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Introduction to Hadith Studies: Definitions of Hadith, Sunnah, Khabar, and Athar, and the Scope of the Field

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Abstract: *This study aims to explain the definitions of hadith, sunnah, khabar, and athar, as well as the scope of hadith studies. This discussion is important because these four terms are closely related, yet differ in meaning and scope of application. This study employs a library research method by collecting and examining written sources, including books and journal articles related to hadith studies. The data are analyzed using content analysis by categorizing definitions, comparing similarities and differences among scholarly views, and drawing conclusions from the sources examined. The findings indicate that hadith generally refers to everything attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), sunnah relates to his way of life and exemplary conduct, khabar may encompass reports from the Prophet as well as from other sources, while athar generally refers to narrations transmitted from the Companions and the Successors (tabi'un). Furthermore, the scope of hadith studies encompasses 'Ilm al-Hadith Riwayah, which examines the transmission of hadith, and 'Ilm al-Hadith Dirayah, which investigates the conditions of the chain of transmission (sanad), the text (matan), and the status of hadith in terms of its acceptance or rejection. An understanding of these terms and their respective scopes is expected to provide students and readers with a foundation for studying hadith sciences in greater depth.*
Keywordsi: *Hadith, Sunnah, Khabar, Athar, Hadith Studies*

INTRODUCTION

Hadith is one of the most important sources for understanding Islamic teachings because it provides explanations of the sayings, actions, tacit approvals, and characteristics of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Hadith is closely related to the Qur'an, particularly in its role in clarifying the teachings contained therein. Therefore, understanding hadith involves more than simply knowing a particular narration; it also requires an understanding of the fundamental terms and concepts employed in hadith studies. Such understanding provides a foundation for studying hadith systematically and avoiding misconceptions when distinguishing among the various terms used in the Islamic scholarly tradition.

Hasanah in Education
ISSN(Online): XXXX-XXXX
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https://hasanah.gerakanedukasi.com/index.php/HIE/index

Several terms frequently appear in hadith studies, including hadith, sunnah, khabar, and athar. These four terms are closely related and are sometimes treated as synonymous. Nevertheless, scholars have offered different explanations regarding the meaning and scope of each term. Hadith is generally understood as everything attributed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), including his sayings, actions, tacit approvals, and personal characteristics. Meanwhile, the terms sunnah, khabar, and athar may differ in scope and usage depending on the perspectives of hadith scholars, scholars of Islamic legal theory (usul al-fiqh), and jurists (fuqaha). These differences indicate that the fundamental terminology of hadith requires careful examination to avoid conceptual confusion when understanding the subject matter of hadith sciences (Nababan et al., 2025).

The distinction among hadith, sunnah, khabar, and athar warrants further examination because differences in their meanings may influence how individuals understand the sources of Islamic teachings. Tsamratul Ain.H et al. (2026) discuss the use of these four terms in classical and contemporary literature, highlighting the need to clarify their respective meanings and scopes. Although the terms are closely interconnected, their usage may vary according to the scholarly perspectives and contexts in which they are employed. Consequently, examining these terms is essential for developing a more precise understanding of hadith terminology and its position within the Islamic scholarly tradition.

Previous studies have addressed the terminology associated with hadith from different perspectives. Nababan et al. (2025) examined the definition of hadith from etymological and terminological perspectives and related it to the concepts of sunnah, khabar, and athar. Similarly, Sholihah (2023) discussed these four terms alongside other important concepts in hadith studies, including sanad, matan, rawi, and mukharrij. Her study provides a broader discussion of the meanings and uses of these terms within Islamic legal studies. These studies establish an important foundation for understanding hadith terminology. However, the present article focuses on integrating the definitions of hadith, sunnah, khabar, and athar with an explanation of the overall scope of hadith studies, thereby providing a systematic introduction to the subject.

Hasanah in Education
ISSN(Online): XXXX-XXXX
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https://hasanah.gerakanedukasi.com/index.php/HIE/index

Although previous studies have examined the definitions and relationships among these terms, an integrated discussion of their significance as foundational concepts in introductory hadith studies remains important. Before engaging with more complex topics, such as sanad (chain of transmission), matan (text of a narration), rawi (narrator), hadith classification, hadith criticism, and the history of hadith transmission and codification, learners need to understand the basic terminology and conceptual boundaries of the field. In addition, understanding the scope of hadith studies requires familiarity with 'Ilm al-Hadith Riwayah, which concerns the transmission and preservation of hadith, and 'Ilm al-Hadith Dirayah, which examines the principles and criteria used to evaluate narrations, including their chains of transmission, texts, and status in terms of acceptance or rejection. Thus, discussing hadith, sunnah, khabar, and athar is not merely a terminological exercise but also an essential foundation for understanding the broader discipline of hadith sciences.

In light of these considerations, this article aims to explain the definitions of hadith, sunnah, khabar, and athar, as well as the scope of hadith studies. The discussion focuses on clarifying the meaning of each term, identifying their similarities and differences, and outlining the principal areas covered by hadith sciences. By bringing these aspects together in a systematic discussion, this article seeks to contribute to a clearer understanding of the fundamental concepts of hadith studies, particularly among university students and readers who are beginning to study the discipline. A sound understanding of these concepts is expected to provide a stronger foundation for exploring the various branches of hadith sciences and understanding the position of hadith within Islamic studies.

METHOD

This study employs a library research method to examine the concepts under investigation through a systematic review of relevant scholarly literature. Library research involves collecting, examining, and analyzing information from written sources to develop an understanding of a particular subject, identify relevant concepts and theories, and formulate conclusions based on existing scholarly works (Zed, 2004; Hariani & Jabbar, 2026). A literature review can also serve as a research methodology for synthesizing existing knowledge and identifying patterns,

Hasanah in Education
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Vol 1 No 1 (2026): May 2026
https://hasanah.gerakanedukasi.com/index.php/HIE/index

differences, and gaps in previous studies (Snyder, 2019). In this study, the method is used to examine the definitions of hadith, sunnah, khabar, and athar, their similarities and differences, and their significance within the broader scope of hadith studies.

The research data consist of written sources, including books on hadith sciences, scholarly journal articles, and other relevant academic publications. Primary sources comprise authoritative classical and contemporary works on hadith sciences that directly discuss the definitions and conceptual boundaries of hadith, sunnah, khabar, and athar. Secondary sources include journal articles and supporting books that interpret, compare, or analyze these concepts. Data collection is conducted through literature searching and documentation, involving the identification, selection, and recording of information relevant to the research objectives.

The collected data are analyzed using content analysis. The analysis proceeds through three stages. First, data reduction involves selecting information relevant to the research focus and excluding material that does not directly address the concepts under investigation. Second, data presentation involves organizing the definitions according to their respective terms and comparing similarities and differences among the interpretations found in the selected sources. Third, conclusion drawing involves synthesizing the findings to formulate clear explanations of each term and establish their conceptual relationships within hadith studies.

To ensure data credibility, definitions and interpretations obtained from individual sources are compared with those presented in other relevant publications. Particular attention is given to authoritative scholarly works and established references in hadith sciences. This cross-referencing process helps identify differences in scholarly perspectives and reduces the risk of relying on isolated or insufficiently supported interpretations. Through these procedures, the study seeks to provide a systematic and well-grounded account of the fundamental terminology and scope of hadith studies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Hadith and Sunnah

Hadith and sunnah are two closely related terms in Islamic studies. Both are associated with Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and play an important role in understanding

Islamic teachings. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, they may emphasize different aspects of meaning depending on the context in which they are used. Therefore, their respective meanings need to be clarified to avoid misunderstandings when examining the sources of Islamic teachings.

Linguistically, the word hadith derives from the Arabic term الحديث (al-hadith), which has several meanings, including something new, a report, or a statement (Zainuddin, 2011). In Islamic terminology, the term is used to refer to reports of everything attributed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Its linguistic meaning provides a basis for understanding hadith as a report or narration originating from the Prophet.

Terminologically, hadith refers to everything attributed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), including his sayings (qawliyyah), actions (fi'liyyah), tacit approvals (taqririyyah), and personal characteristics (Malik & Bunganegara, 2022). This definition indicates that hadith encompasses more than the Prophet's verbal statements; it also includes his actions, his approval of particular practices, and his personal characteristics. Through this broad scope, hadith serves as an important source for understanding both the teachings conveyed by the Prophet and the examples he provided in everyday life.

Hadith occupies an important position in Islam as a source of Islamic teachings after the Qur'an (Azkar, 2016). This position is closely related to its function in explaining Qur'anic verses that are expressed in general terms or require further clarification. Through hadith, Muslims can understand how the teachings of the Qur'an were applied in the life of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Thus, hadith serves not merely as a record of the Prophet's sayings and actions but also as a means of helping Muslims understand and practice Islamic teachings more clearly.

In hadith sciences, hadith is commonly classified into three categories according to its authenticity: sahih, hasan, and da'if (Azkar, 2016). A sahih hadith is one whose chain of transmission (sanad) is continuous, whose narrators are morally upright ('adl) and accurate in transmission (dabt), and which is free from irregularities (shudhudh) and hidden defects ('illah). A hasan hadith generally meets similar requirements, although its narrators possess a lower degree of precision in transmission than those of a sahih hadith. Meanwhile, a da'if hadith

Hasanah in Education
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Vol 1 No 1 (2026): May 2026
https://hasanah.gerakanedukasi.com/index.php/HIE/index

does not meet the requirements for either the sahih or hasan category. This classification is important for assessing the strength of a narration before it is used as a basis for understanding Islamic teachings.

Another term closely associated with hadith is sunnah. Linguistically, sunnah derives from the Arabic term السُّنَّة (al-sunnah), meaning a path, way, practice, or tradition that is followed (Zainuddin, 2011). This meaning suggests an established course of conduct or pattern of behavior. In the context of the life of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the term refers to the path, practices, and exemplary conduct associated with him.

Terminologically, sunnah has a meaning similar to that of hadith, particularly within hadith studies. It encompasses everything originating from Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), including his sayings, actions, approvals, personal characteristics, and life history (Malik & Bunganegara, 2022). This definition indicates that sunnah is not limited to the Prophet's verbal statements but also encompasses his conduct and exemplary practices, which serve as guidance for Muslims.

According to scholars of Islamic legal theory (usul al-fiqh), sunnah can also be understood as everything attributed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), including his sayings (qawliyyah), actions (fi'liyyah), and tacit approvals (taqririyyah) (Nasution et al., 2021). This definition indicates that the Prophet's exemplary conduct can be identified through his words, actions, and approval of practices performed by his Companions.

Based on their forms, sunnah is divided into three categories: sunnah qawliyyah, sunnah fi'liyyah, and sunnah taqririyyah (Nasution et al., 2021). Sunnah qawliyyah refers to the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) transmitted by his Companions. Sunnah fi'liyyah refers to the Prophet's actions observed or known by his Companions. Meanwhile, sunnah taqririyyah refers to the statements or actions of the Companions that were known to the Prophet and that he did not reject. These three categories demonstrate that the Prophet's sunnah can be understood through his words, actions, and tacit approvals.

Hadith and sunnah are closely related because both concern Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). In certain scholarly contexts, the two terms are used with nearly identical meanings. However, some scholars distinguish between them according to their respective perspectives.

Hasanah in Education
ISSN(Online): XXXX-XXXX
Vol 1 No 1 (2026): May 2026
https://hasanah.gerakanedukasi.com/index.php/HIE/index

Hadith is more commonly understood as a report or narration attributed to the Prophet, whereas sunnah emphasizes his path, practices, conduct, and exemplary way of life as guidance for Muslims.

Therefore, hadith and sunnah cannot be separated when examining the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Hadith serves as a means of transmitting knowledge of the Prophet's sayings, actions, approvals, and characteristics to Muslims. Sunnah, in turn, provides an understanding of the Prophet's exemplary conduct that can guide everyday life. Understanding both concepts helps clarify the relationship between the teachings conveyed by the Prophet and their practical application in human life.

B. Khabar and Atsar

Khabar refers to information or a report that may be subject to confirmation or denial. The terms khabar, hadith, and athar may be used with similar meanings, referring to anything attributed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), including his sayings, actions, approvals, physical characteristics, and personal qualities, as well as reports attributed to the Companions and the Successors (tabi'un) (Jailani, 2022).

In hadith sciences, scholars differ in their views regarding the relationship between khabar and hadith. Some scholars regard the two terms as entirely synonymous, such that every hadith can also be classified as a khabar. Other scholars, however, maintain that hadith specifically refers to reports attributed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), whereas khabar encompasses a broader range of reports, including those originating from the Prophet, the Companions, the Successors, and other individuals. This distinction developed particularly among scholars in Khurasan, who differentiated the two terms in their technical usage (Tsamratul, 2026).

The term athar literally means a trace, a remnant, or something left behind. In hadith sciences, it generally refers to narrations transmitted from the Companions or the Successors (tabi'un). In this sense, athar differs from hadith, which is specifically attributed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Nevertheless, some scholars use athar interchangeably with hadith. These variations in usage reflect the development of terminology within the tradition of 'ulum al-hadith (hadith sciences). The term athar is also frequently used by jurists (fuqaha)

Hasanah in Education
ISSN(Online): XXXX-XXXX
Vol 1 No 1 (2026): May 2026
https://hasanah.gerakanedukasi.com/index.php/HIE/index

and scholars of Islamic legal theory (usul al-fiqh) to refer to the opinions or statements of the Companions that serve as considerations in the process of deriving Islamic legal rulings (istinbat al-ahkam) (Tsamratul, 2026).

C. Differences Between Hadith, Khabar, and Athar

In the classical discipline of Mustalah al-Hadith (Hadith Terminology), hadith, khabar, and athar are closely related terms. All three are used to refer to narrations or reports, but they differ in scope and usage. These differences can be examined through the linguistic and technical meanings of each term, as well as the source or person to whom a narration is attributed. Understanding these distinctions enables the terms hadith, khabar, and athar to be used more accurately in hadith studies. Tarida et al. (2025) also examined the conceptual distinctions among hadith, sunnah, khabar, and athar, emphasizing the importance of understanding their respective meanings and scopes within hadith studies. The following section explains each term in detail.

1. Hadith

Linguistically:

الجديد ويجمع على أحاديث على خلاف القياس،

Al-hadith means something new. Its plural form is *ahadith* (أحاديث), an irregular plural that does not follow the usual rules of analogy (*qiyas*).

ما أضيف إلى النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم من قول أو فعل أو تقرير أو صف

Hadith refers to everything attributed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), including his sayings, actions, tacit approvals, and personal characteristics.

2. Khabar

Linguistically:

النبأ وجمعه أخبار، اصطلاحا: فيه ثلاثة أقوال وهي

Al-khabar means a report or piece of news, and its plural form is akhbar (أخبار). In technical usage, scholars hold three different views regarding its meaning.

First, khabar is synonymous with hadith:

Hasanah in Education
ISSN(Online): XXXX-XXXX
Vol 1 No 1 (2026): May 2026
https://hasanah.gerakanedukasi.com/index.php/HIE/index

هو مرادف للحديث: أي إن معناهما واحد اصطلاحاً

This means that khabar and hadith have the same technical meaning. According to this view, anything classified as hadith may also be referred to as khabar. Second, khabar differs from hadith:

مغاير له: فالحديث ما جاء عن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم والخبر ما جاء عن غيره

This means that hadith refers to reports originating from Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), whereas khabar refers to reports originating from other sources. According to this view, the distinction between the two terms lies in the source of the narration. Third, khabar has a broader scope than hadith:

أعم منه: أي إن الحديث ما جاء عن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم والخبر ما جاء عنه أو عن غيره

This means that khabar encompasses a broader range of reports than hadith. Hadith refers to reports originating from Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), whereas khabar includes reports originating from both the Prophet and other sources.

3. Athar

Linguistically:

لغة: بقية الشيء، اصطلاحا: فيه قولان هما

Athar means a remnant, trace, or something left behind. In technical usage, scholars hold two different views regarding its meaning. First, athar is synonymous with hadith:

هو مرادف للحديث: أي إن معناهما واحد اصطلاحا

This means that athar and hadith have the same technical meaning and can therefore be used interchangeably. Second, athar differs from hadith:

مغاير له: وهو ما أضيف إلى الصحابة والتابعين من أقوال أو أفعال

This means that athar refers to reports attributed to the Companions and the Successors (tabi'un), including their sayings and actions. According to this view, hadith is

specifically associated with reports attributed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), whereas athar refers to reports attributed to the Companions and the Successors.

Based on these explanations, hadith, khabar, and athar are closely related terms, although their usage differs. Hadith generally refers to narrations attributed to the Prophet, khabar may encompass reports originating from the Prophet or other sources, and athar generally refers to reports attributed to the Companions and the Successors. Nevertheless, some scholarly views regard khabar and athar as synonymous with hadith.

D. Scope of Hadith Studies

Studying hadith involves more than simply understanding its content or text. Hadith must also be examined from various perspectives, particularly those concerning the chain of transmission (sanad) and the text of the narration (matan). This is important because each hadith has a transmission chain and textual content that need to be examined and evaluated to determine its status. Accordingly, hadith studies include a discipline that establishes the principles and rules for examining and evaluating hadith, namely 'Ilm Mustalah al-Hadith (the Science of Hadith Terminology).

'Ilm Mustalah al-Hadith is the discipline that examines the fundamental principles and rules used to determine the conditions of a hadith's sanad and matan, thereby establishing whether the hadith is acceptable or rejected (Thahhan, n.d.). As stated in the classical work on hadith terminology:

علم الصطلح الحديث:

علم بأصول وقواعد يعرف بها أحوال السند والمتن من حيث القبول والرد

This definition explains that the science of hadith terminology provides the principles and rules for examining the conditions of the chain of transmission and the text of a narration in terms of their acceptability or rejection.

Based on their respective areas of inquiry, hadith sciences are generally divided into two main branches: 'Ilm al-Hadith Riwayah and 'Ilm al-Hadith Dirayah. 'Ilm al-Hadith Riwayah concerns the transmission and conveyance of hadith, whereas 'Ilm al-Hadith Dirayah examines the principles and criteria used to assess the conditions of the sanad and matan and to determine

Hasanah in Education
ISSN(Online): XXXX-XXXX
Vol 1 No 1 (2026): May 2026
https://hasanah.gerakanedukasi.com/index.php/HIE/index

whether a hadith is acceptable or rejected. Multajam (2022) examined the classification of hadith sciences from an ontological perspective, highlighting the significance of distinguishing between riwayah and dirayah in understanding the structure and scope of hadith studies. The definitions of these two branches are explained below.

1. 'Ilm al-Hadith *Dirayah*

علم الحديث إما دراية وإماروراية فأما علم الحديث الحاصل بالدراية فحده علم يعرف به حقيقة الرواية وما يتعلق

بهاوشروطهاوأنواعهاوأحكامهاوحال الرواة وشروطهم وأصناف المرويات.

Hadith sciences are divided into two main branches: 'Ilm al-Hadith Dirayah and 'Ilm al-Hadith Riwayah. 'Ilm al-Hadith Dirayah is the discipline used to understand the nature of hadith transmission, including its requirements, classifications, and governing principles, as well as the characteristics and qualifications required of narrators. Its scope also includes various classifications of hadith, such as sahih, hasan, and da'if, as well as classifications based on the source of attribution, including marfu', mawquf, and maqtu'. Through these discussions, 'Ilm al-Hadith Dirayah helps establish the status and standing of a particular hadith. Furthermore, this discipline examines the characteristics of narrators, including their moral integrity and precision in transmission, as well as various forms of narration related to the sanad and matan. Thus, 'Ilm al-Hadith Dirayah provides the principles necessary to examine hadith and determine its status and acceptability.

2. 'Ilm al-Hadith *Riwayah*

وأماعلم الحديث بالرواية فحده علم يشمل علي نقل ماأضيف للنبي صلى الله عليه وسلم قولا أوفعلا أوتقريرا.

'Ilm al-Hadith Riwayah is the discipline that examines the transmission of everything attributed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), including his sayings, actions, and tacit approvals (Asy-Syafi'i, n.d.). The process of hadith transmission also involves specific techniques, forms, conditions, and methods that govern how narrations are conveyed and preserved (Jusmiati & Idrus, 2024).

Hasanah in Education
ISSN(Online): XXXX-XXXX
Vol 1 No 1 (2026): May 2026
https://hasanah.gerakanedukasi.com/index.php/HIE/index

Based on these explanations, *'Ilm al-Hadith Riwayah* and *'Ilm al-Hadith Dirayah* can be understood as two interrelated branches of hadith studies. *'Ilm al-Hadith Riwayah* focuses on transmitting reports originating from the Prophet, whereas *'Ilm al-Hadith Dirayah* focuses on the principles and criteria used to examine and evaluate the status of hadith. Both are essential because hadith must not only be transmitted and preserved but also examined and understood in order to establish its scholarly status.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion presented, hadith, sunnah, khabar, and athar are closely related terms in Islamic studies, although they differ in meaning and scope. Hadith generally refers to everything attributed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), whereas sunnah relates to his way of life and exemplary conduct. Khabar may encompass reports originating from the Prophet as well as from other sources, while athar generally refers to narrations attributed to the Companions and the Successors (tabi'un). Nevertheless, scholars hold different views regarding the usage and scope of these terms.

Beyond these fundamental concepts, hadith studies also encompass the transmission of narrations and the principles used to examine their conditions and determine their status. These aspects are addressed through 'Ilm al-Hadith Riwayah and 'Ilm al-Hadith Dirayah. The two branches are interrelated because hadith must not only be transmitted but also examined in terms of its chain of transmission (sanad) and text (matan) to determine its status and acceptability. Therefore, understanding the definitions and scope of hadith studies provides an essential foundation for students and readers seeking to study hadith sciences in greater depth.

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