

Methodological Criteria for Detecting Fabricated Hadiths among Hadith Critics: An Analytical Comparative Study

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Abstract: Fabricated Hadiths represent a serious challenge to the preservation of the Prophetic Sunnah because forged reports can influence creed, legal reasoning, ethical teaching, and public religious memory. This study analyzes the methodological criteria used by Hadith critics to identify fabricated narrations and compares the operational approaches of classical and contemporary scholarship. A qualitative library-based design is employed using descriptive, analytical, comparative, and applied procedures. The corpus consists of major works on Hadith terminology, narrator criticism, hidden defects, fabricated reports, and modern Hadith methodology. The analysis focuses on four interconnected evidentiary domains: isnād criticism, narrator evaluation, matn criticism, and historical-contextual indicators. The results show that a judgment of fabrication is normally cumulative rather than dependent on a single sign. Classical critics share the same foundational concern for chain continuity, narrator integrity and precision, textual coherence, and corroborating evidence, while their disagreements often arise from differences in weighing contextual indicators and distinguishing severe weakness from deliberate forgery. Contemporary scholarship largely preserves these foundations while expanding cross-referencing, indexing, and digital access to transmission data. The study concludes that the most reliable approach combines isnād and matn analysis, explicitly states the degree and cause of weakness, and treats digital tools as aids rather than substitutes for expert critical judgment.

Keywords: Fabricated Hadith, Hadith Criticism, Isnād Criticism, Matn Criticism, Jarḥ wa Ta'dīl, Methodological Criteria.

Introduction

Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, and peace and blessings be upon our master Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets and Messengers, and upon his family, his companions, and those who follow his path until the Day of Judgment.

The Prophetic Sunnah holds a paramount position in Islamic jurisprudence, serving as the second primary source of legislation after the Glorious Qur'an. The classical sciences of Hadith therefore developed precise conditions for accepting reports, including continuity of transmission, narrator integrity and precision, and freedom from irregularity and hidden defect [1]. With the expansion of the Islamic state and the emergence of political, sectarian, and intellectual conflicts, the phenomenon of Hadith fabrication (al-waḍ') posed a direct threat to the purity of the Sunnah and to the reliability of legal and ethical reasoning.

Hadith scholars responded by constructing a rigorous culture of verification. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī emphasized the ethics and conditions of transmission [2], while al-Ḥākim systematized major branches of Hadith knowledge and critical classification [3]. Later critics refined the investigation of subtle defects

and competing transmission routes, demonstrating that formal continuity alone could not establish authenticity [4].

Narrator criticism became equally central. Biographical evaluation allowed scholars to identify narrators accused of lying, serious error, weak memory, or unreliable transmission. Major critical compilations such as al-Dhahabī's *Mīzān al-I'tidāl* and Ibn Abī Ḥātim's *al-Jarḥ wa al-Ta'dīl* illustrate the depth of this evidence-based evaluation of transmitters [5], [6].

The importance of the present research lies in examining these methodological criteria as an integrated system rather than as isolated rules. It compares the approaches of classical and contemporary critics, clarifies the relationship between isnād and matn criticism, and evaluates how cumulative evidence is used when distinguishing fabricated reports from merely weak or disputed narrations.

The originality of the study stems from combining theoretical foundation, comparative analysis, and practical methodological reconstruction. Instead of merely cataloguing reports already declared fabricated, it identifies the critical indicators that govern such judgments and explains how those indicators can be applied coherently in contemporary Hadith research.

Research Problem

Hadith fabrication is among the most serious phenomena confronted by the scholars of the Prophetic Sunnah because a false attribution can produce theological, legal, historical, and ethical consequences. The abundance of specialized works on weak and criticized narrators also shows that the problem cannot be reduced to a binary classification of authentic versus fabricated. Ibn 'Adī's *al-Kāmil* and al-'Uqaylī's *al-Du'afā' al-Kabīr* preserve detailed evaluations demonstrating the range of narrator weakness and the need to distinguish severe unreliability from deliberate forgery [7], [8].

Although the literature on fabricated Hadiths is extensive, many works concentrate on collecting reports or presenting general rules. Less attention is given to reconstructing the operational criteria by which critics combine narrator evidence, chain analysis, textual indications, historical possibility, corroboration, and comparative judgment. The central question of this research is therefore: What methodological criteria did Hadith critics employ to detect fabricated Hadiths, how did these criteria develop across classical and contemporary scholarship, and how can they be applied consistently in current Hadith studies?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study derives from several scientific and methodological considerations:

1. Demonstrating the scientific efforts of Hadith critics in protecting the Prophetic Sunnah from fabricated reports.
2. Clarifying the methodological criteria used to evaluate narrations and the evidentiary foundations of those criteria.
3. Explaining the complementary relationship between isnād criticism and matn criticism in the detection of fabrication.
4. Comparing classical and contemporary approaches in order to identify areas of agreement and differences in the weighting of evidence.
5. Connecting traditional Hadith criticism with contemporary research tools without replacing scholarly judgment.
6. Providing a structured framework that can support teaching and future research in Hadith studies.

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. Clarify the concept of fabricated Hadith, its historical emergence, and its major causes.
2. Identify the principal methodological criteria used by Hadith critics to uncover fabricated reports.
3. Analyze the scientific foundations of isnād, narrator, matn, and contextual criticism.
4. Compare the approaches of prominent classical and contemporary Hadith critics.
5. Reconstruct the practical sequence through which multiple critical indicators are weighed together.
6. Assess the continuing applicability of these criteria for contemporary and digitally assisted Hadith research.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative, library-based design combining descriptive, analytical, comparative, and applied methods. The descriptive stage identifies the concepts, terminology, and historical development of fabricated Hadith criticism. The analytical stage extracts the principal criteria used by critics in evaluating chains, narrators, texts, and contextual evidence. The comparative stage examines points of convergence and divergence between classical and contemporary approaches, especially in the distinction between severe weakness and deliberate fabrication.

The research corpus is purposively limited to major works that directly address Hadith terminology, narrator criticism, hidden defects, weak narrators, fabricated reports, and modern critical methodology. Documents are examined through five procedures: identifying the type of defect under discussion; tracing the role of narrator evaluation; assessing chain continuity and historical possibility; analyzing matn coherence and contradiction; and comparing the final judgments of critics. The unit of analysis is the scholarly argument and the evidentiary basis of a critical judgment. No empirical participants or statistical tests are involved; the study therefore reconstructs methodology rather than testing causal effects.

Literature Review

The literature on fabricated Hadiths begins with specialized classical compilations. Ibn al-Jawzī's *al-Mawḍū'āt* represents one of the earliest systematic attempts to collect reports judged fabricated and to state the reasons for their rejection. Its enduring contribution lies in making fabrication a distinct field of critical inquiry; however, later scholars observed that some of its judgments were broader than the evidentiary threshold required for a definitive ruling of fabrication [9].

Al-Suyūṭī's *al-La'ālī al-Maṣnū'ah* critically re-examined a number of Ibn al-Jawzī's classifications and emphasized the importance of verification before moving from severe weakness to a judgment of fabrication [10]. His *Tadrīb al-Rāwī* provides a wider methodological framework for Hadith classification, narrator evaluation, and the terminology needed to distinguish categories of accepted and rejected reports [11]. Together, these works show that declaring a narration fabricated requires more than the existence of a weak chain.

Ibn 'Arrāq al-Kinānī's *Tanzīh al-Sharī'ah* synthesizes earlier discussions and systematically compares prior judgments, thereby illustrating how later scholarship refined the boundary between weak, severely weak, and fabricated material [12]. This comparative function is particularly important for the present study because it demonstrates that disagreement among critics may concern the weight of evidence rather than the underlying critical principles.

Works devoted to damaged narrators and hidden defects provide the second major strand of the literature. Ibn Hibbān's *al-Majrūḥīn* documents narrators whose reports require rejection or special caution [13], while Ibn Rajab's *Sharḥ 'Ilal al-Tirmidhī* explains the subtle comparative reasoning by which apparently sound chains may still contain defects [14]. These works establish that fabrication detection must be grounded in detailed knowledge of narrator careers, transmission patterns, and competing routes.

Modern methodological synthesis is represented by Nūr al-Dīn 'Itr, whose *Manhaj al-Naqd fī 'Ulūm al-Ḥadīth* presents Hadith criticism as a coherent system integrating chain and text analysis [15]. This approach is directly relevant to the present study because it resists the assumption that classical criticism was concerned only with isnād and highlights the role of textual and contextual indicators in final evaluation.

Muṣṭafā al-Sibā'ī places the defense and preservation of the Sunnah within a broader historical and legislative context [16], while Muḥammad Abū Shahbah addresses major objections concerning transmission and the integrity of Hadith preservation [17]. These studies are useful for demonstrating why the detection of fabrication is not merely a technical exercise but also a central issue in preserving the epistemic authority of the Sunnah.

Historical development is further examined by Akram Ḍiyā' al-'Umarī, who traces the institutional and scholarly evolution of Sunnah transmission [18], and by Ṣubḥī al-Ṣāliḥ, whose work on Hadith terminology explains the formation and classification of the principal categories used in critical judgment [19]. Their contributions support a diachronic reading of the criteria and show how terminology became increasingly formalized over time.

Muḥammad 'Ajjāj al-Khaṭīb offers a comprehensive introduction to Hadith sciences and the foundations of authentication [20]. More recent syntheses by 'Abd Allāh al-Judai' and Bashshār 'Awwād Ma'rūf

further systematize critical terminology, evidence weighting, and the relationship between classical sources and modern scholarly practice [21], [22]. These studies provide a bridge between inherited critical methods and contemporary research organization.

The present study is positioned at the intersection of these strands. It does not merely list fabricated reports or repeat definitions of al-mawḍūʿ. Instead, it reconstructs the complete critical process: identifying defects in narrators and chains, testing the matn, examining historical and contextual evidence, comparing alternative routes, and determining how cumulative indicators support or fail to support a judgment of deliberate fabrication. This integrated focus constitutes the principal gap addressed by the research.

Research Structure

The article is organized into four analytical chapters. Chapter One establishes the concept, origins, and effects of fabricated Hadith. Chapter Two examines the emergence and development of Hadith criticism and the role of Jarḥ wa Taʿdīl. Chapter Three compares the approaches of classical and contemporary critics. Chapter Four reconstructs practical critical applications and evaluates the criteria in light of contemporary Hadith studies. The article then presents the results and discussion before stating its conclusion, findings, and recommendations.

Chapter One: The Concept of Fabricated Hadith and Its Origins

Defining scientific concepts is an essential step in academic research because the accuracy of subsequent analysis depends on conceptual clarity. The study of fabricated Hadith therefore begins by distinguishing the linguistic and technical meanings of Hadith and al-waḍʿ, then examining the emergence, causes, and intellectual effects of deliberate fabrication [1], [19].

Section I: Concept of Fabricated Hadith (Linguistically and Terminologically)

Linguistically, the term Ḥadīth denotes news, speech, or discourse. Terminologically, Hadith refers to what is attributed to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ of speech, action, tacit approval, or physical and ethical characteristics. Classical Hadith terminology treats these attributions as objects of transmission that must be evaluated through established rules of acceptance and rejection [1], [20].

Linguistically, al-waḍʿ signifies placing, inventing, or fabricating. In Hadith terminology, al-Ḥadīth al-Mawḍūʿ is a forged report falsely and deliberately attributed to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ. It differs fundamentally from a merely weak Hadith, because weakness may arise from interruption, limited precision, obscurity, or other defects, whereas fabrication entails manufactured attribution or evidence sufficiently strong to establish deliberate forgery [9], [10].

Fabricated Hadith is therefore the most serious category of rejected narration. The famous warning against intentionally lying about the Prophet ﷺ provided an ethical foundation for the verification culture that later became formalized in the sciences of transmission and narrator criticism [2], [17].

Section II: Emergence and Causes of Hadith Fabrication

Hadith scholars associated the wider emergence of fabrication with periods of political and sectarian conflict after the earliest generation, when competing groups increasingly sought authoritative religious support for political, theological, or social claims. Historical works on the development of the Sunnah show that the expansion of transmission networks was accompanied by increasingly systematic verification of transmitters and reports [16], [18].

The causes of fabrication were diverse. They included political rivalry, sectarian fanaticism, attempts to support legal or theological positions, popular storytelling, exaggerated preaching, personal ambition, and the pursuit of material or social advantage. The diversity of motives is methodologically important because it explains why critics could not rely on a single textual stereotype when identifying fabricated reports [9], [17].

Section III: Impacts of Fabricated Hadith on Islamic Thought

The effects of fabricated Hadith extended beyond transmission itself and affected creed, jurisprudence, ethics, historical memory, and popular religious culture. Forged reports could be used to legitimate sectarian doctrines, create unsupported devotional practices, or reinforce beliefs lacking a reliable textual foundation [16], [17].

In jurisprudence, reliance on forged reports could produce unsupported legal reasoning. This risk encouraged Hadith and legal scholars to tighten criteria for accepting evidence and to distinguish carefully

between a weak report that may still have an origin and a fabricated report whose attribution must be rejected [19], [20].

On the scholarly level, the challenge of fabrication contributed to the development of specialized sciences, including Jarḥ wa Taʿdīl, ʿIlal al-Ḥadīth, narrator biography, and comparative route analysis. These disciplines collectively enabled critics to evaluate both the external transmission structure and the internal plausibility of a report [5], [6], [14].

Chapter Two: The Emergence of Hadith Criticism and Its Role in Protecting the Sunnah

Hadith criticism developed from early practices of verification into a formal scientific methodology. As transmission expanded, scholars increasingly documented the identities, dates, teachers, students, locations, and levels of precision of narrators while also comparing textual variants and transmission routes [2], [3], [18].

Section I: Early Beginnings of Hadith Criticism in the Era of Companions and Successors

Early features of Hadith criticism appeared in the careful transmission practices of the Companions. Following the Prophet's ﷺ death, verification became more explicit as reports circulated across growing geographical networks. Later generations emphasized the isnād as an instrument for identifying the men through whom religious knowledge was transmitted [2], [18].

The increasing demand to name transmitters after periods of social and political turmoil demonstrates that isnād criticism was not merely formal genealogy. It functioned as a historical verification mechanism: critics asked whether narrators were trustworthy, whether they could have met, whether their accounts were consistent, and whether their transmission matched that of stronger authorities [5], [6].

Section II: Evolution of Hadith Critical Methodologies until the Era of Codification

The second and third centuries AH witnessed major advances in Hadith codification and critical specialization. Criticism moved from individual verification practices toward formal rules for accepting and rejecting narrations, accompanied by extensive works on narrator evaluation, hidden defects, and technical terminology [3], [14].

Scholars established that chain continuity alone did not guarantee authenticity. A report required reliable transmitters, adequate precision, freedom from hidden defects, and absence of irregular contradiction with stronger evidence. This integrated standard later became central to classical definitions of accepted Hadith [1], [4].

Section III: The Role of Jarḥ wa Taʿdīl in Detecting Fabricated Hadiths

Jarḥ wa Taʿdīl played a decisive role in protecting the Sunnah by documenting narrator integrity, precision, reputation, teachers, students, and critical evaluations. Through this evidence, critics could identify liars, narrators accused of fabrication, severely weak transmitters, and those whose reports required corroboration [5], [6], [13].

Chronological and geographical data further enabled critics to detect impossible meetings, interrupted chains, suspicious transmission claims, and invented authorities. Such indicators are especially strong when they converge with textual anomalies or contradictions in the matn, illustrating the cumulative nature of fabrication judgments [4], [14].

Chapter Three: Comparative Analytical Study of Critics' Approaches in Detecting Fabricated Hadiths

The preceding chapters established the theoretical standards of isnād and matn criticism. This chapter examines how prominent critics operationalized these standards and why their final judgments sometimes differed even when they shared the same foundational principles.

Section I: Methodologies of Classical Critics

Ibn al-Jawzī systematically gathered reports he considered fabricated in al-Mawḍūʿāt and frequently relied on narrator criticism, chain defects, and textual contradiction. His work was pioneering in scope, but later scholars observed that some reports he included were better classified as severely weak rather than definitively fabricated [9].

Al-Suyūṭī re-examined many of these judgments in al-Laʾālī al-Maṣnūʿah and argued that weakness in a chain does not automatically prove deliberate fabrication. His broader methodological writings also insist on distinguishing categories of rejection and on considering corroborating evidence before issuing the strongest possible judgment [10], [11].

Ibn ‘Arrāq al-Kinānī synthesized earlier works and compared competing evaluations, helping to clarify the boundary between weak, severely weak, and fabricated reports. His method demonstrates the value of cumulative comparison rather than isolated reliance on a single critic or single chain [12].

Section II: Methodologies of Contemporary Critics and Researchers

Contemporary Hadith scholars build on the classical heritage while benefiting from improved indexing, critical editions, searchable corpora, and wider access to parallel routes and biographical data. Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itr and other modern methodologists continue to treat isnād and matn as complementary fields of criticism rather than competing alternatives [15], [20].

Modern research also gives greater practical attention to systematic cross-referencing, source chronology, variant comparison, and transparent documentation of why a report is graded in a particular way. These developments do not replace classical principles; rather, they can make the application of those principles more reproducible and easier to audit [21], [22].

Section III: Comparative Analysis of Classical and Contemporary Approaches

A comparative assessment reveals substantial agreement on the core principles of Hadith criticism: the necessity of examining chains and texts together, evaluating narrator integrity and precision, identifying hidden defects, comparing transmission routes, and rejecting reports that conflict with decisive evidence or established historical possibility [4], [15].

Differences arise primarily in the weight assigned to particular contextual indicators (qarā’in), the degree to which corroboration can strengthen a report, and the threshold for moving from severe weakness to a definitive declaration of fabrication. This helps explain why disagreement among critics need not imply disagreement over the legitimacy of the critical method itself [10], [12].

Chapter Four: Practical Critical Applications and Evaluation of Methodological Criteria

Section I: Practical Applications of Critical Standards

A rigorous critical sequence begins by gathering all known transmission routes, identifying the pivotal narrators in each chain, comparing biographical evaluations, checking dates and possibilities of meeting, and examining whether variants can be traced to independent sources. The text is then compared with stronger transmissions, established principles, historical facts, and recognized linguistic usage [4], [14], [22].

Fabrication becomes substantially more probable when several indicators converge: a narrator known for lying or invention, chronological impossibility, a chain that appears only through a suspect transmitter, major textual contradiction, or a report whose wording reveals clear ideological or historical anachronism. Conversely, textual oddity alone or the presence of a weak narrator does not necessarily justify the categorical label of fabricated [9], [10].

Section II: Evaluation of Criteria in Light of Contemporary Hadith Studies

Traditional Hadith criticism remains methodologically relevant because it combines source criticism, biographical evidence, textual comparison, and historical verification. Modern historical and digital methods can facilitate the collection of routes, visualization of transmission networks, and rapid comparison of large textual corpora, but the interpretation of those data still depends on domain-specific scholarly judgment [15], [21].

Section III: Prospects for Developing Critical Methodology and Addressing Modern Challenges

Contemporary research can benefit from unified digital databases linking narrator biographies, critical judgments, manuscripts, textual variants, and source chronology. Computational tools may assist in detecting recurrent chains, unusual lexical patterns, or network anomalies; however, such tools should remain subordinate to transparent philological and Hadith-critical reasoning rather than functioning as autonomous authenticators [21], [22].

Results

The analysis produced five principal results. First, Hadith critics did not identify fabrication through a single isolated marker. The strongest judgments emerge when evidence from the chain, narrator biography, historical possibility, textual content, and comparison with alternative routes converges. A compromised narrator may justify rejection, but a definitive judgment of fabrication normally requires evidence proportionate to the seriousness of that label [5], [6], [13], [14].

Second, the distinction between weak and fabricated Hadith is methodologically decisive. Classical re-evaluations of al-Mawḍūʿāt demonstrate that severe weakness, oddity, or lack of corroboration cannot automatically be converted into proof of deliberate invention [9], [10], [12]. This result confirms that precise terminology is an ethical as well as technical requirement, because an overinclusive ruling can misrepresent both a narrator and a transmitted report.

Third, isnād and matn criticism operate as complementary layers. Chain criticism establishes whether the transmission pathway is historically and biographically plausible, while matn criticism tests contradiction, anomaly, coherence, contextual fit, and comparison with stronger reports. The evidence in the reviewed literature does not support a model in which classical critics relied exclusively on isnād [4], [15], [20].

Fourth, the comparison between classical and contemporary scholarship reveals continuity rather than methodological rupture. Contemporary scholars benefit from indexing, databases, and faster cross-referencing, but their strongest analyses continue to depend on the same core operations: route collection, narrator evaluation, defect detection, and evidence weighting [21], [22].

Fifth, the practical reliability of a fabrication judgment improves when the critic explicitly states the cause and degree of rejection. Labels such as weak, severely weak, rejected, or fabricated should be tied to the underlying evidence. This graduated approach reduces the risk of categorical overstatement and provides a clearer basis for later scholarly review [11], [19].

Discussion

These results clarify why the literature contains both strong agreement and visible differences among Hadith critics. The shared methodological foundation is broad: critics evaluate narrators, routes, continuity, hidden defects, and textual content. Divergence most often appears at the stage of evidence weighting. Ibn al-Jawzī's relatively expansive judgments and the subsequent corrections of al-Suyūṭī and Ibn ʿArrāq illustrate that the debate concerns the threshold for certainty, not the legitimacy of critical scrutiny itself [9], [10], [12].

The findings also reinforce the need to treat matn criticism as an intrinsic component of Hadith methodology. A sound-looking chain may still be affected by subtle error, while an unusual matn may direct the critic back to hidden problems in transmission. The most persuasive methodology therefore moves iteratively between isnād and matn rather than applying them as separate final tests [4], [14], [15]. This integrated model provides a stronger explanation of how critics identify fabrication while avoiding the methodological mistake of declaring a report forged solely because its wording appears strange to a modern reader.

For contemporary Hadith studies, the principal implication is that digital technology should strengthen documentation rather than simplify judgment into an automated score. Searchable corpora can reveal route overlap, narrator networks, source chronology, and textual variants at a scale previously impossible, yet decisions concerning independence of transmission, severity of defects, and the significance of contextual indicators remain interpretive scholarly tasks [21], [22]. Accordingly, methodological development should prioritize transparent evidence trails, reproducible source comparison, and explicit distinction between computer-assisted discovery and human critical evaluation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the detection of fabricated Hadiths rests on an integrated and cumulative critical system. Hadith critics combine isnād scrutiny, narrator evaluation, matn analysis, historical-contextual evidence, and comparison of transmission routes. The most important methodological distinction is between a report that is weak because one or more conditions of acceptance are missing and a report that can be judged deliberately fabricated. Classical and contemporary critics substantially agree on the foundations of this process, while their disagreements frequently concern the relative weight of evidence and the threshold required for categorical judgment. The study therefore concludes that contemporary Hadith research should preserve the graduated vocabulary and evidentiary discipline of the classical tradition while using digital tools to improve access, cross-referencing, and documentation rather than to replace expert criticism.

Findings

1. Hadith criticism operates as an integrated system combining isnād, narrator, matn, and contextual analysis.
2. Jarḥ wa Ta'dīl is a primary mechanism for identifying dishonest, severely weak, or unreliable transmitters, but narrator weakness alone does not always prove fabrication.
3. Textual criticism is an intrinsic component of classical Hadith methodology and functions together with chain criticism.
4. A judgment of fabricated Hadith is strongest when multiple independent indicators converge.
5. Disagreements among critics generally concern application and evidence weighting rather than the foundational legitimacy of Hadith criticism.
6. Digital databases and computational tools can improve route collection and comparison, but final critical judgment remains dependent on transparent scholarly reasoning.

Recommendations

1. Expand comparative studies of classical and contemporary critical judgments in order to clarify why scholars differ on the same report.
2. Develop integrated digital Hadith databases that connect narrator biographies, route variants, source chronology, and critics' evaluations.
3. Use artificial intelligence and computational analysis as research aids for tracing and comparing transmissions, while retaining expert verification of every critical conclusion.
4. Support scholarly editing and digitization of works on 'Ilal, weak narrators, and fabricated Hadiths to improve access to primary evidence.
5. Incorporate integrated isnād–matn criticism and graduated terminology of rejection into university Hadith methodology curricula.

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