



Ma'arif Commons
ISLAMIC LAW LITERACY INITIATIVE



How We Study Islamic Law and Why it Matters



Dr. Mariam Sheibani

Foreword



How We Study Islamic Law and Why It Matters is the first educational resource developed for Maʿruf Commons' Islamic Law Literacy Initiative (ILLI). In many ways, the analysis and observations about Islamic law education in our communities today that we share in this guide have shaped the very approach we've taken to ILLI. We hope it will help you to contextualize and make sense of the varied opportunities available for learning Islamic law and guide you in choosing the most suitable avenues for your own learning, and that of your family.

This guide offers a concise overview of the four most common approaches to studying Islamic law in English-speaking Muslim communities:

- (1) Traditional seminary *fiqh* courses
- (2) *Fard ʿayn* (personally obligatory) programs
- (3) DIY self-study through books, digital tools, and AI
- (4) Academic and historical study.

For each, we explore the origins and aims that gave rise to it, the promise it holds when practiced well, and the gaps and growing pains that emerge when it is applied out of context or without the support it requires.

The guide closes by introducing the Maʿruf Commons approach to Islamic law education; not as a replacement for any of these, but as a complementary avenue designed to strengthen what already exists and address what is still missing. ILLI offers a new educational model that is literacy-centered, skills-based, and graded across four tracks, empowering Muslims to engage Islamic law at the depth appropriate to their roles, needs, and responsibilities.

Our faith teaches, “He is not grateful to Allah, the one who is not grateful to people” (Abū Dāwūd). In that spirit, we begin with gratitude. This resource would not have been possible without the dedication and care of Maʿruf Commons’ education team community stewards—the industrious members serving our community who shepherded this resource to completion: Dr. Zainab Kabba of Quotidian Solutions, Samah Marei, and Hadeer Soliman. Their feedback, comments, and suggestions were invaluable in refining the content to reach its current form. May Allah bless and reward you in the way He rewards those He loves most.



- Dr. Mariam Sheibani
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Boston, Massachusetts

How is Islamic Law taught in English-speaking Muslim communities today?



What opportunities does each approach offer (especially when done well),



and what risks does it pose (especially when carried out poorly)?



How we learn Islamic law shapes how we live it. The way Islamic law is taught in English-speaking Muslim communities today determines not only what Muslims believe the law *is*, but also how they apply it, whether in their families, finances, communities, or civic life. Each approach to learning carries profound opportunities when it is used for its intended purpose and practiced with care, and it carries serious risks when its purpose is misunderstood or its execution is poor.

When we don't understand the landscape of Islamic legal education—how seminary training differs from self-study, or how academic study differs from fard 'ayn (personally obligatory knowledge) programs—we risk mistaking one for the other, and, in turn, using the knowledge or authority of one approach to address matters that require the competencies of another. We might, for example, mistake personal learning for authoritative expertise, or historical insight for religious guidance.

At stake is more than just intellectual clarity, but the spiritual and ethical integrity of Muslim communal life. Knowing the different ways Islamic law is taught, and what each approach prepares learners to do, allows us to appreciate the value and authoritative legitimacy of each approach but also recognize its limits. This is the first step to building a more integrated model of learning for our time; one that is faithful to tradition, attuned to history, and responsive to the realities of today's world.

In this short guide, we discuss four approaches or courses of study for learning about Islamic Law:

- 1  Traditional seminary fiqh courses
- 2  Fard 'Ayn (personally obligatory) fiqh programs
- 3  DIY self-study of Islamic law through books, digital tools, and increasingly, AI.
- 4  Academic and historical study of Islamic law

For each approach we examine its:

1

Origins and Aims

What historical needs gave rise to this approach? Who developed and sustained it, for what audiences, and under what institutional structures of authority? What vision of learning and community life does it aim to realize?

2

Promise and Potential

When practiced as intended, what capacities, virtues, and benefits does this approach cultivate—individually, communally, and institutionally? How does it contribute to the continuity and flourishing of the Muslim community?

3

Gaps and Growing Pains

What are the gaps, risks, and distortions that emerge when this approach is applied, especially when done out of context or piecemeal? We consider this at the individual, communal, and institutional levels. How do these manifest across individual practice, communal life, and institutional culture?

While this analysis is done with Muslim-minority contexts primarily in mind, many of the challenges are shared in Muslim majority-contexts as well.

1

Traditional Seminary Fiqh Courses

*E.g.: In-person or online seminary courses teaching
the fiqh tradition of a specific madhhab.*



ORIGINS AND AIMS

Muslim seminaries (*madrasas*) were developed to maintain the tradition of teaching classical texts. They usually adhere to a traditional pedagogy that orders the study of religious and rational sciences and progresses through a successive curriculum of books in each science. Seminaries generally train students in *fiqh* by following a *madhhab*-based curriculum, introducing comparative perspectives to varying degrees of depth and breadth.

An authorized seminary teacher is one who has received authorization to teach from their teacher, having studied the texts they will teach thoroughly, line-by-line, and has license (*ijāza*) to transmit the book. Graduation from a recognized seminary that guides students through a traditional curriculum, such as al-Azhar or Darul Uloom, is also a form of authorization to serve as a legal authority.

Advanced studies in this trajectory usually culminates in *mufti*-training, enabling the jurist to issue a legal opinion (*fatwā*) in response to religious questions posed to him or her.

While the majority of teachers teaching in minority communities today were trained abroad, increasingly, seminaries are being founded in North America and Europe, branching from or inspired by traditional seminaries in the Muslim world.

PROMISE AND POTENTIAL



FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Mastery of a method of legal reasoning in addition to rote memorization of foundational content.
- Close mentorship and supervision from authorized scholars who can guide students' progression.
- Extra-textual learning on ethics, comportment, and responsibilities of serving the community as a legal scholar.

FOR THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

- Production of trained jurists able to guide religious practice and communal life.
- A pipeline of trained scholars and jurists for mosques, madrasas, and advisory roles.
- Continuity of a centuries-old system for cultivating scholarly experts who contribute to the ongoing development of *fiqh*.

GAPS AND GROWING PAINS



While seminary training continues to benefit our community, the different landscape of learning and living has resulted in the following challenges:

FOR INDIVIDUALS

- High rate of attrition due to weak structures of financial support. (e.g.: patronage structures and job opportunities are weak or unavailable and financial burdens are placed on the individual).
- Cognitive dissonance when classical texts are taught without contextualization or analytical framing (e.g.: premodern financial transactions, criminal law, rules of slavery).
- Graduates may struggle to translate *fiqh* teachings to modern institutional contexts lacking courts and governance structures.

FOR THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

- Half-trained students return as perceived authorities, creating confusion and harm.
- Cultural norms imbibed from training abroad are sometimes misapplied as required or ideal Islamic practices.
- Attempts to apply *fiqh* in contexts lacking the requisite institutional ecosystem that ensure just outcomes result in unjust outcomes.
- Proliferation of “seminaries” without oversight or common standards, leading to uneven quality of education.

2

Fard ‘ayn (Personally Obligatory) Fiqh Programs

*E.g.: Intensive programs ranging from a week to a year in duration
focused on imparting religiously required knowledge.*



ORIGINS AND AIMS

During the 1990s, accessible *fiqh* programs arose for everyday Muslims seeking essential religious knowledge that centered the “personally obligatory” (*fard ‘ayn*) knowledge that every Muslim is required to know. These efforts usually focused on teaching the rules relevant to personal worship (*‘ibādat*), with only occasional forays into other areas of the law, like family law and financial transactions, and even more rarely, the overarching structure of the law, and the history of its development and practice.

These programs tend to reflect the orientation of their founders; most taught personal worship according to a single *madhhab* tradition, like the Rihla Program, while others, like al Maghrib, offered a comparative *fiqh* approach inspired by Salafism.

PROMISE AND POTENTIAL



FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Clear, actionable guidance on daily religious obligations.
- A structured pathway for foundational learning.
- Reinforcement of the ethical duty to learn what is required for practice.

FOR THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

- Widespread access to basic knowledge regardless of location of residence.
- Supportive entry points for new Muslims and returning learners.
- A foundation on which more advanced curricula can be built.
- Increased interest in traditional learning that funnels students into deeper learning pathways and new education organisations and institutions in communities.

GAPS AND GROWING PAINS



While *fard 'ayn* programs continue to provide these benefits, they sometimes result in the following challenges:

FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Some become trapped in a perpetual beginner cycle, repeating *fard 'ayn* programs without progressing, when *fard 'ayn* knowledge does not take more than a few days to learn.
- Underdeveloped legal literacy on financial transactions, family law, or the philosophy, history, and logic of Islamic law.
- Classical pedagogies used without adaptation can be inaccessible or alienating (e.g.: line-by-line study of classical texts and parsing of Arabic grammar for a non-scholarly audience).

FOR THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

- Graduates with partial training may assume teaching roles prematurely.
- Introducing *madhhab* distinctions without proper scaffolding can confuse those with informal learning or mixed practices.
- Programs may rely on charismatic teachers rather than an assessed curriculum.

3

DIY Self-Study (Books, Digital Tools, AI)

E.g.: self-appointed da'is and online influencers, or a solitary student seeking to put together an autodidactic curriculum.



ORIGINS AND AIMS

With growing literacy, widespread access to translations, and digital databases of classical texts, some individuals attempt to access classical books, interpret the Quran and Sunna, or to determine legal rules for themselves.

This approach stems from a belief that an average Muslim can reach conclusions about sound religious practice on their own. It is often paired with a critical stance towards the scholastic, inaccessible, and seemingly contradictory scholarly interpretations that have accumulated over the past millennium. This approach is often associated with reformist, Salafi, or *anti-madhab* orientations that assert immediate accessibility of the Quran and Sunna to the layperson.

PROMISE AND POTENTIAL



FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Scholars and students of Islamic law have unprecedented access to sources, commentaries, and scholarly archives enabling them to ask new questions and research new topics.
- Everyday Muslims can explore topics independently and cultivate genuine curiosity about Islamic law.

FOR THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

- Democratization of access to religious texts.
- Renewed interest and engagement with Islamic scripture and legal tradition.
- Potential for digital learning platforms and expanded educational reach.

GAPS AND GROWING PAINS



While self-study has these benefits to offer, it is outweighed by many harmful outcomes we see in our communities today:

FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Crisis of faith when encountering texts and opinions out of their original contexts.
- “Compound ignorance”: not knowing, and not knowing what one does not know.
- Overconfidence in superficial or decontextualized interpretations.

FOR THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

- Devaluation and undermining of the depth and rigor of scholarly work.
- Spread of unsound opinions and harmful interpretations “rooted” in legal sources by untrained influencers.
- Confusion about who holds religious authority.
- Erosion of respect for scholarly training and method.

4

Academic and Historical Study of Islamic Law

E.g.: University "Introduction to Islamic Law" courses.



ORIGINS AND AIMS

The academic study of Islamic law which was once rooted in Orientalist and colonial frameworks, is now a diverse field increasingly shaped by Muslim scholars. It spans law schools, history departments, religious studies, and area studies. For many Muslims, the combination of seminary training (approach #1) with academic credentials (approach #4) is now seen as the ideal pairing.

PROMISE AND POTENTIAL



FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Provides answers to many of today's questions about Islamic law which are historical in nature.
- Offers a complete picture connecting the dots of rupture and continuity between the Islamic legal past and present.
- Presented through a pedagogical approach more familiar to everyday Muslims.

FOR THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

- New interpretive horizons and creative solutions informed by legal history.
- Avenue for non-Muslims to study Islamic law, offering opportunities for mutual understanding, comparative perspectives, and debunking of egregious stereotypes and Islamic law.
- Major pathway for Islamic law's integration into civic life and socio-legal institutions.

GAPS AND GROWING PAINS



While the academic study of Islamic law has these benefits, it also has a number of challenges:

FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Fragmented learning through a range of topics based on instructor's discretion.
- Projection of modern assumptions onto historical texts.
- Overly theoretical and historical without applicable insights.
- Lack of attention to the ethical and transformative aims of Islamic law.

FOR THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

- Academics may speak primarily to each other, limiting accessibility.
- Some academics make normative claims outside their training, generating tensions with traditional scholars.

The Ma'ruf Commons Approach



The Islamic Law Initiative (ILLI) at Ma'ruf commons begins with a simple question:

How can we preserve the strengths of each approach while addressing their limitations and reducing the risks that emerge when an approach is used outside the role, purpose, or institutional context it was designed for?

Rather than replacing or duplicating existing efforts, we seek to complement and strengthen the valuable work underway in our communities. Our approach draws on the unique benefits each tradition offers — rigor, historical insight, peer review, and wide reach — all while responding to the gaps and pressures that shape Muslim life today.

ORIGINS AND AIMS



The Islamic Law Literacy Initiative (ILLI) was created to address the fragmented and uneven landscape of Islamic legal learning in English-speaking Muslim communities. While access to classes, online content, and self-study tools has expanded, many Muslims still lack a coherent understanding of what Islamic law is, how it works, and how different forms of knowledge and authority relate to one another.

ILLI's aim is to cultivate a community of Muslims—scholars, practitioners, and everyday believers alike—who understand Islamic law's logic, ethics, and history; who can recognize distortion when they encounter it; and who can bring clarity, mercy, and coherence back to communal conversations about the law.

Underlying this effort is a core conviction: that all Muslims need and deserve a foundational Islamic legal education that is faithful to tradition, attentive to history, and responsive to contemporary realities.

PROMISE AND POTENTIAL



FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Grounded literacy that clarifies the logic, aims, and structure of Islamic law.
- Discernment to distinguish between scholarly authority, personal learning, academic knowledge, and digital misinformation.
- Contextual awareness that helps understand classical rulings within their intellectual, historical, and juridical frameworks.
- Confidence and clarity to navigate legal questions with balance, coherence, and mercy.
- Applied skills for translating legal knowledge into responsible practice in personal, professional, and communal life.

FOR THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

- A baseline of Islamic legal literacy among community members, leaders, and professionals.
- A shared legal vocabulary and conceptual clarity, reducing fragmentation and incoherence in communal conversations.
- Stronger institutional guidance, enabling imams, chaplains, educators, and practitioners to offer well-informed, context-aware support.
- A graded learning ecosystem, ensuring that Muslims engage Islamic law at the depth suited to their responsibilities.
- An enhancement of the ethical and intellectual quality of communal conversations around contentious legal issues.

GAPS AND GROWING PAINS



FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Some learners may come expecting quick rulings or definitive guidance, whereas ILLI prioritizes frameworks, method, and interpretive ethics.
- Integrated legal literacy often introduces complexity and ambiguity; learners may struggle with Islamic law's integration of nuance, plurality, and juristic disagreement.
- Individuals accustomed to charismatic teachers, viral content, or fatwa apps may find the shift toward method, history, and scaffolding unfamiliar.
- Learners may enter with fragmented foundations—seminary study, self-study, academic courses, TikTok Islamic content—and require time to integrate them.

FOR THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

- Some may overextend what literacy programs and training can or should do. It is not a replacement for seminary or academic training.
- Long-standing habits—overreliance on charismatic authority, limited historical grounding, or fragmented teaching—may be slow to shift.
- Communities differ in their readiness to absorb integrated approaches; some may lack staff, systems, or legal infrastructure to implement learnings sustainably.

The Islamic Law Literacy Initiative offers four targeted learning tracks



1

TRACK 1: EVERYDAY MUSLIMS

Foundational legal literacy that extends beyond ritual worship to include practical family life, financial ethics, and the broader aims of the law.

2

TRACK 2: PRACTITIONERS

Applied legal learning for professionals serving Muslim communities, such as educators, chaplains, mental health professionals, and community organizers.

3

TRACK 3: SEMINARY TEACHERS & STUDENTS

Historical grounding and analytical tools that strengthen traditional training and support more contextually aware teaching, legal reasoning, and community leadership.

4

TRACK 4: LEGAL PROFESSIONALS

Continuing Legal Education (CLE) oriented learning that bridges Islamic law with civil and common law frameworks, enriching legal practice and public engagement.

Together, these tracks form a graded and integrated model that empowers Muslims to engage Islamic law at the depth appropriate to their roles, needs, and responsibilities.

Learn more about how you can start your literacy learning journey.

illi.marufcommons.org