

Asma Afsaruddin's Contextual Hermeneutics of The Discourse on *Jihād* and Leadership in Islam



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Abstract: Abstrak: This article examines Asma Afsaruddin's historical-contextual interpretive framework for ḥadīths on *jihād* and Islamic political leadership as a response to the biases of textualist-literalist readings. This qualitative library study focuses on two of Afsaruddin's principal works: *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (2013) and *The First Muslims: History and Memory* (2008). The data are analyzed through content analysis and critical discourse analysis in three stages: semantic inference from the texts; tracing asbāb al-wurūd and medieval sociohistorical contexts; and comparing interpretations from the early (formative) and imperial periods. The findings reveal three principal points. First, at the level of semantic analysis, Afsaruddin argues that the term *jihād* in early traditions carries approximately 70 percent nonmilitary meanings—especially moral and spiritual striving—before narrowing toward a predominantly militaristic sense during the Umayyad and 'Abbāsīd periods. Second, in the field of tafsīr, Afsaruddin documents how medieval jurists' claims of naskh concerning peace-oriented passages—including their treatment of Q 9:5—contributed to distorted interpretations of ḥadīths on interreligious relations. Third, with regard to leadership, she recovers early egalitarian traditions centered on shūrā that were later displaced by authoritarian ideologies after the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. This study contributes to contemporary ḥadīth studies by offering a structured historical-methodological model for distinguishing early normative teachings from medieval political constructions without relying on speculative epistemological claims.

Keywords: Asma Afsaruddin; Ḥadīth; *Jihād*; Politics; Progressive Interpretation

Abstrak: Artikel ini menganalisis kerangka interpretasi historis kontekstual Asma Afsaruddin terhadap hadis-hadis jihad dan kepemimpinan politik Islam guna mengatasi bias pembacaan tekstual-literalis. Penelitian kualitatif berbasis kajian pustaka (library research) ini berfokus pada dua karya utama Afsaruddin, yaitu *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (2013) dan *The First Muslims: History and Memory* (2008). Data dianalisis dengan metode analisis isi (content analysis) dan analisis wacana kritis (critical discourse analysis) melalui tiga tahapan: inferensi semantik teks, penelusuran asbab al-wurud dan konteks sosio-historis abad pertengahan, serta komparasi pemaknaan antara diskursus periode awal (formatif) dan periode imperium. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga temuan utama. Pertama, pada level analisis semantik, Afsaruddin membuktikan bahwa kata jihad dalam riwayat-riwayat awal mencakup 70% makna non-militer (perjuangan moral dan spiritual) sebelum makna tersebut menyempit menjadi dominan militeristik pada era Umayyad dan Abbasiyah. Kedua, pada ranah tafsir, Afsaruddin mendokumentasikan bahwa klaim nasakh oleh Fukaha (Ahli Hukum Islam) abad pertengahan atas ayat-ayat perdamaian (seperti QS. 9:5) berimplikasi pada distorsi penafsiran hadis-hadis terkait hubungan interreligius. Ketiga, pada konsep kepemimpinan, Afsaruddin menyoroti kembali riwayat-riwayat egaliter tentang musyawarah (syura) yang tergeser oleh ideologi otoritarianisme pasca-Khulafaur Rasyidin. Penelitian ini berkontribusi memperkaya kajian hadis kontemporer dengan menyediakan model pembacaan historis-metodologis yang terukur untuk membedakan antara ajaran normatif awal dan konstruksi politik abad pertengahan, tanpa harus membuat klaim epistemologis yang spekulatif.

Kata Kunci: Asma Afsaruddin, Hadis, Jihad, Politik, Tafsir Progresif

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Introduction

Contemporary Islamic discourse is often caught in an acute epistemological tension between the authority of sacred texts and the demands of constantly changing social realities. Nowhere is this tension more intense than in debates over *ḥadīth*—the corpus of Prophetic traditions whose position as the second source of Islamic law and theology after the Qur'ān makes it a fiercely contested arena of interpretation. One of the most pressing academic concerns today is the proliferation of scripturalist-literalist readings of the *ḥadīth* corpus, which in turn generate harsh, exclusionary, and militaristic religious discourses.¹

Hadīths concerning *jihād* and politics are frequently reduced in meaning and severed from their sociohistorical roots, allowing extremist groups to deploy them as instruments of legitimation for violence and authoritarian political orders. In such circumstances, *ḥadīth* no longer functions as a source of guidance but becomes a polemical weapon directed against pluralism, democracy, and human rights. The fundamental question, therefore, is whether this hermeneutical rigidity follows logically from the texts themselves or represents a historical construction imposed upon them.

In response to this epistemological impasse, Asma Afsaruddin—an American Muslim scholar of Bangladeshi origin, a professor at Indiana University Bloomington, and an influential voice in contemporary Islamic studies—offers a rigorous and historically grounded hermeneutical approach. Afsaruddin rejects ahistorical readings of *ḥadīth*. She consistently argues that many severe interpretations of *jihād* and politics do not represent the authentic ethos of the early formative period of Islam. Rather, they emerged from legal and exegetical thought under medieval Islamic empires, including the Umayyad, 'Abbāsid, and Mamluk regimes, which required theological legitimation for military expansion and political centralization.²

Previous studies have generally examined Afsaruddin's thought through the lens of gender equality or have merely mapped her contribution to modern Islamic theological discourse.³ These studies, however, display significant methodological limitations. M. Alfatih Suryadilaga's 2018 study analyzes Afsaruddin's gender hermeneutics through a descriptive qualitative method, but it largely maps women's rights in the public sphere without examining the methodology of *ḥadīth* interpretation that underpins her conclusions.⁴ Similarly, Nur Kholis and M. Dahlan's 2021 discussion of Afsaruddin within modern *kalām* discourse employs a broad descriptive-qualitative approach and therefore does not clearly demonstrate the epistemological relationship between her theological thought and her engagement with

¹ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*, Oneworld Publications (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 32–35. See also: John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007), 17–20.

² Asma Afsaruddin, *Contemporary Issues in Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 18–20. See also her analysis in Asma Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5–12.

³ For an example of scholarship addressing the gender dimension, see: Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'ān, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006). For a study of Afsaruddin's modern *kalām* thought, see Muhammad Syahrur, *Dialektika Teks dan Konteks dalam Studi Hadis* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2019), 45.

⁴ M. Alfatih Suryadilaga, "Afsaruddin and Her Hermeneutics on Gender Issues in Hadith," *Musawa Studi Islam and Gender* 17, no. 1 (2018): 18–25.

ḥadīth criticism.⁵ These studies also fail to map Afsaruddin's primary works systematically or to examine the historical-contextual analytical instruments through which she neutralizes—or “tames”—rigid readings of political and *jihād*-related ḥadīths. This article addresses that research gap. Its novelty lies in a systematic analysis of Afsaruddin's methodology for deconstructing scripturalist readings of *jihād* and politics and for returning ḥadīth texts to their ethical-historical matrix without neglecting the Islamic intellectual heritage (*turāth*).

More specifically, this article has three objectives: first, to identify and analyze the epistemology of Asma Afsaruddin's hermeneutics, particularly her use of a historical-semantic approach to ḥadīth; second, to explain how she reinterprets ḥadīths on *jihād* from a discourse of *qitāl* (physical combat) toward an ethos of ethical-spiritual striving; and third, to describe how she reconstructs the meanings of *jihād* and political authority through a historical analysis of early Islamic sources.

Method

This study is qualitative library research. This methodological choice reflects the nature of the object under investigation—ideas and texts—which is most appropriately explored through close analysis of written works. As Creswell emphasizes, qualitative research seeks to understand the meanings constructed by subjects or texts within their historical and social contexts rather than merely measuring variables numerically.⁶

The primary sources comprise Afsaruddin's major works, including: (1) *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2013); (2) *Contemporary Issues in Islam* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015); (3) *The First Muslims: History and Memory* (Oneworld, 2007); and (4) her articles published in major international handbooks and academic journals. Secondary sources include relevant works by scholars of ḥadīth, hermeneutics, and contemporary Islamic thought.

The data are analyzed by combining content analysis with historical hermeneutics. Content analysis identifies recurring themes, arguments, and hermeneutical strategies in Afsaruddin's writings. Historical hermeneutics situates her thought within the broader development of ḥadīth studies and Islamic intellectual history. The analytical procedure consists of: (1) intensive and systematic reading of the primary sources; (2) thematic description of Afsaruddin's arguments; (3) contextualization and epistemological assessment of her critique of literalist reasoning; and (4) critical conclusions concerning the implications of her thought for contemporary ḥadīth studies and Islamic studies.

Results and Discussion

Afsaruddin's Epistemology: Historical-Semantic Analysis as a Hermeneutical Instrument

Afsaruddin's distinctive reading of ḥadīth does not rest solely on verification of the *sanad*—the chain of transmission prioritized in the classical *muḥaddithūn* tradition. Instead,

⁵ Nur Kholis and M. Dahlan, “Kalam Modern dalam Pemikiran Islam Kontemporer: Studi atas Pemikiran Asma Afsaruddin,” *Teologia* 32, no. 2 (2021): 189–208.

⁶ J.W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2014), 189. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2011), 3–5.

she directs analytical attention toward a domain that she regards as more frequently neglected: historical-semantic analysis of the *matn*, or textual content, of a *ḥadīth*. This methodological choice is not without precedent; it continues traditions of Arabic philology and historical hermeneutics that developed in Western academic scholarship and in certain reformist currents of Islamic thought.⁷

Afsaruddin's fundamental epistemological premise is a sharp, almost dichotomous distinction between two broad phases of Islamic civilization: "early historical Islam," or the formative period encompassing the first and early second Islamic centuries, and "imperial Islam," beginning in the third Islamic century and continuing thereafter. In her account, the formative generations' understandings of key theological and legal concepts were flexible, multidimensional, and rich in ethical-moral nuance.⁸ This distinction, however, must be qualified by recurrent conflicts between scholars and rulers and by the complexity of scholarly transmission across dynastic and *madhhab* boundaries.⁹ Studies of the formation of the Islamic legal schools demonstrate that medieval jurisprudence was not a uniform entity serving imperial interests, but a plural field of intellectual contestation marked by sharp disagreements, even within individual schools. The tradition of *al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-al-nahy 'an al-munkar* likewise shows that scholars did not invariably submit to rulers; some made opposition to political arbitrariness part of their scholarly identity. Such evidence weakens the impression that "imperial Islam" constituted a single bloc that systematically engineered interpretation for the state.¹⁰

Afsaruddin develops her argument primarily through two works, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (2013) and *The First Muslims: History and Memory* (2008), using content analysis and critical discourse analysis that emphasize *matn* rather than *sanad*. This procedure enables her to trace historical-semantic shifts in meaning. At the same time, it makes the study heavily dependent on her own selection of the corpus—namely, which *ḥadīths* and *tafsīr* materials are treated as representative of the formative period and which are taken to represent the imperial period. The present article largely accepts that selection without independently reexamining the Arabic primary sources upon which Afsaruddin relies; consequently, its validity depends substantially on the reliability of the synthesis provided by a single scholar.¹¹

⁷ Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*, 5–8. This periodization forms the principal epistemological framework of Afsaruddin's intellectual project and is also outlined in Asma Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims: History and Memory* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 1–5.

⁸ Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims: History and Memory*, 42. Afsaruddin describes this phenomenon as a 'retrojective construction': medieval categories are projected backward as though they were original Islamic doctrines. See also Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 50–55.

⁹ Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 55–90. See also Afsaruddin's discussion of retrojective construction in Afsaruddin Asma Afsaruddin, "The First Muslims," n.d., 42.

¹⁰ Christopher Melchert, *The Formation of the Sunni Schools of Law, 9th-10th Centuries C.E* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1–32. demonstrates significant internal diversity in the formation of the medieval Islamic legal schools.

¹¹ Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament*, 45–60. on the methodological risks of reading medieval jurisprudence solely as an instrument of the state without independently verifying the primary sources.

Afsaruddin describes this phenomenon as a “retrojective construction”: medieval categories and interests are projected backward and presented as though they had constituted original Islamic doctrine since the Prophet’s lifetime. In her account, this reductive interpretation was later adopted uncritically by contemporary puritan and radical movements claiming to return to the *salaf*, although they were in fact drawing on classical legal products shaped by political interests.¹²

The epistemological implication of this approach is far-reaching: any reading of *ḥadīth* that disregards the historical context of its production and the successive recontextualizations of its meaning is incomplete and potentially misleading. In other words, genuinely returning to an authentic Islam—a claim often advanced by literalists—requires the courage to move beyond the hegemony of medieval interpretations that have come to be identified with “tradition” itself.¹³

Reframing *Jihād* Texts: From *Qitāl* to Ethical-Spiritual Striving

Perhaps the most significant dimension of Afsaruddin’s intellectual project is her attempt to dismantle the assumption that *jihād* is synonymous with offensive “holy war.” Through careful philological study of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabic vocabulary, together with a critical analysis of early *ḥadīth* and *tafsīr* corpora, Afsaruddin argues that the central meaning of *jihād* in the formative period was striving for excellence: exerting one’s utmost effort to attain moral goodness, social piety, and the serious pursuit of knowledge.¹⁴

In her major work *Striving in the Path of God*, Afsaruddin systematically traces the semantic evolution of the word *jihād* across pre-Qur’ānic, Qur’ānic, and post-Qur’ānic textual sources. She finds that its semantic root signifies exertion or strenuous effort without an inherent connotation of violence. In the Qur’ān, *jihād* and its derivatives occur more than forty times, and she maintains that most early usages refer to internal struggle against the lower self and morally destructive inclinations.¹⁵

One of Afsaruddin’s strongest arguments is her deconstruction of the theory of *naskh* (abrogation), which has often served as a principal instrument of literalist interpretation. Literalist and *jihādī* groups frequently claim that the so-called “sword verses” (*āyāt al-sayf*), particularly Q 9:5 and 9:36, were revealed later and abrogated all verses and *ḥadīths*

¹² Asma Afsaruddin, “*Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 112. The cited *ḥadīth* is transmitted by al-Tirmidhī (w. 279 H), *Sunan al-Tirmidhī, Kitāb Faḍā’il al-Jihād*, no. 1621., n.d.

¹³ Afsaruddin, *Contemporary Issues in Islam*, 92–95. This concept of *shūrā* is further discussed in relation to Habermasian deliberative democracy by Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 30–45.

¹⁴ The *ḥadīth* is reported by al-Bukhārī (no. 4425) from Abū Bakrah. Its historical *asbāb al-wurūd* relate to the Battle of the Camel (36/656). See Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 49–61; Afsaruddin, *Contemporary Issues in Islam*, 102–4.

¹⁵ See the epistemological critique of this interpretive hegemony in Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1–11. Afsaruddin acknowledges the influence of this framework in several of her critical works.

commanding patience, tolerance, and nonviolent striving. On the basis of this claim, they construct a theological justification for unrestricted violence.¹⁶

Afsaruddin challenges this hermeneutical construction from within the Islamic tradition. She argues that respected early authorities, including Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and other members of the *tābi'ūn*, did not endorse such hermeneutical radicalism. The doctrine of sweeping abrogation used to erase the Qur'ān's messages of peace, she maintains, was a medieval juridical development rather than a consensus of the *salaf*. Even Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d. 595/1198), commonly associated with Islamic rationalism, questioned arbitrary applications of *naskh* in the jurisprudence of warfare.¹⁷

Afsaruddin further brings to the fore a number of “gentler” *ḥadīths* that were systematically marginalized in the literature of warfare. One of the reports she cites most frequently states that “the true *mujāhid* is one who struggles against the lower self” (reported by al-Tirmidhī). She also highlights traditions that identify *jihād* through speech, writing, and the heart, thereby presenting a spectrum of striving that extends far beyond the military dimension.¹⁸

The *Ḥadīth Corpus on Jihād: Texts, Isnād Status, and Variants*. The following five reports are selected because they form the backbone of Afsaruddin's argument that the semantic range of *jihād* is substantially broader than *qitāl* alone.¹⁹

1) The *Ḥadīth* of the *Mujāhid* Who Struggles against the Lower Self

One of the *ḥadīths* used by Afsaruddin to demonstrate that *jihād* cannot be reduced to warfare (*qitāl*) is a report explaining the true character of a *mujāhid*.

حَدَّثَنَا عَلِيُّ بْنُ إِسْحَاقَ، قَالَ: حَدَّثَنَا عَبْدُ اللَّهِ، قَالَ: أَنْبَأَنَا لَيْثٌ، قَالَ: أَخْبَرَنِي أَبُو هَانِيٍّ الْخَوْلَانِيُّ، عَنْ عَمْرِو بْنِ مَالِكٍ الْجَنْبِيِّ، قَالَ: حَدَّثَنِي فَضَالَةُ بْنُ عُبَيْدٍ، قَالَ: قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فِي حَجَّةِ الْوَدَاعِ: «أَلَا أُخْبِرُكُمْ بِالْمُؤْمِنِ؟ مَنْ أَمِنَهُ النَّاسُ عَلَى أَمْوَالِهِمْ وَأَنْفُسِهِمْ، وَالْمُسْلِمُ مَنْ سَلِمَ النَّاسُ مِنْ لِسَانِهِ وَيَدِهِ، وَالْمُجَاهِدُ مَنْ جَاهَدَ نَفْسَهُ فِي طَاعَةِ اللَّهِ، وَالْمُهَاجِرُ مَنْ هَجَرَ الْخَطَايَا وَالذُّنُوبَ»

Translation: ‘Alī ibn Ishāq related to us, saying: ‘Abd Allāh [ibn al-Mubārak] related to us, saying: al-Layth [ibn Sa’d] informed us, saying: Abū Hānī’ al-Khawlanī informed me, from ‘Amr ibn Mālik al-Junabī, who said: Faḍālāh ibn ‘Ubayd related to me, saying: The Messenger of God said during the Farewell Pilgrimage: “Shall I tell you who the believer is? He is one from whom people feel secure regarding their property and their lives. The Muslim is one from whose tongue and hand people are safe. The *mujāhid* is one who struggles against the lower self in obedience to God, and the *muhājir* is one who abandons sins and transgressions.”²⁰

¹⁶ Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*, 15–22. Cf. . Michael Cook, , *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 22–50.

¹⁷ Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*, 20. n. 14. See also Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 1–15.

¹⁸ Afsaruddin analyzes Ibn Rushd's position in the context of Islamic juridical pluralism. See Afsaruddin, *Contemporary Issues in Islam*, 75. Oliver Leaman, *Averroes and His Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

¹⁹ Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*, 25–40. contains a more detailed discussion of the following *jihād ḥadīth* corpus.

²⁰ al-Tirmidhī (w. 279 H), *Sunan al-Tirmidhī, Kitāb Fada'il al-Jihad*, n.d.

This ḥadīth is transmitted by al-Tirmidhī in *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, *Kitāb Faḍā'il al-Jihād* (no. 1621), through the route of Faḍālah ibn 'Ubayd. Al-Tirmidhī classifies it as ḥasan gharīb: an acceptable proof, although it is transmitted through a single route and therefore lacks the strength of mutawātir reports or traditions supported by numerous chains. Variants of the report contain differences of wording (*ikhtilāf al-lafẓ*). Some add the phrase *fī sabīl Allāh* after *nafsahu*, while the version in al-Tirmidhī reads only *fī tā'at Allāh*. These variants do not alter the report's central meaning, for both emphasize that disciplined struggle against the lower self constitutes a form of *jihād* undertaken in pursuit of God's pleasure.

Afsaruddin treats this report as textual evidence that, from the earliest Islamic period, *jihād* was understood to possess spiritual, moral, and ethical dimensions alongside its military dimension. In her view, variants transmitted through several routes indicate that the idea of *jihād al-nafs* was known and circulated among early transmitters; it therefore cannot be dismissed as a later development or merely as a construction of the Sufi tradition. The report thus supports her argument that *jihād* in the Prophetic traditions is multidimensional, encompassing an internal struggle to sustain obedience to God as well as an external struggle that may, under particular conditions, take the form of *qitāl*.²¹

2) The Ḥadīth of the Lesser *Jihād* and the Greater *Jihād* reads as follows:

قَدِمْتُمْ خَيْرَ مَقْدَمٍ، وَقَدِمْتُمْ مِنَ الْجِهَادِ الْأَصْغَرِ إِلَى الْجِهَادِ الْأَكْبَرِ. قَالُوا: وَمَا الْجِهَادُ الْأَكْبَرُ؟ قَالَ: مُجَاهَدَةُ الْعَبْدِ هَوَاهُ

Translation: "You have returned in the best manner, and you have returned from the lesser *jihād* to the greater *jihād*." They asked, "What is the greater *jihād*?" He replied, "The servant's struggle against his lower self."²²

The report is attributed to Jābir ibn 'Abd Allāh through the following chain of transmission:

أخبرنا علي بن أحمد بن عبدان، أنبأنا أحمد بن عبيد، حدثنا تميم، حدثنا عيسى بن إبراهيم، حدثنا يحيى بن يعلى، عن ليث، عن عطاء، عن جابر بن عبد الله رضي الله عنه قال: قدم على رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم قوم غزاة، فقال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: «قدمتم خير مقدم، وقدمتم من الجهاد الأصغر إلى الجهاد الأكبر». قالوا: وما الجهاد الأكبر؟ قال: «مجاهدة العبد هواه».²³

This report is transmitted by al-Bayhaqī in *al-Zuhd al-Kabīr* through Jābir ibn 'Abd Allāh. After narrating it, however, al-Bayhaqī states: *hādhā isnādun fīhi ḍa'f* ("this chain contains weakness"). The same report is also mentioned by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī in *Tārīkh Baghdād*. Another highly popular wording reads:

«رجعنا من الجهاد الأصغر إلى الجهاد الأكبر». قالوا: وما الجهاد الأكبر؟ قال: «جهاد القلب».

²¹ al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, *Kitāb Faḍā'il al-Jihād*, no. 1621, n.d.; cf. Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*, 30–32, on the textual variants of this report.

²² Abū al-Qāsim al-Bayhaqī, *al-Zuhd al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), ḥadīth no. 373, accessed through al-Maktabah al-Shāmilah.

²³ Abu al-Qasim Al-Baihaqi, *al-Zuhd al-Kabīr*.

Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī explains in *Tasdīd al-Qaws* that this wording became well known among the public but was in fact a statement of Ibrāhīm ibn Abī ‘Ablah, as recorded in al-Kunā by al-Nasā’ī, rather than a sound Prophetic ḥadīth. Al-‘Irāqī, in *Takhrīj Aḥādīth al-Iḥyā’*, attributes the report to al-Bayhaqī through Jābir and confirms the weakness of its chain. Al-Suyūṭī likewise cites the version transmitted by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī—“You have returned in the best manner and have returned from the lesser *jihād* to the greater *jihād*”—ending with the Prophet’s answer, “the servant’s struggle against his lower self.” Nevertheless, the report does not attain the status of *ṣaḥīḥ* because of weaknesses in its chain.²⁴

This report is not found in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī or Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, and its chains include several transmitters regarded as weak by ḥadīth critics, among them Yaḥyā ibn Ya‘lā, Layth ibn Abī Sulaym, and ‘Isā ibn Ibrāhīm. Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī therefore also affirms that its chain is not sound.

Afsaruddin explicitly acknowledges the weakness of this *isnād*, but she argues that the report’s popularity and broad reception in Sufi traditions and among Muslim communities constitute important sociohistorical evidence. Its reception demonstrates that the notion of spiritual *jihād*, or the struggle against the lower self, developed and became culturally embedded in Islamic intellectual history, even though the report’s chain is considered weak by the standards of *ḥadīth* criticism.²⁵

3) The Ḥadīth on Speaking Truth before an Unjust Ruler

حَدَّثَنَا يَزِيدُ يَعْنِي ابْنَ هَارُونَ، أَخْبَرَنَا إِسْرَائِيلُ، حَدَّثَنَا مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ جُحَادَةَ، عَنْ عَطِيَّةِ الْعَوْفِيِّ، عَنْ أَبِي سَعِيدٍ الْخُدْرِيِّ، قَالَ: قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ﷺ: «أَفْضَلُ الْجِهَادِ كَلِمَةُ عَدْلٍ عِنْدَ سُلْطَانٍ جَائِرٍ أَوْ أَمِيرٍ جَائِرٍ

Translation: Yazīd ibn Hārūn related to us; Isrā’īl informed us; Muḥammad ibn Juḥadah related to us, from ‘Aṭīyyah al-‘Awfī, from Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī, who said: The Messenger of God said, “The most excellent *jihād* is a word of justice spoken before an unjust sovereign or an unjust ruler” (Sunan Abī Dāwūd, no. 4344).²⁶

This ḥadīth is transmitted by Abū Dāwūd in Sunan Abī Dāwūd. Related reports also occur in Kitāb al-Malāḥim, in al-Tirmidhī’s Sunan under Kitāb al-Fitan, and in Ibn Mājah’s Sunan under *Kitāb al-Fitan*, with minor differences of wording. Some versions use *kalimat ‘adlin* (“a word of justice”), while others use *kalimat ḥaqqin* (“a word of truth”). Scholars generally treat these as variants that do not alter the report’s central meaning, since both expressions convey honesty, justice, and the obligation to uphold truth before abusive power.

Afsaruddin invokes this tradition as important textual evidence that early Islamic ḥadīth discourse did not understand *jihād* exclusively as armed warfare (*qitāl*), but also included moral, ethical, and sociopolitical dimensions. In her interpretation, the courage to speak truth, correct wrongdoing, and uphold justice before an unjust ruler constitutes a form

²⁴ Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma‘rūf, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2002). Accessed through al-Maktabah al-Shāmīlah.

²⁵ al-Bayhaqī, al-Zuhd al-Kabīr, No. 384, through the route of Yaḥyā ibn al-‘Alā’ al-Bajalī. Cf. Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Takhrīj Aḥādīth al-Kashshāf* (Riyadh: Dar Ibn Khuzaymah, 1994), 110–12; and Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*, 34–37.

²⁶ Muḥammad Ashraf ibn Amīr, *‘Awn al-Ma‘būd Sharḥ Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1415).

of *jihād* strongly grounded in the ḥadīth sources. The report indicates that the early Islamic tradition recognized *jihād* as a moral struggle directed toward *al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-al-nahy 'an al-munkar*, the protection of justice, and the social responsibility to remind rulers to govern in accordance with the principles of the Sharī'ah and justice.²⁷

4) The Ḥadīth of *Jihād* through Devotion to One's Parents

Another report used to establish the broader meaning of *jihād* concerns the obligation of devotion to one's parents. It demonstrates that *jihād* does not invariably mean participation in warfare (*qitāl*), but may consist of serving one's parents when that duty takes legal and ethical priority.

حَدَّثَنَا آدَمُ، حَدَّثَنَا شُعْبَةُ، حَدَّثَنَا حَبِيبُ بْنُ أَبِي ثَابِتٍ، قَالَ: سَمِعْتُ أَبَا الْعَبَّاسِ الشَّاعِرَ وَكَانَ لَا يُشَكُّ فِي حَدِيثِهِ، قَالَ: سَمِعْتُ عَبْدَ اللَّهِ بْنَ عَمْرٍو رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمَا، يَقُولُ: جَاءَ رَجُلٌ إِلَى النَّبِيِّ فَاسْتَأْذَنَهُ فِي الْجِهَادِ، فَقَالَ: "أَخِي وَالِدَاكَ"، قَالَ: نَعَمْ، قَالَ: "فَفِيهِمَا فَجَاهِدْ"

Translation: Ādam related to us; Shu'bah related to us; Ḥabīb ibn Abī Thābit said: "I heard Abū al-'Abbās al-Shā'ir, whose reliability in ḥadīth was not questioned, say: I heard 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Amr, may God be pleased with them both, say: A man came to the Prophet and asked permission to participate in *jihād*. The Prophet asked, 'Are your parents still alive?' He replied, 'Yes.' The Prophet said, 'Then strive in serving them.'"

This report appears in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *Kitāb al-Jihād wa-al-Siyar*, and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *Kitāb al-Birr wa-al-Ṣilah wa-al-Ādāb*, and is classified as *ṣaḥīḥ muttafaq 'alayh*—its soundness is agreed upon by al-Bukhārī and Muslim. The two collections differ slightly in the details of the exchange: Muslim's version provides a more extended question concerning the parents, whereas al-Bukhārī's version is more concise. Here, *jihād* is not limited to warfare but includes forms of devotion that uphold Islamic values, such as fulfilling familial obligations, maintaining social responsibility, and giving priority to the common good. The report therefore provides textual evidence that *qitāl* was not the only manifestation of *jihād* in the early Islamic tradition. It was one form whose exercise depended on particular circumstances and legal conditions, while nonphysical forms of *jihād* enjoyed equally strong support in sound ḥadīths.²⁸

5) The Ḥadīth Prohibiting the Killing of Noncombatants in Qitāl

حَدَّثَنَا أَبُو الْوَلِيدِ الطَّيَالِسِيُّ، حَدَّثَنَا عُمَرُ بْنُ الْمُرْقَعِ بْنِ صَيْفِي بْنِ رَبَاحٍ، قَالَ: حَدَّثَنِي أَبِي، عَنْ جَدِّهِ رَبَاحِ بْنِ رَيْعٍ، قَالَ: كُنَّا مَعَ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ ﷺ فِي غَزْوَةٍ، فَرَأَى النَّاسَ مُجْتَمِعِينَ عَلَى شَيْءٍ، فَبَعَثَ رَجُلًا، فَقَالَ: «انْظُرْ عَلَامَ اجْتَمَعَ هَؤُلَاءِ؟» فَجَاءَ، فَقَالَ: عَلَى امْرَأَةٍ قَتِيلٍ، فَقَالَ: «مَا كَانَتْ هَذِهِ لِتُقَاتِلَ». قَالَ: وَعَلَى الْمُقَدِّمَةِ خَالِدُ بْنُ الْوَلِيدِ، فَبَعَثَ رَجُلًا، فَقَالَ: «قُلْ لِحَالِدٍ: لَا يَقْتُلَنَّ امْرَأَةً وَلَا عَسِيفًا.»

Translation: Abū al-Walīd al-Ṭayālīsī related to us; 'Umar ibn al-Muraqqa' ibn Ṣayfī ibn Rabāḥ related to us, saying: My father related to me from his grandfather, Rabāḥ ibn Rabī', who said: We were with the Messenger of God on a military expedition when he saw people

²⁷ Abū Dāwūd, Sunan Abī Dāwūd, Kitāb al-Malāḥim; al-Tirmidhī, Sunan al-Tirmidhī, Kitāb al-Fitan; Ibn Mājah, Sunan Ibn Mājah, Kitāb al-Fitan. Cf. Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*, 38–40.

²⁸ al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-Jihād wa-al-Siyar; Muslim, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Kitāb al-Birr wa-al-Ṣilah wa-al-Ādāb. Cf. Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims: History and Memory*, 55–58.

gathered around something. He sent a man and said, "Go and see why they have gathered." The man returned and said, "They are gathered around a woman who has been killed." The Messenger of God said, "She was not one who fought." Rabāḥ continued: Khālīd ibn al-Walīd was commanding the vanguard, so the Messenger of God sent a man with the instruction: "Tell Khālīd that he must never kill a woman or an 'asīf [a hired worker or servant]."

A number of reports prohibit the killing of women, children, and monks during warfare, as recorded in *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, *Kitāb al-Jihād*, and *Mālik ibn Anas's al-Muwatta'*, *Kitāb al-Jihād*, *Bāb al-Nahy 'an Qatl al-Nisā' wa-al-Ṣibyān fī al-Ghazw*. The corpus also includes instructions attributed to Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq when dispatching troops to Syria. Taken together, these traditions indicate that qitāl in early Islam was not regarded as unlimited violence but as an action constrained by ethical principles and humanitarian values. The prohibition against killing women, children, and others not directly participating in combat underscores that qitāl was not intended for indiscriminate destruction or aggressive territorial expansion. Rather, it was to protect human life and ensure that force was directed only against those actually engaged in armed conflict. Afsaruddin understands these reports as evidence of the breadth and diversity of *jihād* in Islam: *qitāl* is one manifestation whose application is limited by justice, proportionality, and respect for the rights of noncombatants.²⁹

These five reports show that Afsaruddin's ḥadīth corpus on *jihād* is not uniform in isnād status: it includes reports classified as ḥasan gharīb, ḥasan, ṣaḥīḥ muttafaq 'alayh, and explicitly weak. This diversity is important because Afsaruddin does not treat all "gentler" traditions as equal. She distinguishes reports that serve as foundations for normative argument—such as the sound ḥadīth on devotion to parents—from reports that function primarily as evidence of the cultural reception of an idea—such as the weak but socially widespread report concerning the greater *jihād*.³⁰

Afsaruddin does not deny the existence of qitāl (physical combat) in Islamic law. She explicitly acknowledges that the Qur'ān and Sunnah contain regulations concerning warfare. She nevertheless restores qitāl to what she considers its proper proportion: it is one, but not the principal, manifestation of *jihād*, and it is fundamentally defensive rather than offensive. Qitāl is permitted only under restricted conditions—to defend against aggression, protect persecuted communities, or restore violated justice. It is neither an instrument of territorial expansion nor a means of coercing belief.³¹

Through this approach, Afsaruddin reframes severe doctrines of *jihād* as a progressive civilizational ethos: intellectual striving to uphold truth, social advocacy to protect vulnerable people, and ethical commitment to a life of integrity. She regards this paradigm as both more historically authentic and more relevant to Muslims living as minorities in plural societies and to those confronting poverty, ignorance, and structural injustice.

²⁹ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, *Kitāb al-Jihād*; Mālik ibn Anas, *al-Muwatta'*, *Kitāb al-Jihād*, *Bāb al-Nahy 'an Qatl al-Nisā' wa-al-Ṣibyān fī al-Ghazw*. Cf. Afsaruddin, *Contemporary Issues in Islam*, 80–83.

³⁰ Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*, 40–45, on distinctions among isnād grades and the argumentative function of each report in the *jihād* corpus

³¹ Amina Wadud, *Qur'ān and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1–10; and Afsaruddin, *Contemporary Issues in Islam*, 110–15.

Reconstructing Authority: *Jihād* and Political Authority through a Historical Reading of Early Islamic Sources

If *jihād* constitutes the first domain dominated by militaristic interpretation, politics is the second domain in which religious texts have frequently been used to legitimate unaccountable power. Classical Islamic political thought was significantly shaped by the genre of *aḥkām al-sultāniyyah*, which extensively cited *ḥadīths* to demand absolute obedience (*tā'ah*) to rulers—even tyrannical rulers—and to restrict women's political participation.³²

Afsaruddin challenges these patriarchal and authoritarian constructions through the same methodology that she applies to *jihād*. Regarding political leadership, she argues that the earliest Islamic political model did not recognize an “authoritarian theocratic state” or an absolute monarchy inherited from Roman and Persian traditions. Instead, she describes the leadership of the early Muslim community as resting on two principal foundations: egalitarianism—equality before law and God—and *shūrā*, collective consultation involving communal participation in public decision-making.³³

Other philological studies of the vocabulary of *jihād* in pre-Islamic and early Islamic materials indicate that connotations of armed struggle were already present in relatively early textual layers and did not arise exclusively from the later interests of the Umayyad and 'Abbāsīd empires. Such findings do not necessarily invalidate Afsaruddin's thesis, but they show that a neat periodization separating the spiritual meaning of the formative period from the militaristic meaning of the imperial period requires more careful testing rather than being treated as an established fact.³⁴

The most dramatic and frequently discussed case in Afsaruddin's treatment of political authority is the *ḥadīth* often invoked to exclude women from political leadership: “A people who entrust their affairs to a woman will never prosper” (reported by al-Bukhārī from Abū Bakrah). Because it appears as a *ṣaḥīḥ* report in al-Bukhārī's collection, this *ḥadīth* has functioned for centuries as a theological veto against women's leadership.³⁵

Interpretation of this report, however, requires careful distinction between two historical contexts. The first is the Prophet's original statement, uttered as a situational response upon hearing that the throne of the Sasanian Empire had passed to Princess Būrān after the execution of Khusraw II.³⁶ On this reading, the statement was a political prediction concerning the collapse of a tyrannical Persian monarchy rather than a universal theological ruling. The second context concerns the later use of the report by its transmitter, Abū Bakrah

³² Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam Doktrin dan Peradaban* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1992), 512–15; and Azyumardi Azra, *Islam in the Indonesian World: An Account of Institutional Formation* (Bandung: Mizan, 2006), 22–30.

³³ Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims: History and Memory*, 165–70. This argument is consistent with Tariq Ramadan's conclusion in *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 35–50.

³⁴ Cf. Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17–52, which demonstrates that military connotations of *jihād* were present in relatively early textual layers.

³⁵ Afsaruddin, *Contemporary Issues in Islam*, 200–210. See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 218–30, on the relevance of Islamic ethical values to global civilization.

³⁶ Ibn Ḥajar Al-ʿAsqalān, *Fath al-Bārī bi Syarḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Kairo: Dār al-Rayyān li al-Turāth, 1986), Vol. 13, 53–55.

al-Thaqafi. Following a critical approach associated with Fatima Mernissi, Afsaruddin applies historical contextualization, or *asbāb al-wurūd*, to Abū Bakrah's recollection and retransmission of the report decades after the Prophet's death during the highly charged context of the Battle of the Camel (36/656), when 'Ā'ishah led a political faction against the caliph 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Abū Bakrah invoked his memory of the Prophet's statement to legitimate his personal decision not to participate in the turmoil of the civil war.³⁷

Afsaruddin argues cautiously that, although the report is regarded as authentic within the ḥadīth tradition, its context concerned criticism of the tyrannical absolute monarchy of Kisrā's daughter in Persia—the political referent known to the Prophet—or, more specifically, a situational comment later redeployed during the Battle of the Camel and then disproportionately generalized into an eternal universal prohibition. For Afsaruddin, treating it as a universal proclamation that permanently bars women from leadership constitutes a serious methodological violation of responsible hermeneutics.

In gender hermeneutics, scholars such as Amina Wadud and Kecia Ali employ somewhat different methodological strategies from Afsaruddin. They focus, for example, on reconstructing the meaning of Qur'ānic texts directly or on structural critiques of family law rather than concentrating primarily on the historical contextualization of *ḥadīth*. Afsaruddin's framework of *shūrā* may also be brought into conversation with theories of deliberative democracy in order to assess how far analogies between classical consultation and modern democracy are conceptually defensible rather than merely asserted in broad terms.³⁸

Through this reconstruction, Afsaruddin aligns the Qur'ān's and Sunnah's values of justice with the principles of modern citizenship. Ḥadīth no longer functions as a barrier to progress but as an ethical foundation for participatory, inclusive, and accountable politics—a political vision that she regards as more faithful to the ethos of early Islam than authoritarian models advanced in the name of tradition.

Relevance and Implications: Afsaruddin's Hermeneutics in a Global Context

The significance of Afsaruddin's thought extends beyond the academy. In a global context marked by the resurgence of religious extremism, Islamophobia, and increasingly heated debates over Islam and modernity, her hermeneutical proposal has considerable practical relevance. It demonstrates that committed Muslim piety and critical intellectual inquiry need not be contradictory: fidelity to sacred texts and commitment to universal human values can—and should—operate together.

Afsaruddin's approach also has particular resonance in Indonesia, the country with the world's largest Muslim population, where debates among traditionalist, modernist, and fundamentalist currents remain intense. Indonesia's rich Islamic traditions, represented by organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, have long developed contextual approaches that resonate with the spirit of Afsaruddin's hermeneutics, even when articulated through different vocabularies and methodologies.

³⁷ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (Addison-Wesley: Reading, 1991), 49–61.

³⁸ Wadud, *Qur'ān and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, 1–10. Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'ān, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 1–25.; Sachedina, *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights*, 130–145.

More broadly, Afsaruddin's work opens space for more productive dialogue between Islamic traditions and global humanistic thought. By arguing that democracy, equality, and justice are not merely "Western imports" alien to Islam but are rooted in the formative Islamic ethos, she contributes to the larger project of reconciling civilizations that are often portrayed as inherently opposed.

Conclusion

This study addresses three principal questions: how Asma Afsaruddin's hermeneutical epistemology is constructed; how she reconstructs the meaning of ḥadīths on *jihād* from a discourse of qitāl toward ethical-spiritual striving; and how she reconstructs Islamic political authority through a historical reading of early Islamic sources. Based on an analysis of two of her major works, *Striving in the Path of God* and *The First Muslims*, the study arrives at five conclusions.

First, Afsaruddin's epistemology rests on historical-semantic analysis, emphasizing the diversity of meanings associated with *jihād* from pre-Qur'ānic through post-Qur'ānic periods. It also distinguishes the formative period from the imperial period as a framework for tracing semantic shifts in ḥadīths on *jihād* and leadership. This approach indicates that militaristic meanings were neither the sole nor the dominant meanings of *jihād* in the earliest period, but resulted from a later narrowing during the Umayyad and 'Abbāsīd eras.

Second, historical-semantic analysis proves useful for criticizing the generalization of ḥadīths that underpins literalist readings, including claims of sweeping naskh concerning verses of peace and the universalization of the ḥadīth prohibiting women's leadership. By tracing *asbāb al-wurūd* and the contexts in which reports were later retransmitted, Afsaruddin argues that a number of legal conclusions commonly treated as final resulted from readings severed from the circumstances of their emergence.

Third, methodologically, Afsaruddin's principal strength lies in *matn* criticism and historical contextualization, whereas her engagement with *sanad* criticism is comparatively limited in relation to the classical science of ḥadīth. This is evident in her treatment of the "lesser *jihād* and greater *jihād*" report: she acknowledges the weakness of its chain but continues to use it as sociohistorical evidence for the cultural reception of spiritual *jihād*. This choice is consistent with her argumentative aims, but it also demonstrates that *matn* and *sanad* criticism do not always receive equal weight in her framework.

Fourth, the distinction between formative and imperial periods—Afsaruddin's central analytical framework—is a useful methodological device for separating early normative layers of meaning from medieval juridical constructions. Nevertheless, as studies of the formation of the Islamic legal schools also demonstrate, the legal tradition of the imperial period was not a monolithic bloc uniformly serving the state. It was an internally plural field of intellectual contestation. The two-period division should therefore be treated as a heuristic analytical framework rather than an absolute boundary applicable equally to every medieval Islamic legal and political discourse.

Fifth, Afsaruddin's hermeneutical framework offers a productive model for distinguishing early normative teachings from medieval political constructions. Its application, however, does not automatically resolve all contemporary questions of Islamic

politics, including debates over women's leadership, the limits of *shūrā* in modern political systems, and interreligious relations. These issues require further elaboration beyond the two works examined in this study.

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