

Digitizing the Fatwas of Perlis: Efforts toward a Digital Reference Framework in the Era of Artificial Intelligence

Mohd Akram bin Dahaman@Dahlan^{1*}, Syed Abu Bakar bin Syed Kamal Bharin Jamalullail², Mohd Nazim bin Mohd Noor³, Hazman bin Hassan⁴

^{1,4}School of Languages, Civilisation and Philosophy (SLCP), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM).

^{2,3}Perlis Islamic Religious Council and Malay Customs (MAIPs)

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Fatwas serve as a crucial instrument in guiding the Muslim community toward a sound understanding and practice of Islamic law, particularly in addressing complex contemporary issues. Historically, the compilation of fatwas has been an important mechanism to facilitate scholarly reference and public access, whether reflecting specific schools of thought or individual scholarly opinions. In Perlis, the Fatwa Committee, established under the Administration of Islamic Law Enactment 1964, has produced a series of responsive fatwas grounded in valid *ijtihad* and informed by the Fiqh of the Early Three Generations and Comparative Fiqh, without being confined to a single *madhhab*. Despite this progressive approach, challenges persist in terms of documentation, fragmented storage, and the lack of efficient retrieval systems. With the advancement of information technology, digital compilation has become essential to ensure accessible, accurate, and user-friendly fatwa references. The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) further enhances this initiative through intelligent databases capable of keyword-based search, semantic analysis, and automated generation of responses derived from authentic sources. This study underscores the significance of digital fatwa compilation in strengthening the role of fatwas as authoritative references while preserving the Islamic intellectual tradition in a form that aligns with the demands of the digital and AI era.

Keywords: Perlis State Fatwas; Fatwa Committee; Fatwa Digitalization; Database; Artificial Intelligence

INTRODUCTION

Fatwa represents an explanation and clarification in response to a particular issue that arises within society. Linguistically, *al-Asfahani* (t.t) defines *fatwa* as an answer to a problematic legal matter. In terminology, *al-Qaradawi* (1988) defines *fatwa* as a clarification of a shar'ī ruling concerning a certain issue, issued as a response to a question posed either by a specific or non-specific individual or group.

The concept of *fatwa* has existed concurrently with the revelation of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). There are approximately eleven occurrences in nine different verses of the Qur'an that indicate that the process of issuing *fatwa* took place simultaneously with the revelation of divine guidance (Mohd Akram Dahaman, 2005).

The status of *fatwa* in Islam is of great significance. From the time of revelation until today, *fatwa* has served as one of the principal means for both scholars and the general public to obtain clarification regarding Islamic legal rulings. The *salaf* scholars have emphasized that *fatwa* occupies a noble and exalted position (Muhammad Ahmad Makki, 1999). *Al-Nawawi* (1987), in his work *Adab al-Fatwa*, asserts: "Know that the giving of fatwa is a matter of great danger, wide in its field, and abundant in its merits."

Al-Shatibi (1996) summarises the elevated position of *fatwa* in Islam as arising from several key factors:

1. **Scholars are the inheritors of the Prophets**, as stated by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): “Indeed, the scholars are the heirs of the Prophets.”
2. **The mufti acts as an assistant to the Prophet** in conveying the divine law to the people.
3. **The mufti bears responsibility for issuing and determining legal rulings**, which necessitates fulfilling specific qualifications and conditions.

According to *al-Qaradawi* (1996), *fatwa* serves as a medium for communicating the rulings of Islamic law in response to religious questions posed by the community. Based on this definition, the scope of *fatwa* clearly extends beyond the domain of *ahkam taklifiyyah* related only to acts of worship (*‘ibadat*), family matters (*munakahat*), or transactions (*mu‘amalat*). Rather, it encompasses the entirety of Islamic rulings, including:

1. *Ahkam I’tiqadiyyah* – rulings pertaining to belief and creed;
2. *Ahkam ‘Amaliyyah* – rulings related to practical and external acts, such as worship, transactions, and penal law;
3. *Ahkam Tahzibiyyah Akhlaqiyyah* – rulings concerning moral refinement and ethical conduct (Mohd Akram Dahaman, 2012).

From this understanding, the role of *fatwa* is profoundly significant in elucidating and enhancing the Muslim community’s comprehension of *shar‘i* law in its entirety. This aligns perfectly with the realities of human life, in which diverse challenges emerge across various spheres. Islam, as a comprehensive system of life, provides solutions to every human predicament. Within this framework, *fatwa* functions as one of the key mechanisms for addressing the issues that arise within the Muslim community.

Fatwa originates from the community, and the community is also involved in its reception and implementation. Two aspects illustrate the practical role of *fatwa* in this context. First is the necessity of **providing clarification to the inquirer**, since, according to Mohd Akram Dahaman (2005), a statement cannot be deemed a *fatwa* unless it is initiated by a form of inquiry. At times, *fatwa* may remain confidential and addressed solely to the inquirer to safeguard sensitivities or administrative considerations (Raihanah Abdullah, 2004). The second aspect involves **the wider public**, beyond the original inquirer, who require guidance and authoritative legal responses to ongoing social and moral issues. Based on this rationale, *fatwa* dissemination is imperative to ensure the continuous guidance of the Muslim community in all spheres of life.

METHODS

The methodology employed in this study is **qualitative in nature**. This approach was selected as it is more appropriate for a study of this kind, which is not based on hypothesis testing. Moreover, the qualitative method allows for a more conducive and natural research environment (Merriam, S. B., 1998). Several forms of qualitative research are incorporated in this study. The first is **historical research**, the second is **comparative research**, and the third is **textual analysis**. With regard to **historical research**, this study seeks to evaluate and assess all arguments and evidence objectively concerning specific historical developments, thereby drawing sound and well-founded conclusions. This process involves systematic, rational, and scientific consideration to understand the questions of *what*, *why*, and *how* certain events occurred. The historical dimension of this study explores the **development and current practice of fatwa and the administration of ifta’ in the State of Perlis**. The core methodological framework of this research, however, is **textual analysis**. This form of study involves examining classical and contemporary Islamic texts, academic articles, enactments, legal provisions, and various media materials - both electronic and print.

In the context of this research, several methods were employed for **data collection and analysis**. Data were primarily gathered through **library research**, which included the examination of classical and contemporary works, academic publications, enactments, statutes, and relevant media sources, whether printed or digital. The **data analysis process** utilized the **content analysis method**, which was conducted manually to analyze documentary data based on specific themes derived from the research objectives. This thematic content analysis

enabled the researcher to organize, interpret, and synthesize the collected data systematically and comprehensively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Dissemination and Compilation of Fatwas: Past and Present

The dissemination of *fatwa* constitutes a fundamental component of the broader concept of *ifta'*. This is because a *fatwa* serves as a form of legal response that must be communicated to the *mustafti* (the inquirer). According to 'Ali Ibn 'Abbas al-Hakami (2001), *fatwa* denotes the act of informing or communicating a legal ruling. Essentially, such communication must be delivered directly to the inquirer when it involves sensitive or personal matters. Nevertheless, *fatwa* dissemination may also be extended for the benefit of the wider Muslim community, providing them with legal guidance should similar cases arise.

This understanding aligns with the definition put forward by 'Abdullah al-Turki (1990), who stated: "A *fatwa* is any information provided by a *mufti* concerning a particular matter as a response to an inquiry or as an explanation of a ruling, even in the absence of a specific question."

The process of disseminating *fatwas* has taken place throughout Islamic history since the time of divine revelation. Numerous Qur'anic verses refer to inquiries or requests for *fatwa* directed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), followed by his response conveying divine guidance. Among the clearest examples are:

"They ask you (O Muhammad) about the new moons. Say, 'They are measurements of time for the people and for Hajj.'" (al-Baqarah: 189)

"They seek your *fatwa* (legal ruling) concerning women. Say, 'Allah gives you a *fatwa* about them...'" (al-Nisa': 127)

The dissemination of Islamic legal responses continued after the Prophet's time, through the Companions, particularly as new circumstances arose in regions far from the Arabian Peninsula. These evolving contexts generated novel issues that demanded answers, and the Companions were the most qualified group to undertake this responsibility.

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (1996) reports that the Companions varied in the frequency with which they issued *fatwas* - some frequently, others moderately, and some rarely. He notes:

"Those who issued *fatwas* among the Companions of the Messenger of Allah numbered about 130 men and women, and among them, seven were the most prolific: 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ud, 'A'ishah Umm al-Mu'minin, Zayd ibn Thabit, 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas, and 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar."

A clear indication that the *fatwas* of the Companions were disseminated and recognized within the Muslim community lies in their later adoption by one of the founders of the four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence, Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal. Born in 164 AH ('Umar Sulayman al-Ashqar, 2003), Imam Ahmad lived more than seventy-five years after the generation of the Companions, yet their *fatwas* were recorded and widely circulated among scholars and the general public.

The recording and broad dissemination of *fatwas* among the Muslim community became a foundational element of the Hanbali methodology of legal derivation, where *fatwas* of the Companions were considered the **third source of law** after the Qur'an and Sunnah. In fact, *mursal* and *da'if* hadiths were ranked below the *fatwas* of the Companions in the hierarchy of evidentiary sources within this school (Muhammad Mustafa al-Shalabi, 1985). The compilation and dissemination of these *fatwas* were continued by subsequent generations, who collected and codified them to facilitate reference and serve as legal guidance for Muslims. Al-Amidi (1979) recorded that one scholar compiled and documented all the *fatwas* of 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas into twenty volumes.

The method of *fatwa* compilation and dissemination in the form of **hard copies**, such as books and manuscripts, has been used from the early centuries of Islam up to the present day. Numerous individual and school-based *fatwa* collections were written, compiled, printed, and disseminated to serve as legal reference works for both scholars and the wider Muslim community. According to ‘Umar Sulayman al-Ashqar (1991), one of the earliest known *fatwa* compilations was *al-Fatawa al-Ziniyyah* by Ibn Nujaim al-Hanafi, followed by *al-Nataf fi al-Fatawa* by Qadhi al-Qudhah ‘Ali ibn al-Husayn al-Shadafi, around the year 400 AH.

Subsequent *fatwa* collections include *al-Fatawa al-Khaniyyah* (Fatwa Qadhi Khan, ca. 500 AH), *al-Fatawa al-Zahiriyyah* by Qadhi Zahiruddin al-Hanafi, *Fatawa al-Nawawi al-Shafi’i* (ca. 600 AH), *al-Fatawa al-Kubra* by Ibn Taymiyyah, *Fatawa al-Subki* (ca. 700 AH), *al-Fatawa al-Tatar Khaniyyah* and *al-Fatawa al-Bazaziyyah* (ca. 800 AH), *Fatawa al-Ramli*, *al-Fatawa al-Kubra al-Fiqhiyyah* by Imam al-Haythami, *al-Fatawa al-Hamidiyyah* by Maula Hamid al-Qanuni (ca. 900 AH), *al-Fatawa al-Khairiyyah li Naf’ al-Barriyyah* by Khayruddin al-Ramli al-Hanafi, and *al-Fatawa al-Hindiyyah* (ca. 1000 AH) (Hussain Muhammad al-Mallah, 2001).

The same method continues to be employed by contemporary Muslim jurists in disseminating their legal opinions, among them Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Mustafa al-Zarqa’, and others. Moreover, *fatwa* collections compiled collectively by **official religious bodies** in various Muslim-majority and minority countries have also been published.

A more recent development in this regard is the emergence of **legal encyclopedias** compiled by recognized juristic institutions composed of leading scholars. Among these are *Mawṣū‘ah li al-Fiqh al-Islami*, Faculty of Sharia, University of Damascus (1956), *Mawṣū‘ah al-Fiqh*, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Egypt (1961) and *Mawṣū‘ah al-Fiqh*, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Kuwait (1980), which is considered the most comprehensive and up-to-date.

In contemporary times, *fatwa* dissemination has further expanded through **online accessibility**, allowing Muslims worldwide to obtain legal guidance from recognized authorities with greater ease and immediacy. This digital transformation represents a major advancement in connecting the global Muslim community with qualified religious expertise.

Fatwas in the State of Perlis and Efforts Toward Digital Compilation in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

The issuance of *fatwas* in the State of Perlis has undergone several developmental phases, beginning from the period **before the official establishment of the state (1834–1948)**, to **the post-establishment era (from 1948 onward)**, and continuing into **the contemporary phase up to 2025**.

Prior to the formal establishment of Perlis, *fatwa*-related matters were managed alongside the office of the *Chief Qadi*, who was appointed by the ruling monarch. Around the year **1873**, during the reign of **Syed Ahmad Jamalullail (1873–1897)**, the first *Chief Qadi* of Perlis, **Sayyid Muhammad al-Haddad**, was appointed.

In **1920**, during the reign of **Raja Syed Alwi (1904–1943)**, the position of **State Mufti** was established concurrently with the founding of the **Perlis Department of Islamic Affairs**, **Haji Muhammad Noor bin Haji Muhammad**, who previously served as *Chief Qadi*, became the **first State Mufti** and held the position until **1941**.

Following the **gazettement of the Constitution of the State of Perlis in 1948**, the office of the State Mufti continued to exist as it had prior to the state’s establishment. However, no specific legal provisions explicitly defined the **status, roles, or functions of the Mufti**, apart from his membership in the **Council of Islamic Religion and Malay Customs of Perlis (MAIPs)**, serving as an adviser to the Ruler on matters pertaining to Islam and Malay customs, including *fatwas* (Perlis State Constitution, 1948, Article 6[1]).

In **1964**, the **Perlis Administration of Islamic Law Enactment** was enacted, clearly outlining the **appointment of the State Mufti** and specifying his **powers under Part III (Appointments), Clause 9**. It also recognized the **Majlis Agama** as the authoritative body in issuing *fatwas*. In **2006**, further improvements were made through the **creation of the Deputy Mufti post**, as stated in **Part III, Clause 44 (Appointment of Mufti and Deputy Mufti)**,

Sub-clauses 1–3. Authority to issue *fatwas* was subsequently vested fully in the **Perlis Fatwa Committee (JFNP)**.

Over time, the **membership of the Fatwa Committee** expanded from **five members (1964)** to **seven members (1988)**, **nine members (2006)**, and finally **fifteen members (2012)**.

Historical documentation and legal provisions thus clearly demonstrate the **systematic evolution of *fatwa* formulation in Perlis**. The process of *fatwa* development does not merely end with issuance; it also encompasses **dissemination and public communication** to the *mustafti* (inquirer) and the broader Muslim community.

As documented, dissemination has taken various forms - including **hardcopy publications** such as individual *fatwas*, *fatwa* compendiums, and thematic pamphlets addressing specific issues. The **Department of the Mufti of Perlis** has also undertaken dissemination through **seminars, outreach lectures at mosques**, and a **special radio segment titled “Ambik Tau Fatwa” broadcast on Perlis FM**.

According to Secretary of Perlis Fatwa Committee Mr. Muhammad Khidhir bin Abdul Ghani (25 August 2025), in line with technological advancements, **Perlis *fatwas* are now disseminated through the official website and all official social media channels** of the **Department of the Mufti of Perlis**.

The Digital Compilation of Fatwas in the State of Perlis in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: An Integrated Approach

The process of *fatwa* issuance is inherently linked to both **formulation and dissemination**. However, to ensure that all issued *fatwas* remain **accessible and traceable**, a systematic effort of **collection and archiving** is indispensable.

The **approach of Three-Generational Jurisprudence** and **comparative jurisprudence**, which is not confined to any single school of thought, has enabled the issuance of *fatwas* that are **responsive and proactive** in addressing the evolving legal and ethical issues faced by the Muslim community.

The **distinctive methodology** adopted by the **Perlis Fatwa Committee** since its inception in **1964** - which differs from that of other Malaysian states—provides a strong foundation for a **comprehensive and sustained effort** to compile all *fatwas* that have been issued to date. Nevertheless, several challenges remain, including **documentation constraints, fragmented storage systems, and inefficient search mechanisms**.

With the advancement of information technology, the **digital compilation of *fatwas*** has become an **urgent necessity** to ensure **rapid, accurate, and user-friendly access**. The **era of Artificial Intelligence (AI)** offers new opportunities for developing **intelligent databases** capable of **keyword-based retrieval, semantic analysis, and automated answer generation** derived from verified religious sources.

To maximize the impact of these compilation and dissemination efforts, **linguistic accessibility** must also be emphasized. Beyond the use of major languages - **Malay, English, and Arabic**—the inclusion of **sign language** is crucial to ensure that *fatwas* fulfil their primary function as **authoritative public communication of Islamic rulings** for all segments of society, including persons with disabilities (PWDs).

Three core elements are essential for the success of *fatwa* compilation and digital referencing in the AI era: **(1) Content, (2) Medium, and (3) Skill**. A **hybrid method** integrating these three elements may be applied as follows:

1. **Content** refers to all *fatwas* issued since the establishment of the Fatwa Committee, systematically organized and authenticated.
2. **Medium** involves the digital platform powered by AI technologies, enabling interactive access, intelligent search, and contextual linkages between *fatwas*.
3. **Skill** encompasses the multilingual and multimodal presentation of *fatwas*, including **spoken narration and sign language interpretation**, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for both the general public and persons with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

A *fatwa* is a clarification and declaration of Islamic legal rulings issued by a qualified jurist (*faqih*) in response to a specific inquiry. It functions as one of the key mechanisms for resolving legal and ethical issues that arise within the life of the Muslim community. The approach adopted by the **Perlis State Fatwa Committee** in formulating *fatwas* is distinctive, being **unique, responsive, and proactive**. Based on this foundation, the dissemination of *fatwas* is of paramount importance. To ensure effective dissemination, a **systematic effort to compile all issued fatwas** is an urgent necessity. This compilation should be developed in **digital form**, leveraging **artificial intelligence (AI) technologies** to enhance accessibility, organization, and analytical capability. A **hybrid approach** that integrates three essential elements—**content (the fatwas themselves), digital medium, and linguistic communication skills**—is crucial. Such an initiative not only strengthens the position of *fatwas* as an authoritative reference for the Muslim community, but also contributes to the **continuity of the Islamic scholarly tradition** in a form that remains **relevant and adaptive** to the demands of the contemporary era.

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