

The Apostasy Penalty in Contemporary Islamic Jurisprudence: A Comparative Analysis and Contextual Interpretation

doi [10.15408/ajis.v26i1.36147](https://doi.org/10.15408/ajis.v26i1.36147)

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Abstract

This study examines the evolving discourse on the punishment for apostasy (*riddah*) in Islamic jurisprudence by analyzing its classical foundations and contemporary relevance. Using a comparative approach, it examines the legal positions of the major Sunni schools and the *Zāhirī* tradition, while assessing responses from modern scholars and fatwa institutions to shifting political structures, social realities, and evolving concepts of citizenship. The research evaluates whether the classical death penalty for apostasy remains theologically justified and legally applicable in contemporary nation-states characterized by religious pluralism and individual rights. Through an examination of Quranic texts, prophetic traditions, historical precedents, and juristic methodologies, the study distinguishes apostasy associated with rebellion, treason, or public sedition from apostasy arising from private belief or personal conviction. The findings suggest that classical jurists frequently linked apostasy to threats against communal stability and political order rather than to disbelief alone. Accordingly, the study argues that contemporary interpretations should be guided by the objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*), particularly the preservation of life, intellect, religion, and human dignity. It concludes that modern applications of apostasy rulings require contextual evaluation and cautions against the political instrumentalization of religious law in contemporary societies.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis perkembangan pandangan mengenai hukuman bagi pelaku murtad (*riddah*) dalam fikih dengan menelaah dasar-dasar pemikiran klasik serta relevansinya pada masa kini. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan komparatif, penelitian ini mengkaji pandangan mazhab-mazhab Sunni dan mazhab *Zāhirī*, serta menganalisis tanggapan para ulama dan lembaga fatwa kontemporer terhadap perubahan sistem politik, kondisi sosial, dan konsep kewarganegaraan modern. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menilai apakah hukuman mati bagi pelaku murtad yang dikenal dalam fikih klasik masih memiliki dasar teologis dan dapat diterapkan dalam negara modern yang menjunjung pluralisme agama dan hak-hak individu. Melalui analisis terhadap ayat-ayat Al-Qur'an, hadis Nabi, fakta sejarah, dan metode istinbat hukum para ulama, penelitian ini membedakan antara kemurtadan yang disertai tindakan pemberontakan, pengkhianatan, atau ancaman terhadap ketertiban umum dengan kemurtadan yang hanya berkaitan dengan keyakinan pribadi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa banyak ulama klasik menghubungkan kemurtadan dengan ancaman terhadap stabilitas masyarakat dan negara, bukan semata-mata perubahan agama seseorang. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa pemahaman hukum kemurtadan pada masa kini perlu mempertimbangkan tujuan-tujuan syariat (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*), terutama perlindungan terhadap jiwa, akal, agama, dan martabat manusia. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penerapan hukum kemurtadan dalam konteks modern memerlukan kajian yang kontekstual dan tidak boleh digunakan sebagai alat kepentingan politik.

Keywords:

The apostasy penalty; Contemporary islamic jurisprudence; Denouncing religion; *al-Riddah*

How to Cite:

El-Gammal, M. M. M., et al. (2026). The Apostasy Penalty in Contemporary Islamic Jurisprudence: A Comparative Analysis and Contextual Interpretation. AHKAM: Jurnal Ilmu Syariah, 26(1). <https://doi.org/10.15408/ajis.v26i1.36147>

Introduction

The question of whether apostasy in Islam warrants legal punishment, particularly capital punishment, has sparked sustained debate in both classical and contemporary Islamic discourse. In modern times, the issue has become especially contentious in the context of human rights, state sovereignty, and the evolving understanding of religious freedom. While historical legal systems such as *jizyah*, a tax levied on non-Muslims, have drawn significant attention, the issue of punitive measures for apostasy presents deeper normative and legal challenges, especially in Muslim-majority societies striving to balance Islamic tradition with pluralistic citizenship frameworks.

Apostasy (*riddah*), defined as the conscious renunciation of Islam by a Muslim, has historically been treated as both a religious and political offense. Classical jurists across various schools upheld the death penalty for male apostates, primarily based on certain hadith reports and early state practices. However, modern scholars and legal reformers increasingly question the applicability of such rulings in contemporary contexts, arguing that they conflict with Quranic principles of non-coercion in religion (QS 2:256) and with modern norms of individual liberty and human dignity (al-Khātib, 2022). Several modern Muslim thinkers, such as Muḥammad ‘Abduh (Riḍā, 1990), Maḥmūd Shaltūt, and others, have called for a re-examination of classical rulings, emphasizing that punishment for apostasy was context-specific and not necessarily tied to religious belief alone but to acts of rebellion against the community (Shaltūt, M. 2001).

Despite this growing body of critical literature, there remains a lack of comprehensive engagement with how classical and contemporary jurists construct their arguments on apostasy within broader legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), especially in distinguishing between personal belief and public harm. The core problem, therefore, lies in reconciling the inherited legal tradition with the values of freedom of conscience in today's diverse Muslim societies.

Furthermore, the study pays particular attention to how sociopolitical conditions, such as state policies, civil liberties, and social cohesion, shape both traditionalist and reformist understandings of apostasy. It examines the roles of official religious institutions and independent scholars in reinterpreting the punishment of apostasy in a way that seeks to maintain communal stability without infringing upon individual rights and religious freedom.

This paper addresses this problem by adopting a comparative methodology that blends inductive and deductive analysis. It critically examines classical legal texts from the major Islamic schools alongside modern reformist arguments to assess whether the death penalty for apostasy is a juristic necessity or a historically contingent measure. Key questions include: Does apostasy, in the absence of public provocation or sedition, warrant execution under Islamic law? How do contemporary jurists interpret the intersection of apostasy, public order, and religious freedom?

The issue of apostasy in Islamic law has become one of the most debated topics at the intersection of legal tradition, state power, and contemporary human rights discourse. A notable contemporary example is the case of Meriam Yahia Ibrahim Ishag in Sudan, who was sentenced to death for apostasy by a Sudanese court in May 2014 after authorities regarded her Christian faith as a renunciation of Islam. She was also sentenced to 100 lashes for adultery because her marriage to a Christian man was considered invalid under Sudanese law. The case attracted widespread international condemnation from human rights organizations, foreign governments, and advocates of religious freedom, who argued that the ruling violated the fundamental right to freedom of religion and belief. Intense international pressure ultimately led to the overturning of her conviction and her subsequent release, making the case a significant example of the tensions between traditional interpretations of Islamic law, state authority, and contemporary international human rights norms (Amnesty International, 2014). While a classical consensus among jurists upheld capital punishment for apostates, modern

scholars have increasingly interrogated this stance by revisiting the foundational sources and legal methodologies that undergird such rulings. The existing literature reflects a diverse array of approaches, from traditional reaffirmation to legal reform, each grounded in differing readings of Islamic texts, historical contexts, and sociopolitical pressures.

Contemporary scholarship on apostasy (*riddah*) in Islam demonstrates a significant transformation in the way the subject is approached. Whereas classical jurisprudence generally treated apostasy as a punishable offense threatening the integrity of the Muslim community, contemporary scholars increasingly examine it through the lenses of religious freedom, human rights, constitutionalism, and legal reform. Despite their diverse conclusions, the existing literature can be organized around three interconnected themes: the historical and political origins of apostasy law, the reinterpretation of scriptural evidence and legal authority, and the relationship between apostasy, state power, and modern legal orders.

The first major theme concerns the historical foundations of the classical doctrine. A growing body of scholarship argues that the traditional punishment for apostasy emerged within a socio-political environment in which religious affiliation was inseparable from political loyalty. Virgili (2021) contends that apostasy functioned simultaneously as a theological and political offense in early Islamic society, where abandoning the faith could be interpreted as a challenge to communal cohesion and political authority. Similarly, Kau and Suleman (2016) argue that classical jurists conflated religious conversion with rebellion and sedition, thereby transforming what was fundamentally a matter of belief into a criminal offense subject to state punishment. Although these scholars differ in emphasis, they share the view that apostasy law cannot be understood apart from its historical context. This perspective challenges essentialist assumptions that regard the classical ruling as a timeless and universally applicable religious norm. At the same time, these studies devote relatively little attention to explaining how historical circumstances were translated into authoritative legal doctrines through the formal mechanisms of Islamic jurisprudence.

The second theme centers on scriptural interpretation and the legitimacy of the classical consensus. Reformist scholars such as al-Alwani (2011), Ahmad (2005), and Moqsith (2013) argue that neither the Quran nor the Prophet Muḥammad's practice provides unequivocal support for the execution of apostates solely on the basis of personal belief. Their analyses emphasize Quranic principles of freedom of conscience, the absence of explicit worldly sanctions for apostasy, and the contextual nature of prophetic reports often cited in support of capital punishment. Al-Alwani approaches the issue through *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and ethical reasoning, arguing that apostasy becomes legally relevant only when accompanied by rebellion or threats to public order. Ahmad similarly maintains that all scriptural references to apostasy emphasize divine rather than human judgment. Moqsith (2013) extends this critique by demonstrating that the classical doctrine relies heavily on particular interpretations of prophetic traditions, especially the hadith commanding the killing of those who change their religion, while alternative readings remain possible within the broader Islamic tradition. Collectively, these scholars challenge the notion that capital punishment for apostasy constitutes an uncontested religious obligation.

However, important methodological differences distinguish these reformist approaches from more traditional legal reasoning. Rather than engaging extensively with the technical apparatus of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, many reformist studies prioritize ethical principles, theological coherence, and broader Quranic objectives. As a result, they are often highly persuasive in exposing tensions between classical rulings and contemporary conceptions of religious freedom, yet less systematic in explaining how alternative legal conclusions can be justified according to established juristic methodologies. This methodological tension reflects a broader debate concerning the sources of legal authority in Islamic law: whether reform should proceed

primarily through moral and theological reinterpretation or through the internal mechanisms of legal theory itself.

A third major theme concerns the interaction between apostasy law and contemporary political, legal, and human-rights frameworks. Schirmacher (2016) demonstrates that contemporary Muslim discussions increasingly reflect global debates regarding religious liberty, identifying traditionalist, contextualist, and reformist approaches to Quran 2:256 and related texts. Syamsuddin (2021) similarly highlights the continuing tension between classical understandings of *hifz al-dīn* and international human-rights norms protecting freedom of religion and the right to change one's faith. From a policy-oriented perspective, al-Ḥajj (2015) argues that Muslim governments are not necessarily obliged to implement the traditional punishment and may suspend it on grounds of *maṣlahah* and public welfare. These studies collectively illustrate how contemporary discussions of apostasy have shifted from questions of doctrinal correctness alone toward broader concerns involving governance, citizenship, pluralism, and constitutional legitimacy.

Regionally focused studies further demonstrate the significance of social and political context. Morgan and Sulong (2020) show how Malaysian scholars employ the principle of *tarjih* to reassess inherited juristic positions in light of local legal and social realities. Likewise, Fitriani & Aziz (2019) reveal that apostasy continues to produce important legal consequences in contemporary Islamic family law, influencing questions of marital dissolution, maintenance obligations, and judicial discretion. These studies broaden the discussion beyond criminal sanctions by demonstrating that apostasy functions as a multidimensional legal issue affecting family relations, religious identity, and state administration. Together, they underscore the importance of examining how legal doctrines operate within specific institutional and social contexts.

Despite considerable disagreement regarding the legitimacy of classical punishment, several points of convergence emerge across the literature. First, many contemporary scholars acknowledge that classical rulings developed within historical circumstances characterized by a close relationship between religious identity and political authority. Second, there is growing recognition that modern conditions of citizenship, constitutional governance, and religious pluralism require renewed examination of inherited legal doctrines. Third, scholars increasingly accept that apostasy cannot be analyzed solely as a theological issue but must also be understood in relation to questions of legal authority, public order, and human rights. The principal disagreement concerns whether the classical punishment remains a valid legal norm for contemporary Muslim societies or whether it should be restricted to cases involving political rebellion, suspended through considerations of public interest, or abandoned altogether.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate the remarkable evolution of contemporary discussions on apostasy, moving from a largely unquestioned acceptance of the classical death penalty toward more nuanced debates centered on religious freedom, human rights, public interest, and contextual interpretations of scripture. Nevertheless, a significant scholarly gap remains in the treatment of the internal mechanisms of Islamic legal reasoning. Much of the existing literature focuses on the outcomes of juristic rulings rather than the methodological processes through which those rulings were derived. Although scholars such as al-Alwani, Moqsih, and Kau & Suleman challenge the traditional doctrine of apostasy, relatively few studies systematically examine the role of *uṣūl al-fiqh* in constructing the classical consensus. Critical questions concerning the authority of solitary (*āḥād*) hadith in establishing capital punishment, the operation of *ijmā'* (consensus) as a source of legal legitimacy, and the extent to which *qiyās* (analogical reasoning) contributed to the criminalization of apostasy remain insufficiently explored. As a result, the epistemological foundations upon which the classical doctrine rests have not received the sustained analytical attention they deserve.

Furthermore, the next gap concerns the relationship between legal reform and epistemic authority within the Islamic legal tradition. Many contemporary scholars advocate revisiting apostasy laws by appealing to broader Quranic principles, *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*, or international human-rights norms. While these approaches have generated compelling ethical and theological critiques of the death penalty, they often leave unresolved the question of how alternative interpretations can maintain legitimacy within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence itself. In other words, reformist scholarship frequently demonstrates why the traditional ruling may be morally or socially problematic, but devotes less attention to explaining how new legal conclusions can be justified according to the accepted methodological standards of the legal tradition. Consequently, the tension between continuity and change in Islamic law remains insufficiently theorized, particularly regarding the extent to which contemporary reinterpretations can depart from established juristic authority without undermining the coherence of the legal system.

The last gap lies in the tendency of the literature to separate doctrinal analysis from the socio-political realities in which legal interpretations are produced and applied. Classical rulings on apostasy emerged within historical contexts characterized by close integration between religious affiliation, political loyalty, and communal identity. Contemporary Muslim societies, by contrast, operate within nation-state frameworks shaped by constitutionalism, citizenship, international human-rights regimes, religious pluralism, and minority-rights discourses. Yet many studies either focus exclusively on textual and legal arguments or treat political considerations as external influences rather than integral components of legal interpretation. This separation obscures the ways in which modern conditions of state sovereignty, institutional religious authority, and changing conceptions of citizenship influence juristic reasoning and legal reform. Accordingly, this research seeks to bridge these methodological, epistemological, and socio-political gaps through a comparative examination of classical and contemporary arguments on apostasy. By analyzing how legal authority, scriptural interpretation, public order, and religious freedom interact within Islamic jurisprudence, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the doctrinal evolution and contemporary relevance of apostasy law.

Classical Juristic Positions on Apostasy and Its Punishment

The issue of apostasy (*al-riddah*) in Islamic jurisprudence has historically attracted considerable juristic attention, particularly concerning the legal consequences that follow such a religious departure. Across the four Sunni schools of law (*madhāhib*), the predominant view has been that apostasy is a punishable offense, typically warranting the death penalty. However, the conditions, rationale, and justifications behind this ruling vary across the *madhāhib*. In Ḥanafī jurisprudence, the apostate (*murtadd*) is given an opportunity for repentance and is not to be killed immediately. The apostate is to be invited back to Islam and given time to reconsider. If they persist in apostasy, male apostates are liable to the death penalty, whereas female apostates are not executed, but rather imprisoned until they repent ([al-Marghīnānī, n.d.](#); [al-Sarakhsī, 1989](#)). This distinction is based on interpretive reasoning (*ra’y*) and social function rather than an explicit textual mandate. The underlying rationale in the Ḥanafī school hinges on the idea that the punishment for apostasy is linked not merely to personal belief, but to potential public disorder. Women, due to their traditionally non-combatant status, were seen as posing less threat to public stability ([al-Zayla‘ī, n.d.](#)).

The Mālikī position, as articulated in sources such as Mukhtaṣar Khalīl and its commentaries by ‘Alīsh and al-Nafrawī, adopts a firm stance: the apostate is given three days to repent. If no repentance occurs, execution is mandated for both men and women. Some

Mālikīs, however, allowed for indefinite imprisonment for female apostates depending on public interest (*maṣlahah*) and the potential for future repentance (‘Alīsh, 1989). This reflects the Mālikī attention to both the preservation of communal religious identity and the ethical imperative of repentance. The school holds that apostasy constitutes not only a spiritual betrayal but a form of political rebellion, especially in the pre-modern Islamic polity.

The Shāfi‘ī school holds that apostates must be called to repentance for three days. If unrepentant, both male and female apostates are to be executed (al-Shāfi‘ī, 1983; al-Rāfi‘ī, n.d.). This ruling is supported by prophetic traditions (hadith often cited as proof-texts, including the famous narration, "Whoever changes his religion, kill him" (*man baddala dīnahu fa-uqtulūh*), which appears in both Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim. The Shāfi‘īs do not differentiate between genders in this context, emphasizing the gravity of apostasy as a direct challenge to divine authority and the Islamic legal order. However, some late Shāfi‘ī scholars discussed whether political motives or external rebellion are necessary conditions for applying the death penalty (al-Haytamī, 2004).

The Ḥanbalīs, particularly as represented in al-Mughnī by Ibn Qudāmah and in the works of Ibn Taymiyyah, are among the strictest in enforcing the death penalty for apostasy, with some exceptions for those who are mentally impaired or newly converted. Like the Shāfi‘īs, they do not distinguish between men and women in this ruling (Ibn Qudāmah, 1968; Ibn Mufliḥ, 2003). However, Ibn Taymiyyah introduced a more nuanced perspective. While affirming the punishment in principle, he emphasized the context of public order and the necessity to ensure that apostasy does not become a pretext for political instability. In his Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā, he underlined that the prophetic tradition must be applied within a legal framework that accounts for broader social harmony and justice (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1995).

Ibn Ḥazm, the most prominent representative of the *Zāhirī* school, was distinctive in his literalist approach. Despite his reliance on apparent textual meaning, he paradoxically denied the permissibility of executing an apostate unless acts of aggression or rebellion accompany the apostasy. In his al-Muḥallā, Ibn Ḥazm criticized the majority view, arguing that the Quran clearly affirms freedom of belief, as in the verse: "There is no compulsion in religion" (QS. 2:256), and notes that many who apostatized during the Prophet Muḥammad's time were not killed (Ibn Ḥazm, 2004). This view challenges the juridical mainstream by appealing to Quranic textualism and a contextual reading of prophetic practice, signaling early debates over religious freedom that remain relevant today.

Apostasy in the Framework of Islamic Political Jurisprudence

In the domain of Islamic political jurisprudence (*siyāsah shar‘iyyah*), apostasy (*riddah*) occupies a critical place, not only as a theological deviation but as a political act that challenges the collective identity and stability of the Muslim community. Jurists such as al-Māwardī, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Khaldūn, and Ibn Farḥūn have viewed apostasy as a disruption to public order and a threat to the legitimacy of the Islamic polity. Within this framework, the punishment for apostasy is not solely a matter of belief or disbelief, but a mechanism for preserving social cohesion and political integrity.

This leads to a foundational question: Did the Prophet Muḥammad issue the command, "Whoever changes his religion, kill him" (Bukhārī, 3017), as a binding legal ruling for all times, or was it a political directive delivered in his capacity as head of state during a specific context of statecraft and communal protection? If the latter, the apostasy ruling should be understood as a matter of public policy (*siyāsah*), subject to the discretion of the legitimate ruler (*walī al-amr*), and contingent upon the broader objectives of maintaining social order and communal

unity. Conversely, if the statement is treated as general legal legislation (*tashrī' ʿāmm*), then the punishment must apply across all contexts, irrespective of situational variables.

This section explores the treatment of apostasy in Islamic political jurisprudence through three interrelated themes. First, it examines apostasy as a public crime that extends beyond the realm of individual belief. Second, it analyzes apostasy in relation to the political concept of *Dār al-Islām* and the practices of the early caliphs. Third, it argues that the implementation of penal punishments, including those for apostasy, is not an end in itself within the sharia but rather a measure of last resort aimed at preventing public harm.

Regarding apostasy as a public crime in political jurisprudence, sources agree that apostasy is not merely a private belief deviation but a collective threat when it disrupts public order or destabilizes the Muslim community. Al-Māwardī (1996) stated that the ruler's responsibilities include both protecting the religion and managing worldly affairs. If an apostate publicly denounces religion, incites others, or leaves the Muslim community, the ruler must act, not for theological reasons, but to preserve community stability. This aligns with Ibn Khaldūn's (1967) view of apostasy as a form of political rebellion. In his *Muqaddimah*, he saw Abū Bakr's wars against those who refused to pay *zakāt* as acts of defending against political disintegration, not religious coercion (Ibn Khaldūn, 1967:159).

Similarly, Ibn Taymiyyah (1998) argued that not every deviation from religion warrants worldly punishment; instead, intervention is necessary only if the deviation causes public discord or disorder. He distinguished between the "silent apostate" and the "apostate agitator," stating that the latter constitutes treason due to incitement against the unity and legal framework of the Muslim community (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1998:13–15). This jurisprudential view redefines apostasy as a political crime that threatens collective security, thus removing it from the realm of private religious autonomy.

In the tradition of Islamic governance, apostasy has often been viewed through the lens of *Dār al-Islām*, the domain of Islam as a political and legal entity. Entering this domain is understood as joining a collective covenant. Al-Qarāfī (1994) asserted that public apostasy constitutes a breach of this social contract, comparable to an act of sedition. The classical requirement for *istitābah* (offering repentance) underscores the reformatory nature of the ruling. Al-Shāfī'ī (1983) held that if the apostate repents, execution is waived, not merely because of a change in belief but because the danger to communal order is removed. Al-Nawawī (1991) similarly stated that the punishment intensifies only when apostasy is coupled with provocation or incitement. Historically, Abū Bakr's campaigns against apostates illustrate this principle (al-Nawawī, 1991). His statement, "By Allah, I will fight the one who separates between prayer and *zakāt*" (al-Bukhārī, 1975, hadith no. 3017), affirms that the conflict was about political disobedience, not personal belief. These juristic approaches show that political realities and communal cohesion historically conditioned the punishment for apostasy, and thus are more aligned with maintaining the integrity of *Dār al-Islām* than enforcing dogma.

On the reluctance of sharia toward implementing *ḥudūd* for apostasy, Islamic law does not promote punitive measures for their own sake. The overarching purpose of the sharia is to protect essential values: religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (1991) emphasized that punishments are intended to deter harm, not to exact retribution. He wrote that if execution leads to greater disorder or civil strife, it must be avoided (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, 1991: 10–12). Likewise, Ibn Taymiyyah (1998) reiterated that apostasy alone does not justify punishment unless it results in public harm. Al-Māwardī (1996) concurred, stating that punishment must serve communal welfare, not theological absolutism. This is consistent with the Prophetic directive: "Avoid applying the *ḥudūd* whenever you find an excuse [for leniency], for it is better for the leader to err in pardoning than to err in punishing" (Tirmidhī, 1998; Dāraqutnī, n.d., Hadith no. 2811). Al-Shāfī'ī (1983) explained that repentance should always be prioritized, especially when there are plausible doubts or legal ambiguities.

Thus, within the framework of Islamic political jurisprudence, apostasy is treated as a conditional political offense, subject to the preservation of public order, and not as an unqualified theological transgression.

Contemporary Fatwas on Apostasy: Between Official Institutions and Reformist Scholars

In recent decades, a range of contemporary fatwas concerning apostasy (*riddah*) have emerged, reflecting a spectrum of approaches between strict adherence to traditional interpretations and reformist efforts to contextualize the rulings in light of modern socio-political realities. These fatwas vary between institutional jurisprudence rooted in dominant madhhab traditions and independent scholarly efforts aimed at reconciling Islamic law with constitutional frameworks and human rights discourses.

Institutional Approaches: Between Theoretical Rigidity and Practical Flexibility

In Saudi Arabia, official fatwas and court rulings largely draw upon the classical Hanbalī school, which affirms the death penalty for apostasy following a period of *istitābah* (soliciting repentance). The Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta' issued a fatwa affirming that: "Apostasy from Islam is among the gravest of crimes, as it constitutes disbelief after belief, a rejection of truth, and mockery of the religion. Thus, it is obligatory upon the rulers to establish the ḥadd punishment upon one whose apostasy is proven and who does not repent" ([Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta', 1996: 41–42](#)). This represents a doctrinal position where the ḥadd punishment is treated as a fixed, obligatory command based on the *ḥadīth*: "Whoever changes his religion, kill him" ([al-Bukhārī, 1975, Hadith no. 3017](#)). However, legal practice in Saudi Arabia shows a more restrained application. Recent human rights reports ([Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)) indicate that explicit apostasy charges rarely result in capital punishment. Instead, such cases are often processed under broader categories like blasphemy, atheism, or incitement to sedition. Accused individuals are frequently referred to religious guidance committees for rehabilitation, and if they offer a public apology or verbal repentance, formal charges are dropped. This pragmatic approach reflects an implicit distinction between theoretical obligation and judicial enforcement, suggesting a more cautious exercise of the state's punitive authority, influenced by international scrutiny and evolving legal norms.

In Egypt, the state muftis and al-Azhar-affiliated institutions have increasingly emphasized a distinction between private apostasy and apostasy that entails public harm, sedition (*fitnah*), or provocation. A 2013 fatwa by *Dār al-Iftā' al-Miṣriyyah* stated: "One who quietly changes their faith without propagating their beliefs or inciting social unrest is not subject to any worldly punishment, as Islam does not compel belief. However, apostasy that threatens public order or undermines communal bonds may be liable to punishment, not due to belief per se, but due to the resulting harm" ([Dār al-Iftā' al-Miṣriyyah, Fatwa No. 6592, October, 2013](#)).

This understanding aligns with the position adopted in a 2017 declaration by al-Azhar during its international conference on Freedom and Citizenship, which affirmed that Islamic tradition does not prescribe a worldly penalty for apostasy unless it endangers public stability or involves organized subversion. The declaration emphasized the Qur'anic basis for freedom of belief, citing: "There is no compulsion in religion" (QS. 2:256).

This evolving jurisprudence is not merely theoretical. In Egypt's legal system, apostasy is not a criminal offense under the penal code. However, civil courts have occasionally issued rulings related to apostasy-like accusations, such as annulments of marriages or exclusions from inheritance, based on religious expert testimony. For example, in the 1995 case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, a family court ruled to dissolve his marriage after religious authorities deemed his writings to contradict Islamic beliefs (Lombardi, 2006).

Indonesia provides an important model of Islamic legal reasoning in a pluralistic constitutional framework. The national constitution guarantees full religious freedom, and apostasy is not penalized in the criminal code. While the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), a semi-official Islamic body, has declared apostasy religiously prohibited (MUI, 2005), it has simultaneously emphasized that responses should focus on dialogue and *da'wah* (proselytization), not punishment. In its 2010 guidelines, the council stated: "Freedom of religion does not mean one can insult sacred beliefs or incite division. The state must balance between freedom of conscience and preserving national unity" (MUI Official Statements, 2010). Even in high-profile cases such as that of Ahmad Deedat's son in 2007, charges were not brought under apostasy laws, but under blasphemy-related provisions (Indonesia Penal Code, 1965, Art. 156a), illustrating the legal decoupling of belief change from criminality.

Reformist Scholarly Trends: Contextualizing Apostasy as a Political Offense

Among the most influential voices for reinterpreting apostasy laws is Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, who argued that the classical *ḥadd* ruling must be understood in light of *siyāsah shar'īyyah* and political rebellion. In his work *Jarīmat al-Riddah* (The Crime of Apostasy), he maintained: "The penalty is not for mere belief change, but for joining a political rebellion against the Muslim community. It is akin to high treason in modern law" (al-Qaradāwī, 2006). He argued that the Prophet Muḥammad did not execute the hypocrites or those who quietly left Islam, which implies that apostasy alone does not necessitate the death penalty unless accompanied by sedition or armed defection.

Al-Najjār similarly emphasized that the apostasy rulings in early Islam were contextually tied to war, tribal defection, and attempts to dismantle the nascent Muslim state. At a 2009 conference of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, he stated that: "The punishment is valid only when apostasy becomes a functional component of rebellion or public disorder. Without this element, the penalty becomes unwise and counterproductive" (al-Najjār, 2009). This position anchors itself in *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, the higher objectives of Islamic law, particularly the protection of faith, life, and social cohesion, without criminalizing private belief.

Al-'Alwānī re-examined all scriptural texts on apostasy through the lens of Quranic ethics. He concluded in his book *La Ikrah fī al-Dīn: Ishkāliyat al-Riddah* (No Compulsion in Religion: The Problem of Apostasy) that the Qur'an consistently leaves the judgment of apostasy to God in the afterlife, and that no worldly penalty is ordained without additional crimes (al-'Alwānī, 2006). He interpreted the prophetic hadith often cited in support of execution as contextual, reflecting the Prophet's political leadership and decisions in cases involving rebellion, not a universal legal norm.

Al-'Awā took a similar approach, arguing that the hadith "Whoever changes his religion, kill him" must be read as a political directive issued by the Prophet Muḥammad in his role as head of state. He emphasized that: "The Prophet did not apply this ruling uniformly, and refrained from punishing some known apostates, suggesting that the matter rests on political discretion rather than fixed legal obligation" (al-'Awā, 2010). In multiple publications,

al-‘Awā stressed that the ruling on apostasy must fall under *siyāsah shar‘iyyah*, and thus requires case-by-case *ijtihād* by competent authorities.

In sum, the landscape of contemporary fatwas on apostasy is far from monolithic. While some official bodies uphold classical rulings, others differentiate between private belief change and acts of political or social harm. Reformist scholars, drawing on the frameworks of *maqāṣid*, *siyāsah shar‘iyyah*, and Quranic hermeneutics, argue that the penalty should only apply where apostasy functions as a threat to public order, not as a mere religious choice.

This divergence highlights a critical shift in modern Islamic jurisprudence, from treating apostasy as a purely theological offense to evaluating its public consequences, political meanings, and contextual applications. It also affirms that the evolution of apostasy rulings is shaped as much by legal tradition as by the institutional, constitutional, and sociopolitical realities of the Muslim world today.

The Role of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah* in Contemporary Fatwa Issuance and Legal Judgments

In contemporary Islamic jurisprudence, the objectives of the sharia (*maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*) have become essential to guiding legal and political decision-making. Traditionally, these objectives encompass the preservation of religion (*dīn*), life (*nafs*), intellect (*‘aql*), lineage (*nasl*), and wealth (*māl*), commonly known as the five necessities. These aims ensure not only religious integrity but also individual and societal welfare in both spiritual and worldly dimensions (al-Shāṭibī, 1997). In their refined form, these objectives are generally categorized into three tiers: essentials (*darūriyyāt*), needs (*ḥājīyyāt*), and enhancements (*taḥsīniyyāt*). Essentials are indispensable for human survival and spiritual success, while the other two categories alleviate hardship and promote moral and social values (Ibn ‘Āshūr, 1999). These classifications allow scholars and jurists to address unprecedented realities using a principled yet adaptable legal framework.

Given the growing complexity of contemporary societies, especially in contexts where Muslim communities coexist within pluralistic, secular, or modern nation-states, fatwa bodies and legal authorities have increasingly invoked *maqāṣid* to contextualize rulings. This shift highlights the adaptability of Islamic law in aligning legal rulings with overarching ethical objectives (al-Alwānī, 2003). The jurist's task, therefore, goes beyond mere textual fidelity; it includes evaluating outcomes, safeguarding public interest (*maṣlahah*), and preventing harm (*mafsadah*). Ibn Taymiyyah (1998) emphasized that political authority in Islam aims first and foremost at safeguarding religion, as its loss leads to the ultimate breakdown of both worldly and spiritual affairs. From this standpoint, governance and fatwa issuance must align with both the letter and the spirit of the law. Consequently, Islamic political jurisprudence (*siyāsah shar‘iyyah*) is not fixed but contextual, requiring careful analysis of time, place, and circumstance (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1998; al-Alwānī, 2003).

This theoretical orientation becomes vital in contemporary discussions about apostasy. Scholars and fatwa councils today must evaluate whether enforcing classical rulings, such as the death penalty for apostasy, achieves *maqāṣid* or contradicts them in a legal system that prioritizes civil liberties, freedom of conscience, and the rule of law. Many modern jurists argue that Islamic politics is a field of applied ethics and governance, requiring a careful balance of conflicting interests and adaptability to new realities (al-Shāṭibī, 1997; Ibn ‘Āshūr, 1999).

The Feasibility of Enforcing Apostasy Penalties in Contemporary States

The question of whether the death penalty for apostasy can be meaningfully or justly applied in a modern state demands a multi-layered analysis. Classical jurists considered apostasy (*riddah*) not merely as a personal act of disbelief but also as a political crime akin to treason, particularly when it involved public dissent, defection to enemy forces, or incitement against the Muslim community (Ibn Qudāmah, 1968). Evidence from prophetic traditions supports the notion that apostasy, when coupled with rebellion or harm to the Muslim polity, warranted capital punishment. For example, the well-known hadith recorded in both *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* states: "Whoever changes his religion, kill him" (al-Bukhārī, 1975; al-Tirmidhī, 1998). Scholars such as Ibn Rajab (1987) and al-Shawkānī (2004) regarded this narration as a general legal principle, reinforced by the actions of the Companions, including Abū Bakr's campaign against the apostates during the *Riddah* Wars.

Nevertheless, the classical position was not applied uniformly in all historical circumstances. The Prophet Muḥammad accepted the Treaty of *Ḥudaybiyyah*, which allowed Muslims who had abandoned Islam and returned to Quraysh to remain unharmed, suggesting that no fixed punishment (*ḥadd*) was automatically enforced in every case of apostasy (Ibn Ḥanbal, 1995; Ibn Kathīr, 1988). Likewise, historical reports record instances in which apostates were granted clemency after repentance, including the case of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Abī Sarḥ, who received amnesty through the intercession of ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān (al-Ḥākīm, 1990). Such precedents have prompted contemporary scholars to re-examine whether the death penalty was intended for apostasy per se or for apostasy accompanied by political rebellion, sedition, or acts threatening communal security.

The relevance of this debate becomes particularly apparent when examining the experience of contemporary Muslim-majority states. One of the most significant modern examples is Sudan. Under Article 126 of Sudan's 1991 Criminal Code, apostasy was punishable by death. The law became the focus of international attention in 2014 through the case of Meriam Yahia Ibrahim, a Sudanese woman who identified as a Christian and was convicted of apostasy after refusing to renounce her faith. A Sudanese court sentenced her to death, generating widespread criticism from international organizations, foreign governments, and human rights advocates. Ultimately, the Court of Appeal overturned the conviction and ordered her release (Amnesty International, 2014). The case demonstrated the legal, diplomatic, and human rights challenges associated with implementing classical apostasy laws within a contemporary international environment characterized by strong protections for religious freedom.

More importantly, Sudan undertook a major legal reform in 2020 by repealing Article 126 and abolishing apostasy as a criminal offense. The transitional government presented this reform as part of a broader effort to align domestic legislation with constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and international human rights obligations (U.S. Department of State, 2020). The Sudanese case is particularly instructive because it illustrates how a state with a long history of sharia-based criminal legislation can maintain Islam as a central component of its social identity while abandoning criminal sanctions for religious conversion. In effect, Sudan shifted from treating apostasy as a matter of criminal law to treating it primarily as a matter of personal belief and conscience.

By contrast, some contemporary Muslim-majority states continue to retain legal frameworks informed by classical sharia principles concerning apostasy and religious dissent. Saudi Arabia, for example, maintains a legal system in which Islam serves as the foundation of governance and public law, and religious expression is subject to significant state regulation. According to the U.S. Department of State (2023), individuals may face legal consequences for acts deemed contrary to Islamic teachings, including blasphemy, religious criticism, or expressions perceived as undermining public order and social cohesion. Similarly, Freedom

House (2024) notes that limitations on freedom of religion and belief remain extensive, while public expression of non-Islamic religious views or criticism of religious institutions may attract state scrutiny. In practice, therefore, contemporary legal controversies involving apostasy are frequently intertwined with broader concerns relating to public order, national security, and political authority rather than questions of private belief alone. This reality has led a number of modern scholars to argue that the classical jurisprudential treatment of apostasy was historically linked to acts perceived as threatening the political and social integrity of the Muslim community, rather than merely to individual changes of religious conviction (U.S. Department of State, 2023; Freedom House, 2024).

The divergence between Sudan's repeal of apostasy legislation and the continued retention of such laws in countries such as Saudi Arabia illustrates a broader transformation in the relationship between religion and state. Classical jurists formulated their rulings within a socio-political framework in which religious affiliation constituted a primary marker of political loyalty and communal identity. Modern nation-states, however, are generally organized around citizenship, constitutional rights, and territorial sovereignty rather than religious membership alone. Consequently, many contemporary scholars argue that the original legal rationale underlying the classical punishment—namely, protecting the Muslim polity from treasonous defection—cannot automatically be extended to cases involving individual religious conversion that pose no direct threat to public security.

In this regard, contemporary jurists face several important questions. Should apostasy in modern pluralistic societies continue to be treated as a capital offense? Does the emergence of constitutional governance and legally protected freedom of religion alter the legal rationale for applying the classical ruling? Is personal religious conversion sufficient to trigger state punishment, or must it be accompanied by demonstrable harm to society and public order? These questions are especially significant because Islamic criminal punishments require stringent evidentiary standards and are traditionally justified by considerations of public welfare (*maṣlaḥah*). Classical jurists themselves emphasized caution in implementing severe punishments when doing so could generate greater social harm or political instability. Reports attributed to 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb reflect this cautious approach, emphasizing persuasion and voluntary return rather than coercive punishment (al-Bukhārī, 1975).

In sum, while the prohibition of apostasy remains largely uncontested within Islamic theology, its legal consequences—particularly the death penalty—have become increasingly debated in contemporary jurisprudence and state practice. The experiences of Sudan and Saudi Arabia demonstrate that the issue extends beyond textual interpretation and involves broader considerations of constitutional governance, citizenship, international law, and public welfare. The diversity of legal approaches among Muslim-majority countries suggests that many contemporary states are increasingly distinguishing between the theological status of apostasy and its treatment under criminal law. Consequently, any contemporary assessment of apostasy penalties must consider not only classical precedents but also the realities of modern legal systems and the higher objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*), including justice (*'adl*), mercy (*rahmah*), human dignity (*karāmah*), and public welfare (*maṣlaḥah*).

Conclusion

The discourse on apostasy (*riddah*) within Islamic law is far more intricate than a simple mandate for capital punishment, as evidenced by the diverse perspectives found in the major Sunni schools, the Zāhirī tradition, and modern scholarship. Historically, classical jurists did not view religious conversion in a vacuum; rather, they understood it as being deeply interwoven with political rebellion, social disorder, and a breach of communal loyalty. These

legal rulings were shaped by pre-modern societies where religious identity and state authority were inseparable. However, as we transition into the era of modern nation-states defined by citizenship and constitutional rights, it becomes essential to distinguish between a private change of heart and acts of treason or organized subversion. By recognizing that many historical penalties were context-dependent measures often falling under discretionary state authority (*ta'zīr* and *siyāsah shar'iyyah*) rather than immutable sanctions, we can appreciate the flexibility and pragmatism that characterized early Islamic governance.

To address these challenges today, we must look to the higher objectives of Islamic law, known as *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, which seek to balance the protection of faith with the fundamental preservation of life, intellect, human dignity, and social welfare. This ethical framework suggests that when an individual's change of belief remains a personal matter, devoid of hostility or political aggression, it does not warrant the severe punishments historically reserved for threats to the state. Moving forward, scholars and religious institutions carry a profound responsibility to move beyond rigid literalism and guard against the political exploitation of these rulings. By fostering a methodology that honors classical heritage while remaining deeply attuned to contemporary realities, we can develop a more nuanced legal approach, one that clearly differentiates between intellectual doubt, private faith, and actual violence, ensuring that Islamic guidance remains both principled and compassionate in a changing world.

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