

Reinterpreting Revelation: A Critical Examination of Muhammad Syahrur's *Nazariyyāt al-Ḥudūd* and Its Impact on Contemporary Islamic Thought

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ABSTRACT

The growing need for contextual interpretations of Islamic teachings has encouraged contemporary Muslim scholars to reassess traditional approaches to Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic law. Among these scholars, Muhammad Syahrur introduced Nazariyyāt al-Ḥudūd (Limitation Theory) as an alternative framework for understanding Qur'anic legal provisions. This study aims to critically analyze the philosophical foundations, interpretive methodology, and contemporary relevance of Syahrur's Limitation Theory. Employing a qualitative library research approach and critical-analytical method, the study examines Syahrur's major works and relevant scholarly literature on his thought. The analysis focuses on Syahrur's reinterpretation of Qur'anic legal texts through the concepts of limitation, rationality, justice, and human freedom. The findings reveal that Syahrur's theory challenges the rigidity of classical legal interpretations by proposing that the Qur'an establishes normative boundaries within which Muslims may formulate contextually appropriate legal solutions. This approach revitalizes the role of ijtihad and provides a framework for addressing contemporary issues such as gender equality, human rights, and legal reform. However, the study also finds that Syahrur's methodology has been criticized for its limited engagement with classical jurisprudential traditions and its tendency toward highly subjective interpretations. This study contributes to contemporary Islamic thought by highlighting both the strengths and limitations of Syahrur's hermeneutical approach and demonstrating its significance in promoting a more dynamic and contextual understanding of Islamic law in the modern era.

Keywords: Muhammad Syahrur, Nazariyyāt al-Ḥudūd, Limitation Theory, Islamic Legal Thought, Qur'anic Interpretation

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on Islamic legal theory in contemporary scholarship has increasingly shifted toward reinterpretation of foundational texts in response to changing social, political, and intellectual contexts. Within this evolving landscape, the works of Muhammad Syahrur occupy a distinctive position due to his radical methodological departure from classical *uṣūl al-fiqh*. His *Nazariyyāt al-Ḥudūd* (Theory of Limits) proposes that divine revelation does not prescribe fixed legal rulings in absolute terms, but instead establishes flexible boundary conditions within which human reasoning operates.⁴ This conceptualization has generated extensive debate among contemporary

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⁴ Rachmat Afandi, "Islamic Theology and Gender: Reflections on Muhammad Syahrur's Thoughts," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2018): 8.

Muslim thinkers, particularly regarding its epistemological validity and implications for Islamic legal reform.⁵

The emergence of Syahrur's thought must be situated within the broader intellectual crisis of modern Islamic thought, where traditional interpretive frameworks are increasingly questioned in light of modernity, globalization, and human rights discourse. Reformist thinkers such as Fazlur Rahman have previously emphasized the need for a double movement hermeneutic that bridges the gap between historical revelation and contemporary application. Similarly, thinkers like Mohammed Arkoun have critiqued the "closed corpus" of classical Islamic interpretation, advocating for an open and critical reading of the Qur'an. Syahrur's contribution can be understood as part of this wider intellectual movement, yet his theory diverges significantly by introducing a mathematical and linguistic structuralism in interpreting Qur'anic text.⁶

At the core of *Nazariyyāt al-Hudūd* lies the assertion that Qur'anic legal verses are structured around upper and lower limits rather than fixed prescriptions. Within these limits, human societies are granted interpretive autonomy to formulate contextually appropriate laws. This approach challenges the traditional juristic assumption that fiqh rulings represent fixed divine intent. Instead, Syahrur positions the Qur'an as a dynamic text whose meanings are partially contingent upon historical and social conditions.

The implications of this theory are significant for contemporary Islamic legal and ethical debates. In issues such as gender justice, criminal law, and human rights, Syahrur's framework allows for expansive reinterpretations that align with modern normative standards.⁷ For example, scholars engaging with his theory argue that *hudūd* punishments in classical jurisprudence should be understood as maximum thresholds rather than obligatory fixed penalties. However, critics argue that such readings risk undermining the authority of classical fiqh and may lead to excessive subjectivism in legal interpretation. Furthermore, the epistemological foundations of Syahrur's theory have been widely debated. Some scholars emphasize that Islamic legal theory is deeply rooted in pre-modern epistemic structures that resist reduction to modern linguistic or scientific models. Conversely, proponents of reform argue that Islamic jurisprudence must evolve to remain relevant in contemporary contexts, particularly in relation to constitutional governance and global human rights standards. This tension highlights the broader methodological divide within contemporary Islamic thought between textual literalism, contextual historicism, and rationalist reconstruction.

Despite criticisms, Syahrur's work has significantly influenced modern Islamic intellectual discourse, especially among reform-oriented scholars in the Arab world and Southeast Asia. His reinterpretation of revelation encourages a shift from rigid legal formalism toward a more dynamic and context-sensitive understanding of Islamic law. This has contributed to renewed debates on the role of *ijtihād*, the authority of classical jurisprudence, and the adaptability of Islamic legal principles in pluralistic societies. In light of these developments, this study seeks to critically examine the philosophical foundations, interpretive methodology, and contemporary impact of Syahrur's *Nazariyyāt al-Hudūd*. It argues that while the theory offers a compelling framework for

⁵ Supriyanto, "Pergeseran Paradigma Tafsir Ala Linguis (Studi Atas Kitab 'Qira'ah Mu'ashirah' Karya Muhammad Syahrur) [A Paradigm Shift in Linguistic Exegesis (A Study of the Book 'Qira'ah Mu'ashirah' by Muhammad Syahrur)]," *Jurnal Studi Agama* 2, no. 2 (2018): 71–86.

⁶ Qaem Aulassyahied, "Studi Kritis Konsep Sunnah Muhammad Syahrur [A Critical Study of Muhammad Syahrur's Concept of Sunnah]," *Kalimah* 13, no. 1 (2015): 127.

⁷ Fuad Mustafid, "Pembaruan Pemikiran Hukum Islam: Studi Tentang Teori Hudud Muhammad Syahrur [Renewal of Islamic Legal Thought: A Study of Muhammad Syahrur's Hudud Theory]," *Al-Mazahib* 5, no. 2 (2017): 307.

rethinking Islamic legal interpretation, it also raises significant epistemological and methodological challenges that require careful scholarly engagement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative library research approach to critically examine Muhammad Syahrur's *Nazariyyāt al-Hudūd* and its impact on contemporary Islamic thought. The research is based on the analysis of primary and secondary textual sources. Primary sources include Syahrur's major works, particularly *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'an: Qirā'ah Mu'āṣirah*, as well as other writings that elaborate his methodological framework and legal theories. Secondary sources consist of scholarly books, journal articles, dissertations, and academic discussions that evaluate, support, or criticize Syahrur's ideas. Data were collected through systematic document analysis, focusing on the philosophical foundations, interpretive principles, and legal implications of the Theory of Limits. The study adopts a descriptive-analytical method to explain Syahrur's conceptual framework and a critical approach to assess its strengths, weaknesses, and relevance within contemporary Islamic discourse. Furthermore, a comparative analysis is employed to contrast Syahrur's hermeneutical method with classical approaches to Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic jurisprudence. The collected data were analyzed through content analysis, identifying key themes related to legal flexibility, contextual interpretation, and the relationship between revelation and modernity. By examining both supportive and critical perspectives, this research aims to provide a balanced assessment of Syahrur's contribution to contemporary Islamic legal and intellectual debates, while highlighting the broader implications of his thought for the reinterpretation of Islamic teachings in modern contexts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Biography of Muhammad Syahrur

Muhammad Syahrur is an intellectual, scholar and political philosopher from Syria who was born on April 14, 1938 in the village of Atmeh, near the city of Idlib. He is known for his controversial views in Islamic studies and politics. Syahrur studied at Damascus University and graduated with a degree in Arabic literature in 1963. He then continued his education at the Sorbonne University in Paris, France, where he earned a doctorate in modern literature in 1970. At the start of his career, Syahrur worked as a lecturer in Arabic literature at Damascus University. However, his deep interest in Islamic thought and politics prompted him to focus his research and writing on these issues. He criticized many traditions and conventional views in Islam, and introduced controversial new ideas in contemporary Islamic thought.

One of Syahrur's main contributions was in the field of al-Quran exegesis. He believes that traditional interpretations of the Qur'an are too tied to historical context and are not relevant to modern times.⁸ Syahrur tries to develop an interpretive approach that is more contextual and in line with current social and political developments. Apart from that, Syahrur also has innovative thoughts in the political field. He proposed the idea of "political Islam" which differentiates between religious principles and political

⁸ Abdul Mustaqim, "Konsep Poligami Menurut Muhammad Syahrur [The Concept of Polygamy According to Muhammad Syahrur]," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu al-Quran dan Hadis* 8, no. 1 (2007): 41-58.

principles, and emphasizes the importance of democracy, individual freedom, and social justice in the Islamic context.⁹

Syahrur's works include *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān* (The Book and the Quran), *al-Islām: 'Aqīdah wa Shara'* (Islam: Belief and Law), and *al-Ḥaqīqah al-Muḥammadiyyah* (The Muhammadiyyah Truth). These books have been translated into several languages and influenced religious and political thought in the Islamic world. Muhammad Syahrur passed away on December 31, 2019 in Damascus, Syria, but his thoughts and contributions to the field of Islamic and political studies remain impactful to this day.

Theoretical Foundations of Syahrur's Thought

Muhammad Syahrur is a contemporary Muslim intellectual originating from Syria. He is known for his innovative thinking in the field of Islamic thought. Some of the theoretical foundations underlying Syahrur's thinking are as follows:

a. Hermeneutics

Syahrur adopts a hermeneutical approach in understanding and interpreting religious texts, especially the Qur'an. He argued that religious texts must be interpreted by considering the social, historical and intellectual context that surrounds them. Syahrur emphasized the importance of understanding universal messages in religious texts that are relevant to contemporary times and society.¹⁰ Muhammad Syahrur, a contemporary Syrian thinker, is known for his hermeneutical approach in interpreting Islamic texts, particularly the Qur'an. His method seeks to bridge the gap between traditional interpretations and modern realities by recontextualizing divine revelation in light of changing human circumstances. Syahrur emphasized that the Qur'an must be understood dynamically, not statically, and that its meanings evolve through human experience and rational engagement. According to him, the Qur'an is a divine text revealed within a specific socio-historical context, but its universal values transcend time and place. Therefore, interpretation should consider linguistic analysis, socio-historical background, and contemporary human understanding.¹¹

In his works, such as *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'āṣirah*, Syahrur introduced the concept of limits theory, which posits that divine law establishes boundaries within which human interpretation and legislation can operate. He argued that God provided maximum and minimum limits for moral and legal principles, allowing flexibility and adaptability in accordance with changing circumstances.¹² This approach challenges traditional *tafsīr* methods that often rely on literalism and rigid jurisprudence. Instead, Syahrur encourages a reading that aligns with the spirit of justice, equality, and rationality, values he considers central to Islam.

Moreover, Syahrur's hermeneutics reflects the influence of modern linguistic philosophy and the need to harmonize revelation with human reason.¹³ He rejected the notion of absolute, once-for-all interpretations, emphasizing that understanding the

⁹ Muhammad Syahrur, *Naḥwa Uṣūl Jadīdah li al-Fiḥ al-Islāmī*, translated by Sahiron Syamsuddin and Burhanuddin (Yogyakarta: Forstudia & eLSAQ Press, 2004), 18.

¹⁰ Syamsul Wathani, "Kritik Salim al-Jabi atas Hermeneutika Muhammad Syahrur [Salim al-Jabi's Critique of Muhammad Syahrur's Hermeneutics]," *El-'Umdah* 1, no. 2 (2018): 146.

¹¹ Muhammad Syahrur, *Al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'āṣirah* (Damascus: Al-Ahālī, 1990).

¹² Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹³ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur'an: Toward a Humanistic Hermeneutics* (Amsterdam: Humanistics University Press, 2004).

Qur'an is an ongoing process involving interaction between text, context, and reader.¹⁴ Through this interpretive model, Syahrur sought to revitalize Islamic thought, promote intellectual freedom, and demonstrate that Islam remains relevant to contemporary global challenges.

b. Rationality

Syahrur based his thinking on common sense and rational reasoning. He believes that religious teachings must make sense and be understood by human common sense. Syahrur rejects the dogmatic approach which ignores logic and rational reasoning in understanding religion.¹⁵ Muhammad Syahrur, a prominent contemporary Islamic thinker from Syria, based his hermeneutical approach to the Qur'an on common sense and rational reasoning. He argued that divine revelation must be compatible with human reason, as both originate from the same divine source God. For Syahrur, religion should never contradict rational understanding because Islam, as a universal message, was revealed to guide human life within the boundaries of reason and logic. Therefore, any interpretation of Islamic texts that defies rational comprehension must be reconsidered.

Syahrur rejects the dogmatic and literalist approaches that dominate traditional Islamic scholarship. He believes such methods often suppress intellectual freedom and limit the dynamic nature of the Qur'an's message. According to him, traditional scholars have often frozen Islamic law and ethics in historical contexts, treating classical interpretations as absolute. Syahrur, instead, advocates for a contextual reading that aligns with modern knowledge, science, and human rationality. He insists that reason (*'aql*) is a fundamental instrument for understanding revelation, as the Qur'an itself repeatedly calls upon believers to think, reflect, and use intellect.

Moreover, Syahrur introduces the concept of limits theory (*nazariyyāt al-ḥudūd*) to explain that Qur'anic injunctions establish flexible boundaries rather than rigid rules.¹⁶ Within these boundaries, human beings are free to interpret and apply divine guidance in accordance with their circumstances and rational understanding. This view challenges traditional jurisprudence that often relies on imitation (*taqlīd*) and discourages critical reasoning (*ijtihād*). For Syahrur, true faith requires intellectual engagement rather than blind adherence to inherited interpretations.¹⁷

His rational approach aims to revive the spirit of *ijtihād* in Islam and to harmonize revelation with modernity.¹⁸ By grounding religious interpretation in reason, Syahrur seeks to demonstrate that Islam is compatible with universal human values, scientific progress, and democratic thought. His methodology thus represents a critical attempt to bridge the gap between faith and reason in contemporary Islamic discourse.

¹⁴ Adis Duderija, "Neo-Modernist and Progressive Muslim Interpretations of the Qur'an," *Religion Compass* 4, no. 6 (2010): 314–328.

¹⁵ Rachmat Afandi, "Islamic Theology and Gender: Reflections on Muhammad Syahrur's Thoughts," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2018): 82.

¹⁶ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Freedom of Expression in Islam* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1997).

¹⁷ Alena Kulinich, "Muhammad Syahrur's Theory of Limits and Its Application in Contemporary Islamic Thought," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 22, no. 3 (2020): 45–67.

¹⁸ Louay Safi, *Reason and Revelation in Islam* (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1998).

c. Concept of Justice

Syahrur's thinking is strongly influenced by the concept of justice in Islam. He emphasized that the principle of justice must be the basis in all aspects of life, including politics, social and economics. Syahrur views that a just society is a society that provides equal rights to all individuals regardless of their race, religion or background. Muhammad Syahrur's intellectual framework is profoundly rooted in the Islamic concept of justice ('*adl*'), which he considers the central value of the Qur'anic message. For Syahrur, justice is not merely a moral virtue but a foundational principle that must guide all dimensions of human existence political, social, economic, and legal.¹⁹ He argues that any system claiming to represent Islam must uphold justice as its primary aim, since God describes Himself as Just, and thus, divine revelation must reflect this essential attribute.²⁰

Syahrur interprets Qur'anic justice in a universal and egalitarian sense, transcending the confines of ethnicity, gender, and religion.²¹ He rejects any interpretation that legitimizes inequality or discrimination under the banner of religion. In his view, true Islamic justice entails equal rights and dignity for all individuals, as the Qur'an positions humanity as a single moral community created from the same origin (Quran 4:1). Therefore, laws and social structures that create hierarchies or privilege certain groups contradict the ethical essence of Islam.

In the political domain, Syahrur advocates for systems that protect human freedom and equality before the law. He opposes authoritarianism justified through religious dogma, asserting that justice cannot coexist with coercion or tyranny.²² For him, Islam supports pluralism, dialogue, and participation in governance. This view aligns with his rationalist interpretation of revelation, where he argues that God's sovereignty (*ḥākimiyyah*) is exercised through just human institutions rather than oppressive rule.

Economically, Syahrur envisions justice as the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. He criticizes monopolies and exploitative practices, emphasizing that Islam seeks balance and fairness in wealth and production. Social justice, in his conception, requires ensuring human dignity through education, access to livelihood, and the elimination of poverty.²³

Syahrur's approach to justice is both theological and reformative. By grounding his interpretation in reason and universal ethics, he seeks to reinterpret Islam in a way that harmonizes with modern human rights principles. His vision of justice serves as a framework for reconstructing Islamic law to meet contemporary challenges while remaining faithful to divine revelation.

d. Pluralism

Syahrur advocates an inclusive view of pluralism in social and religious contexts. He views that Islam must dialogue with other thoughts and religions without sacrificing its own identity. Syahrur supports diversity and rejects extremism and discrimination against minority groups. Muhammad Syahrur's thought represents one of the most progressive

¹⁹ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Place of Tolerance in Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

²⁰ Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²¹ Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters: The Modern Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

²² Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

²³ Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

articulations of religious pluralism and inclusivity within modern Islamic scholarship. He argues that Islam, as a religion of mercy and guidance for all humankind, must engage constructively with other religions and worldviews. For Syahrur, pluralism is not a threat to Islamic identity but rather an acknowledgment of God's will for human diversity.²⁴ He bases this conviction on the Qur'anic affirmation that diversity among peoples and religions is a divine design (Qur'an 5:48; 49:13). Hence, pluralism, in Syahrur's view, is not merely a social necessity but a theological imperative grounded in revelation.

Syahrur believes that Islam should maintain a dialogical relationship with other faiths one characterized by mutual respect, intellectual exchange, and shared moral commitment.²⁵ He rejects the exclusivist tendencies of some traditionalist interpretations that claim monopoly over truth. Instead, Syahrur emphasizes that truth manifests in multiple forms and that divine wisdom allows for a variety of legitimate paths toward ethical living.²⁶ His inclusive approach seeks to foster coexistence among Muslims, Christians, Jews, and followers of other faiths, particularly in plural societies.

Furthermore, Syahrur consistently denounces religious extremism and intolerance. He considers these attitudes not only politically destructive but also contrary to Qur'anic teachings that uphold justice, mercy, and freedom of belief (Qur'an 2:256).²⁷ He insists that the Qur'an recognizes individual conscience as sacred, thereby prohibiting coercion in religion. Consequently, Syahrur calls for Muslims to defend the rights of minorities and reject sectarianism in all its forms.

In social and political contexts, Syahrur's pluralism translates into a call for inclusive citizenship, where individuals regardless of religion, ethnicity, or gender share equal rights and responsibilities.²⁸ He envisions a civil state (*dawlah madaniyyah*) that respects religious principles but operates on justice and equality rather than exclusivist religious authority. By integrating rationalism with pluralism, Syahrur provides a framework for reconciling Islam with democratic and human rights values, emphasizing that authentic faith flourishes through openness, not isolation.

e. Social Transformation

Syahrur's thoughts also emphasize the need for social transformation in Muslim society. He expressed the importance of changing unjust social conditions and overcoming inequality in society. Syahrur emphasized the importance of social change through education, awareness and active individual participation in building a more just society.²⁹

Syahrur's thoughts have made an important contribution to the intellectual debate in the contemporary Muslim world. Although controversial, his thoughts have inspired many people in their efforts to understand and apply Islam in today's context. Muhammad Syahrur's intellectual project extends beyond theology and hermeneutics to encompass a vision of social transformation within Muslim societies. He argues that Islam, as a religion of justice and progress, must serve as a catalyst for transforming unjust social realities.³⁰

²⁴ John L. Esposito, *The Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²⁵ Abdullah Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

²⁶ Riffat Hassan, *Equal Before Allah? Women-Men Relations in the Islamic Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

²⁷ Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997).

²⁸ Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

²⁹ Aulassyahied, "A Critical Study of Muhammad Syahrur's Concept of Sunnah," 127.

³⁰ Bassam Tibi, *Islamism and Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

For Syahrur, the Qur'an provides a dynamic framework for social reform, urging believers to fight oppression, poverty, and inequality. He views revelation not as a static set of rules but as a moral and intellectual force intended to liberate human beings from ignorance and injustice.³¹

Central to Syahrur's call for transformation is the belief that education and awareness are essential instruments for change.³² He insists that Muslims must reclaim the rational and scientific spirit of early Islamic civilization to confront modern challenges effectively. According to him, education should not merely transmit religious dogma but must cultivate critical thinking, moral consciousness, and social responsibility. Through education, individuals can recognize the structural injustices in their societies and take part in reforming them.

Syahrur also highlights the importance of individual agency and participation in building a just society.³³ In his view, every Muslim bears responsibility for promoting justice (*'adl*) and combating corruption (*fasad*) at both personal and institutional levels. He calls for Muslims to move away from passive fatalism and to embrace active engagement (*ijtihād*) in public life. This participation includes contributing to political, economic, and cultural development in accordance with ethical and humanitarian values.

Social change, for Syahrur, must also involve reinterpreting religious texts in ways that respond to modern realities.³⁴ He criticizes traditional jurists for perpetuating outdated interpretations that no longer serve the ethical aims of Islam. His reformist hermeneutics seeks to align Islamic law (*sharī'ah*) with contemporary social needs ensuring that religion remains a force for emancipation rather than domination.

Syahrur's ideas have sparked extensive intellectual debate in the Muslim world. While his reinterpretations are often controversial, they have inspired a new generation of scholars and activists committed to integrating Islamic values with democracy, human rights, and social equity.³⁵ His emphasis on rationality, justice, and transformation situates him among the leading voices of Islamic modernism, offering a bold alternative to both rigid traditionalism and secularism. Syahrur's thought thus continues to influence contemporary discourses on Islam's role in shaping a more humane and equitable global society.

Limitation Theory (*Naẓariyyāt al-Ḥudūd*) in Syahrur's Thought

The theory of limitations in Muhammad Syahrur's thinking, which is also known as *naẓariyyāt al-ḥudūd*, is one of the important concepts in his thinking.³⁶ This theory tries to overcome the problem of interpretation of Islamic laws which are based on a literalistic view of religious texts. Syahrur believes that interpretations that limit religion to ancient and non-renewable rules can lead to stagnation and an inability to adapt to the times.

³¹ Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³² Charles Kurzman, *Modernist Islam, 1840–1940: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³³ Asma Afsaruddin, *Contemporary Issues in Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

³⁴ Adis Duderija, *Constructing the Religious Self and the Other: Neo-Traditional Salafi and Progressive Muslim Methods of Interpretation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

³⁵ Malise Ruthven, *Islam in the World* (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

³⁶ Muhammad Syahrur, *Dialektika Kosmos & Manusia, Dasar-Dasar Epistemologi Qurani* [The Dialectic of Cosmos and Human: Foundations of Qur'anic Epistemology] (Bandung: Yayasan Nuansa Cendikia, 2003), 26.

According to Syahrur, the aim of Islamic laws is to achieve justice and human benefit in a changing social and historical context. Therefore, the interpretation of these laws must take into account the conditions of time and place. Syahrur stated that Islamic laws are related to the basic goals (*maqāsid*) of religion, such as protecting religion, soul, mind, offspring and property. These principles remain constant, but the means of achieving these goals may change according to societal needs and context.³⁷ In the context of *nazariyyāt al-ḥudūd*, Syahrur criticizes the literalistic approach to criminal laws enforced in Islam, especially laws related to sexual offenses and criminality. He argued that the limits of *ḥudūd* punishment in Islam must be reformed and adapted to universal principles of justice. Syahrur believes that *ḥudūd* punishments applied in the old historical context should not be considered a fixed and unchangeable form of punishment.

Instead, they should be treated as general principles that can be adapted to different social and civilizational contexts. Thus, the theory of limitations in Syahrur's thinking emphasizes that Islamic laws must be understood and applied by taking into account the principles of justice, *maqāsid al-sharī'ah*, and social context.³⁸ This concept aims to avoid literalism and rigidity in religious interpretation, as well as allowing for renewal and adaptation in responding to the challenges of the times.

Criticism of Syahrur's Limitation Theory

Syahrur's Limitation Theory is a philosophical view put forward by Muhammad Syahrur, a Muslim intellectual and writer from Syria. This theory tries to connect Islamic thought with modern realities and offers an interpretive approach to religious texts.³⁹ However, like other theories, Syahrur's Limitation Theory also has several criticisms raised by Muslim scholars and thinkers. The following are some general criticisms of Syahrur's Limitation Theory:

1. Subjective Interpretation

Criticism of Syahrur's Limitation Theory often focuses on the nature of subjectivity in its approach to understanding religious texts. Syahrur tends to provide a very individualistic interpretation of the verses of the Qur'an and ignores the legacy of collective and traditional interpretation. Some critics argue that this can lead to erroneous understandings or even justify interpretations that conflict with established Islamic principles.⁴⁰

2. Socio-Political Context

One of the criticisms of Syahrur's Limitation Theory is that his approach tends to ignore the social and political context in understanding religious texts. Several scholars criticized Syahrur for not paying enough attention to the historical and political realities at the time

³⁷ Mustafid, "Renewal of Islamic Legal Thought," 307.

³⁸ Alam Tarlam, "Analisis dan Kritik Metode Hermeneutika al-Qur'an Muḥammad Shahrūr [Analysis and Critique of Muhammad Shahrūr's Qur'anic Hermeneutical Method]," *Empirisma* 24, no. 1 (2015): 95.

³⁹ Asriaty Asriaty, "Menyoal Pemikiran Hukum Islam Muhammad Syahrur [Questioning Muhammad Syahrur's Islamic Legal Thought]," *Istinbath* 13, no. 2 (2014): 217.

⁴⁰ Peter Clark, "The Syahrur Phenomenon: A Liberal Islamic Voice from Syria," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7, no. 3 (1996): 337.

the verses of the Qur'an were revealed, so that the results of his interpretation could be far from the meaning intended by the author.

3. Separation of Religion and Politics

Syahrur's Limitation Theory emphasizes the separation of religion and politics, considering religion as a personal matter limited to spiritual matters. However, many critics argue that this separation is not fully compatible with a more holistic view of Islam. In the Islamic tradition, religion is considered to have significant social and political dimensions, and cannot be separated.

4. Neglect of Hadith and Tradition

Syahrur tends to place more emphasis on the Qur'an and ignores the role of hadith and tradition in understanding Islamic teachings. This resulted in criticism that his approach was too restrictive of the sources used to understand and apply Islamic teachings.⁴¹

5. Too Much Simplicity

Some critics argue that Syahrur's Limitation Theory places too much emphasis on simplicity in religious understanding, thereby reducing the complexity and depth of Islamic teachings. An understanding that is too simplistic can ignore important aspects in the traditional understanding of Islam. It is important to note that these criticisms do not prohibit new approaches to understanding Islamic teachings. However, these criticisms emphasize the importance of consistency with established Islamic principles, historical context, and a holistic study of Islamic sources.⁴²

Critical Analysis of Syahrur's Thinking

Muhammad Syahrur is a contemporary Muslim intellectual known for his controversial views in the field of Islamic theology. He is considered one of the liberal thinkers in the Islamic tradition. Below is a critical analysis of Syahrur's thoughts:

1. Controversial Interpretation of the al-Quran

One of the critical points towards Syahrur's thinking is his interpretation of the al-Quran. Syahrur tends to adopt a literal and historical approach in understanding the texts of the Qur'an, and he rejects traditional exegetical approaches that rely on the legacy of previous interpretations. However, this literal approach often leads to conclusions that run counter to a broader understanding of the texts, as well as ignoring the relevant social and historical context. This can lead to serious misinterpretations.⁴³

⁴¹ Peter Clark, "The Syahrur Phenomenon," 337.

⁴² Syofrianisda Syofrianisda and Dewi Murni, "Metode Pemahaman Muhammad Syahrur terhadap Ayat-Ayat Hukum [Muhammad Syahrur's Method of Understanding the Legal Verses]," *Jurnal Syahadah* 5, no. 1 (2017): 48.

⁴³ Musda Asmara, Rahadian Kurniawan, and Linda Agustian, "Teori Batas Kewarisan Muhammad Syahrur dan Relevansinya dengan Keadilan Sosial [Muhammad Syahrur's Limit Theory of Inheritance and Its Relevance to Social Justice]," *De Jure* 12, no. 1 (2020): 21.

2. Rejection of the Sunnah Concept

Syahrur also rejects the importance of the Sunnah concept in Islam. He believes that the Qur'an is sufficient as the sole source of law and guidance for life. However, many Muslim scholars and scholars consider the Sunnah to be an important source in understanding and implementing Islamic teachings, because it provides context and in-depth explanations regarding the implementation of religious practices.⁴⁴

3. Rejection of the Traditional Concept of Monotheism

Syahrur reformulated the concept of monotheism (the oneness of Allah) in Islam by emphasizing the understanding of that unity as "the existence of God in the universe" and emphasizing that humans have an independent existence from God. This view is contrary to the traditional view of Islam which emphasizes the absolutism and transcendence of Allah, as well as the subordinate relationship between humans and God.

4. Not Taking into Account the Heritage of Traditional *Tafsīr*

One of the main weaknesses of Syahrur's thinking is his rejection of the legacy of traditional Islamic interpretation. He considers that classical interpretations have become a burden in understanding contemporary Islamic teachings. However, ignoring or completely rejecting this valuable exegetical heritage can eliminate a deep understanding of the historical, linguistic, and cultural context in understanding the Quranic texts.⁴⁵

5. Controversy in Political Thought

Syahrur's political thought has also attracted criticism. He advocates the concept of a secular state in Muslim-majority countries, which goes against the Islamic principles held by many people. Apart from that, some of his views on issues such as the role of women in society, Islamic criminal law, and democracy have also generated controversy and criticism from various circles. Muhammad Syahrur's political thought represents one of the most debated aspects of his intellectual legacy. His views challenge both traditional Islamic jurisprudence and modern political orthodoxy in the Muslim world. Central to his political philosophy is the advocacy of a secular civil state (*dawlah madaniyyah*), which he regards as compatible with Islamic ethics but distinct from a theocratic or clerical model of governance.⁴⁶ This stance has positioned Syahrur as a reformist thinker who seeks to reconcile Islam with modern governance structures, while also making him a target of intense criticism from conservative scholars and Islamist movements.

Syahrur's idea of a secular state stems from his interpretation of the Qur'an as a book of moral guidance rather than a detailed legal-political constitution.⁴⁷ He argues that the Qur'an sets ethical boundaries (*hudūd*) that regulate human behavior but leaves the

⁴⁴ M Zainal Abidin, "Gagasan Teori Batas Muhammad Syahrūr dan Signifikansinya bagi Pengayaan Ilmu Ushul Fiqh [Muhammad Syahrur's Concept of Limit Theory and Its Significance for the Enrichment of Ushul Fiqh]," *Al Mawarid* 15 (2006): 100.

⁴⁵ Mia Fitriah Elkarimah, "Teori Limit dalam Metode Hukum Islam Muhammad Syahrur [The Limit Theory in Muhammad Syahrur's Method of Islamic Law]," *Maslahah: Jurnal Hukum Islam dan Perbankan Syariah* 5, no. 1 (2014): 25–26.

⁴⁶ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).

⁴⁷ Abdullah Ahmed An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

institutional and political arrangements to human reason and experience. This framework implies that Muslims are free to establish governance systems that ensure justice, equality, and freedom, even if such systems are secular in nature.⁴⁸ For Syahrur, secularism does not signify hostility to religion but rather a means to protect the integrity of religion from politicization and exploitation.⁴⁹

However, this reinterpretation of Islam's role in politics has provoked significant controversy. Many critics accuse Syahrur of attempting to dilute Islam's comprehensive nature, arguing that by separating religion from politics, he undermines the Islamic ideal of divine sovereignty (*ḥākimiyyah*). Traditional scholars maintain that Islam provides guidance for all spheres of life, including governance, law, and social order. They view Syahrur's model of a secular state as a Western import that threatens Islamic identity and unity.⁵⁰ His opponents often link his ideas to liberal theology and accuse him of aligning with Western secularism and modernism to weaken the religious foundation of Muslim societies.

Syahrur's views on democracy are equally contentious. He supports democracy as the most effective mechanism to achieve the Qur'anic principles of justice ('*adl*), consultation (*shūrā*), and equality.⁵¹ Yet, conservative scholars argue that democracy prioritizes human will over divine command, thereby compromising the sovereignty of God. Syahrur counters this by asserting that divine sovereignty is realized through human justice and rationality, not through clerical authority.⁵² His perspective resonates with modern reformers who seek to construct a democratic order grounded in Islamic ethics rather than dogmatic law. Nonetheless, this position continues to polarize public opinion across the Muslim world.

Another controversial area is Syahrur's approach to Islamic criminal law (*ḥudūd* punishments). He interprets these laws symbolically and argues that their application should be reexamined in light of contemporary human rights and ethical considerations.⁵³ Traditionalists regard this as a dangerous deviation from clear Qur'anic injunctions, accusing him of undermining divine law. Syahrur, however, insists that Qur'anic limits represent moral boundaries, not fixed legal penalties, and must evolve with the needs of society. His humanistic reinterpretation, which prioritizes justice and compassion over literal punishment, has been hailed by progressives but condemned by conservative jurists.

Syahrur's stance on women's rights and gender equality has also stirred debate. He argues that the Qur'an promotes full gender equality, challenging patriarchal readings that restrict women's participation in public and private spheres.⁵⁴ He calls for reinterpreting verses traditionally used to justify male authority (*qiwāmah*) and polygamy, asserting that these must be contextualized according to the moral objective of justice.⁵⁵ While feminist

⁴⁸ Hasan Hanafi, *Islam in the Modern World: Religion, Ideology, and Development*, Vol. 1 (Cairo: Dar Kebaa Bookshop, 2000).

⁴⁹ Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Who Needs an Islamic State?* (London: Grey Seal, 1991).

⁵⁰ Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁵¹ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁵² Ali Paya, *Islam, Modernity and a New Millennium* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁵³ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Punishment in Islamic Law: A Critique of the Hudud Bill of Kelantan, Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Ilmiah Publishers, 1994).

⁵⁴ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁵⁵ Rula Jurdi Abisaab and Malek Abisaab, *Gender Relations in Islamic History* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2017).

scholars have praised his work as a step toward reform, traditional clerics accuse him of distorting the Qur'an and violating classical consensus (*ijmā'*).

The broader controversy surrounding Syahrur reflects a deeper tension within contemporary Islamic thought: the struggle between tradition and reform, revelation and reason, faith and modernity. His critics often classify his ideas as part of a secular-liberal agenda that seeks to Westernize Islamic discourse.⁵⁶ Yet, Syahrur's supporters emphasize that his project aims to revive the ethical spirit of Islam by freeing it from historical rigidity and dogmatic control. They argue that his work represents a continuation of the rationalist legacy of thinkers like Ibn Rushd and the Mu'tazilites, who upheld the compatibility of revelation and reason.⁵⁷

Despite the criticisms, Syahrur's political ideas have gained traction among Muslim intellectuals advocating for religious reform and civil governance.⁵⁸ His call for separating religious authority from state power resonates in contexts where politicized religion has led to division and authoritarianism. His writings have influenced discussions on constitutional reform, women's rights, and democracy in several Muslim-majority countries.⁵⁹

Ultimately, the controversy surrounding Syahrur's political thought underscores his significance as a transformative yet polarizing figure. His vision of a rational, just, and pluralistic Islam challenges both conservative orthodoxy and secular reductionism. By reimagining the relationship between Islam and the modern state, Syahrur has expanded the boundaries of Islamic political thought offering a model that is both faithful to the ethical core of Islam and responsive to the complexities of contemporary life. It is important to remember that this critical analysis is not a rejection of Syahrur's thinking as a whole. However, the aim is to highlight some of the weaknesses and concerns that emerge in his thought, which need to be taken into account in understanding and evaluating his contribution to contemporary Islamic theology.⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined Muhammad Syahrur's *Nazariyyāt al-Hudūd* (Theory of Limits) as an alternative framework for understanding Qur'anic legal texts in the context of contemporary Islamic thought. The first objective of the study was to analyze the conceptual foundations of Syahrur's theory. The findings demonstrate that Syahrur redefines the relationship between revelation and legal interpretation by distinguishing between fixed divine boundaries and the dynamic space available for human reasoning. This approach seeks to reconcile the permanence of the Qur'an with the changing realities of modern societies.

The second objective was to evaluate the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the theory. The analysis shows that Syahrur's framework offers a

⁵⁶ Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁵⁷ Fazlur Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam: A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2002).

⁵⁸ Mahmood Monshipouri, *Islamism, Secularism, and Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

⁵⁹ Asef Bayat, *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶⁰ Bayu Fermadi, "Konsep Dasar Teori Batasan: Tela'ah Pemikiran M. Syahrur dalam Metodologi Fiqh Islam Kontemporer [The Core Concepts of Limit Theory: A Study of M. Syahrur's Thought in Contemporary Islamic Jurisprudential Methodology]," *Jurnal Islam Nusantara* 2, no. 2 (2018): 284.

significant contribution to contemporary Islamic legal discourse by encouraging contextual interpretation, intellectual renewal, and greater flexibility in responding to modern social issues. However, the theory has also attracted substantial criticism. Scholars have questioned its methodological consistency, its extensive reliance on linguistic reinterpretation, and its tendency to depart from established principles of classical *uṣūl al-fiqh*. These critiques indicate that while the theory promotes innovation, it also raises important concerns regarding the limits of reinterpretation and the preservation of Islamic legal authority. The third objective was to assess the impact of *Naẓariyyāt al-Ḥudūd* on contemporary Islamic thought. The study finds that Syahrur's ideas have stimulated extensive debates on reform, gender relations, human rights, democracy, and the adaptability of Islamic law in the modern era. His theory has become an important reference point in discussions concerning the renewal of Islamic jurisprudence, particularly among scholars seeking a balance between textual fidelity and social transformation.

The principal contribution of this article lies in its critical synthesis of Syahrur's theoretical framework and its implications for contemporary Islamic intellectual discourse. Rather than viewing the theory solely as either a progressive breakthrough or a departure from orthodox tradition, this study highlights its dual significance as both a catalyst for legal reform and a subject of ongoing scholarly contestation. Such a perspective contributes to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary debates surrounding Islamic legal methodology. This study is limited by its reliance on library-based research and textual analysis, without examining the practical implementation of Syahrur's ideas in specific legal systems or Muslim societies. Future research may therefore explore comparative studies between Syahrur's theory and other contemporary reformist approaches, as well as empirical investigations into the influence of his ideas on legal reforms, judicial practices, and Islamic intellectual movements in different socio-political contexts. Through such studies, a more comprehensive assessment of the relevance and applicability of *Naẓariyyāt al-Ḥudūd* can be achieved.

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