



OPENACCESS

Al-Azwa الإضاء

ISSN 1995-7904 ;E 2415-0444

Volume 40, Issue, 63, 2025

[www.aladwajournal.com](http://www.aladwajournal.com)

# The Political Role of the Ulama in Al-Andalus: An Analytical Study of Religious Leadership and Statecraft in Muslim Spain

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## Abstract

### KEYWORDS

Al-Andalus; Ulama;  
Muslim Spain;  
Islamic governance;  
religious leadership;  
Andalusian politics;  
Umayyad Córdoba;  
Granada; Islamic  
jurisprudence;  
statecraft

This research article explores the political role of the Ulama (Islamic scholars) in Muslim Spain (Al-Andalus), focusing on how religious leadership intersected with statecraft across different historical periods. From the establishment of the Umayyad Emirate in Córdoba to the final days of the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada, the Ulama played crucial roles not only in religious and judicial affairs but also in shaping political discourse, legitimizing rulers, mediating conflicts, and influencing administrative reforms. By analyzing historical chronicles, biographical dictionaries, and fatwa literature, this study examines the complex relationship between knowledge and power, highlighting how the authority of the Ulama often extended beyond the pulpit and the madrasa into the court and the battlefield. It argues that their political engagement was both strategic and principled, aimed at preserving social cohesion, Islamic identity, and ethical governance during times of internal strife and external threats. The paper contributes to a deeper understanding of Islamic political thought in a European context and sheds light on the legacy of the Andalusian Ulama in the broader narrative of Islamic history.

Date of Publication:  
30-06-2025



## Introduction:

Muslims ruled the Iberian Peninsula from the early eighth century until the fall of Granada in 1492. They established sophisticated administrative systems and cultural centers, contributing to the multicultural dynamics of Muslim-ruled territories. The Muslim conquest of Spain began in 711 and led to the establishment of the Emirate of Cordoba and the Caliphate of Cordoba.<sup>1</sup> Religious tolerance was a key factor in this period. Muslims ruled Spain for eight hundred years. During this period, the Umayyads developed Andalusia in every respect. During the Umayyad era, there was so much scientific, economic, and social development that the wonders of knowledge illuminated no corner of Europe.<sup>2</sup> The Period of the Umayyads of Andalusia is a glorious period in the history of Islam, during which scholars gained great importance in every field of life. This period saw scientific and literary development, as well as great political development. The Muslim Contributions to Political and Intellectual Life. Muslim political institutions in Spain were highly organized, with ministries for finance, war, and public works in cities like Cordoba, Seville, and Granada.<sup>3</sup> The Muslim scholars, administrators, and judges played crucial roles in state governance. Figures like Ibn Hazm, Al-Mansur, and Averroes were intellectuals and involved in political affairs. This integration of knowledge and governance allowed for efficient administration and promotion of science, philosophy, and literature, positioning Al-Andalus as a leading political and intellectual force in medieval Europe. Some of the Umayyad caliphs of Andalusia were very good scholars, Such as Hisham bin Abdur Rahman and Al-Hakam the Second.<sup>4</sup>

The political role of Islamic scholars in Al-Andalus has been understudied, with existing historiography focusing on the caliphal and dynastic dimensions of power in Muslim Al-Andalusia. This overlooks how religious elites influenced statecraft, legitimized authority, and mediated between rulers and the populace. This gap in scholarship limits our understanding of how religious authority intersected with political power and shaped governance, law, and social order in Andalusian society. This study examines the political role of Andalusian scholars in shaping the Muslim political landscape of Al-Andalusia. The study argues that the ulama of Al-Andalus significantly shaped the Muslim political climate of Al-Andalusia. They legitimized state authority and criticized ruling elites, occupying strategic positions in judicial, educational, and advisory institutions. The study highlights their interactions with various dynasties, including the Umayyads of Córdoba, Taifa, and Almoravid

rulers, highlighting their role in negotiating the boundaries between divine law and temporal power.

### **The role of Khalif Hisham bin Abdur Rahman as Aalim-e-Deen in politics:**

Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān, al-Andalus' ruler between 788 and 796 CE, played a crucial role in consolidating Umayyad control in the Iberian Peninsula following the foundational rule of his father, 'Abd al-Raḥmān I. His reign was marked by efforts to centralize power, suppress internal rebellions, and establish Islamic dominance in terms of governance by Maliki law. Politically, Hisham is worthy of praise for having better organized the administrative and judiciary institutions, raised religious foundations, and promoted Islamic orthodoxy. He actively promoted the institution of Maliki law as the dominant legal school in al-Andalus via religious legitimacy for upholding his political authority. His campaigns on the battlefield against insurgent movements in Toledo and the Franks in the north of the Peninsula demonstrate his attempt to achieve territorial integrity and to defend Umayyad rule.<sup>5</sup> Hisham bin Abdur Rahman was in no way inferior to Muhammad bin Abdul Aziz in terms of his habits and manners. He was very pious, religious, ascetic, worshipful, and strictly followed the Islamic law. He was particularly interested in religion. He used to sit in the company of great scholars from childhood and benefited from them to the fullest extent. He tended acquiring knowledge from his early childhood. Great scholars and scholars of the time taught him. Whatever they taught, Hisham I understood it with great sincerity and kept it in his mind. The company of jurists and scholars made him committed to religion and law.<sup>6</sup>

Ibn al-Qutiya states that Amir Hisham himself was also a man of knowledge and virtue and was a scholar of Maliki jurisprudence and a lover of it. Imam Malik was also very impressed by his biography and character. That is why, after inquiring about Hisham's condition from the famous scholar of Spain, Ziyad bin Abdur Rahman, he said, "I wish Allah Almighty would make our season (Hajj) an adornment for such people."<sup>7</sup> Hisham, I had a special attachment to Maliki jurisprudence. At first, he tried hard to invite Imam Anas bin Malik to Spain. When he did not agree, he sent many scholars and students of religion from his country, such as Yahya bin Yahya, to study Maliki jurisprudence and principles. When they returned after studying, he gave them important positions. He spread the Maliki school of thought and spread its ideas.

He studied Maliki jurisprudence and was called a scholar of Maliki jurisprudence. Along with his attachment to religion, Amir Hisham I also

showed full diligence in carrying out the affairs of the kingdom. After becoming king, whenever he received news that an official was using mercy instead of justice and fairness, he would immediately dismiss him and appoint another and would also advise him to be kind and gentle. He was a great supporter and helper of the oppressed. He would not waste a moment in listening to their cries and redressing injustice. These kinds of habits were present in them from childhood.<sup>8</sup> Hisham had appointed representatives during his reign. They would visit the emirs and rulers without hesitation and would calculate the expenses. In addition, they would observe the proceedings of the courts, examine the treasuries and if they found any irregularities, they would immediately inform the Caliph. The result was that oppression and oppression were eliminated from one corner to the other. Hisham was the first to organize security police to root out criminals and protect the lives and property of the subjects from bandits and robbers. After spending about eight years in politics at the age of forty, Hisham died in 796 CE, corresponding to 180 AH. Before his death, he appointed his son Al-Hakam I as his successor. Al-Hakm was in no way inferior to him in administrative abilities. But morally, he was also prone to some bad habits.

The will he gave to Al-Hakm after the oath of allegiance indicates his political abilities.

“My son, in justice and fairness, it is not appropriate to distinguish between the rich and the poor. Treat the guards with kindness. Leave the management of the city to the honest and experienced people who will treat the subjects with kindness and you will treat them with love. Set a special goal for the soldiers. Rule with independence and moderation. To endear your subjects with love, their fear will be a danger to you and their hatred will be harmful, to support the farmers and not let their crops spoil, and to adopt such a behavior that prayers will come out of the hearts of the people. If those people live happily, you will also be happy and this will be the cause of your good name and salvation.”<sup>9</sup> In short, Hisham ruled for about eleven years not only as a scholar but also as a successful politician. The Ulamās of the time and the jurisprudents of the time used to support and consult him. Finally, this great era ended with the death of Hisham in 796.

### **The rebellion of the scholars during the reign of Al-Hakam I and its tragic end:**

After the death of Hisham I, his son Al-Hakam I became the Caliph. The reign of Al-Hakam I (796–822) was very different from the reign of his father. During Hisham's reign, the scholars had a lot of political

influence. Hisham did not do anything without consulting them. All appointments and selection of officials were made with the advice of the scholars. But Al-Hakam had a different temperament from his father. Al-Hakam was a free-thinking and free-willed man from the beginning. He had a great passion for hunting, and this passion exceeded all limits. For hunting, he also used wild dogs and pigs, which are forbidden animals according to the Sharia. Keeping them is not only abhorrent but also prohibited. He was also addicted to drinking alcohol, and following his example, the princes and chiefs also became addicted to drinking alcohol. Al-Hakam, I had a habit of luxury from the beginning. He wore colorful and flamboyant clothes and lived luxuriously. He was very strict in temperament. And he also openly went to dance and entertainment gatherings. In short, Al-Hakam I had every defect found in worldly kings. Because of these wrong habits of Al-Hakam I, both the 'Ulamās and the people were disgusted with him.<sup>10</sup>

The 'Ulamās tried hard to bring Al-Hakam back on the right path, but Al-Hakam did not care about the scholars. He believed that the scholars were unnecessarily participating in politics. Their only job was to build mosques and preach religion. They had no right to interfere in the affairs of the Caliph. Despite the scholars' efforts, when Al-Hakam refused to cease his misguided behavior, they planned to conspire against him so that a righteous person would be made the Caliph in his place. Among the 'ulamās' who wanted to bring Al-Hakam back on the right path, the most important were Yahya bin Yahya, Isa bin Dinar, and Talut. They made the people realize that the Caliph was violating Islamic boundaries. And he had no right to hold the Caliphate. Someone else should be made the ruler in his place. The people fully supported them<sup>11</sup>. Al-Hakam spent the majority of his time suppressing uprisings in Toledo, Saragossa, and Mérida.

The uprisings extended as far as Cordoba twice. Al-Hakam was brought to trial for treason and succeeded by his cousin, Mohammed ibn al-Kasim, but the coup plot failed. On 16 November 806, CE 72 aristocrats and their helpers were murdered at a dinner, hanged and displayed along the banks of the river Guadalquivir. Such displays of brutality were common at this time, the heads of rebel leaders or Christian foes killed on campaigns to the north being marched to the gates of Cordoba<sup>12</sup>. At the same time, Al-Hakam's cousin Muhammad bin Qasim, also known as Ibn Al-Shamash, informed Al-Hakam about the conspiracy against him. After the investigation several 'ulamās, including 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Ḥabīb, 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Mughīrah, Sa'īd ibn Qays al-Kalbī,

and unnamed Mālikī jurists, were accused of opposing Al-Hakam I's authority during the uprisings. These figures were often executed, exiled, or silenced, and their dissent was often cited as a leading religious voice.

According to Doze, "Those who escaped at that time were saved; otherwise, those who remained in their homes until the next morning were arrested. Those who escaped were Isa bin Dinar and Yahya bin Yahya. Those who were arrested were Yahya bin Nasr, Musa bin Salim Khawlani, Ibn Abi Ka'b, Abu Yahya Zakariyya Matarghasani. All these scholars were considered pillars of religion in Spain. In addition to them, 72 more scholars and jurists were crucified in front of the royal palace, and the Muslims of Spain were forever deprived of the blessings of these elders. When the conspiracy was discovered, Yahya bin Yahya, Isa bin Dinar, and a few other scholars fled and took refuge in Talitla. Because they had considerable importance there.<sup>13</sup>"

But after some time, after receiving pardon, they returned to Cordoba. Since these people had always been against the Hakam, they again mentioned Hisham's asceticism and piety and began to discuss the order's occupations, irreligion, and wrongdoings. And thus, in subdued words, they would compare the two and condemn one. Now, the Hakam took a drastic step and had ten scholars who were considered the leaders of this rebellion killed. But the result was completely the opposite. Instead of the people being subdued, they gave the ten slain the status of martyrs and resolved to avenge their blood. " Among the scholars who incited the people to rebellion, Yahya ibn Yahya was the most prominent. He began to strengthen the rebellion movement through the influence of his fame and reputation, more than through sermons. Rather, he became the leader.<sup>14</sup>" Finally, there was a riot, and one day in Ramadan 198 AH, during a fight between a soldier guarding the Hakam and a blacksmith, Yahya bin Yahya and his other companions, who had been stirring up emotions among the people for a long time through their advice and sermons, came and started inciting the people that if they wanted to take revenge, then they should take it from the one who trained such a rude and cruel soldier. And by keeping such people as soldiers, they boosted their morale.

The enraged crowd immediately headed towards the palace, gathering hundreds and thousands of people with them on every path they passed through. This crowd reached the four walls of the palace and surrounded it from all sides so that the emir could be killed. If the guards had moved forward to suppress and stop them, they would have been killed themselves. When the Hakam heard this commotion, it came out on the

balcony of the palace and found a sea of people shouting in front of it. The Hakam immediately ordered his soldiers to disperse the crowd, but the rebels forced the king's soldiers to retreat. Now, he called his cousin Ubaidullah and instructed him to quickly go to the southern part of the city with some selected and experienced soldiers, break up the crowd, which was the center of the scholars and teachers, and burn their houses.

Ubaidullah was one of the best horsemen of his time. He immediately took a few soldiers and came out of the palace, breaking through the crowd, and fighting with his sword, he reached the part of the city where the rebels had their houses, and set fire to all the houses. When the people looked back, they saw smoke rising from about twenty places, so they panicked. They all ran to their homes in a hurry to save their wives, children, parents, and property, but Ubaidullah attacked them from the front. Taking advantage of this anxiety and chaos, the commander ordered his soldiers to attack from behind. Now this armed crowd went home on both sides.<sup>15</sup> "Their hearts were set on the children, so they did not pay attention to the fighting, which resulted in thousands of rebels being killed and thousands jumping into the river. And about three hundred prominent and high-ranking men were arrested, and these people were hanged in front of Bab al-Sawad in the palace so that others could learn a lesson. This was the traditional place for hanging. Then he called Hadiya, the warden of the prison, and ordered him to kill all the scholars and jurists who had been arrested in the early days of the rebellion so that others could learn a lesson. But when Hadiya hesitated a little, he dismissed him and appointed Ibn Nadir as warden in his place, who obeyed his order wholeheartedly<sup>16</sup>.

The king thus crushed the rebellion. Since most of the people of the southern part had participated in this rebellion, a council of consultation was called to decide on the punishment for the depopulation of that part. Some people thought that they should be killed, some ministers thought that they should be imprisoned, but some thought that they should be exiled, so that such a rebellion could never happen again. And this opinion was considered acceptable and all the people living in the southern parts, including the scholars and mujtahids, were ordered to leave the city with their belongings within three days. These suffering, and helpless people, carrying their belongings on their heads or mules, left their homeland with weeping eyes and in a state of despair. As soon as they left, all the houses there were demolished, and what was left was looted. This utter destruction of thousands of people is a very dark page in the history of Spain. Because, for the protection of his person and the establishment of

his government, Al-Hakam I don't know how many were killed, how many were arrested, and how many were drowned. Later, Al-Hakam himself regretted his actions and, to compensate for this unsavory act, he pardoned many scholars. He even forgave Yahya bin Yahya, who was the founder of this sedition, and allowed him to remain in Cordoba, and he soon became a close friend of the king due to his generosity. Similarly, Al-Hakam also pardoned Talut, and he was also at the forefront of this effort.<sup>17</sup> Following the uprising in Cordoba, Al-Hakam formed a personal guard, the Al-Haras, led by the Visigothic Christian Cordoban leader, the Comes (Count) Rabi, son of Theodulf, who was also the Emir's tax collector. Rabi was later removed and executed by crucifixion for corruption.<sup>18</sup>

### **Yahya bin Yahya's role in politics during the reign of Abd al-Rahmān II:**

After al-Hakam I, when Abd al-Rahmān II became caliph in 866, he gave great respect to Yahya bin Yahya. Yahya bin Yahya had already achieved ascendancy during the reign of Hisham. Although this political rise did not last during the reign of Abd al-Rahman, he once again achieved considerable greatness and status in the eyes of everyone in the court of Cordoba during the reign of Abd al-Rahman. Due to his knowledge, ability, and wisdom in religious matters, Abd al-Rahman tolerated his harsh words with great patience. His influence in the court had increased to such an extent that the appointments of important officials were made on his behalf, important works were carried out with his advice, and his decision in religious matters was considered final. He did not hold any position, but every official considered himself inferior.<sup>19</sup>

According to Philip K. Hitti:

"The political influence of Yahya bin Yahya on Abdur Rahman II was so great that once the emir broke his fast in Ramadan. When Yahya bin Yahya was asked about the matter, he said: "According to the Sharia, fast sixty days as expiation." Therefore, the emir had to fast for two more. Some scholars who were pleased with the emir objected that expiation could also be paid in the form of freeing a slave or feeding sixty poor people. In response, Yahya bin Yahya said that this is correct, but it is easy for the king to pay this expiation, and he will make it his habit to break his fast and free the slaves. Now he will fast for two months and never break his fast.<sup>20</sup>" This example alone is enough to explain the political influence of Yahya bin Yahya. This example makes it clear that the king's pleasure was not even considered.<sup>21</sup>



### **The role of the scholar Al-Hakam Al-Sani in politics:**

After the death of Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir, his son Al-Hakam Al-Sani ascended the throne of the Caliphate of Andalusia on 5 Ramadan 2, 053 AH, corresponding to 02 April 169 CE, and assumed the title of Al-Mustansir. During Al-Hakam's reign, the government did not gain as much importance and popularity due to military skill or conquests as it did due to his excessive intellectual taste. "The previous caliphs of Andalusia were often very appreciative and skilled in science and art, but Al-Hakam II was especially interested in literature and philosophy. The sciences of philosophy only developed in Andalusia during the reign of Al-Hakam II. With his body, Al-Hakam II had gathered all the famous scholars of the time in his court, but his academic background was no less than that of the scholars of the time. He had made Andalusia the cradle of all kinds of science and art during his time.<sup>22</sup>

"Thus, a huge collection of books had been accumulated in the royal library. Their number is said to be 000004, and the list of these books consisted of 44 volumes, each of which had 202 pages. Al-Hakam Al-Sani had especially read these books and had written footnotes on many of them with his hand.<sup>23</sup>" All this detail shows that Al-Hakam Al-Sani was a great scholar of his time, and he had a great love for scholars and books, but despite all this scholarly affection, Al-Hakam Al-Sani never remained indifferent to political affairs. The Christian states used to have this custom that whenever a Caliph of Andalusia died, they would rebel during the early period of the new Caliph. So, on the death of Abd al-Rahman, they abrogated all the old treaties and started conspiring. They thought that Al-Hakam II lacked the zeal for jihad and the courage to fight, and his entire inclination was towards books. Why would he take up the sword? Because of this view, at the beginning of Al-Hakam II's period, the Jaliqs entered the border and started looting. When the Caliph received the news of this, he personally led an army towards Jaliqs and conquered the fort of Firdlind bin Ghand Shalab, Shant-e-Ishbin, in 269 AH. After that, he had the fort demolished and returned to Cordoba victorious. But the Jaliqs did not pay attention to such warnings and continued the rebellion.

Now Al-Hakam sent one of his followers and the border emir Ghalib with an army. When the emir When Ghalib reached the city of Salem, he learned that the Christian army was much larger than the Arabs, but they attacked the city of Allah and after a fierce battle, plundered a large part of the kingdom of Fredland and returned. The campaign had not yet been concluded when Shanja bin Rumair, the king of Lyon, not only began to violate all previous treaties himself, but also persuaded the neighboring

states to break their treaties. When Al-Hakam received information about this, he sent Ya'la bin Muhammad, the ruler of Saraqesta, to teach him a lesson. When Shanja received information about the arrival of the army, he asked for help from King Jaliqah. King Jaliqah himself came to Shanja's aid with a large army and the two of them advanced together to fight the Arabs, but at the city of Qornia, Ya'la bin Muhammad scattered this united army in a single battle. Meanwhile, news of a rebellion came from Jerusalem and Castile, but Al-Hakam II He also crushed these rebellions by sending an army<sup>24</sup>.

"Al-Hakam and his brother Ubaidullah had built separate libraries for themselves during the lifetime of their father. Now, when Al-Hakam II became the caliph, he merged both libraries into his father's library and spent a lot of money to make it comprehensive and beautiful, collecting many beautiful and important books. Al-Hakam's passion for collecting books and taking his libraries to the highest level reached the point of love. His followers were spread across all countries, and wherever they went, they would get information that a book had been written and either buy it or copy it.

These agents were spread across major cities like Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, and Alexandria. If a writer intended to write a book, they would get information and then they would encourage the writer to sell that book to Al-Hakam Sani.<sup>25</sup> Thus, a huge collection of books had been accumulated in the royal library. Their number is said to be 000004, and the list of these books consisted of 44 volumes, each of which had 202 pages. Al-Hakam Al-Sani had especially read these books and had written footnotes on many of them with his hand.<sup>26</sup>" All this detail shows that Al-Hakam Al-Sani was a great scholar of his time, and he had a great love for scholars and books, but despite all this scholarly affection, Al-Hakam Al-Sani never remained indifferent to political affairs.

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### **The role of Qadi Mundhir bin Saeed in politics:**

Qadi Mundhir bin Saeed was one of the great jurists of the era of Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir, who enjoyed respect and dignity due to your truthfulness and sincerity of action. His early life was spent in obscurity. His period of rise began when a delegation of goodwill from the Baz-e-Nitini Goodwill Delegation came to his court during the reign of Caliph Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir. Caliph al-Nasir ordered al-Qali (who was a famous orator at that time) to respond to the ambassador's sermon, but al-Qali, despite his eloquence, was so impressed by the greatness and splendor of the Roman ambassador that he could not say more than a few lines and fell silent. The Caliph was worried that he might be dishonored in front of the Roman embassy, but at that moment Qadi Mundhir bin Saeed stood up and, maintaining his expressiveness, delivered a response to the sermon with his self-confidence. Al-Nasir was pleased and asked the Crown Prince Al-Hakam Sani who he was, and later, when the assembly adjourned, he was honored with gifts and honors. Caliph also

bestowed upon him the position of Imam and preacher of the largest mosque in Cordoba, and when Qazi Muhammad ibn Isa died a few days later, he appointed Qazi Mundhir ibn Saeed as Qazi al-Qada'i in his place.

### **Conclusion:**

This study analyzes the political role of the Ulamās of al Andalusia in shaping political landscape of Muslim Spain. It claims that the ulama played a significant role in influencing the region's political climate. They not only legitimized state authority but also criticized ruling elites, occupying strategic positions in judicial, educational, and advisory institutions. The study highlights their interactions with various dynasties, including the Umayyads of Córdoba, Taifa, and Almoravid rulers, highlighting their role in negotiating the boundaries between divine law and temporal power. The above description shows that the scholars of Spain did not only focus on knowledge but also performed political feats along with religious feats. Although the list of these feats is not that long, they still tried their best to maintain a balance between religion and politics.

The arrival of Muslims in Europe in the 8th century AD marked a significant shift in European history. Scholars, including scholars, played a significant role in politics, but sometimes went beyond their limits to fulfill personal goals. Emir Abd al-Rahman al-Dakhil had immense power, but scholars played a positive role in politics. However, during Hisham I's reign, scholars' influence increased due to Hisham's excessive religiosity and respect for religion. This led to the suppression of wise individuals and the eventual reduction of scholars' political power. The scholars' actions fueled rebellions, leading to the deaths and displacement of thousands of people. Scholars, like Yahya ibn Yahya, gained political influence during the reign of Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir al-Thani. They chose judicial officials, judges, and court department officials, and wrote decisions of important cases themselves. Despite their negative role, the political achievements of scholars in Andalusia, particularly during the reign of Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir, are a valuable asset of the Islamic Dark. Qadi Mundhir ibn Saeed's political and religious achievements are unforgettable, and their contributions to the Islamic world are significant despite their shortcom.

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- <sup>23</sup> S.M Immamudin, " A Political history of Muslim Spain
- <sup>24</sup> ibid
- <sup>25</sup> ibid
- <sup>26</sup> Ibn al-Qutiyah, "The Opening of Andalusia", translated by Jamil al-Rahman (London 1949), p. 34