Abū ʿIsḥāq al-Shāṭibī, an 8th/14th century Muslim jurist who lived in Granada, has had an immense influence on modernist as well as revivalist Muslim legal thinkers of the last two centuries. Most Muslim thinkers regard his doctrine relating to the objectives of law (maqāṣid al-sharīʿa) as a philosophy of Islamic law and his analysis of religious innovation (bidʿa) as a theory of Islamic normativity relevant to modern Islamic thought. In this essay I explore al-Shāṭibī’s intellectual formation, analyze his legal reasoning, and translate a section of his al-Iʿtiṣām on the definition of bidʿa.

**Early Life**

Little information is available about al-Shāṭibī’s family or early life. His name, Abū ʿIsḥāq Ibrāhīm b. Mūsā b. Muḥammad al-Lakhmī al-Shāṭibī, indicates that he belonged to the Arab tribe of Lakhm. He was most probably born in Granada, where he spent all his life. The nisba al-Shāṭibī caused some scholars to claim that he was born in Shāṭiba (Xativa or Jativa). But this is not possible because the last Muslims were driven out of Shāṭiba in 1247.

Al-Shāṭibī’s date of birth is not known. Abūʾl-Ajfān, who edited several of al-Shāṭibī’s works, suggested that he was born before 720/1320, explaining that one of al-Shāṭibī’s teachers, Abū Jaʿfar aḥmad b. al-Zayyāt, died in 728/1327. Al-Shāṭibī must have been at least eight years old in 1327 if

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1 For a detailed analysis of al-Shāṭibī’s doctrine of maqāṣid al-sharīʿa, see Muhammad Khalid Masud, Shāṭibī’s Philosophy of Islamic Law.

2 On the sources for al-Shāṭibī’s life, see Masud, Shāṭibī’s Philosophy of Islamic Law, 82; al-Shāṭibī, al-Ifādāt waʾl-Inshādāt; and Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Mujārī, Barnāmaj.


4 EI’, s.v. “Shāṭiba.”
he was al-Zayyāt’s disciple. Abū’l-Ajfān concluded that al-Shāṭībī was probably born in 719/1319 or 720/1320.⁵ Al-Shāṭībī died on 8 Shaʿbān 790/1388 in Granada.⁶

The kingdom of the Banū Aḥmar or Naṣrids, the last Muslim kings in al-Andalus, was confined to the city of Granada. During this period the entire region experienced tremendous political turmoil. Christians from the north of al-Andalus had been pushing Muslims to the south. Demographic pressure, decreasing cultivable land and the depletion of economic resources impacted negatively on the prosperity of the kingdom.

Al-Shāṭībī lived through the eventful reigns of the Nasrid kings Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad IV (r. 725–33/1325–33), Abū’l-Ḥajjāj Yūsuf I (r. 733–55/1333–54), and Muhammad V al-Ghanī Bi’llāh (r. 755–60/1354–59 and 763–93/1362–91). These kings were great patrons of art, architecture and sciences. The Nasrids introduced several economic and social changes in the kingdom. Granada attracted a large number of scholars, artists, poets and statesmen from the Maghrib, where Muslim kingdoms were politically and economically unstable. The city gained a reputation as a great center of Islamic culture and learning.

The Madrasa Naṣriyya, built by Abū’l-Ḥajjāj Yūsuf, and the Alhambra, built by Sulṭān Muḥammad V al-Ghanī Bi’llāh, continue to invoke the glory of the Nasrid kings. The Madrasa Naṣriyya was a bold departure from the Mālikī tradition of learning in al-Andalus, where, previously, students went to mosques or to the residences of teachers to receive instruction. Mālikīs, particularly in al-Andalus, had long resisted the introduction of the madrasa system, in which teachers taught students in the madrasa itself. Al-Shāṭībī studied in the Madrasa Naṣriyya as well as with individual teachers at their residences.

Education

The biographical literature gives us a fair idea about the broad scope of al-Shāṭībī’s education.⁷ The sources mention that al-Shāṭībī studied the Qurʾān, Arabic language, literature, grammar, semantics (ʿilm al-maʿānī)

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⁵ Abū’l Ajfān, Fatāwā al-Imām al-Shāṭībī, 32.
⁶ Ahmad Bābā, Nayl al-ibtihāj, 49. This date is mentioned in a poem composed by one of al-Shāṭībī’s disciples at the end of his abridgement of al-Shāṭībī’s al-Muwāfaqāt entitled Nayl al-munā: “Until his life came to an end in the year ninety of seven hundred [790].” See Abū’l-Ajfān, Fatāwā, 48.
⁷ Ahmad Bābā, Nayl, 47.