

# *Critique to Orientalist Views on Isnad of Hadith*

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**Abstract:** This study aims to examine the views of Orientalists on isnad (the chain of narration) of hadith. They have a different perspective from hadith scholars regarding the isnad. According to them, the use of isnad began in the last third of the first Hira century, the isnad emerged long after the text of the hadith, and it is considered an internal phenomenon in the development of Islam. They also claim that the majority of hadith isnads are false. Initially, the isnad appeared in a very simple form, later achieving its perfected form in the second half of the third Hira century. The Orientalists regard the isnad criticism method used by the scholars as weak, which makes the resulting hadiths scientifically unaccountable.

This view of the Orientalists is refuted by hadith scholars, who argue that the isnad of hadith has existed since the time of the Prophet, through the transmission of hadith among the Companions after they received it from him. This tradition continued in the subsequent periods until the hadiths of the Prophet were compiled by the hadith collectors.

**Keywords:** hadith, sunna, sanad, narration, hadith scholars, Orientalists.

## Introduction

A hadith contains two elements, each of which can determine its existence, quality, and prosperity. The two elements are isnad and matn. A statement that does not contain both cannot be called a hadith, how good its content is. The scholars of hadith have explained the existence of isnad and matn dealing with their definitions, terms relating to isnad, kinds of isnad, isnad and hadith documentation, methods of writing isnad and matn, definitions and forms of matn, and the content of matn of hadith. Orientalists also have their own views about isnad and matn which are relatively different from the views of scholars of hadith.

Etimologically, isnad comes from the word sanada yasnudu sunudan (al-Zabidi, 1965: 216), which means something that stands out from the ground (al-Khatib, 1989: 32), or a high ground, hill, or wadi (al-Zabidi, 1965: 215), the backrest that we lean on, something that can be held, trusted, foothold, or a mountain. According to Ibn al-Jama'ah, isnad is a land that rises at the foot of the hill (al-Suyuti, 2003: 40 and Tahun, 2009: 9). Its plural is asanid or sanadat. In Arabic, if it is said that someone is an isnad or mu'tamad, it means that he is a support, a handle, or a guideline (Shaban, 2008: 26). In other words, isnad means etimologically guideline, backrest, or something high because sanad becomes a guideline, handle, and support in the narration of hadith and elevates or elevates the hadith to its source, namely the Prophet Muhammad.

Terminologically, isnad is a path to matn, namely the chain of narrators from the mukharrij (hadith collector) to the sahib al-matn (the owner of hadith texts), namely Prophet Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah. According to al-Khatib (1989: 32), isnad is the way to matn, namely the chain of narrators who quoted it from the first source. Al-Tahhan (1992: 17) stated that isnad is a series of chain of narrators that connects to the text of hadith. According to Ibn Jama'ah quoted by al-Suyuti (2003: 14-15), isnad is news about the way of matn. It is so called because the hadith experts hold and lean on the paths of matn in the form of isnad in examining the validity of a hadith. Meanwhile, Ibn Hajar defined isnad as a path connecting to matn (Tahun, 2009: 9).

## Isnad of Hadith According to Orientalists

The transmission (read: isnad), although not a new concept and recognized before Islam, was not regarded as significant by pre-Islamic narrators in terms of the truthfulness of the stories they transmitted, the investigation of the narrators' conditions, and the alignment of those stories with actual truth and reality. They lacked the comprehensive tools, such as critical assessment, discussion, evaluation, and filtering of what was narrated, which are characteristic of the Islamic transmission system. This can be understood, considering that what they narrated did not contain the sacred values that must be revered as seen in Islamic narrations. Therefore, they were not particularly meticulous in their narrations. This can be observed in the majority of ancient stories and superstitious tales they conveyed. These tales were intended merely to satisfy emotions, serve as entertainment, or inspire a spirit of struggle and bravery, as well as to uplift the spirit of battle (Abu Shuhbah, 1994: 25).

Muslim scholars generally believe that the concern for isnad began after the assassination of the third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan, during the period of fitna among the Muslim community. Since that time, hadith scholars became more cautious in the transmission of hadith compared to earlier times. In studying the sanad and matan of hadith, Orientalists differ from hadith scholars and the broader Muslim community. While hadith scholars focus more on the definition and essence of the isnad and matn, Orientalists emphasize their origins. They tend to highlight when the sanad first emerged in hadith transmission.

According to Caetani, 'Urwah (died 94 AH) was the first person to compile hadith, but he did not use isnad. Furthermore, Caetani states that during the time of 'Abd al-Malik (died between 70-80 AH), the use of isnad in hadith transmission was also not recognized. He argues that the use of isnad began between the time of 'Urwah and Ibn Ishaq (died 151 AH). Based on this perspective, he concludes that most of the isnad found in hadith collections were fabricated by hadith scholars in the second and even third centuries of the Hira. This view is supported by Alois Sprenger (Azami, 1996: 234 and Idri, 2011: 208).

A more moderate opinion is expressed by Horovits, who states that the use of isnad began in the last third of the first century of the Hira. R. Jobson suggests that by the middle of the first century, there may have already been a method similar to isnad. At that time, many companions had passed away, and those who had never met the Prophet began to narrate his hadiths, which naturally led to questions from their listeners about the sources of those hadiths. However, the detailed method of isnad likely developed gradually afterward (Yakub, 2004: 99-100).

Henry Lammens, a Belgian missionary, and Leoni Caetani, an Italian missionary, argue that isnad emerged long after the matan of hadith existed and is an internal phenomenon in the development of Islam (Arif, 2008: 30, Lammens, 1926: 92-93, and Caetani, 1988: 28-31). Joseph Horovits (1918: 44) speculates that the chain transmission system (isnad) was only introduced and applied at the end of the first century of the Hira. Furthermore, this Jewish-German Orientalist states that it is highly likely that the practice of isnad originated from and was influenced by oral traditions known in Jewish literature. Fuat Sezgin claims that the initial emergence of isnad occurred during the time of al-Zuhri (died 125 AH). Joseph Van Ess, based on certain reports, believes that isnad began after the assassination of Uthman. The conclusions of these Orientalists seem to stem from the statement of Ibn Sirin (died 110 AH), who noted that scholars initially did not question isnad, but as fitna began to spread, they demanded the names of the hadith narrators. For those classified as ahl al-sunna, their hadiths were accepted, while those deemed fabricators (ahl al-bid'a) had their hadiths rejected (Azami, 2005: 180). However, they do not consider Ibn Sirin's statement carefully. He did not claim that isnad began with the emergence of divisions among Muslims, but rather that the hadith narrators at that time were trusted and truthful. It was only when divisions arose that lies began to emerge, including in the transmission of hadith. Consequently, scholars began to question and investigate who narrated the hadiths and the quality of their narrators.

Meanwhile, Joseph Schacht argues that the vast majority of the isnad of hadith is fraudulent. He claims that everyone knows that isnad initially appeared in a very simple form and only reached its perfected state in the second half of the third century of the Hira (Schacht, 1975: 163). He states that isnad is the result of the fabrication by scholars of the second century Hira, who sought to link a hadith to earlier figures until it ultimately reached the Prophet, in order to find strong legitimacy for that hadith (Azami, 1995: 232-233).

This theory stems from Schacht's understanding of the development of hadith in parallel with the development of Islamic law. According to him, Islamic law was only recognized after the appointment of qadis during the Umayyad dynasty. By the end of the first century of the Hira, the appointment of qadis was directed towards the fuqaha', whose numbers continued to grow, eventually forming classical legal schools (madhhab). To obtain strong legitimacy for their legal rulings, qadis would attribute these decisions to figures previously regarded as authoritative.

This attribution did not stop at the generation above them but extended to the companions and ultimately to the Prophet. This practice gave rise to an opposition group consisting of hadith scholars. The central idea of these hadith scholars is that hadiths accompanied by isnad trace back to figures before them, ultimately reaching the Prophet. This process of backward attribution is known as "projecting back." Based on this understanding, Schacht concludes that both classical legal groups and hadith scholars are equally guilty of fabricating hadith, and therefore, there are no hadiths that genuinely originate from the Prophet; rather, they are products born from the competition among scholars (Azami, 1995: 233).

### Critique on Orientalist Views

In general, according to Azami (1995: 233), this thesis can be countered by stating that fiqh had already developed during the time of the Prophet. This is because fiqh is the product of ijihad by the mujtahids, and the companions during their time, even during the Prophet's time, engaged in this ijihad. Therefore, Schacht's claim that fiqh only developed with the appointment of qadis during the Umayyad dynasty is difficult to accept.

Furthermore, to clarify this theory, Azami conducted a specific study of the hadiths of the Prophet found in classical manuscripts. Among these is a manuscript by Suhayl ibn Abi Salih (died 138 AH). Abu Salih was a student of Abu Hurayra, a Companion of the Prophet. Thus, the isnad in this manuscript is structured as follows: Prophet Muhammad – Abu Hurayra – Suhayl. This manuscript contains 49 hadiths, and Azami researched the narrators up to the generation of Suhayl (the third generation), including their number and lineage.

From this study, Azami discovered that in the third generation, there were around 20–30 narrators scattered across places such as India, Turkey, Morocco, and Yemen, while the text of the hadith they narrated was identical. According to him, it is highly improbable, given the circumstances of the time, that they ever gathered to create hadiths that resulted in the same wording. It is also highly unlikely that each of them fabricated hadiths, only for the next generation to find that their texts were identical. This conclusion contradicts Schacht's conclusions regarding the reconstruction of the formation of isnad and the matan of hadith (Azami, 1995: 233).

Orientalist accusations that the isnad and matan of hadith are fabrications by the Muslim community in the first, second, and third centuries of the Hijrah are refuted by Azami as follows:

1. Historical facts prove that the use of isnad began during the time of the Prophet, as evidenced by his encouragement to the companions who attended his gatherings to convey hadiths to those who were absent.
2. The majority of hadith fabrications occurred during the fortieth year of the Hijrah, driven by political issues, as some Muslims at that time had weak faith and created hadiths to serve the interests of their political factions or groups.
3. The focus of Orientalist research in the area of isnad is not acceptable because what they studied were not hadith collections, but rather books of fiqh and sira.
4. The theory of projecting back (al-qadf al-khalf), which is used as the basis for their arguments along with examples of hadith that serve as samples, is thus undermined by the numerous chains of transmission for a single hadith.
5. There has never been a development or improvement of the isnad, such as transforming a mawqūf into a marfū' hadith or making a mursal into a muttasil hadith. Similarly, the accusation that isnad is only used to strengthen a particular opinion or school of thought lacks evidence and contradicts historical reality.

6. The research and critique by hadith scholars on the isnad and matn of hadith, to the best of their abilities, were conducted with sincerity and without worldly motives (Azami, 2005: 457-458).

From the perspective of matn, among the Orientalists who have critiqued hadith in this regard are Ignaz Goldziher and A.J. Wensinck. Both consider the methods of isnad criticism employed by scholars to be weak, resulting in products that cannot be scientifically validated. Goldziher doubts the authenticity of the entire matn, viewing it as a fabrication by hadith scholars and scholars of opinion (al-Salih, 1988: 37). Goldziher cites a hadith from Abu Hurayra that states: "Do not undertake a journey except to three mosques: the mosque of al-Haram, the mosque of the Prophet, and the mosque of al-Aqsa" (al-Bukhari, 2011, II: 60). According to Goldziher, Malik ibn Marwan, a caliph of the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus, was concerned that 'Abd Allah ibn Zubayr, the self-proclaimed caliph in Mecca, would take the opportunity to ask the people of Sham (Shiria) for their allegiance while they were performing the pilgrimage. As a result, he sought to prevent them from performing the pilgrimage to Mecca and instead encouraged them to perform it at Qubba al-Sakhra in Jerusalem by instructing Muhammad ibn Shihab al-Zuhri to fabricate the above marfū' hadith (Azami, 2005: 457).

Azami refutes Ignaz Goldziher's accusation of fabrication against al-Zuhri regarding this hadith. He argues that there is no historical evidence to support the accusation because, on one hand, the hadith is transmitted through 19 different isnads, including al-Zuhri, and the date of al-Zuhri's birth is disputed among historians between the years 50 AH and 58 AH. He never met 'Abd Malik ibn Marwan before the year 81 AH. On the other hand, in 68 AH, the Umayyads were in Mecca performing the pilgrimage, while Palestine at that time was not yet under Umayyad control (Malik ibn Marwan), and the construction of Qubba al-Sakhra began in 69 AH (when al-Zuhri was between 10 and 18 years old) and was completed in 72 AH. Therefore, it is impossible that 'Abd Malik ibn Marwan intended to divert Muslims from performing the pilgrimage in Mecca to Palestine, and it is also improbable that al-Zuhri fabricated a hadith at the age of 10 to 18 (Azami, 2005: 457).

A.J. Wensinck states that the development and activity of thought among Muslims after the Prophet's death opened opportunities for scholars to explain the essence of Islam through hadith. The statements of these scholars are what later became known as the matn (al-Mursafi, 1994: 50). Wensinck's view aligns with the assertions of the aforementioned Orientalists, culminating in the perspective that the matn is not the Prophet's words, but rather the words of scholars that were later attributed to him. Wensinck accuses the hadiths concerning beliefs and shariah as fabricated. For example, the hadith narrated from Ibn 'Umar that the Messenger of Allah said: "Islam is built upon five pillars: to bear witness that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, to establish prayer, to give zakat, to perform the pilgrimage, and to fast during Ramadan" (al-Bukhari, 2011, I: 11). According to Wensinck, the hadith containing the shahada is a creation of the Companions, not the words of the Prophet, because the Prophet never mandated the recitation of the two shahadah phrases for someone who has just entered Islam. It was only when the Muslims debated with Christians in Sham that they encountered questions requiring answers with those two phrases (Azami, 2005: 461).

Mustafa Azami argues that Wensinck's accusation regarding the falsity of the hadith concerning the shahada as one of the pillars of Islam is far-fetched, as Wensinck knows well that the two shahadah phrases have been part of the congregational prayer performed by Muslims since the time of the Prophet, in addition to the sunna prayers, and that these phrases are included in the adhan, which has been proclaimed since the time of the Prophet (Azami, 2005: 461, al-Mursafi, 1994: 50-51).

The explanation above indicates that the Orientalists' views on isnad actually stem from their understanding of the sunna itself, which they believe does not originate from the Prophet. They assume that both the isnad and the matn found in hadith collections are the creations of scholars and the Muslim community in the second and third centuries of the Hira (Azami, 2005: 293).

To support this belief, they seek arguments to suggest that the isnad is a product of scholarly fabrication and that the matn consists of their own words. The implication of the Orientalists' thinking is that neither the isnad nor the matn of hadith can be scientifically validated for their truth. This opinion contrasts sharply with the view held by hadith scholars, who affirm that the matn of hadith (which is authentic) truly originates from the Prophet, while the roots of isnad have existed since the time of the Prophet, when the Companions transmitted the hadiths they received from him.

Thus, if the rejection of the existence of isnad and matn by the Orientalists is accepted, it could lead to the following consequences: Firstly, the hadiths of the Prophet cannot be recognized as true because they would all be considered false. Secondly, the theories of hadith science cannot be used to evaluate the authenticity of a hadith. Thirdly, accusations that the scholars and narrators of hadith are liars who intentionally fabricated isnads for statements later attributed to the Prophet (Idri, 2011: 214). Fourthly, hadith collections such as Sahih al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Sunan al-Tirmidhi, Sunan Ibn Maja, Sunan al-Nasa'i, Muwatta' Malik, Musnad Ahmad, and others would be deemed useless and valueless because they would only contain fabricated hadiths. Fifthly, all data regarding the narrators of hadith recorded in the books of Rijal al-Hadith, such as in the book Tahdzib al-Kamal by al-Mizzi, Tahzib al-Tahzib and Taqrib al-Tahzib by Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Mizan al-I'tidal by al-Dhahabi, and others, would not be recognized.

Among the Orientalists, the study of isnad involves not only its origins and authenticity but also the vast number of its branches and the existence of chains of isnad consisting of narrators from specific families. Nabia Abbott, for instance, examines the development of isnad through a theory known as explosive isnad. The concept of explosive isnad, as described by Nabia in her book *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri II: Qur'anic Commentary and Tradition*, indicates that there are between one to two thousand names of Companions and Successors involved in the transmission of hadith, with each of them narrating an average of two to five hadiths. This provides an indication of the estimated number of hadiths that were documented in the third century Hira. Nabia recognizes that the existence of various chains of isnad has involved a significant number of individuals in the narration of hadith, resulting in an explosive isnad due to the increasing number of people involved in hadith transmission with each generation (Abbott, 1967: 72).

To explain the theory of explosive isnad, Nabia uses the theory of geometric progression, assuming that on average, Companions transmit one hadith to two Successors, and then each of those Successors transmits it to two subsequent generations (tabi' al-tabi'in), and this chain of narration continues for up to four or even eight generations below them. Nabia states:

“Using geometric progression, we find that one to two thousand Companions and senior Successors transmitting two to five traditions each would bring us well within the range of the total number of traditions credited to the exhaustive collections of the third century. Once it is realised that the isnad did, indeed, initiate a chain reaction that resulted in an explosive increase in the number of traditions, the huge numbers that are credited to Ibn Hanbal, Muslim and Bukhari seem not so fantastic after all.” (Abbott, 1967: 72).

Therefore, according to Nabia, by using a geometric series, we can identify around two thousand names of Companions and several scholars who narrated two to five hadiths each, indicating the total number of hadiths included in various hadith collections from the third century Hira. This development also demonstrates the chains of isnad found in these hadiths, the majority of which originate from Ibn Hanbal, Muslim, and al-Bukhari.

In addition to explosive isnad, the term isnad family is also recognized, referring to hadith chains that contain narrators who are related by blood or close kinship (mawali). For example, Nafi' (died 117 H/735 CE), a relative of Ibn Umar, and Muhammad Ibn Sirrin (died 110 H), a relative of Anas ibn Malik. This isnad family developed through several prominent Companions and continued for up to three generations, following a formula like "so-and-so" (from his father, from his grandfather). However, at certain times, the isnad family may also develop through just one generation if an older narrator finds his grandson (student) wanting to narrate hadith through an alternative line within the family chain, for instance, to a male nephew. According to Nabia, several isnad families spread through notable Companions such as Anas ibn Malik, Zayd ibn Thabit, Ibn Umar, 'Abd Allah ibn 'Amr ibn al-'As, Ibn Abbas, and Urwah ibn al-Zubayr are recognized and trustworthy throughout Islamic civilization, where numerous hadiths narrated through these reliable isnad families fall within the five categories of criteria for accepting a hadith (Abbott, 1967: 36).

In contrast to Nabia, Schacht argues that narration through isnad family is questionable and fabricated. He states: "There are numerous traditions which claim an additional guarantee of soundness by representing themselves as transmitted among members of one family, for instance, from father to son (and grandson), from aunt to nephew, or from master to freedman.

Whenever we come to analyse them, we find these family traditions spurious, and we are justified in considering the existence of a family isnad not an indication of authenticity but only a device for securing its appearance.” (Azami, 1995: 196).

According to Schacht, there are several hadiths claimed to be guaranteed authentic, representing the form of narration among various members of a family, such as from a father to his son (and also his grandson), from an aunt to her nephew, or from a teacher to his student. Whenever we analyze them, we find that the hadiths from family narrators (isnad family) are false, and we are convinced of their lack of authenticity, asserting that only falsehood exists in their presence.

In response to this, James Robson, as quoted by Azami, argues that the existence of isnad family must be acknowledged as a valuable guarantee for the documentation of hadith. However, it must also be recognized that such a narration model can lead to the falsification of hadith. This is because the quality of narration from one narrator cannot be equated with that of another. Some examples of questionable isnad family include Ma'mar ibn Muhammad narrating hadith from his father, Isa ibn 'Abd Allah from his father, Kathir bin 'Abd Allah from his father, Musa bin Matir from his father, and Yahya bin 'Abd Allah from his father (Azami, 1995: 197). However, as Nabia Abbott explained earlier, several isnad families spread through prominent Companions such as Anas ibn Malik, Zayd ibn Thabit, Ibn Umar, 'Abd Allah ibn 'Amr ibn al-'As, Ibn Abbas, and Urwah ibn al-Zubayr are genuinely recognized for their quality, and their authenticity is accepted.

## Conclusion

The Orientalists have a different perspective from hadith scholars regarding the isnad of hadith. According to them, the use of isnad began in the last third of the first Hijra century, the isnad had been emerging long after the text of the hadith, and it is considered an internal phenomenon in the development of Islam. They claim that the majority of hadith isnads are false. Initially, the isnad appeared in a very simple form, later reaching its perfected form in the second half of the third Hijra. The Orientalists consider the isnad criticism method used by the scholars to be weak, which makes the resulting hadiths scientifically unaccountable. Therefore, according to them, the isnad of hadith cannot be trusted in terms of its truthfulness because it is a product of the Muslim community after the time of the Prophet. The isnad is merely a creation that developed over time, leading to a large number of them. For this reason, hadith research based on sanad criticism methods is not academically acceptable.

This view of the Orientalists is refuted by hadith scholars, who argue that the isnad of hadith has existed since the time of the Prophet, through the transmission of hadith among the Companions after they received it from him. This tradition continued in the subsequent periods until the hadiths of the Prophet were compiled by the hadith collectors. Therefore, the transmission of hadith, whether orally or in writing as seen in the chain of isnad, can be accepted as truthful as long as it is transmitted by reliable narrators. Likewise, hadith research based on the isnad criticism method established by the hadith scholars can be accepted as truthful both theoretically and practically.

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