

# A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS OF AL-MA'MŪN'S MOTIVES IN THE *MIḤNA*

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**Abstract:** This article investigates historians' perspectives on al-Ma'mūn's motives in the *Miḥna* concerning the createdness of the Qur'an (*ḵhalq al-Qur'an*). Two prevailing approaches are identified for comprehending the caliph's motives. The first suggests that the *Miḥna* represents al-Ma'mūn's attempt to maintain his political authority amid the increasing influence of the ulema (*muhaddithūn*). The second posits the *Miḥna* as al-Ma'mūn's initiative to impose his religious perspective on society. Using historiographical analysis, this article argues that the two approaches should not be viewed in isolation but can be integrated to understand the caliph's motives in the *Miḥna* comprehensively.

**Keywords:** *Miḥna*; al-Ma'mūn; Mu'tazila; Qur'an's createdness (*ḵhalq al-Qur'an*).

## Introduction

*Miḥna*, which literally means a test or a trial, is one of the darkest events in the history of Islamic civilization. Terminologically, the *Miḥna* means an inquisition, which is very closely related to al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-833), the seventh caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, who imposed that the Qur'an was created (*makblūq*). There are two opposing views regarding the debate about whether the Qur'an is created or eternal (*qadīm*). The Mu'tazila believes the Qur'an is not eternal but is created. On the other hand, *Abl al-Ḥadīth*, the proto *Abl al-Sunna*, maintains that since the attribute of Allah is inseparable from His essence, the Qur'an, which is the Word of Allah, is eternal or uncreated (*ghayr makblūq*).

To spread and to set this doctrine, in Rabī' al-Awwal 218/April 833, four months before his sudden death, al-Ma'mūn sent a letter

to the chief of Baghdad police, Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Khuzāʿī (d. 850), to examine *muḥaddithūn* (traditionalists or Ḥadīth specialists) and *qāḍīs* (judges) in his authority about their views of the createdness of the Qurʾān.<sup>1</sup> Those with dissenting views from the caliph would undergo trials, be tortured and be compelled to change their opinions.<sup>2</sup> Among the *muḥaddithūn*, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbāl (d. 855) was the central figure who was the target of the Inquisition. He became a victim of the Inquisition in three periods of the Abbasid Caliphate, namely al-Maʾmūn, al-Muʿtaṣim (r. 833-842), and al-Wāthiq (r. 842-847). Alongside the *muḥaddithūn* and the *qāḍīs*, the trial was also conducted on political figures who opposed the authorities during that period.

In the study of *Miḥna*, the motives behind al-Maʾmūn's conducting the Inquisition have been a mystery and the most often asked by researchers. Attempts to reveal the caliph's objectives have led to differences of opinion among historians. For instance, Nawas proposes three main hypotheses explaining al-Maʾmūn's reasons for imposing the doctrine: his Muʿtazilite sympathies, his affinity with Shiʿism, and his determination to regain caliphal authority in all aspects.<sup>3</sup> In general, modern historians have two approaches regarding the caliph's motives. Firstly, the *Miḥna* is considered al-Maʾmūn's strategy to uphold his political authority. al-Maʾmūn is deemed to have employed religious issues to diminish the influence of the *muḥaddithūn*, which was strengthening at that time. Secondly, the *Miḥna* is perceived as al-Maʾmūn's effort to participate actively and to reshape the Islamic theological discourse. With his authority, he enforced his religious perspective to be accepted by the whole society.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Umam wa al-Mulūk* (Jordan: Bayt al-Afkār al-Dawliyah, n.d.), 1820; Martin Hinds, "Miḥna," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (version 2nd ed.), Brill Online, ed. Peri J. Bearman (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Nimrod Hurvitz, "Miḥna as Self-Defense," *Studia Islamica*, No. 92 (2001), 93.

<sup>3</sup> John A. Nawas, "A Reexamination of Three Current Explanations for al-Maʾmūn's Introduction of the Miḥna," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (1994), 615.

<sup>4</sup> This categorization follows Hurvitz's classification and is used as the framework of this paper. See Nimrod Hurvitz, "Al-Maʾmūn (r. 198/813-218/833) and the Miḥna," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 649-650.

Therefore, this study investigates these two approaches used by historians in viewing al-Ma'mūn's objectives in carrying out the *Miḥna*. This investigation employs a historiographical analysis, critically examining historians' works. Therefore, particular sources will be selected, and a synthesis of the sources along with the researcher's stand, will be narrated.<sup>5</sup> This study argues that instead of considering these two approaches in isolation, they can be integrated to comprehensively understand the caliph's motives in the *Miḥna*.

### **The *Miḥna* during the Caliphs**

*Miḥna* is one of the historical records of violence in Islam. When ordering *Miḥna*, in addition to sending a letter to his deputy in Baghdad, al-Ma'mūn, who was then living in Raqqa, sent letters to his deputies in other regions to conduct an inquiry into the *qādis* and *Ḥadīth* specialists. A question asked in the Inquisition was whether the Qur'an was created or not. Most of the ulema obeyed the caliph's will and agreed to the createdness of the Qur'an. The rejection of the caliph's doctrine indeed took place in Baghdad, where the traditionalists (*muḥaddithūn*) such as Aḥmad b. Ḥanbāl and Muḥammad b. Nūḥ firmly refused al-Ma'mūn's doctrine.<sup>6</sup> The two ulema were forcibly taken to meet al-Ma'mūn in person. Nevertheless, al-Ma'mūn suddenly passed away in August 833 before the meeting. Both of these scholars were then repatriated to Baghdad. On their way home, Muḥammad b. Nūḥ died, and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbāl was arrested when he arrived in Baghdad.<sup>7</sup>

Prior to his death, al-Ma'mūn had a will to his brother and successor, al-Mu'taṣim (r. 833-842), instructing him to maintain the *Miḥna* policy and to appoint Aḥmad b. Abī Du'ād (d. 854), a

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<sup>5</sup> Aviezer Tucker (ed), *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2009), 2.

<sup>6</sup> 'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'il b. 'Umar b. Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah*, Vol. 10 (Beirut: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1990), 274; Walter Melville Patton, *Ahmed Ibn Hanbal and the Miḥna: A Biography of the Imam Including an Account of the Mohammedan Inquisition Called the Miḥna, 218-234 A.H* (Leiden: Brill, 1897), 80.

<sup>7</sup> How Aḥmad b. Ḥanbāl and Muḥammad b. Nūḥ underwent the inquisition, see Abū al-Faraj 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Alī b. al-Jawzī, *The Life of Ibn Hanbal*, Translated by Michael Cooperson (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 175-179; Hinds, "Miḥna."

Mu'tazilī chief judge, as the caliph's advisor. Al-Mu'taṣim then continued his predecessor's policy of implementing the Inquisition. It was stated that the enforcement of the *Mihna* during the reign of al-Mu'taṣim was less strict than that of his predecessor. Al-Mu'taṣim even wanted the *Mihna* to be nothing more than a formality in a courtroom. However, in responding to Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's rejection of the doctrine, al-Mu'taṣim was known to be very strict. In Sunni's hagiography, it is mentioned that Aḥmad b. Ḥanbāl was severely flogged under al-Mu'taṣim's command.<sup>8</sup> However, it is also mentioned that the real actor behind the Inquisition of Ibn Ḥanbāl was Ibn Abī Du'ād, described as the most responsible person for the tragedy of the Inquisitions after the reign of al-Ma'mūn.<sup>9</sup>

After the death of al-Mu'taṣim in 842, the caliphate of the Abbasids was led by al-Wāthiq (r. 842-847), the son of al-Mu'taṣim. During al-Wāthiq's rule, the Inquisition was enforced more rigorously. No ulema left untested. Al-Wāthiq even commanded that the words "There is no god but God, the Lord of the created Qur'an" written in the Fuṣṭāt mosque.<sup>10</sup> During his reign, to be a Mu'tazilī means to be a proper citizen.<sup>11</sup>

When al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861) succeeded his brother, al-Wāthiq, in 847, he ended the *Mihna*. He prohibited any trial on the createdness of the Qur'an throughout all his jurisdictions. The *Mihna* finally ended in 851 when Ibn Abī Du'ād, who was a *qāḍī al-quḍāt* (a prime judge) and his son, who was also a judge in Samarra, were dismissed from their positions.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hinds, "Mihna."

<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Mihna," in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, edited by Richard C. Martin, Vol. 2 (New York, NY: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 449.

<sup>10</sup> Hinds, "Mihna."

<sup>11</sup> Nadia Mohamed Nader, "The Memory of the Mihna in a Haunted Time: Dogmatic Theology, Neo-Mu'tazilism and Islamic Legal Reform" (Ph.D Thesis - University of California, Santa Barbara, 2011), 15.

<sup>12</sup> Hinds, "Mihna"; Zaman, "Mihna"; al-Mutawakkil released Aḥmad b. Ḥanbāl from prison and even respected him. However, he was known for his intolerant policies towards the Sh'ra and *Ahl al-Kitāb* people (Christians and Jews). See Nader, "The Memory of the Mihna," 17.

The most obvious consequence of the termination of *Mihna* is the end of the Caliphs' authority as interpreters of religion. The contestation over the status of the heirs of the prophets (*warathat al-anbiyā'*) was finally held by the ulema, as mentioned in the ḥadīth. Likewise, the influence of Mu'tazila faded in society. Since then, people's sentiment has been more towards the *muhaddithūn*, believing in the uncreatedness of the Qur'an.<sup>13</sup> This doctrine later became one of the essential features of Sunni tradition.

In addition, with the end of *Mihna*, the feud between the rationalists (*Ahl al-Ra'y*) and the traditionalists (*Ahl al-Ḥadīth*) ended with the victory of the latter. At the same time, it was the beginning of what Wael Hallaq calls "the great synthesis" between traditionalism and rationalism. This synthesis later produced *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (Islamic legal theory) as a scientific discipline in Islam.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Theological Controversy surrounding the *Mihna***

A central question in the Inquisition was whether the Qur'an was created (*makhlūq*).<sup>15</sup> In response to this query, Muslims are broadly divided into two camps.<sup>16</sup> Firstly, some *mutakallimūn* (Muslim theologians) held the view that the Qur'an was created. This view was put forth by Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 745) and al-Ja'd b. Dirham (d. 742). According to Christopher Melchert, instead of Mu'tazila, it was Bishr b. Giyāth al-Marīsī (d. 833 or 834), a follower of Jahm b. Ṣafwān who frequently linked to the belief of the createdness of the Qur'an (*kehalq al-Qur'an*). Al-Marīsī, who studied Ḥanafite school with Abū Yūsuf and left, was known for promoting this doctrine. He is also known as one of the figures

<sup>13</sup> Hinds, "Mihna."

<sup>14</sup> Wael B. Hallaq, *Shari'a, Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 55-60.

<sup>15</sup> According to Peter, the earliest source stating the doctrine of the eternity of the Quran is the *Wasīyyat Abi Ḥanīfab*, written circa 210/825. Conversely, the initial document asserting the createdness of the Quran is the letter of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn in 218/833 to his deputy in Bagdad to conduct the *Mihna*. See Johannes Peters, *God's Created Speech: A Study in the Speculative Theology of the Mu'tazilī Qādī al-Qudā Abū al-Ḥasan 'Abd al-Jabbā b. Aḥmad al-Hamadānī* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Safrudin Ediwibowo, "The Debates of the Createdness of the Qur'an and Its Impact to the Methodology of Qur'anic Interpretation," *Ulumuna*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2015), 357.

who influenced al-Ma'mūn's view on the doctrine. Initially, this doctrine was known as Jahmī, as used by Ibn Ḥanbāl when referring to it, but later on, it has been more attached to the Mu'tazila.<sup>17</sup> The idea of the doctrine was to avoid the likeness of God to His creatures (*tashbih*) or to purify the oneness (*taḥḥīd*) of God.

Unlike the view of Christians who believe that Jesus is the Word of God and thus he was not created,<sup>18</sup> al-Ma'mūn believed that the speech attribute (*kalām*) of God does not everlastingly exist (*laysa bi qadīm*), meaning that it is created. The Christians' view of the eternity of the Word of God necessitates a number of eternities (*ta'addud al-qudamā*), which is impossible for God. Al-Ma'mūn held to a verse of the Qur'an "*innā ja'alnāhu Qur'ānan 'Arabīyyan la'allakum ta'qilūn.*"<sup>19</sup> The words *ja'ala* in this verse were interpreted as "making", meaning that the Qur'an was created. Therefore, al-Ma'mūn, in this regard, was in the position of Mu'tazila, the rationalist.

Besides, by stating that the Qur'an was created, the Mu'tazila intended that the Qur'an could be more flexible in its interpretation, and it should not be understood literally, which led to the discouragement of the free-will doctrine. The latter was a doctrine campaigned by the caliph at that time. As a consequence, with the position of the prophet as the deliverer of the created Qur'an, the status of the Ḥadīth as a source of Islamic law would be less authoritative.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, the proto-Sunni *mutakallimūn* hold the opposite view, asserting that the Qur'an is simply a *kalām Allāh* (the speech of

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<sup>17</sup> Christopher Melchert, *Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, Makers of the Muslim World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 9; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Miẓān al-'Iṭidāl fī Naqd al-Rijāl*, Vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya, 1995), 35; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah*, 275.

<sup>18</sup> W. Madelung, "The Controversy on the Creation of the Koran," in *Orientalia Hispanica Sive Studia F.M. Pareja Octogenaria Dicata*, ed. J.M. Barrāl (Leiden: n.p., 1974), 517.; Laura Etheredge (ed.), *Islamic History* (New York: Britanica Educational Publishing, 2009), 87-88.

<sup>19</sup> Means: "We have made it, a Qur'an in Arabic in order that you may understand." See Hinds, "Mihna."

<sup>20</sup> Etheredge (ed.), *Islamic History*, 88.

God).<sup>21</sup> This opinion was advocated by *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* (people of Ḥadīth), where Aḥmad b. Ḥanbāl was the central figure. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbāl firmly rejected the view that the Qur'an was created because, according to him, there is no explicit verse of the Qur'an or report of the Ḥadīth stating the createdness of the Qur'an. As for the Qur'anic verse (al-Zukhruf [43]: 3), which was used by al-Ma'mūn as the basis of his argument, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbāl asserted that the meaning of the word *ja'ala* in that verse is ambiguous (*mutashābih*) due to its several meanings. For instance, it can be interpreted as attaching a characteristic to something already in existence. Consequently, the meaning of *maj'ul* (made), the passive form of the word *ja'ala*, differs from that of *makebluq* (created). Therefore, a caliph's policy should not have been based on propositions that are ambiguous in meaning.<sup>22</sup>

Subsequently, after the *Mihna* tragedy, the notion of the uncreatedness of the Qur'an was more sophisticatedly elaborated by Abū Mūsā al-Ash'ārī (873-935), the founder of the Ash'arite school. The Ash'arite argues that *kalām* is one of the attributes of Allah. Since the attributes of Allah are different from His Essence, and at the same time, those qualities are no other than His Essence (*aṣ-ṣifāt laysa hiya al-dhāt wa lā hiya ghayrūh*), the *kalām* of God is uncreated. The Ash'arite also distinguishes the *kalām* of God into *kalām nafsy* and *kalām lafẓy*. While *kalām nafsy* is the eternal quality of God that is abstract, *kalām lafẓy* which is composed of letters and sounds, is created (*muhdath*).

### Recovering Caliphal Religious Authority Approach

Some scholars analyze al-Ma'mūn's motives in imposing the *Mihna* as a strategy to regain religious authority from the traditionalist ulema. Religious authority was the first discourse debated among Muslims following the death of the Prophet Muḥammad. Disputes emerged regarding whether the successor of the Prophet Muḥammad inherently assumed a religious leadership role, focused solely on worldly affairs, or managed both simul-

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<sup>21</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah*, 273; Hinds, "Mihna"; Jon Hoover, "Ḥanbālī Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 629.

<sup>22</sup> Hurvitz, "al-Ma'mūn," 652.

taneously. Historians adopting this approach view the *Mihna* as a contestation for religious and political authority.

As cited by Hinds, W. Montgomery Watt suggests that al-Ma'mūn's advocacy for the createdness of the Qur'an aimed at diminishing the authority of the 'ulamā who believed in the uncreatedness of the Qur'an.<sup>23</sup> A similar idea was also conveyed by Joseph Schacht, stating that the main target of the *Mihna* was the traditionalists (*Ahl al-Ḥadīth*). Despite sharing a common understanding with the Mu'tazila regarding the createdness of the Qur'an, al-Ma'mūn disagreed with their views on free will. Thus, he was not a Mu'tazilī. Therefore, al-Ma'mūn's choice to promote the createdness of the Qur'an can be understood as his position to support the "hardline" Ḥanafī thoughts (*Ahl al-Ra'y*), who also believed in the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'an. Moreover, *Ahl al-Ra'y* at that time was very selective in using the *Ḥadīth*, which set them in opposition to *Ahl al-Ḥadīth*. In addition to the similarity of Hanafite's understanding with that of the Mu'tazila concerning the createdness of the Qur'an, they also shared a view that "the Qur'an is the only basis for their system of religious doctrine ... [an insistence which] led them to the rejection of most traditions and, by implication, of legal doctrines based on traditions."<sup>24</sup>

Likewise, Ira M. Lapidus interprets the *Mihna* as the caliph's attempt to reestablish the caliphate's ideological authority.<sup>25</sup> Lapidus asserts that *Mihna* was al-Ma'mūn's measure to crush the opposition groups, including the Arab-Khurasanians.<sup>26</sup> Lapidus's hypothesis has opened new directions for the study of *Mihna* and has stimulated discussions among scholars.

Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds are among the scholars who share the same idea as Lapidus's hypothesis. The central argument of their book, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam*, is that in the classical Islamic caliphs, the religious and

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<sup>23</sup> Hinds, "Mihna."

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ira M. Lapidus, *The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society*, in *IJMES*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1975), 363-385.

<sup>26</sup> This view was rejected by Nawas, stating that there were no Arab Khurasanians who became interrogees in the *Mihna*. See Nawas, "The *Mihna*," 698-698.



political authorities were concentrated in the caliphs.<sup>27</sup> Crone and Hinds prove their assumption by highlighting the official designation of *ḵhalīfat Allāh*, which means deputy of God. This term indicates a strong claim by the caliphs that they are the holders of religious authority.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, Crone and Hinds argue that the *Miḥna* was al-Ma'mūn's endeavour to regain the religious authority that began to diminish as the growing influence of the 'ulamā' of *Ḥadīth* (*muhaddithūn*). *Muhaddithūn* advocating for the restoration of the *Sunna* had become a threat to the caliph's authority. It was because the caliph considered that defining the *Sunna*, whose authority is held by private ulema rather than scholars within the caliphate's structure, did not serve the caliph's agendas and even constrained the caliph's flexibility in formulating rules. Therefore, to prevent the application of *Sunna* from becoming an impediment to the caliph, the authority in defining the *Sunna* needed to be held by scholars aligned with the caliph's interests.<sup>29</sup>

Hence, according to Crone and Hinds, it was not the authority of the caliph in policy-making that weakened, but rather the role of interpreting the Prophet's *Ḥadīth*, which was assumed by the ulema. Consequently, the *Miḥna* is perceived as al-Ma'mūn's effort to subdue the authority of the ulema under that of the caliph.<sup>30</sup>

### **Reshaping Islamic Theology Approach**

The second approach that historians used in seeing the motive of al-Ma'mūn when issuing the policy of the createdness of the Qur'an is that the *Miḥna* was considered as al-Ma'mūn's attempt to change the direction of the development of Islamic theology by engaging in its debate through his policies. According to Muhammad Qasim Zaman, the *Miḥna* was undertaken by the caliph in fulfillment of his responsibility as both caliph and imām, aiming to offer guidance to his people and prevent misconception about the Qur'an.<sup>31</sup> The caliph's motivation was not solely driven

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<sup>27</sup> Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5, and 13.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 94 and 96; Zaman, "Miḥna," 449.

<sup>31</sup> Zaman, "Miḥna," 449.

by a struggle for religious authority, as proposed by the scholars in the first approach.

Challenging Crone and Hinds, Zaman raises doubts about whether the early caliphs preceding al-Ma'mūn truly held precedence in religious authority, given that they won the contestation over the ulema. Zaman, in his book *Religion and Politics in the Early Abbasids*, argues that there is little evidence indicating a rivalry between the ulema and the caliphs prior to the reign of al-Ma'mūn.<sup>32</sup> Zaman asserts a cooperative relationship between the caliphs and the ulema. Through their policies, the early caliphs even contributed to the emergence of the proto-Sunni figures. This relationship peaked during the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 809).<sup>33</sup>

However, unlike his predecessor caliphs who collaborated with the ulema, al-Ma'mūn attempted to diminish the influence of ulema and tried to establish himself as the ultimate authority in religious matters.<sup>34</sup> According to Zaman, al-Ma'mūn's stance should not be regarded as the culmination of the struggle for religious authority between the caliphs and the ulema. Instead, it should be viewed as a disruption in their relationship. The *Mihna*'s failure and the subsequent restoration of their relationship confirmed their previous relationship pattern.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, Zaman insists that when studying *Mihna*, modern scholars are often stuck in their view of the conflict between the caliphs and ulema in the period preceding al-Ma'mūn.<sup>36</sup> If the early

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Compare this with Kuru, stating that during the Umayyad and Abbasid eras, the 'ulamā', especially the founders of the four law schools, were persecuted by the caliphs. Kuru argues that it was the independence of the 'ulamā' and their estranged relationship with the caliphs that enabled the emergence of the golden age of Islam in the 8th-12th centuries. See Ahmet T. Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 71-75.

<sup>33</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Religion and Politics Under the Early 'Abbasids: The Emergence of the Proto-Sunni Elite* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 11-12.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Zaman, "Mihna," 449. This perspective is typical of modern scholars, associating the relationship between the state and religion in Islam with the state and church in the traditions of Modern European society. Regarding how the secular modern paradigm is used to analyze pre-modern Islam, see Talal Asad, *Formations of The Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford

Abbasid period was indeed marked by tension between the caliphs and ulema, then the logical consequence is that the *Miḥna* was the culmination of their feud. Therefore, the failure of *Miḥna* should have represented a turning point in the separation between the caliphs and their role in religious affairs and the separation between political and religious authority in Islam. In fact, even following the unsuccessful *Miḥna*, caliphs remained actively involved in religious affairs. Given the significant role caliphs played in religious matters, al-Māwardī (d. 1058), who wrote his book more than a century after the end of *Miḥna*, still emphasized the requirement for a leader to possess expertise in exercising legal reasoning (*ijtihad*) on various legal cases.<sup>37</sup>

Another reason the *Miḥna* did not solely revolve around the contestation of religious authorities was that it was not only ulema who were interrogated. Some political leaders who opposed the caliph, such as Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī (779-839), the son of al-Mahdī (r. 775-785), the third caliph of the Abbasid, also experienced the Inquisition. This notion suggests that the *Miḥna* did not solely represent the caliph's affirmation of his religious authority. Instead, there were multiple factors underlying the implementation of the *Miḥna*.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, the primary source for knowing al-Ma'mūn's motives of the *Miḥna* is his five letters sent to his deputy in Baghdad, as stated in the chronicles of Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī (d. 923). Some clauses in the letters implied that the relationship between the caliph and the ulema was not in an opposed position. At the opening of the first letter, al-Ma'mūn asserted, "Indeed, it is Allāh's right is upon the *imāms* and caliphs of Muslims to strive to

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University Press, 2003); Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); John P. Turner, *Inquisition in Early Islam: The Competition for Political and Religious Authority in the Abbasid Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013) 8.

<sup>37</sup> Zaman, "Miḥna," 449; al-Māwardī states that the leadership (*al-imāmah*) is established to succeed the Prophet in guarding religion and worldly policy. See Abī al-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Māwardī, *al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2006), 3, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Zaman, "Miḥna," 450.

uphold Allāh’s religion....”<sup>39</sup> Hurvitz argues that this indicates two points: first, that the imāms and the caliphs were alike identical, and second, that they constituted two distinct camps, rulers and ulema, therefore establishing a partnership between them. It implies that the *Miḥna* was not caused by a clash between the caliphs and the *imāms*.<sup>40</sup> Should the caliph be in confrontation with the ulema, he would refrain from acknowledging the imāms as the authority entrusted with religious matters.

Furthermore, it is written in the third letter, “Indeed, among the rights of Allah towards His caliphs on His earth and those entrusted by Him with authority over His servants....”<sup>41</sup> Hurvitz contends that the distinction between the caliphs and “those untrusted by Him” in the text shows that the caliphs were part of religious leaders. Consequently, both clauses in the letters indicate an equality between the caliphs and the ‘ulamā’. In other words, the caliphs did not occupy the highest position in terms of religious authority.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, according to Hurvitz, the *Miḥna* served as al-Ma’mūn’s instrument to participate in a theological debate in which the earlier caliphs had never before been involved. Al-Ma’mūn claimed that he was competent in spirituality, enabling him to engage in debates over theological speculations. Consequently, the *Miḥna* was al-Ma’mūn’s strategy to endorse the free-thinking *mutakallimūn* (Muslim theologians) in the fight for religious discourse and, at the same time, to undermine the influence of conservative *muhaddithūn* (traditionists) who were gaining prominence during that period. According to Hurvitz, al-

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<sup>39</sup> The original text is, “*Fa inna ḥaqq Allāh ‘alā a’immat al-muslimin wa kbulafā’ihim al-ijtihād fi iqamat din Allāh alladhi istahfazabum...*,” al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Umam*, 1820.

<sup>40</sup> Hurvitz, “al-M’mūn,” 650.

<sup>41</sup> The original text is, “*Fa inna min ḥaqq Allāh ‘alā kbulafā’ih fi arḍih wa umanā’ih ‘alā ibādih...*,” al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Umam*, 1821.

<sup>42</sup> Hurvitz, “al-Ma’mūn,” 650. In assessing al-Ma’mūn’s position in religious authority, Hurvitz and Zaman hold different perspectives. While Zaman perceived al-Ma’mūn as asserting the highest authority in religious and political domains, Hurvitz maintains that al-Ma’mūn and the ‘ulamā’ were in an equal position.

Ma'mūn seeks to reverse the direction of the development of religious doctrine and intellectual.<sup>43</sup>

Another scholar who argues that the *Miḥna* is al-Ma'mūn's plan to ensure the institution of the caliphate by controlling religious affairs is John Nawas. In his article "The *Miḥna* of 218 A.H./833 A.D. Revisited: An Empirical Study," Nawas investigated information about people who were interrogated during al-Ma'mūn's reign to find out the caliph's objectives behind the *Miḥna*. Of the twenty-eight people whose biographical details were found in various chronicles, Nawas concluded that al-Ma'mūn selected the interrogees for two reasons. Firstly, the selection was based on their intellectual capacity and social influence. Secondly, it served as a warning to the traditionist 'ulamā' to censor the hadith enterprise.<sup>44</sup>

In his article, Nawas also asserts that the hypothesis stating that the *Miḥna* was al-Ma'mūn's attempt to crush the opposition movement was of doubtful validity. This is due to the absence of significant (Arab-) Khurasānians from the list of interrogated people. Finally, Nawas emphasizes that the *Miḥna* was an instrument used by al-Ma'mūn to secure his authority across a spectrum of religious or worldly issues, affirming his position as the ultimate authority in a diverse sphere.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

The term of *Miḥna* has been so firmly attached to al-Ma'mūn. His decision to set the institution of *Miḥna* for a specific group of people has been an extensive study by scholars. Among the themes still being debated is the motives of al-Ma'mūn in upholding the *Miḥna*. Modern historians use two main approaches to analyze this issue. The first approach views the *Miḥna* as a strategy to reclaim the caliphate's authority, which began to be rivalled by the strengthening influence of the ulema of *Ahl al-Ḥadīth*. The second approach interprets the *Miḥna* as al-Ma'mūn's means for reshaping Islamic theology.

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<sup>43</sup> Hurvitz, "al-Ma'mūn," 651.

<sup>44</sup> John A. Nawas, "The *Miḥna* of 218 A.h./833 A.d. Revisited: An Empirical Study," *Journal- American Oriental Society*, Vol. 116, No. 4 (1996), 698.

<sup>45</sup> Nawas, "The *Miḥna*," 708.

The arguments presented in these two approaches are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For instance, as proposed by scholars in the second approach, the caliph's efforts to control and redirect religious discourse inherently involve diminishing the caliph's competitors, particularly the ulema. Consequently, the competition for religious authority, as emphasized by scholars in the first approach, becomes inevitable. Therefore, this paper asserts that these two approaches should not be viewed in isolation but can be integrated to comprehend the caliph's motives in the *Mihna* comprehensively.

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