

A Beginner's Guide to Hawza Studies

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Hawza Centres

One of the greatest Shi'ah scholars to have lived was [Shaykh al-Tusi](#) (385 AH/995 CE – 460 AH/1067 CE). He established the Hawza 'Ilmiyya in Najaf (Iraq) which remained the main centre of learning for the Shi'ahs for over 1000 years until its decline in the last century. With the decline of Najaf, the city of Qum (Iran) rose to prominence and remains to date as the primary centre of traditional Islamic learning for Shi'ahs today.

The Lingua Franca at Hawzas

With the shift of the primary Hawzas from Najaf to Qum, the influence of Iran was inevitable. As a result, there now are an equal, if not more, number of Shi'ah Islamic resources produced in Persian (Farsi) as there are in Arabic, although the original sources (Qur'an and Hadith) continue to be preserved and studied in Arabic.

On this site you will find Hawza lectures in both Arabic and Farsi presented by some of the leading scholars in Qum today. We have also provided some material in English and will continue to add more lectures as we acquire them.

Hawza Subjects

Most of the traditional subjects taught at a Hawza are interconnected and they supplement each other. For example, one who strives to specialize in Jurisprudence (fiqh) must also study other sciences in depth such as the Principles of Jurisprudence (Usul al-Fiqh), Arabic language and grammar, the Sciences of the Qur'an ('Ulum al-Qur'an), Hadith, Islamic History (Tarikh), Theology (Aqaid), Qur'an Exegesis (Tafsir), Logic (Mantiq), and so on.

Whilst some may study at a Hawza for decades and devote their entire lives to the study and teaching of traditional Islamic sciences, others study for as little as 3-5 years at a Hawza and thereafter return to their hometowns (sometimes as a full-time Islamic missionary [muballigh]) whilst continuing to study on their own. Another common practice in recent years is for young men and women to take 1-3 month crash courses at Hawzas in Iran, especially over their summer holidays.

The need for individuals who are well-rounded in all sciences is also being realized, and so Hawzas today are also introducing secular subjects into their curriculum such as human psychology, sociology, current affairs & political science, English language studies, geography, comparative religions/world religions, western philosophy, and so forth.

This "Hawza Studies" section however is dedicated to the more traditional subjects only, especially since they are not readily available elsewhere. The traditional subjects taught at a Hawza may be divided into the following:

- [1. Mantiq \(Logic\)](#)
- [2. Usul al-Fiqh \(Principles of Jurisprudence\)](#)
- [3. Fiqh \(Jurisprudence\)](#)
- [4. Tafsir al-Qur'an \(Qur'an Exegesis\)](#)
- [5. 'Ulum al-Qur'an \(Qur'an Sciences\)](#)
- [6. 'Ilm al-Hadith \(The Study of Traditions\)](#)
- [7. 'Ilm ar-Rijal \(Science of Narrators\)](#)
- [8. Tarikh \(History\)](#)
- [9. Aqaid / Kalam \(Theology\)](#)
- [10. Lugha \(Language Studies\)](#)
- [11. Falsafa \(Islamic Philosophy\)](#)
- [12. 'Irfan \(Islamic Mysticism\)](#)

1. Mantiq (Logic)

Mantiq or Islamic Logic is a similar science to what is called Traditional Logic at Western universities (as opposed to Modern Logic that is taught as a field of Mathematics).

In the past, the text used at hawzas for mantiq was the *Sharh al-Mandhumah fil Mantiq* by Sabzawari. Whilst this classic text is still taught in some hawzas, the most popular work taught now is the [Usul al-Mantiq by Shaykh al-Mudhaffar](#) commonly called "Mantiq al-Mudhaffar".

Mantiq is usually one of the first subjects to be taught at a hawza because it is seen as a 'tool' (rather than an independent science studied for its own sake) that is necessary for correct thinking and deduction when studying all other Islamic sciences. In particular, it is vital in the study of Theology (kalam/aqaid) and is a necessary prerequisite to studying Islamic Philosophy (falsafa). Whilst a superficial knowledge of kalam or falsafa without logic may be beneficial, to truly be grounded in theology, the study of logic is vital.

The famous Muslim philosopher and logician, al-Farabi, defines logic (mantiq) as an instrumental, rule-based science aimed at directing the intellect towards the truth and safeguarding it from error in its acts of reasoning. Al-Farabi also compares logic to tools such as rulers and compasses, which are used to ensure exactness when we measure physical objects subject to the errors of sensation. Like these tools, logical measures can be

employed by their users to verify both their own acts of reasoning and the arguments of others. Logic is especially useful and important to guide the intellect when it is faced with the need to adjudicate between conflicting opinions.

For Shi'ahs, not only is logic (mantiq) important in theology and philosophy, but it is a re-occurring theme in Shi'a jurisprudence too (which they refer to as 'aql' (the use of intellect) as a means of deduction, in addition to Qur'an, hadith and *ijma*). The Sunnis do not employ the use of logic to the same degree (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharia>) and instead rely on *qiyas* (reasoning by analogy) which Shi'ahs reject as a form of religious deduction.

With the rise of the Ash'arite school (to which the majority of Sunni Muslims belong today) and with the teachings of individuals like Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya, the study of logic and philosophy was not favoured amongst the Sunnis; and yet, al-Ghazali too (who wrote against philosophy and is believed to have dealt a lasting blow to its study amongst Muslims) is believed to have said: "*man lam ya'rifi al-mantiqa fa laa thiqata lahu fi 'l-uloom*" ('whosoever does not know logic, he has no trustworthiness in (the matters) of religious knowledge.') This signifies the status of logic and the importance it should have amongst all Muslims who aspire to be scholars.

Note: Some hawzas may also begin with the primer *Khulasat al-Mantiq* of Sh. 'Abd al-Hadi Fadli before studying *Mantiq al-Mudhaffar*.

2. Usul al-Fiqh (Principles of Jurisprudence)

In the early days of Islam, scholars only relied on the Qur'an and hadith to understand the practical laws of Islam. They grouped all the traditions at their disposal based on jurisprudence issues. It has therefore been said that the early jurist (faqih) was in fact no more than today's expert of hadith (muhadith).

In time though, a jurist had to be skilled in other sciences as well because many practical issues arose that were beyond the scope of just a literal interpretation of the Qur'an and hadith. There was now a need for a science that, for example, discusses not only the jurisprudence content of a Qur'an verse or hadith but also the general principle(s) behind it that jurists could adhere to when deriving other laws on other issues. This science is The Science of the Principles of Jurisprudence ('ilm usul al-fiqh). Usually referred to as '*ilm al-usul* (the Science of Principles) or *usul al-fiqh* (the Principles of Jurisprudence).

A student will typically begin with a primer such as *Mabadi Usul al-Fiqh* by Sh. Abd al-Hadi Fadli or the 2 volume *Al-Moojaz fi Usul al-Fiqh* by Ayatullah Ja'far Subhani (which in addition to other books on Usul al-Fiqh is [available online here](#)). Thereafter, the two most popular works studied are:

1. [Durus fi Usul al-Fiqh](#) (simply called the *Halaqat*) of Shahid Ayatullah Baqir al-Sadr. This is divided into 3 courses with the last course or *Halaqat* being further divided into 2 volumes.

2. Usul al-Fiqh of Sh. Mudhaffar (simply called *Usul al-Mudhaffar*). This is divided into 2 volumes.

The first Halaqa of Shahid al-Sadr is now [available in English](#). Once Hawza students have completed studying these works, they are now ready to study the more advanced classic works of Usul al-Fiqh which are *ar-Rasail*, *al-Kifayah* and *Ma'alim al-Usul*.

3. Fiqh (Jurisprudence)

Fiqh (Jurisprudence) is a major (if not 'the major') science around which most of the other subjects revolve. The study of the practical laws of Islam and how to derive them is divided by areas of jurisprudence such as purification, prayers, fasting, hajj, marriage, trade, etc. For more information on the divisions in this science, see [Fiqh and Fugaha](#).

Beginners usually commence their studies in Fiqh with *Mukhtasar an-Nafi* followed by Sh. Jawad Mughniya's *Fiqh al-Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq [a]* although the latter is fast being replaced by other works like *Al-Duroos fi al-Fiqh al-Istidlali* of Sh. Baqir al-Irwani.

A higher text that every Hawza student 'must' study is Shahid al-Thani's 9-volume *al-Zabdat al-Fiqhiyya fi Sharh Rawdat al-Bahiyya* popularly known as [Sharh Lum'ah](#). This work is a commentary of the *Lum'ah* of Shahid al-Awwal.

Additional texts that may be studied on the side are the *Shara'i al-Islam* (al-Hilli), *Ayaat al-Ahkam* (al-Irwani), and the books of laws (*tawdhih al-masail*) of present and past high-ranking jurists (ayatullahs).

A branch of fiqh that was once never recognized as a subject on its own is *Al-Qawaid al-Fiqhiyya* (The Laws or Principles of Jurisprudence). This is distinct from but often confused with *Usul al-Fiqh*. Two popular texts on this subject are the *al-Qawaid al-Fiqhiyya* (2 vols.) of Sh. Baqir al-Irwani (Qum) and the *al-Qawaid al-Fiqhiyya* [Volume 1](#) and [Volume 2](#) of Ayatullah Makarim Shirazi (Qum).

4. Tafsir al-Qur'an (Qur'an Exegesis)

'Ilm al-Tafsir, or "the science of Qur'an exegesis" is usually a systematic (either sequential or thematic) exegetical study of the Qur'an's verses. This subject is widely studied by all Hawza students and one who chooses to specialize in this field becomes a *mufassir* or commentator of the Qur'an. Both Shia and Sunni scholars have written literally hundreds of

Tafsir works over the ages. Some Shia scholars limit the word *tafsir* to being the interpretation of the Qur'an by the Prophet [s] Himself and his special household members (the Ahl al-Bayt). They consider all other interpretations as being simply a personal reflection (tadabbur). It is also common for students to form small study groups to share and discuss their understanding of the Qur'an's verses (i.e. to engage in tadabbur).

In the last two decades, the most popular tafsir work has been the 20 vol. *Tafsir al-Mizan* of Allamah Tabatabai. [Some English translations of this work](#) also exist today. Of late though, other, newer, tafsir works are emerging and gaining prominence.

5. 'Ulum al-Qur'an (Qur'an Sciences)

Unlike Tafsir al-Qur'an which explains and discusses the 6000+ verses of the Qur'an themselves, this science studies the Qur'an holistically. For example, the Qur'an's history, how it was revealed, the reasons that prompted revelations, how it was compiled, by whom and when, its preservation through the ages, the variations in its readings, the classification of verses into various categories such as abrogating (*nasikh*) verses vs. abrogated (*mansukh*) verses, and so forth. The most popular 'Ulum al-Qur'an work studied at Hawzas is the 2 volume *Talkhis al-Tamhid* by Sh. Muhammad Hadi Ma'rifah.

6. 'Ilm al-Hadith (The Study of Traditions)

'Ilm al-Hadith (or the Science of Hadith) is not about the narrations or traditions themselves; rather it discusses the history of traditions, their compilation and classification, their collection and preservation, and so forth. A useful work in English is the [Introduction to Hadith](#) by Abd al-Hadi al-Fadli including the *Dirayat al-Hadith* of Al-Shahid al-Thani translated by Nazmina Virjee.

Needless to say, familiarity with the traditions (ahadith) themselves is indispensable just as familiarity with the Qur'an's verses is indispensable for one studying 'Ulum al-Qur'an or Tafsir. A student therefore needs to read works of hadith all the time and gain familiarity with the multitude of ahadith available.

The verses of the Qur'an and the hadith texts are the building blocks and the most fundamental material on which all Islamic sciences rest. Without them, there would nothing to study.

The four most important Shi'ah hadith works that are referred to by jurists are:

1. *Al-Kafi* of Shaykh al-Kulayni (d. 328/9 AH)
2. *Man La Yahdhuruh al-Faqih* of Shaykh al-Saduq Ibn Babwayh (d. 381 AH)

3. *Tahdhib al-Ahkam* of Shaykh al-Tusi (d. 460 AH)
4. *Al-Istibsar* of Shaykh al-Tusi (d. 460 AH)

In addition to the above, there are other invaluable classic works of hadith that a student will come to use as references such as *Wasail al-Shi'ah*, *Mustadrak al-Wasail*, *Bihar al-Anwar*, *Tuhuf al-Uqool*, etc.

7. 'Ilm ar-Rijal (Science of Narrators)

'Ilm ar-Rijal is, literally, "The Science of People". Any tradition (hadith) is usually made up of two parts: a header (called *isnad* or *sanad*) and the main text or narration itself (called *matn*). The header lists the chain of narrators, which is crucial in identifying the original source of a hadith and verifying its authenticity.

'Ilm ar-Rijal, as an off-shoot of 'Ilm al-Hadith, studies the individual lives of narrators to check their trustworthiness. This in turn is used as one factor (amongst others) in concluding the authenticity of narrations. Sometimes a narrator may be unknown and his history may simply be lost in time.

A popular work on 'Ilm ar-Rijal which lists all the narrators in major Shi'ah hadith works and their trustworthiness-status is the *Al-Mu'in 'ala Mu'jam Rijal al-Hadith* of Marhum Ayatullah Abul Qasim al-Khui.

8. Tarikh (History)

There are numerous works of Islamic history - both Shi'ah and Sunni. A work that is popular at Hawzas is the *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal* by Shahrastani. Other popular books are the works of the famous Shi'ah historian Sayyid Murtada al-Askari.

9. Aqaid (Theology)

Aqaid (theology) is also called *'Ilm al-Kalam* or *Usul al-Din*. The latter title is rarely used in Hawzas, perhaps to avoid confusing it with *Usul al-Fiqh* (which is at times called *'Ilm al-Usul*). Shi'ah theology usually discusses issues around five principles: Tawhid (Divine Unity), Adalah (Divine Justice), Nubuwwah (Prophethood), Imamah (Imamate) and Ma'ad (Day of Judgement, also called al-Qiyamah or the Resurrection).

This subject is as important as jurisprudence for the hawza student. It is also a crucial subject for one who is interested in comparative religious studies for it goes beyond discussing the five principles in themselves and discusses issues related to them. For example: anthropomorphism (as related to Tawhid), Predestination and Freewill (as related

to Adalah), Infallibility (as related to Nubuwwah and Imamah), and Intercession (as related to Qiyamah). Aqaid also discusses religion in general and topics such as the Need for Religion, Pluralism, etc.

Popular theological works studied at Hawzas include: [Tajrid al-'Itiqad](#) of Khwaja Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (and its commentary (*sharh*) by Allama al-Hilli called [Kashf al-Murad fi Tajrid al-'Itiqad](#)), *al-Bab Hadi Ashar* of Allama Hilli, *Adle Ilahi* of Shahid Mutahhari, and the 4 volume *Ilahiyaat* of Ayatullah Ja'far al-Subhani. An early English translation of the *al-Bab Hadi Ashar* (Hilli) exists and can usually be found at university libraries that have an Islamic collection.

10. Lughah (Language Studies)

Arabic is the language of the Qur'an and hadith. No amount of English translation will help you truly appreciate the Qur'an and hadith. They simply have to be read and understood in their original language, if they are to be fully appreciated. So while it is very tempting for the non-native-Arabic-speaking student to take shortcuts in this science, it is not advisable. The more time one invests in learning the Arabic language (especially classic Arabic grammar and vocabulary), the faster one can progress in their Hawza studies of other Islamic sciences.

Studying the Arabic language will usually consist of:

1. Grammar (*Nahw*)
2. Syntax/Morphology (*Sarf*)
3. Rhetoric (*Balagha*)
4. Vocabulary Building

Popular grammar works used at hawzas are the *al-Hidayah fi al-Nahw*, *Sharh Ibn Aqil*, and *al-Nahw al-Wadih*.

For Arabic morphology (*sarf*), there is the *Mabadi al-'Arabiyyah* and *Kitab al-Tasreef*. And for Rhetoric, *al-Balagha al-Wadihah* is used. At advanced levels, the [Nahjul Balagha](#) (sermons, letters and sayings of Imam Ali [a] compiled by Sayyid ar-Radhi) is used.

Students whose primary language is English may want to consider the following texts as well (all of which can be purchased easily from Amazon and other online booksellers):

1. *Al-Kitaab Fi Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya: A Textbook for Beginning Arabic* (3 volumes with DVDs) by Kristen Brustad, Mahmoud Al-Batal and Abbas Al-Tonsi
2. *An Introduction to Koranic and Classical Arabic: An Elementary Grammar of the*

Language by Wheeler M. Thackston

3. *A New Arabic Grammar of the Written Language* by Haywood and Nahmad

Vocabulary building comes with time. Get yourself a good Arabic-English dictionary and learn how to look up words based on their root verb. The best dictionary for English-speakers is *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* by Hans Wehr.

This subject is one where having a teacher is highly recommended. Finally, keep in mind that you need to study Classic Arabic. This is the Arabic used in the Qur'an and Hadith and is somewhat different from the literally Arabic that many language schools and universities teach.

11. Falsafa (Islamic Philosophy)

Having studied *Mantiq*, those who wish to gain a deeper understanding of the philosophy of Islam will study *Falsafa*. This typically starts with Allama Tabatabai's [Bidayah al-Hikmah](#) followed by his *Nihayah al-Hikmah*. The first work is available in English. It first appeared in the Al-Tawhid journals and has since been [revised and republished by ICAS](#).

Instead of the *Bidayah* (of Tabatabai) some Hawzas prefer to start with *Al-Manhaj al-Jadeed* of Ayatullah Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi – also available in Farsi under the title *Amoozish-e-Falsafa* and in English under the title *Philosophical Instructions*.

For English readers, the two-volume *History of Islamic Philosophy* edited by S H Nasr and Oliver Leaman is highly recommended.

At the hawzas, a large part of Islamic philosophy deals with theoretical metaphysics and mysticism, the practical aspects of which are covered in '*Irfan*' (see below).

12. 'Irfan (Islamic Mysticism)

'*Irfan* is generally divided into theoretical (*nadhari*) 'irfan and practical (*'amali*) 'irfan. Theoretical 'Irfan is the study of Islamic metaphysics and 'Transcendent Philosophy'. The latter is usually a discussion around the teachings of philosopher-mystics like Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi, Ibn 'Arabi and Mulla Sadra. 'Irfan however distinguishes its goal from that of religious philosophy by being more theosophical. In other words: Whereas *falsafa* seeks to know God with the mind and through rationalization, 'irfan seeks to know God through direct, personal experience.

Practical 'Irfan is sometimes called *sayr wa suluk* (Spiritual wayfaring) and is in many ways synonymous to Sufism.

At Hawzas, one of the most advanced texts studied in theoretical 'irfan is the 9 volume magnum opus of Mulla Sadra called *al-Hikmah al-Muta'aliya* or simply the *Asfar* of Mulla Sadra.

For English readers, the two-volume *Islamic Spirituality vol. 1 (Foundations)* and *vol. 2 (Manifestations)* edited by S H Nasr is highly recommended.

Supplications are also a very important part of practical 'irfan. In addition to the [Sahifa al-Sajjadiya](#) and the popular *Mafatih al-Jinan* of Shaykh 'Abbas Qummi, Hawza students also like to refer to the works of Ibn Tawus such as his 3 volume *Iqbal al-'Amal*.

What Next?

For answers to commonly asked questions related to Hawza studies, see [Hawza FAQ](#).