

Competing Grounds of Hadith Authority in the Thought of Kassim Ahmad and M. Syuhudi Ismail in Late-Twentieth-Century Malaysia and Indonesia

Kontestasi Landasan Otoritas Hadis dalam Pemikiran Kassim Ahmad dan M. Syuhudi Ismail di Malaysia dan Indonesia pada Akhir Abad ke-20

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Abstract

Modern debates about hadith are often organized through a binary of rejection and defense. This classification identifies polemical positions but obscures the different standards by which prophetic reports become religiously binding. This article compares the parallel but asymmetrical projects of Kassim Ahmad and M. Syuhudi Ismail in late-twentieth-century Malaysia and Indonesia. Using qualitative document analysis, contextual close reading, directed content analysis, and structured, focused comparison, it examines seven primary works across five dimensions: foundational norm, status of hadith, validation procedure, authorized mediator, and normative reach. The analysis finds that Kassim does not deny the possible historical existence of reports about the Prophet; he subordinates their authority to Qur'anic, historical, and rational adjudication and treats them as defeasible historical precedents. Syuhudi, by contrast, preserves hadith as a normative source while conditioning its acceptance and application on disciplined sanad–matn criticism, identification of the Prophet's function, and contextual interpretation. Both projects reject unexamined reception, but they assign final jurisdiction to different procedures and forms of competence. The comparison therefore reframes modern hadith controversy as a contest over the organization of authority rather than a simple conflict between tradition and reason.

Keywords: hadith authority; Kassim Ahmad; M. Syuhudi Ismail; religious authority; Malaysia and Indonesia

Abstrak

Perdebatan modern mengenai hadis sering disusun melalui oposisi antara penolakan dan pembelaan. Klasifikasi ini mengenali posisi polemis, tetapi mengaburkan perbedaan standar yang menjadikan laporan tentang Nabi memiliki daya ikat keagamaan. Artikel ini membandingkan proyek Kassim Ahmad dan M. Syuhudi Ismail yang berjalan secara paralel tetapi asimetris di Malaysia dan Indonesia pada akhir abad ke-20. Dengan menggunakan analisis dokumen kualitatif, pembacaan kontekstual, analisis isi terarah, dan perbandingan terstruktur-terfokus, penelitian ini menguji tujuh karya primer melalui lima dimensi: norma fondasional, status hadis, prosedur validasi, mediator yang diotorisasi, dan jangkauan normatif. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa Kassim tidak meniadakan kemungkinan keberadaan



historis laporan yang benar tentang Nabi; ia menempatkan otoritas laporan tersebut di bawah penilaian Qur'ani, historis, dan rasional serta memperlakukannya sebagai preseden historis yang dapat dibatasi. Sebaliknya, Syuhudi mempertahankan hadis sebagai sumber normatif, tetapi mensyaratkan kritik sanad-matan yang disiplin, identifikasi fungsi Nabi, dan interpretasi kontekstual sebelum penerapannya. Keduanya menolak penerimaan tanpa pemeriksaan, tetapi memberikan yurisdiksi terakhir kepada prosedur dan kompetensi yang berbeda. Dengan demikian, kontroversi hadis lebih tepat dipahami sebagai perebutan cara pengorganisasian otoritas daripada konflik sederhana antara tradisi dan akal.

Kata kunci: otoritas hadis; Kassim Ahmad; M. Syuhudi Ismail; otoritas keagamaan; Malaysia dan Indonesia

Introduction

The modern controversy over hadith is commonly narrated as a dispute between those who accept the Prophetic tradition and those who reject it. This binary has a real polemical history, yet it compresses several different questions into a single test of loyalty. Whether a report can be historically attributed to the Prophet is not identical to whether it functions as scripture, whether it generates law, whether its wording should be applied literally, or whether a specialist possesses the competence to decide these matters. The distinction between authenticity and authority is therefore indispensable. A report may be judged historically plausible while its normative reach remains disputed; conversely, a community may affirm the Prophet's authority while disagreeing over the transmission, interpretation, or application of reports.¹

This article approaches authority not as a substance automatically possessed by a text or scholar, but as a relation built through claims about sources, methods, competence, and obligation. Religious authority concerns what or who may generate binding guidance. Epistemic authority concerns why a source, procedure, or expert is considered reliable enough to justify assent. These dimensions intersect in hadith studies because the authority of a report is rarely established by its label alone. It is articulated through a chain of judgments: which norm is foundational, how hadith is classified, how transmission and meaning are validated, who may perform that validation, and how far the resulting ruling extends.²

1 Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 60–107; Aisha Y. Musa, *Hadith as Scripture: Discussions on the Authority of Prophetic Traditions in Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230611979>.

2 Ismail Fajrie Alatas, *What Is Religious Authority? Cultivating Islamic Communities in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 1–36, <https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691204314.001.0001>; Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199936472.001.0001>.

Kassim Ahmad and M. Syuhudi Ismail provide a productive comparison because their major works were published within an overlapping period but emerged from different intellectual genres. Kassim's *Hadis: Satu Penilaian Semula* (1986), *Hadis: Jawapan kepada Pengkritik* (1992), and the revised English *Hadith: A Re-Evaluation* (1997) constitute an explicit polemical project that challenged the independent authority of hadith. The first book provoked public controversy in Malaysia, elicited scholarly responses, and was followed by Kassim's systematic clarification. Syuhudi's³ *Kaedah Kesabihan Sanad Hadis* (1988), *Metodologi Penelitian Hadis Nabi* (1992), *Hadis Nabi yang Tekstual dan Kontekstual* (1994), and *Hadis Nabi Menurut Pembela, Peningkar, dan Pemalsunya* (1995) form an academic-methodological corpus concerned with authentication, research procedure, interpretation, and the defense of hadith.⁴

The comparison is analytical rather than genealogical. No verified evidence establishes that Kassim and Syuhudi engaged in a bilateral exchange or directly influenced one another. Their works are treated as parallel responses to a shared problem: how prophetic reports can remain, become, or cease to be binding under conditions of historical criticism and methodological self-consciousness. This limitation prevents the article from inventing a dialogue and from reducing Malaysia and Indonesia to national intellectual types represented by a single author in each country.

Studies of Kassim have documented his location within the Malaysian anti-hadith controversy, reconstructed his arguments, and examined the reactions of scholars and state institutions. Early and later scholarship has variously classified him as an *inkār al-sunna thinker*, a Qur'an-centrist, and a critic whose position nonetheless permits conditional acceptance of reports consistent with the Qur'an.⁵ More recent work has refined this picture by examining the epistemological grounds of his criticism and the factors behind his rejection of hadith authority. Nevertheless, much of the literature still treats Kassim through one book or one stable label. The

3 Kassim Ahmad, *Hadis: Satu Penilaian Semula* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Media Intelek, 1986); Kassim Ahmad, *Hadis: Jawapan kepada Pengkritik* (Kuala Lumpur: Media Indah, 1992); Kassim Ahmad, *Hadith: A Re-Evaluation*, trans. Syed Akbar Ali (Tucson, AZ: Monotheist Productions International; Fremont, CA: Universal Unity, 1997).

4 M. Syuhudi Ismail, *Kaedah Kesabihan Sanad Hadis: Telaah Kritis dan Tinjauan dengan Pendekatan Ilmu Sejarah* (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1988); M. Syuhudi Ismail, *Metodologi Penelitian Hadis Nabi* (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1992); M. Syuhudi Ismail, *Hadis Nabi yang Tekstual dan Kontekstual: Telaah Ma'ani al-Hadis tentang Ajaran Islam yang Universal, Temporal, dan Lokal* (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1994); M. Syuhudi Ismail, *Hadis Nabi Menurut Pembela, Peningkar, dan Pemalsunya* (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 1995).

5 Benny Afwadzi, "Epistemologi Inkār Al-Sunnah: Telaah Pemikiran Kassim Ahmad," *Al Furqan: Jurnal Ilmu Al Quran dan Tafsir* 1, no. 2 (2018): 121–144; Izwan Mohd Ali and Aminudin Basir@Ahmad, "Kassim Ahmad's Thought on Hadith and the Factors of Rejection to Its Authority," *Al-Hikmah* 16, no. 2 (2024): 118–141.

argumentative development from the Malay book of 1986 through the reply of 1992 to the revised English edition of 1997 remains insufficiently integrated.⁶

The literature on Syuhudi is broader but fragmented. Biographical studies establish his importance in Indonesian hadith scholarship; technical studies examine his criteria for connected transmission; and a large group of articles focuses on his textual-contextual distinction, attention to the Prophet's functions, and differentiation between universal, temporal, and local guidance. These studies illuminate important components of his thought, but the components are often separated. Sanad criticism, matn research, contextual interpretation, and the defense of hadith are rarely reconstructed as one chain through which epistemic validation supports normative authority.⁷

International scholarship supplies a vocabulary for connecting these two literatures. Daniel Brown has shown that modern disputes over sunna concern the binding power of tradition as much as the historical reliability of individual reports. Aisha Musa extends the history of hadith-as-scripture debates beyond the assumption that scriptural authority was uncontested and only recently challenged.⁸ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, meanwhile, demonstrates that modern Muslim criticism often operates from within the normative language of the tradition rather than simply opposing tradition from an external secular standpoint. This is significant here: both Kassim and Syuhudi seek to speak as Muslim intellectuals, although they redistribute authority differently.⁹

The gap is consequently not the absence of studies on either figure. It lies in the separation of their scholarly conversations and in the conceptual weakness of the usual opposition between rejection and defense. That opposition describes

6 Chaliq Muchtar, "Hadits dalam Sorotan di Malaysia: Studi tentang Pemikiran Dr. Kassim Ahmad terhadap Hadits," *Al-Jami'ah* 43 (1990): 78–102, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.1990.043.78-102>; Zikri Darussamin, "Kassim Ahmad Pelopor Inkar Sunnah di Malaysia," *Al-Fikra: Jurnal Ilmiah Keislaman* 8, no. 1 (2009): 1–34, <https://doi.org/10.24014/af.v8i1.3802>; Wan Mohd Fazrul Azdi Wan Razali et al., "Elemen Anti Hadis dalam Ucapan kepada Konferensi Politik Nasional oleh Kassim Ahmad: Satu Penilaian," *Abqari Journal* 6, no. 1 (2015): 7–34, <https://doi.org/10.33102/abqari.vol6no1.431>.

7 Fithriady Ilyas and Ishak bin Hj. Suliaman, "Muhammad Syuhudi Ismail (1943–1995): Tokoh Hadith Prolifk, Ensiklopedik dan Ijtihad," *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura* 17, no. 1 (2017): 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jiif.v17i1.1604>; Sahiron Syamsuddin, "Kaidah Kemutasilan Sanad Hadis: Studi Kritis terhadap Pendapat Syuhudi Ismail," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Hadis* 15, no. 1 (2014): 95–112, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.2014.1501-05>; Amrulloh, "Kontribusi M. Syuhudi Ismail dalam Kontekstualisasi Pemahaman Hadis," *Mutawatir* 7, no. 1 (2017): 76–104, <https://doi.org/10.15642/mutawatir.2017.7.1.76-104>; Hasan Suaidi, "Hermeneutika Hadis Syuhudi Ismail," *Religia* 20, no. 1 (2017): 33–48, <https://doi.org/10.28918/religia.v20i1.837>; Dayan Fithoroini, "Hadis Nabi yang Tekstual dan Kontekstual: Analisis Pemikiran Muhammad Syuhudi Ismail," *Nabawi: Journal of Hadith Studies* 2, no. 1 (2021): 116–140.

8 Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 60–107; Musa, *Hadith as Scripture*.

9 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–42, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511973062>.

the end position of an argument but not the mechanisms that produce it. It does not disclose what each author treats as the final norm, what standards of proof are authorized, who may apply those standards, or how a historically situated prophetic act becomes universally or conditionally binding. Nor does it adequately capture their important common ground: both authors refuse to treat every inherited report and every immediate application as self-validating.

The article asks: How do Kassim Ahmad and M. Syuhudi Ismail reconfigure the grounds, procedures, and authorized mediation through which hadith becomes religiously binding? It argues that the two authors articulate distinct mechanisms of legitimation. Kassim subordinates extra-Qur'anic reports to Qur'anic, historical, and rational adjudication, whereas Syuhudi preserves the normative status of hadith through disciplined validation and contextual interpretation. The decisive disagreement is not merely whether hadith exists or deserves respect, but which jurisdiction may transform a report into binding guidance and what competence is required to exercise that jurisdiction.

Methodologically, this article adopts a qualitative, document-based comparison of intellectual arguments. The corpus was selected purposively and comprises Kassim Ahmad's *Hadis: Satu Penilaian Semula* (1986), *Hadis: Jawapan kepada Pengkritik* (1992), and the author-revised English edition, *Hadith: A Re-Evaluation* (1997), alongside M. Syuhudi Ismail's *Kaedah Kesahihan Sanad Hadis* (1988), *Metodologi Penelitian Hadis Nabi* (1992), *Hadis Nabi yang Tekstual dan Kontekstual* (1994), and *Hadis Nabi Menurut Pembela, Peningkar, dan Pemalsunya* (1995). The corpus is balanced by analytical function rather than page count: foundational critique, reply to critics, validation, research procedure, contextual interpretation, and explicit discussion of hadith defense and rejection. Kassim's English revision is treated as a distinct layer in the development of his argument, not as a transparent substitute for the 1986 Malay text. Source access was documented hierarchically. Author-published serializations were cited as stable web reproductions without assigning unverified print pagination; the complete online transcription of the 1995 second edition of Syuhudi's S1 was treated as a directly inspectable reproduction; and claims concerning S2–S4 were retained only when independently supported by bibliographic previews or peer-reviewed, page-specific studies. No page number taken from a secondary study is presented as though an unavailable print copy had been directly consulted. Table 1 summarizes the corpus and the function assigned to each work.¹⁰

10 Ahmad, *Hadis: Satu Penilaian Semula*; Ahmad, *Hadis: Jawapan kepada Pengkritik*; Ahmad, *Hadith: A Re-Evaluation*; Ismail, *Kaedah Kesahihan Sanad Hadis*; Ismail, *Metodologi Penelitian Hadis Nabi*; Ismail, *Hadis Nabi yang Tekstual dan Kontekstual*; Ismail, *Hadis Nabi Menurut Pembela, Peningkar, dan Pemalsunya*. For source-access verification, see M. Syuhudi Ismail, *Kaedah Kesahihan Sanad Hadis*, 2nd ed. (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1995).

Table 1. Primary Corpus and Analytical Functions

Code	Primary work	Year / function
K1	Kassim Ahmad, Hadis: Satu Penilaian Semula	1986 - foundational critique, status, historical and sanad criticism
K2	Kassim Ahmad, Hadis: Jawapan kepada Pengkritik	1992 - clarification, response to methodological and theological objections
K3	Kassim Ahmad, Hadith: A Re-Evaluation	1997 - author-revised English version and development of the argument
S1	M. Syuhudi Ismail, Kaedah Kesahihan Sanad Hadis	1988 - criteria of sanad validity and historical approach
S2	M. Syuhudi Ismail, Metodologi Penelitian Hadis Nabi	1992 - procedures for sanad and matn research
S3	M. Syuhudi Ismail, Hadis Nabi yang Tekstual dan Kontekstual	1994 - Prophet functions, context, universal-temporal-local reach
S4	M. Syuhudi Ismail, Hadis Nabi Menurut Pembela, Peningkar, dan Pemalsunya	1995 — normative authority, rejection arguments, fabrication, and defense

The unit of analysis is the argumentative segment: a sentence or sequence of sentences that advances a claim about authority together with its reasons, procedures, mediating agents, qualifications, or normative consequences. The analysis combines contextual intellectual history, which interprets statements in relation to genre, audience, polemical purpose, and available conceptual vocabulary, with qualitative document analysis, directed content analysis, and structured, focused comparison. Five deductive categories organized the analysis—foundational norm, status of hadith, validation procedure, authorized mediator, and normative reach—while contextual and disconfirming evidence was recorded separately. Each comparative claim was checked against the strongest available source level and phrased according to that level of certainty.¹¹¹²

This argument makes three contributions. First, it replaces a classificatory binary with a comparison of mechanisms: foundational norm, status, validation, mediation, and reach. Second, it reads Kassim across three stages and Syuhudi across four functionally related works instead of reducing either figure to one frequently

11 Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504188>; J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

12 Glenn A. Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40, <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>; Margrit Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (London: SAGE, 2012); Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 67–72; Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2020); Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2021).

cited book. Third, it connects hadith methodology to the study of religious and epistemic authority without claiming that the two authors represent all of Malaysia, Indonesia, or Southeast Asia. The analysis proceeds from corpus and method to genre, foundational norms, validation, authorized mediators, normative reach, theoretical synthesis, and contextual limits.

Two Projects, Two Genres, One Problem

The first asymmetry concerns genre. Kassim's project is polemical and programmatic. *Hadis: Satu Penilaian Semula* challenges what he calls the elevation of hadith into an authority alongside the Qur'an, reconstructs the emergence of canonical collections, criticizes sanad evaluation, and advances alternative criteria for judging reports. The controversy extended beyond academic discussion. The book was banned shortly after publication, responses were issued, and Kassim later wrote *Jawapan kepada Pengkritik* to answer objections concerning obedience to the Messenger, ritual practice, legal methodology, and the authority of scholarly consensus. The English edition of 1997 added a further layer because it incorporated authorial revisions rather than simply reproducing the Malay text.¹³

Syuhudi's corpus belongs primarily to an academic-methodological arena. S1 grew from a sustained study of the criteria for a sound connected sanad and explicitly brought the discipline into conversation with historical method. S2 systematized the practical investigation of sanad and matn. S3 addressed the application of Prophetic reports across changing contexts by distinguishing the Prophet's functions and the universal, temporal, or local character of guidance. S4 made the apologetic stakes explicit through its treatment of defenders, rejecters, and fabricators. These works do not merely repeat one another; they occupy successive points in a chain from authentication to interpretation and normative defense. The present analysis distinguishes direct inspection of S1's complete online transcription from mediated, page-specific reconstruction of S2–S4, rather than collapsing these evidentiary levels.¹⁴

The shared problem does not imply identical authorial intentions; rather, it concerns the fragility of inherited authority under conditions of historical criticism. Kassim asks why reports compiled and evaluated by later humans should be allowed to bind believers as a second normative source. Syuhudi asks how the hadith tradition

13 Ahmad, "Author's Preface to This Translation"; Darussamin, "Kassim Ahmad Pelopor"; Wan Razali et al., "Elemen Anti Hadis."

14 Ilyas and Suliaman, "Muhammad Syuhudi Ismail," 1–33; Syamsuddin, "Kaidah Kemuttasilan Sanad," 95–112; Fithoroini, "Hadis Nabi yang Tekstual dan Kontekstual," 116–140.

can be investigated rigorously and interpreted without confusing universal guidance with historically specific action. Both reject an unexamined move from attribution to obligation. Their divergence appears in the institutions of judgment they construct.

No evidence justifies describing the works as a bilateral debate. S4 belongs to a discourse that addresses hadith rejection, and later scholarship sometimes uses Syuhudi to evaluate Kassim, but this is mediated reception, not proof of mutual exchange. Accordingly, the comparison shifts from treating the authors as whole persons to examining a shared set of questions. With the genre asymmetry declared, the relevant issue becomes the grounds on which each project authorizes a report.

Foundational Norms and the Status of Hadith

Kassim's foundational norm is visible in a compact formulation from the preface to the revised English version: "The Hadith, and everything else, have to be judged by the Quran." The verb "judged" is more significant than a conventional claim that the Qur'an is the highest source. It gives the Qur'an an adjudicative function. Hadith is not a coordinate authority whose apparent contradictions must always be harmonized; it is an object that must pass a prior test. The hierarchy therefore concerns jurisdiction, not only rank or reverence.¹⁵

The same structure shapes Kassim's account of documentation. He contrasts the Qur'an, which he understands as recorded and authorized during the Prophet's life, with hadith collections compiled and sifted substantially later. The canonical judgment "sound," in this account, remains the fallible judgment of later collectors rather than a divine guarantee. His historical narrative is contestable, but its argumentative function is clear: it removes automatic sacredness from the corpus and relocates the burden of proof. A report does not gain binding authority merely because a later discipline classifies its chain as reliable.¹⁶

Yet Kassim carefully distinguishes authority from existence. He states that rejecting hadith authority "does not mean denying its existence." Some true reports about what the Prophet said or did may have survived, especially reports of his activity as community leader or ordinary human being. They are not discarded; they are reclassified as historical accounts that must be tested against other historical evidence, the Qur'an, and rational criteria. This is a crucial negative case. It rules out

15 Ahmad, "Author's Preface to This Translation." The quotation is taken from Kassim's author-published reproduction of the revised English preface; no unverified printed page is assigned.

16 Kassim Ahmad, "Hadis: Satu Penilaian Semula #17: Bab IV—Kritikan terhadap Hadis," July 3, 2008, accessed July 17, 2026, <https://kassimahmad.blogspot.com/2008/07/hadis-satu-penilaian-semula-17-bab-iv.html>.

the claim that his project is a denial of every report outside the Qur'an.¹⁷

The reclassification has a normative consequence. Qur'anic pronouncements are treated as eternally binding, while a decision of Muhammad in his sociopolitical capacity is conditionally binding for its original community and may operate for later communities as a precedent to be followed or bypassed according to usefulness and conformity with the Qur'an. Hadith thus retains evidentiary and exemplary value without possessing an independent status as universally binding legislation. The category is not "nothing"; it is defeasible historical precedent.¹⁸

Syuhudi begins from a different normative grammar. His work assumes the established place of hadith and sunna as sources of Islamic teaching, but does not permit that status to bypass investigation. S4 reconstructs arguments advanced by hadith rejecters in order to answer them. A peer-reviewed study reproduces Syuhudi's presentation of their conclusion that "what must be followed is not the Prophet's hadith but the Qur'an," citing S4, page 18; this wording is therefore used here as a mediated quotation, not as a claim of direct access to that printed page. Syuhudi's own argument proceeds by defending hadith while insisting that the authority of particular reports is mediated by sanad and matn quality, the Prophet's function, and the context of utterance.¹⁹

The difference is therefore not historical existence versus non-existence. Both corpora allow the possibility of reports that require evaluation. The difference lies in the default category and the relation between norm and report. For Kassim, the Qur'an alone supplies final and eternal normativity; extra-Qur'anic reports begin as historical claims and must earn limited relevance. For Syuhudi, hadith remains a recognized normative source, but the authority of a particular report and the form of its application are conditional upon authentication and interpretation. The disagreement concerns the grounds through which normative force is acquired.

This comparison also clarifies why the label "Qur'an-centrist" is useful but insufficient. It identifies Kassim's final norm but not the additional historical and

17 Kassim Ahmad, "Hadith: A Re-Evaluation—Where Have We Gone Wrong?," May 8, 2006, accessed July 17, 2026, <https://kassimahmad.blogspot.com/2006/05/hadith-re-evaluation-where-have-we.html>.

18 Ahmad, "Where Have We Gone Wrong?" Kassim describes political-social pronouncements as conditionally binding for the original community and as precedents for later communities.

19 Ismail, *Hadis Nabi Menurut Pembela, Pengingkar, dan Pemalsunya*; Husnul Khotimah, "Urgensi Kajian Hadis di Indonesia: Pemikiran M. Syuhudi Ismail dan Ali Mustafa Ya'qub," *DIRAYAH: Jurnal Ilmu Hadis* 3, no. 2 (2023): 188–206, <https://doi.org/10.62359/dirayah.v3i02.128>; Fithoroini, "Hadis Nabi yang Tekstual dan Kontekstual," 118–133; Muhammad Nasrulloh and Doli Witro, "Pemikiran Syuhudi Ismail tentang Paradigma Hadis Tekstual dan Kontekstual: Sebuah Tinjauan Umum," *An-Nida'* 46, no. 1 (2022): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.24014/an-nida.v46i1.19226>. Khotimah reproduces the rejecters' formulation and attributes it to S4, 18; the quotation is used here through that mediating source.

rational tests through which he evaluates reports. Similarly, “defender of hadith” identifies Syuhudi’s normative commitment but not the methodological conditions he places between a transmitted text and its present application. Once status and procedure are separated, the binary begins to lose explanatory power.

Competing Procedures of Validation

Kassim does not oppose procedure as such. He disputes the jurisdiction of the classical procedure and constructs an alternative. In his critique of sanad, he argues that the earliest links in a chain could no longer be directly examined when systematic narrator criticism developed. He therefore refuses to treat a formally complete sanad as sufficient when the matn is defective. The argument then identifies three fields of matn criticism: contradiction with the Qur’an; contradiction with established history, science, and reason; and contradiction among hadith reports themselves. This arrangement combines scriptural hierarchy with historical and rational corroboration.²⁰

The August 2008 serialization makes the role of non-scriptural knowledge explicit. Kassim maintains that findings of science that have been tested, historical demonstration, and the laws of reason are legitimate criteria by which a report may be rejected. Hadith books remain useful as historical records, but they must be criticized like other records before being accepted. The point is not simply that reason interprets revelation. Reason and history participate in deciding whether an extra-Qur’anic report may be credited at all.²¹

K2 sharpens the methodological conflict. When critics accuse Kassim of refusing the principles of uṣūl al-fiqh, he argues that those principles already require acceptance of hadith as a legal source. To use them as the compulsory method for evaluating a challenge to that source would therefore beg the question. He points instead to his own account of the late formation of official collections, limited early use of reports as precedent, competing reports about hadith authority, and Qur’anic prohibition of dual legal sources. Whatever one thinks of these historical claims, the response exposes the dispute as one over authorized premises: who is entitled to set the rules of the test.²²

20 Kassim Ahmad, “Hadis: Satu Penilaian Semula #18: Kelemahan Kritikan Isnad,” July 6, 2008, accessed July 17, 2026, <https://kassimahmad.blogspot.com/2008/07/hadis-satu-penilaian-semula-18-bab-iv.html>.

21 Kassim Ahmad, “Hadis: Satu Penilaian Semula #22: Kontradiksi dengan Sains, Sejarah dan Akal,” August 17, 2008, accessed July 17, 2026, <https://kassimahmad.blogspot.com/2008/08/>.

22 Kassim Ahmad, “Hadis: Jawapan Kepada Pengritik #5,” November 2, 2006, accessed July 17, 2026, <https://kassimahmad.blogspot.com/2006/>.

Syuhudi's procedure is layered rather than singular. In S1 he distinguishes the general criteria of sanad soundness from the detailed indicators through which continuity, narrator integrity, and precision are assessed. The complete online transcription of the 1995 second edition preserves his terminology "kaedah mayor" for general criteria and "kaedah minor" for their detailed elements. The distinction matters analytically: authority is not produced by a single label of authenticity, but by a structured set of tests whose elements can be specified and criticized. Studies of S1 likewise emphasize that Syuhudi does not reduce validity to one formal feature and that his use of historical method remains open to internal scholarly evaluation.²³

S2 extends the process from criteria to research practice. Peer-reviewed reconstructions attribute to Syuhudi a sequence beginning with takhrīj and the identification of transmission routes, continuing through i'tibār, narrator and continuity analysis, investigation of irregularity and hidden defect, and ending with a reasoned conclusion. For matn research, the same literature identifies attention to sanad quality, comparison of variant wording, examination of content, and formulation of a conclusion. These steps give authority a procedural form: a report becomes credible through operations that can be taught, repeated, documented, and challenged. Because the printed S2 edition was not directly available in the present digital workspace, this procedural sequence is explicitly attributed to the studies that reproduce it rather than to unverified primary pagination.²⁴

S3 adds a second layer of validation: a sound report still requires a judgment about meaning and reach. Fithoroini reproduces Syuhudi's premise that "the situation experienced in the present differs from the situation in the Prophetic period," citing the 2009 reprint at page 3. The formulation is used here on the basis of that documented secondary transmission. The interpreter consequently considers linguistic form, the circumstances of utterance, the Prophet's role, the audience, and the purpose of the statement. Authenticity is necessary, but it does not exhaust authority: an authentically attributed report may still require contextual rather than immediate literal application.²⁵

23 Ismail, *Kaedah Kesahihan Sanad Hadis*, 2nd ed., online transcription; Makmur, Muhammad Ismail, and Burhanuddin, "Metode Kesahihan Sanad Hadis: Telaah terhadap Pemikiran Syuhudi Ismail dalam Kaidah Kesahihan Hadits," *AL-MUTSLA* 3, no. 2 (2021): 85–95, <https://doi.org/10.46870/jstain.v3i2.50>; Irham Habib, "Standar Keshahihan Hadis Menurut Syuhudi Ismail," *El-Sunan: Journal of Hadith and Religious Studies* 1, no. 1 (2023): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.22373/el-sunan.v1i1.3454>.

24 Ilyas and Suliaman, "Muhammad Syuhudi Ismail," 24–25; Habib, "Standar Keshahihan Hadis," 9–10. These studies explicitly attribute the procedural sequence to Syuhudi's *Metodologi Penelitian Hadis Nabi*; their page references are not transferred to an unexamined print copy.

25 Fithoroini, "Hadis Nabi yang Tekstual dan Kontekstual," 118–133. Fithoroini reproduces Syuhudi's statement about the difference between the present situation and the Prophetic period and cites the 2009 reprint at page 3.

The two projects therefore differ not in the presence or absence of method, but in the jurisdiction assigned to methods. Kassim denies that inherited sanad criticism can establish final authority and places reports under Qur'anic, historical, scientific, and rational adjudication. Syuhudi retains sanad and matn criticism as disciplined means of authentication and supplements them with contextual interpretation. Both procedures are fallible. Kassim's criteria require judgments about what counts as established science or decisive Qur'anic contradiction; Syuhudi's criteria require judgments about narrator reliability, historical circumstance, and the Prophet's function. Neither mechanism abolishes interpretation.

This result also corrects a normative asymmetry in much commentary. It is inadequate to call Kassim unmethodological and Syuhudi scientific. Kassim's procedure can be criticized for its historical assumptions, scope, or adjudicative standards, but it is still a procedure. Syuhudi's methodology can be defended for its disciplinary density, but it does not produce infallibility. Sahiron Syamsuddin's critical examination of Syuhudi's rule for connected sanad demonstrates that methodological defense remains part of an internal scholarly debate.²⁶

Authorized Mediators: Reader, Method, and Expertise

A procedure always implies an authorized user. Kassim's critique challenges the ability of established hadith disciplines and inherited consensus to close the question in advance. His response to critics asks for arguments to be answered with evidence rather than suppression and refuses to let rules grounded in the authority under dispute determine the outcome. This stance redistributes the right of evaluation beyond the monopoly of hadith specialists.²⁷

Redistribution, however, should not be exaggerated into complete individualization. Kassim does not say that any spontaneous reading is equally valid. His own practice presupposes Qur'anic interpretation, historical reasoning, comparison of evidence, and an account of rational coherence. These are positive constraints, even if he does not specify an institutional curriculum equivalent to hadith studies. The safest conclusion is that he widens adjudicative participation and locates adjudicative competence in the reasoning reader, not that he abolishes all forms of expertise or community judgment.

Syuhudi's corpus articulates mediation through learned procedure. Sanad research requires identification of transmitters, assessment of continuity, familiarity with rijāl materials, comparison of routes, and evaluation of narrator integrity and

26 Syamsuddin, "Kaidah Kemuttasilan Sanad," 95–112.

27 Ahmad, "Hadis: Jawaban Kepada Pengritik #5"; Ahmad, "Where Have We Gone Wrong?"

accuracy. Matn research requires variant comparison and substantive criticism. Contextual interpretation requires attention to language, occasion, the Prophet's capacity, and the difference between universal and local instruction. Authority is thus not derived simply from holding the social title *ulama*; it is attached to demonstrable competence exercised through a disciplinary sequence.

The distinction between social position and epistemic competence is analytically important. Epistemic authority does not necessarily mean passive submission to a dominant institution. It can mean a justified reliance on an expert whose access, training, and performance offer better reasons for belief than a nonspecialist could obtain independently. Syuhudi's model can consequently be read as an attempt to make scholarly mediation accountable through method. The authority of the researcher is derivative: it depends upon correct performance of procedures rather than personal charisma alone.²⁸

The unresolved question is where final decision lies in Syuhudi's system. Is it located in a consensus of specialists, in the reproducible method, or in the competent individual scholar who applies that method? The available texts and studies support the cautious phrase "scholarly-methodological mediation," not "monopoly of the *ulama*." Likewise, Kassim's model supports "redistribution of evaluative authority," not the claim that all interpretive communities disappear. These qualifications prevent the comparison from becoming a moral story in which one side represents freedom and the other hierarchy.

The central contest is thus over authorized mediation. Kassim seeks to prevent the hadith discipline from functioning as an unquestionable gatekeeper between the believer and the Qur'an. Syuhudi seeks to prevent the believer's access to hadith from bypassing the competencies required to establish attribution and relevance. One model worries about circular inherited authority; the other worries about judgment without adequate method. Their disagreement is not a conflict between reason and expertise, because both claim reasoned procedure. It concerns which procedures create credible expertise and how far that expertise may bind others.

Normative Reach: Precedent, Universality, and Context

The question of authority becomes concrete when a report is applied. Kassim limits normative reach by differentiating Qur'anic revelation from the Prophet's historically situated acts as leader and ordinary person. In the revised English text,

28 Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*; Ali-Reza Bhojani and Morgan Clarke, "Religious Authority beyond Domination and Discipline: Epistemic Authority and Its Vernacular Uses in the Shi'i Diaspora," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 65, no. 2 (2023): 272–295, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417522000470>.

reports of sociopolitical decisions may be conditionally binding on the original community and function for later communities as precedents rather than eternal legislation. This model preserves the Prophet's historical guidance while denying that every reported decision automatically acquires transhistorical force.²⁹

The notion of precedent is significant because it avoids two extremes. Kassim does not need to assert that a reported action is meaningless once its original context has passed. A precedent may offer practical wisdom and can be followed when useful. Yet it has no independent, permanent authority against the Qur'an or later judgment. Its force is defeasible. Application is authorized through present assessment rather than through an assumption that Prophetic attribution alone universalizes the act.

Syuhudi limits normative reach through a different route. S3 is organized around the distinction between textual and contextual understanding and the character of Islamic teachings as universal, temporal, or local. Studies that cite the book reconstruct a threefold movement: analysis of the text, identification of the historical context in which the report arose, and contextualization for the present. The Prophet's role at the time of the statement affects whether its wording is generalized or tied to a particular circumstance. This reading is supported through page-specific scholarship and the verified bibliographic record of the 1994 first edition; the article does not transfer reprint pagination to that edition.³⁰³¹

Textual interpretation is therefore not simply a mistake to be overcome. When linguistic form, Prophetic function, and context indicate universal guidance, direct textual application can be appropriate. Contextual interpretation is likewise not permission to revise every report. It is a judgment produced through diagnostic analysis. The distinction places the scope of obligation after authentication and contextual analysis, making normative reach an outcome rather than a presumption.

Both projects thus recognize limits, a commonality obscured by the rejection-defense binary. Kassim's limit begins with the reduced normative category of extra-Qur'anic reports: later communities may treat them as precedents subject to Qur'anic and rational adjudication. Syuhudi's limit begins within an affirmed normative tradition: authentic reports can express universal, temporal, or local guidance depending on the Prophet's function and historical setting. The routes are not equivalent. One restricts the status from which reports begin; the other differentiates the application of reports whose hadith status is preserved.

The contrast helps explain why both authors can sound "contextual" while

29 Ahmad, "Where Have We Gone Wrong?"

30 Nasrulloh and Witro, "Pemikiran Syuhudi Ismail," 2-3.

31 Fithoroini, "Hadis Nabi yang Tekstual dan Kontekstual," 118-133.

producing different architectures of authority. Context for Kassim helps judge the historical character and limited force of a report. Context for Syuhudi helps determine the meaning and reach of an authenticated Prophetic report within a continuing normative framework. Their shared willingness to limit application therefore conceals a deeper divergence over how those limits are authorized.

Table 2. Comparative Architecture of Hadith Authority

Dimension	Kassim Ahmad	M. Syuhudi Ismail
Foundational norm	Qur'an as final adjudicator over hadith and other claims	Qur'an and hadith retained in normative relation; particular authority mediated by method
Status of hadith	Possible historical report or defeasible precedent; no independent eternal legislation	Recognized normative source whose attribution and application require validation
Validation	Qur'anic coherence, history, tested science, reason, and criticism of contradictions	Sanad-matn criticism, route and wording comparison, historical context, Prophet's function
Authorized mediator	Reasoning reader using Qur'anic-historical-rational criteria; institutional limits under-specified	Competent researcher whose authority derives from disciplined scholarly procedures
Normative reach	Conditional for original setting; precedent for later communities	Universal, temporal, or local; textual or contextual application after diagnosis
Deviant evidence	Does not deny every report; does not eliminate all criteria	Does not contextualize every hadith; method remains open to criticism

Table 2 is an analytical synthesis rather than a substitute for the source-based discussion. Its formulations are limited to the evidentiary level documented in the relevant sections: direct authorial reproductions for Kassim, direct inspection of S1's online transcription, and explicitly mediated reconstruction for S2–S4, where the print editions were not digitally inspectable.

From Rejection and Defense to Competing Grounds of Authority

The comparison demonstrates that “rejecter” and “defender” are not false labels, but they are analytically incomplete. They identify the public alignment of each project: Kassim denies the independent theological and legislative authority of hadith, while Syuhudi maintains hadith as a source of Islamic teaching. What they conceal is the sequence that connects the alignment to an actual decision. Between source and obligation stand classification, standards of evidence, authorized

interpreters, and judgments of scope.

The first commonality is a refusal of unexamined reception. Kassim's entire project challenges the assumption that canonical collection and sanad grading automatically establish normativity. Syuhudi's methodological works insist that a report must be researched, its transmission and content examined, and its context and Prophetic function interpreted. This commonality should not be romanticized into agreement. It merely shows that both respond to the same modern demand for explicit justification.

The decisive difference is epistemic jurisdiction. Kassim's procedure subordinates the hadith discipline to a broader adjudicative order headed by the Qur'an and supplemented by history, science, and reason. Syuhudi's procedure reforms and extends the hadith discipline from within: sanad criticism, matn research, and contextual interpretation together mediate the normative tradition. Kassim asks the reasoning reader to judge the corpus's claim to authority; Syuhudi asks the competent researcher to establish the conditions under which the corpus may be trusted and applied.

This divergence reconfigures religious authority in two ways. In Kassim's model, the Qur'an's authority expands through the reduction of extra-Qur'anic reports to conditional historical evidence. The authority of inherited specialists contracts because their disciplinary premises cannot settle the question. In Syuhudi's model, the normative authority of hadith is maintained, but the authority of any immediate reading contracts. Scholarly competence expands because authentication and contextualization become prerequisites for responsible application.

Religious authority and epistemic authority are therefore inseparable but non-identical. A source may be affirmed as religiously authoritative while access to its binding meaning is mediated by epistemic competence. Conversely, an individual may be empowered to test a historical report without thereby acquiring unlimited religious authority. The comparison supports Alatas's insight that authority is cultivated through relations among texts, persons, methods, and institutions rather than carried as an automatic property.³² It also supports Zaman's account of criticism as an activity internal to modern Islamic thought: both projects criticize inherited arrangements while appealing to Islamic norms.³³

The term epistemic contestation is useful only at this limited level. It describes the incompatibility of the two arrangements when they answer the questions of who may judge and by what standard. It does not imply that the authors met, that

³² Alatas, *What Is Religious Authority?*, 1–36.

³³ Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought*, 1–42.

a dialectical synthesis emerged, or that one arrangement straightforwardly maps onto modern reason while the other maps onto tradition. Kassim cites revelation and history; Syuhudi uses rational method and classical scholarship. The conflict is between rival organizations of norm, evidence, and competence.

The theoretical implication for hadith studies is modest but important. Modern hadith controversy should not be studied solely by listing arguments for and against authenticity. It should also ask how a judgment gains authority: what source functions as the court of final appeal, what procedures count as admissible evidence, who is recognized as competent, and how the judgment travels from original context to present obligation. These questions make comparison possible without predetermining a theological winner.

Context and the Limits of Regional Inference

Context helps explain why the two mechanisms take different forms. Kassim wrote as a public intellectual in a Malaysian arena where his 1986 book generated organized rebuttal, prohibition, and continuing public controversy. The revised English preface itself records that political considerations led to the book's banning. Later studies document the importance of institutional and official responses in defining the category "anti-hadith." These conditions help explain the declarative tone of his critique and the form of K2 as an answer to named objections.³⁴

Syuhudi's principal works were produced within the Indonesian academy of Islamic studies and contributed to the formalization of hadith research in higher education. His influence is visible in the pedagogical circulation of methods for takhrij, sanad criticism, matn analysis, and contextual interpretation. Biographical scholarship describes him as a prolific and encyclopedic hadith scholar whose work helped shape the discipline in Indonesia. This setting helps explain why his intervention appears through methodological manuals and analytical categories rather than through a single public manifesto.³⁵

The contexts are explanatory, not deterministic. Malaysia also contains academic hadith scholarship, and Indonesia also contains polemics about hadith rejection. State regulation, scholarly institutions, and publication networks differ, but the intellectual content of a text cannot be deduced from national character. Comparative research on hadith publication regulation confirms institutional differences between the two

34 Ahmad, "Author's Preface to This Translation"; Darussamin, "Kassim Ahmad Pelopor," 1–34; Wan Razali et al., "Elemen Anti Hadis," 7–34.

35 Ilyas and Sulieman, "Muhammad Syuhudi Ismail," 1–33.

countries without turning them into uniform epistemologies.³⁶

For the same reason, the article does not claim to represent Southeast Asia. Two intellectual projects can illuminate a regional conversation, but they cannot stand as statistical or civilizational samples. The argument is restricted to the corpora studied and to the contexts necessary for interpreting their genre, reception, and claims. These contexts make the comparison intelligible; they do not transform two authors into national types.

Conclusion

Kassim Ahmad and M. Syuhudi Ismail reconfigure hadith authority by constructing different pathways from prophetic report to religious obligation. Kassim does not merely deny the historical existence of reports. He removes their independent theological and legislative status, places them under the final judgment of the Qur'an, and subjects them to historical and rational corroboration. Reports that survive may function as conditional historical precedents. Syuhudi begins from the normative recognition of hadith but places disciplined authentication and interpretation between transmission and application. Sanad-matn research, comparison of evidence, identification of the Prophet's function, and attention to context determine whether and how a report binds.

Three findings follow. First, the central disagreement concerns normative category and jurisdiction rather than the bare existence of reports. Second, both projects reject unexamined reception, but they authorize different procedures and mediators: a redistribution of reasoned judgment in Kassim's model and scholarly-methodological mediation in Syuhudi's. Third, both limit application, but Kassim does so by treating reports as defeasible precedents, whereas Syuhudi differentiates universal, temporal, and local guidance within an affirmed hadith tradition.

These findings show the limit of the rejection-defense binary. The binary remains useful for describing polemical alignment, yet it cannot explain how authority is produced. A more precise account follows the sequence of foundational norm, status, validation, mediator, and normative reach. This approach connects technical hadith criticism to the study of religious and epistemic authority without reducing modern Muslim argument to tradition against reason.

The comparison has clear boundaries. It does not establish a personal debate or direct influence, and it does not make Kassim and Syuhudi representatives of

36 Mohamad Khalid Bahrudin, Ishak Suliaman, and Mohamad Azrien Mohamed Adnan, "The Reality and Challenges of Authoritative Regulation on Hadith Publication in Malaysia and Indonesia," *Jurnal Usuluddin* 51, no. 1 (2023): 81–114, <https://doi.org/10.22452/usuluddin.vol51no1.4>.

Malaysia, Indonesia, or Southeast Asia as wholes. Documentary access was also uneven. Kassim's author-published serializations and the complete online transcription of Syuhudi's S1 could be inspected directly, whereas claims concerning S2–S4 were retained only when supported by bibliographic previews and peer-reviewed studies that identify the source and page cited. This hierarchy prevents secondary pagination from masquerading as direct consultation of an inaccessible print copy. Full physical comparison of every edition may refine individual formulations, but the comparative question remains productive: the authority of hadith is sustained, restricted, or displaced through competing arrangements of norm, method, and interpretive competence.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed to the conception, analysis, drafting, and revision of the article and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

All data supporting the findings of this study are contained within the article and the cited sources.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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