solidified as an exclusive category that combines piety, truth, and authority within the framework of institutional and pedagogical Salafism,[22] especially those that have to do with the creation of official religious discourse. Al-Mālikī deliberately grabbed the opportunity to specify the Salaf framework's access procedures rather than rejecting it outright. *Al-ittibā*'s meaning was transferred from literal commitment to allegiance to historically accurate interpretive processes as the emphasis switched from claims of consensus (*ittifāq*) to the unity of methodological principles (*manhaj*).[23]

Al-Mālikī's deconstruction of the hadith "the best of generations are my generation and then the generation after them" in the prevailing Salafi discourse makes this reclassification technique evi-

[20] Pierre Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field," *Comparative Social Research* 13 (1991): 1–44.

[21] Muḥammad ʿAlawī al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf fī Fahm al-Nuṣūṣ bayna al-Naẓarīyah wa al-Taṭbīq* (Mecca: n.p., n.d.), 15–17.

[22] Roel Meijer, "Politicizing al-JarḤ wa-l-Taʿdīl: Rabīʿ b. Hādī al-Madkhalī and the Transnational Battle for Religious Authority," in *Salafism after the Arab Awakening: Contending with People's Power*, ed. Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone (London: Hurst, 2016), 119–134.

[23] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 17–19; Andreas Christmann, "'The Form Is Permanent, but the Content Moves': The Qur'anic Text and Its Interpretation(s) in Mohamad Shahrour's al-Kitab wal-Qur'an," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 205–228.

dent.[24] This ḥadīth is used as a conceptual closure method in numerous pieces of Salafi educational literature.[25] It transforms the virtue of generations (*faḍl*) into epistemic finality, so ending the variety of interpretations. Al-Mālikī challenged this reasoning with a basic hermeneutical query: Is the freezing of understanding the same as historical precedence? He demonstrates that the Salaf constituted a dynamic and productive interpretive community, despite their disagreements, by referencing the existence of debate among the Companions, which is extensively documented in traditional legal literature[26], such as Ibn Qudāmah's al-Mughnī.[27] The notion of *taḥqīq al-manāṭ* is employed here not just as a weapon of usul al-fiqh but also as an epistemological critique of ahistorical literalism that ignores the text's field of application, social context, and normative purposes.[28]

Al-Mālikī's criticism also focuses on the anti-madhhab position that is said to be a logical outgrowth of the *Manhaj al-Salaf*,[29] as well as the epistemological individualism that underpins modern reformist Salafism.[30] By initiating what could be referred to as the "Mecca Connection," he positioned the academic authority formation process at the core of the transmission chain (*sanad*). Here, however, the chain of transmission functions as a social mechanism for knowledge transmission that requires *al-talaqqī* (receiving), *al-ta'ahhud al-'ilmī* (commitment to knowledge), and *al-adab ma'a al-ikhtilāf* (etiquette with disagreement) in addition to serving as normative validity.[31] The isnad is not totally immune to the possibility

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[24] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 29–31.

[25] Bernard Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action," in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London: Hurst, 2009), 33–57.

[26] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 33–36.

[27] Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī, *al-Mughnī*, ed. 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī and 'Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Ḥulw (Riyadh: Dār 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1997).

[28] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 41–44; Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunnī Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 112–117.

[29] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 47–50.

[30] Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

[31] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 52–56; Muḥammad 'Alawī al-Mālikī, *Mafāhīm Yajibu an Tuṣaḥḥaḥ* (Mecca: Dār al-Ṣādiq, n.d.), 97–104; Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi,

of exclusivity, either, as this stage also reopens the hierarchical dimension in the creation of Sunni authority. In this sense, the al-Mālikī effort echoes Muhammad Qasim Zaman's criticism of contemporary reformist inclinations that "flatten" tradition while also posing fresh queries regarding the distribution of access and who is eligible to claim the sanad.[32]

Al-Mālikī effectively remapped the coordinates of the *Manhaj al-Salaf* discourse as an interpretive principle focused on process rather than uniformity of results through the techniques of conceptual reclassification, canonical deconstruction, and sanad repositioning.[33] This achievement did not, however, conceal the project's underlying conflicts. Attempts to recover the Salaf's symbolic capital may result in a new form of authority that is still elitist but uses more inclusive methodological terminology.[34] Therefore, rather than being a definitive solution to the fragmentation of contemporary Islamic discourse, the Maliki version of the Salaf method should be viewed as an open field of epistemological negotiation—a living interpretive principle whose strength lies precisely in its ability to maintain plurality while simultaneously challenging claims of monopoly over the Salaf legacy without eliminating the complexity of the tradition itself.[35]

The Foundation of Authority is Intellectual Cosmopolitanism

Al-Mālikī's counter-authority was constructed through an epistemological technique that functions as a mechanism for establishing authority, namely intellectual cosmopolitanism, rather than a doctrinal rejection of Salafism. The mapping of references and the network of chains of transmission that link *Manhaj al-Salaf fi Fahm*

Ḥadith Literature: Its Origin, Development and Special Features (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 88–104.

[32] Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 42–78.

[33] Muḥammad ʿAlawī al-Mālikī, *al-Ghuluww wa-Atharuhu fi al-Irḥab wa-Ifsād al-Mujtamaʿ* (Mecca: Maktabat al-ʿIlm wa al-Ḥikmah, n.d.), 33–39.

[34] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 163–170.

[35] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 60–62; Muḥammad ʿAlawī al-Mālikī, *Ḥawla al-IḤtifāl bi-Mawlid al-Nabi* (Mecca: Maktabat al-ʿIlm wa al-Ḥikmah, n.d.), 11–15; Ebrahim Moosa, *What Is a Madrasa?* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 187–215.

al-Nuṣūṣ to the traditions of scholars across regions like the Two Holy Mosques, Ḥadramawt, Syria, and Egypt, as well as across Sunni scholarly disciplines, from multi-madhab fiqh and hadith to Sufism, demonstrate this legitimacy.[36] "The methodology is not words to be memorized but rather a way of understanding and reasoning," stated al-Mālikī, making it clear that the approach is not the same as a set of fixed ideas but rather a means of comprehending historically inherited materials.[37] According to this assertion, cosmopolitanism serves as symbolic capital, transforming transregional connection and lineage continuity into a source of epistemic legitimacy that challenges the authority of the homogeneous and centralized Salafi state.

In the realm of religious authority, this cosmopolitanism actively serves as a contestation mechanism. Al-Mālikī positioned what is commonly called the "Mecca Connection" as a cosmopolitan epistemic node where many traditions met and were negotiated, rather than as a hegemonic center creating a single orthodoxy. In this setting, Mecca serves as a networked epistemic hub rather than a political territory. According to al-Mālikī, "correct *al-ittibā'* is following their method in understanding the texts, not blindly imitating their words without understanding."[38] He rejects the idea that *al-ittibā'* can be reduced to literal obedience. He discursively opposes the reduction of orthodoxy to methodological puritanism by citing and including experts from a broad range of schools of thought and inclinations, including those sometimes claimed solely by Salafism.[39]

However, structural ambivalence is present in al-Mālikī's philosophical cosmopolitanism. While it operates through a scholarly hierarchy that requires access to a worldwide chain of transmission, classical literature, and the authority of professors, it is also inclusive in terms of geography and history. The remark "Knowledge is not taken from books nor from those who are not qualified," which maintains that epistemic power is not egalitarian, is one of the ways

[36] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 9–14.
[37] Ibid., 16–17; Nile Green, *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1–27.
[38] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 18–19; Lumbard, "Islam and the Challenge of Epistemic Sovereignty," 406.
[39] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 21–26; Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oneworld, 2018), 239–244.

that al-Mālikī himself underlined the significance of *al-talaqqī* and the continuity of knowledge as prerequisites for correct understanding.[40] Therefore, it is not possible to interpret this cosmopolitanism as populist pluralism but rather as an elite epistemic approach aimed at gaining a prominent place in the conventional Sunni hierarchy of power.[41] By recasting cosmopolitan academic elites as the rightful interpreters of the Salaf lineage, the state's monopoly on Salafism was criticized.[42]

It is precisely this tension that makes al-Mālikī's perspective significant. It demonstrates that opposition to Puritanism and the consolidation of contemporary power can arise through the selective reactivation of the cosmopolitan aspects that have long been ingrained in Sunni Islamic history rather than by destroying tradition from the outside.[43] "The differences of the Salaf are proof of the vitality of their methodology, not its negation," al-Mālikī's affirmation that disagreements are a valid result of using the same methodology, revived the *Manhaj al-Salaf* as a living interpretive principle rather than a restrictive ideological label.[44] This analysis demonstrates how intellectual cosmopolitanism both strengthens and weakens modern Sunni counter-authority. While it allows for methodological diversity, it is still constrained by the structure of epistemic elitism that defines the classical scholarly tradition itself.[45]

The Polemic Approach of "Discursive Reversal"

Al-Mālikī's polemic against Saudi Arabian institutional Salafism utilized discursive inversion, employing identical canons to derive contradictory methodological conclusions instead of dismissing credible sources. Al-Mālikī elucidates in his work *Manhaj al-Salaf fī Fahm al-Nuṣūṣ* that the divergence among Sunni Muslims lies in their

[40] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 38–40; al-Mālikī, *Mafāhim Yajibu an Tuṣaḥḥaḥ*, 92–94; Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 43–70.
[41] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 210–235.
[42] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 42–45.
[43] Al-Mālikī, *al-Ghuluww wa-Atharuh*, 41–43; Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 261–297.
[44] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 31–33.
[45] Ibid., 55–57; Wael B. Hallaq, *Authority, Continuity, and Change in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 181–204.

interpretation and application of the Qur'ān and Sunna to reality: "The disagreement is not in the texts, but rather in understanding and applying the texts to reality."[46] With that in mind, he entered the Salafi epistemological arena from within, arguing against the idea that there is only one "Salafi" way to interpret texts while still recognizing the authority of texts and classical scholars.[47] This strategy intentionally shifts the conflict from the realm of heresy or creed to the domain of *manhaj al-fahm*, which refers to the methodology of textual reasoning.[48]

The discussion about visiting graves is a clear example of this change in tone. Al-Mālikī acknowledged the existence of hadiths that forbid commemorating the Prophet's burial as 'Eid,' yet he opposed the literal interpretation that strips the hadith of its context.[49] He emphasized that the prohibition pertains to acts of worship and reverence, rather than the pilgrimage recognized in the traditions of the Companions and Followers.[50] His methodological definition posits that "not every prohibition in the text necessitates absolute prohibition; rather, the prohibition is interpreted in relation to its cause and context."[51] Thus, the method of deduction (*ṭarīqat al-istidlāl*) represents the error of institutional Salafism by undermining the text's meaning and overlooking the historical practices of previous generations, rather than the hadith references utilized. In this case, al-Mālikī denies the accusation of *bid'ah* (religious innovation), saying that the problem is the way of reading that separates the book from its historical context, not the pilgrimage practice.[52]

Al-Mālikī employed a comparable strategy by concentrating on Ibn Taymīyah, a pivotal figure often appropriated by contemporary Salafis. The Mālikīs opted to cite Ibn Taymīyah instead of disregarding him, illustrating internal distinctions within the Ḥanbāli tradition concerning tawassul and visitation.[53] He stressed that it is contrary

[46] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 15.
[47] Ibid., 18–20.
[48] Ibid., 22–24; Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 186–191; Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 37–41.
[49] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 95–97; Brown, *Hadith*, 235–239; Hallaq, *Authority, Continuity, and Change*, 63–67.
[50] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 100–102.
[51] Ibid., 41.
[52] Ibid., 108–110.
[53] Ibid., 130-137.

to the essence of the Salaf to regard Ibn Taymīyah's singular opinion as the sole applicable perspective. "It is a grave error to regard the pronouncement of a solitary scholar as representative of the entirety of Islam, subsequently excommunicating or labeling dissenters as innovators."[54] By doing this, al-Mālikī not only showed that Saudi Salafism is not a direct continuation of Ibn Taymiyyah,[55] but he also shifted the blame for mistakes from classical texts and academics to the current ideological and methodological constriction.[56]

This discursive inversion has both political and epistemological consequences. Al-Mālikī demonstrates that the most comprehensive understanding of the principle of textual interpretation (*fahm al-nuṣūṣ*) establishes religious authority, rather than mere literalism in textual citation.[57] "The Salaf's method is more comprehensive than being confined to a singular interpretation or direction."[58] He unequivocally expressed his belief in the absence of a single truth. The conflict that seems to be between "orthodoxy and heresy" is really just an argument about how to use logic in a single Sunni setting, as this polemic shows. People still disagree about how well this strategy works.[59] Do discursive reversals undermine the state's Salafi public authority institutions, or do they just move the conversation to the scholarly elite level without changing the larger institutional hegemony?[60]

Institutional Authority, Religious Rulings, and the Regulation of Religious Knowledge

The Saudi response to al-Mālikī demonstrates that disputes over religious knowledge were addressed not only through theological argument but also through institutional mechanisms governing the public circulation of religious authority. This is evident in Reso-

[54] Ibid., 137; al-Mālikī, *Mafahim Yajibu an Tuṣaḥḥaḥ*, 87–89.
[55] Ovamir Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 312–318; DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam*, 123–127.
[56] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 140–142.
[57] Ibid., 55–57.
[58] Al-Mālikī, *al-Ghuluww wa-Atharuh*, 33–35.
[59] Ibid., 60.
[60] Ibid., 156–157; Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 151–156; Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 37–41.

lution No. 86 of the *Hay'at Kibār al-'Ulamā'* (Council of Senior Scholars), issued in 1401 AH and reproduced in 'Abd Allāh b. Sulaymān b. Manī'"s *Ḥiwār Ma'a al-Mālikī fī Radd Munkarātih wa-Ḍalālātih*. The resolution records that the Council examined reports concerning al-Mālikī's religious activities, writings, contacts, and travels and reviewed several of his works, including *al-Dhakhā'ir al-Muḥammadīyah*, *al-Ṣalawāt al-Ma'thūrah*, and *Ad'iyah wa-Ṣalawāt*.[61] The Council subsequently characterized the practices attributed to him through categories such as *bid'ah*, *khurāfāt* (superstition), *shirk* (polytheism), and deviation from the methodology of the Salaf.[62] More significantly, the decision connected this theological assessment to possible restrictions on his activities in the Grand Mosque, mass media, and foreign travel.[63] The documentary record therefore shows that the dispute was not confined to competing theological texts but became connected to institutional procedures governing the public circulation of religious claims.

The institutional character of this response is further confirmed by the statements of 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Bāz concerning al-Mālikī. Ibn Bāz stated that scholars had responded to al-Mālikī's writings and had requested the authorities to prevent him from speaking in the Grand Mosque, on the radio, and through other media until he publicly declared his repentance.[64] He subsequently stated that al-Mālikī should be prevented from teaching in the Grand Mosque and from appearing on radio, television, and newspapers until he declared his repentance to God.[65] These statements provide direct evidence that theological judgment was connected to the regulation of religious communication. The issue therefore concerned not only the validity of particular theological propositions but also the institutional conditions under which al-Mālikī could teach, preach, and communicate his interpretation to a wider public. Religious authority was consequently shaped through both scholarly argument and access to rec-

[61] 'Abd Allāh b. Sulaymān b. Manī', *Ḥiwār Ma'a al-Mālikī fī Radd Munkarātih wa-Ḍalālatih* (Riyadh: Farazdaq al-Tijāriyyah, 1983), "Muqtaṭafāt min Qarār Hay'at Kibār al-'Ulamā' fī Ḥaqq al-Madhkūr," 8.
[62] Ibid., 9–11.
[63] Ibid., 11–12.
[64] 'Abd al-'Azīz b. 'Abd Allāh b. Bāz, "Al-Inkār 'alā Muḥammad 'Alawī al-Mālikī wa-Bayān 'Aqīdatihi," official website of Ibn Bāz, accessed November 26, 2026, https://ibnbaz.org/fatwas/2364/
[65] Ibid.

ognized spaces and channels of religious transmission. This institutional dimension is consistent with broader scholarship showing that religious authority in contemporary Muslim societies is shaped through the interaction of scholarly legitimacy, institutional structures, and control over recognized sites of religious communication.[66]

The documentary record further indicates a process of institutional review rather than a single isolated denunciation. The decision reproduced by Ibn Manīʿ records the involvement of *al-Lajnah al-Dāʾimah li-l-Buḥūth al-ʿIlmīyah wa-l-Iftāʾ* (Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and *Iftāʾ*), which examined al-Mālikī's writings and prepared a response to positions it considered objectionable.[67] The matter was subsequently considered by the *Hayʾat Kibār al-ʿUlamāʾ*, whose decision connected the theological assessment to measures concerning al-Mālikī's public religious activities.[68] This sequence is analytically significant because it shows how a theological assessment could move through institutional procedures involving a specialized scholarly committee, senior religious authorities, and state authorities. The available evidence therefore supports understanding the Saudi response as a process of institutional regulation in which theological classification became connected to decisions concerning the permissible conditions of public religious activity. It does not, however, establish that al-Mālikī's broader scholarly or transnational networks were eliminated. The distinction between regulating public religious activity and eliminating wider scholarly networks is important for assessing the scope of institutional intervention without extending the evidence beyond what the documentary record demonstrates.[69]

The epistemic boundary articulated by these Saudi religious authorities also becomes clearer when it is read alongside al-Mālikī's own writings. The Saudi documents framed the dispute through categories including *tawḥīd* (the oneness of God/Islamic monotheism), *shirk*, *bidʿah*, and adherence to the methodology of the Salaf, thereby locating al-Mālikī's positions outside what the authorities considered

[66] Chris Chaplin, "Religious Authority in the Urban Mosque," *American Ethnologist* 52, no. 2 (2025): 159–170.
[67] Ibn Manīʿ, *Ḥiwār Maʿa al-Mālikī*, 8–9.
[68] Ibid., 11–12.
[69] Sinani, "Post-Salafism," 340.

an acceptable doctrinal framework.[70] These classifications should be understood as normative judgments made by the authorities issuing the decision rather than as neutral descriptions of al-Mālikī's theology. Al-Mālikī's own writings present a different conception of Sunni religious authority. In *Mafāhīm Yajibu an Tuṣaḥḥaḥ,* he defends positions concerning inherited Sunni scholarship and the legitimacy of established interpretive traditions.[71] His discussion in *al-Ghuluww wa-Atharuh fī al-Irḥāb wa-Ifsād al-Mujtama'* similarly reflects his concern with defining legitimate religious reasoning and distinguishing established Islamic scholarship from forms of religious excess.[72] In *al-'Ilm wa-l-'Ulamā' fī al-'Ālam al-Islāmī*, he emphasizes the place of scholarly authority and the transmission of Islamic knowledge within the wider Sunni intellectual tradition.[73] Read together, these texts indicate that al-Mālikī understood his position as operating within an inherited Sunni scholarly framework, whereas the Saudi authorities classified significant aspects of his religious practice and interpretation as deviations from the doctrinal boundaries they recognized. The disagreement can therefore be understood as a contest within Sunni religious authority over the legitimate interpretation, transmission, and public representation of inherited Islamic knowledge.

The evidence consequently supports a more precise interpretation of marginalization as the institutional regulation of al-Mālikī's publicly recognized religious authority rather than the destruction of his wider scholarly network. The available documents directly establish attempts to restrict his teaching and access to important channels of religious communication in Saudi Arabia, particularly the Grand Mosque and mass media.[74] They do not, however, by themselves demonstrate that his transregional scholarly relationships disappeared or that his broader intellectual influence was eliminated. This distinction is important because institutional restrictions on

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[70] Ibn Manīʿ, *Ḥiwār Maʿa al-Mālikī*, 9–11.

[71] Muḥammad ʿAlawī al-Mālikī, *Mafāhīm Yajibu an Tuṣaḥḥaḥ*, 10th ed. (Mecca: Dār al-Jawāmiʿ al-Kalim, 1995), 79.

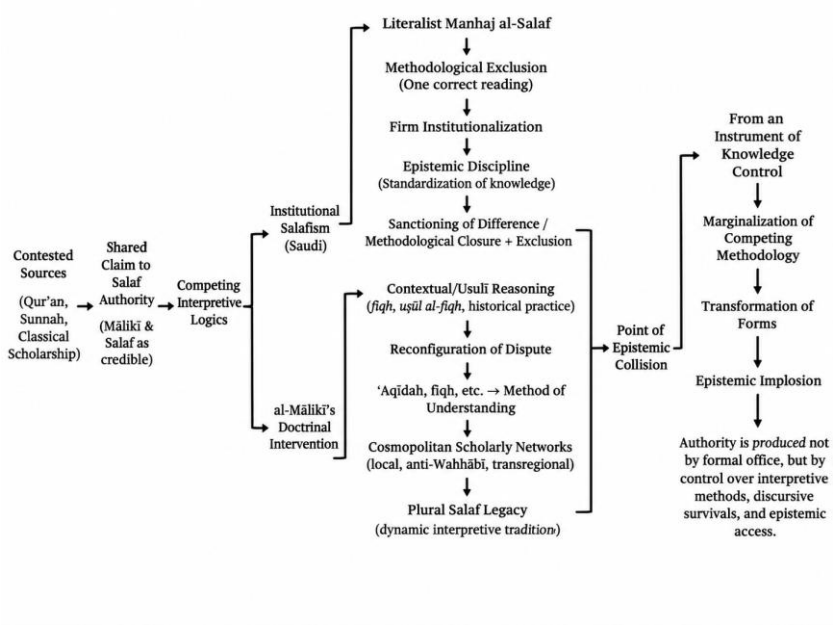
[72] Muḥammad ʿAlawī al-Mālikī, *al-Ghuluww wa-Atharuh fī al-Irḥāb wa-Ifsād al-Mujtamaʿ*, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah, 2004), 25.

[73] Muḥammad ʿAlawī al-Mālikī, *al-ʿIlm wa-l-ʿUlamāʾ fī al-ʿĀlam al-Islāmī* (Mecca: al-Maktabah al-Mālikiyyah, 1998), 45.

[74] Ibn Manīʿ, *Ḥiwār Maʿa al-Mālikī*, 11–12; Ibn Bāz, "Al-Inkār ʿalā Muḥammad ʿAlawī al-Mālikī."

public religious communication do not necessarily entail the disappearance of transnational scholarly networks.[75] The case instead reveals three interconnected mechanisms: theological classification, institutional review, and regulation of public communication. Religious rulings and related institutional interventions thus functioned not only as judgments concerning doctrinal correctness but also as mechanisms for defining the boundaries of publicly recognized religious authority.[76] Al-Mālikī's case consequently illustrates how an intra-Sunni theological dispute could acquire institutional consequences when competing claims about legitimate religious knowledge became connected to procedures governing teaching, communication, and access to authoritative religious spaces.

Figure 1. Epistemic Contestation over *Manhaj al-Salaf*



[75] Mabon and Wastnidge, "Transnational Religious Networks and Geopolitics," 593–603.
[76] Lumbard, "Islam and the Challenge of Epistemic Sovereignty," 406.

Urban Traditions' Endurance in the Modern Context.

This research revises the linear thesis that contemporary nation-states inherently obliterate traditional religious authority.[77] Al-Mālikī's example illustrates that the urban-cosmopolitan intellectual heritage of the Haramain was transformed under the influence of a homogenizing state rather than completely obliterated.[78] Al-Mālikī opted for an adaptive strategy within a limited epistemic framework instead of a confrontation, which was institutionally predisposed to failure.[79] In this study, resilience is characterized as the capacity of traditional networks to traverse locations, the persistence of knowledge transmission, and the replication of symbolic authority, rather than the achievement of maintaining formal positions or official power.[80] This idea sees state pressure as a situation that forces the restructuring and rearticulation of authoritative techniques, not as the end of tradition.[81]

Al-Mālikī's discursive positioning exemplifies these adaptive endeavors. He emphasizes in *Manhaj al-Salaf fī Fahm al-Nuṣūṣ*: "Indeed, the correct Salaf method is broad, encompassing all goodness, and is not fanatical toward a specific opinion as long as everything is based on evidence".[82] This statement exemplifies Al-Mālikī's self-positioning strategy in authority contestation, which entails redefining "truth" as a comprehensive methodological category.[83] From an analytical perspective, this comment is construed as an indication of the actors' recognition of the state's official discourse's constriction

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[77] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 181–201.
[78] Michael Cook, "On the Origins of Wahhabism," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2, no. 2 (1992): 191–202.
[79] Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 58–63.
[80] Muḥammad ʿAlawī al-Mālikī, *al-ʿIlm wa-l-ʿUlamāʾ fī al-Islām* (Mecca: Dār al-Shurūq, n.d.), 31–36; Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–258.
[81] Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 77–81.
[82] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 22.
[83] Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 33–40.

of meaning, rather than as proof of the strategy's efficacy.[84] In other words, al-Mālikī reacted to epistemic pressure by taking a defensive action that is typicaSl of the urban-cosmopolitan tradition: he expanded the framework from within instead of rejecting it.[85]

The two main ways that this adaptive resilience works are through discourse translation and keeping up traditional social capital.[86] Sanads and transregional networks, known as the "Mecca Connections," offered a form of moral legitimacy that was mostly separate from the government.[87] Al-Mālikī intentionally incorporated this tradition into the lexicon of the "salaf method," which constitutes the prevailing discourse concurrently.[88] The introduction to his book says, "This book is compiled to explain the true methodology of the Salaf, which is built upon jurisprudence, tranquility, and respect for the imams of the Muslims."[89] However, this strength does have some clear limits. The Mālikī school lost its institutional power in Saudi Arabia and was still ignored by state fatwas.[90] Therefore, the resilience talked about here does not mean the state has failed; it means the difference between the state's institutional dominance and the tradition's epistemic continuity, which the state does not directly control.[91]

These findings theoretically introduce the concept of adaptive resilience as an alternative to the commonly employed "destruction versus resistance" dichotomy in research concerning religion and the nation-state.[92] This model illustrates the resilience of religious authority amid linguistic evolution, symbolic realignment, and geo-

[84] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 131–133.
[85] Al-Mālikī, *Mafāhim Yajibu an Tuṣaḥḥaḥ*, 11–18; Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 38–42.
[86] Patrick Eisenlohr, "Media and Religious Diversity," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): 37–55.
[87] William Ochsenwald, *Religion, Society, and the State in Arabia: The Hijaz under Ottoman Control, 1840–1908* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), 120–128.
[88] Roel Meijer, "Introduction," in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London: Hurst, 2009), 1–31.
[89] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 5.
[90] Al-Mālikī, *al-Ghuluww wa-Atharuh*, 64–71; Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 142–145.
[91] Brown, *Hadith*, 239–244.
[92] Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 92–95.

graphical mobility, rather than perpetual disintegration or success.[93] Al-Mālikī's assertion that "following the salaf does not mean being frozen in the text, but understanding the spirit and purpose of the Sharia in order to be able to face the changes of time" exemplifies this logic of adaptation.[94] Nonetheless, this statement is once more construed as an actor's discursive strategy rather than the author's normative assertion.[95] This study contributes to the literature examining the relationship between religion and the state by illustrating that the modern state is more accurately perceived as a realm of authority reconfiguration rather than a mechanism of total eradication.[96] This concept paves the way for further investigation into the evolution and stability of non-state religious authority in an increasingly centralized political landscape.[97]

Table 1. Adaptive Resilience of Traditional Religious Authority under a Homogenizing Nation-State

Analytical Dimension	Dominant State Logic	Al-Mālikī's Adaptive Strategy	Analytical Implication
Concept of Authority	Authority defined by institutional position and official endorsement	Authority rearticulated as epistemic legitimacy grounded in sanad, learning, and scholarly recognition	Religious authority persists beyond formal state structures
Epistemic Framework	Narrow definition of manhaj al-salaf emphasizing literalism and uniformity	Expansion of manhaj al-salaf as a comprehensive methodological category rooted in evidence, plural reasoning, and juristic ethics	Contestation occurs at the level of interpretation, not textual authenticity

[93] Armando Salvatore, *The Sociology of Islam: Knowledge, Power and Civility* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 157–163.
[94] Al-Mālikī, *Manhaj al-Salaf*, 117.
[95] Talal Asad, "Introduction," in *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, ed. Talal Asad (London: Ithaca Press, 1973), 14–19.
[96] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 3–8.
[97] Ibn Manī', *Ḥiwār Ma'a al-Mālikī*, 7–10; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–6.

Mode of Engagement	Disciplinary governance through fatwas and standardization	Defensive discursive expansion from within the dominant Salafi lexicon	Non-confrontational adaptation increases epistemic survivability
Transmission of Knowledge	Centralized and regulated scholarly production	Persistence of sanad-based transmission and transregional scholarly networks (Mecca Connections)	Knowledge circulation remains mobile and non-statist
Symbolic Capital	State monopolization of orthodoxy and public legitimacy	Reproduction of symbolic authority through cosmopolitan Haramain heritage	Symbolic authority operates independently of state recognition
Institutional Outcome	Marginalization of non-official madhhab traditions	Loss of formal influence without epistemic disappearance	Institutional defeat does not equal intellectual extinction
Understanding of Change	Tradition viewed as static and deviation as threat	Tradition understood as dynamic, adaptive, and context-sensitive	Resilience lies in rearticulation, not preservation of form
Theoretical Contribution	Destruction vs. resistance binary	Adaptive resilience as a third analytical category	Modern state functions as a site of authority reconfiguration

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Mecca Connection, as reconstructed through al-Mālikī's *Manhaj al-Salaf fī Fahm al-Nuṣūṣ*, represents a historically grounded configuration of Sunni authority within the Saudi religious context of the late twentieth century. Rather than constituting a peripheral Hijazi anomaly or a departure from Sunni tradition, the Mecca Connection was rooted in Mecca's longstanding role as a center of Islamic learning and connected scholars across the Ḥaramayn, Ḥaḍramawt, Egypt, and the Levant. Its significance lies in the combination of pedagogical, genealogical, and transregional network resources through which scholarly authority associated with Mecca could be transmitted, legitimized, and reproduced across regions.

The study further demonstrates how these inherited resources were articulated under conditions of increasing institutional centralization. Al-Mālikī's *Manhaj al-Salaf* provided a methodological language through which inherited Sunni positions could be articulated through the Qur'ān, ḥadīth, established scholarship, and the authority of the Salaf. His treatment of contested practices such as pilgrimage, tawassul, and devotional ethics shows how alternative interpretations could be formulated within a shared Sunni epistemological vocabulary rather than through a rejection of the broader Sunni tradition. At the institutional level, Saudi religious rulings and related interventions connected theological judgments concerning al-Mālikī to the regulation of teaching, public communication, and access to recognized religious spaces. The case therefore demonstrates that the contest over religious authority involved both competing interpretations and the institutional conditions governing their public articulation.

The study has several limitations. It relies on a selected corpus of al-Mālikī's writings rather than his complete published oeuvre, while Saudi institutional sources are unevenly available, with some evidence preserved through later reproductions or published statements rather than comprehensive archival records. The analysis is also focused historically and geographically on al-Mālikī, Mecca, and the Saudi religious context of the late twentieth century. These limitations caution against extending the findings to all forms of Saudi religious authority or to Sunni scholarly networks beyond the scope examined here. Within these boundaries, however, the al-Mālikī case provides evidence for the reorganization of inherited scholarly resources under conditions of institutional centralization.

The broader theoretical implication is that state centralization does not necessarily eliminate pre-existing forms of religious authority. Rather, it can compel traditional authorities to reorganize the sources through which their legitimacy is articulated, the networks through which knowledge circulates, and the methodological language through which their claims are expressed. The Mecca case therefore complicates linear accounts of Islamic modernization that describe a transition from dispersed scholarly networks to centralized state institutions. Centralization and continuity can operate simultaneously: institutional regulation may narrow the conditions under which religious authority is publicly exercised without neces-

sarily eliminating the historical networks, genealogies, and interpretive resources through which alternative legitimacy is sustained. The Mecca Connection thus provides a lens for understanding modern Sunni intellectual history as a process of institutional regulation and adaptive reorganization rather than simple institutional replacement.

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