Contesting the Term Sunnah: Between Normative Prescription and the Living Practice of the Prophet

Mohammad Syarofuddin Firdaus*

*Darussunnah International Institute for Hadith Sciences, Indonesia, email: firdaus@darussunnah.ac.id

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Abstract: The term sunnah has increasingly been applied across domains far removed from classical religious discourse, ranging from commercial products and medical treatments to sporting activities and group identity markers. This article seeks to reform the application of sunnah terminology in line with established scholarly criteria, while affirming its relevance across diverse cultural contexts. Using a descriptive-analytical method grounded in Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, the study analyzes prophetic hadith texts and contemporary Islamic discourse at three levels: text, discursive practice, and social practice. The study finds that the term sunnah cannot be reduced to formal normative prescription alone. Reading sunnah as the Prophet's conduct, habits, and lived practice opens space for Muslim communities worldwide to implement prophetic values contextually without abandoning their substance. This article contributes to debates on hadith methodology, particularly in responding to the commodification of religion and the growing pressure of cultural Arabization.

Keywords: *authority; hadith; lifestyle; normative rules; sunnah*

Abstrak: Penggunaan term sunnah dewasa ini semakin meluas dan tidak terkontrol, merambah wilayah komoditi, kesehatan, olahraga, hingga identitas kelompok. Artikel ini bertujuan mereformasi penerapan terminologi sunnah sesuai kualifikasi keilmuan yang berlaku, sekaligus menegaskan relevansinya dalam berbagai kondisi kultural. Melalui metode deskriptif-analitik dengan pendekatan analisis wacana kritis model Norman Fairclough, artikel ini menganalisis teks-teks hadis dan wacana keislaman kontemporer pada tiga level: (1) teks, yakni membaca hadis berdasarkan diksi, struktur, dan konteks wacana aslinya; (2) praktik diskursif, yakni menelusuri bagaimana teks diproduksi, didistribusikan, dan dikonsumsi dalam wacana publik Islam kontemporer; dan (3) praktik sosial, yakni mengidentifikasi kepentingan ideologis dan otoritas keagamaan yang menyertainya. Studi ini menemukan bahwa term sunnah tidak dapat direduksi hanya pada makna aturan normatif formal. Makna sunnah sebagai tingkah laku, kebiasaan, dan gaya hidup Nabi membuka ruang bagi umat Islam di berbagai penjuru dunia untuk mengimplementasikan nilai-nilai kenabian secara kontekstual tanpa melepaskan substansinya. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada diskursus metodologi pemahaman hadis, khususnya dalam menjawab tantangan komodifikasi agama dan Arabisasi budaya.

Kata Kunci: *gaya hidup; hadis; otoritas; sunnah; aturan normatif.*

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1. Introduction

Hadith, as the accumulated record of the Prophet's sayings and conduct, occupies a foundational position in Islamic thought. Muslims are expected to consult it in expressing their faith, and neglecting it carries serious consequences. This imperative is grounded in the Prophet's declaration:[1]

عَنْ عَائِشَةَ رَضِيَ اللهُ عَنْهَا، قَالَتْ: قَالَ رَسُولُ اللهِ صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ: مَنْ أَحْدَثَ فِي أَمْرِنَا هَذَا مَا لَيْسَ فِيهِ، فَهُوَ رَدٌّ.

Beyond hadith, the companion term sunnah circulates widely in popular Muslim discourse, routinely ascribed to the Prophet in the phrase "sunnah of the Prophet." In everyday usage, sunnah has proven more semantically flexible than hadith itself. It now functions as a label attached to sporting activities, clothing, mosques, communities, and radio stations, among other things.[2] Whatever one makes of these usages, they collectively represent a public effort to anchor conduct in prophetic precedent.

This elasticity, however, generates friction. The term sunnah carries an antonym of real doctrinal weight: *bid'ah*. When *bid'ah* is understood as any practice without prophetic precedent, and when sunnah is taken to legitimate everything bearing its name, the result is a binary in which labelled products and practices are considered more Islamically valid than unlabelled ones. Al-Jabiri's concept of semantic expansion (*ishbāʿ*) is illuminating here: external pressures cause a term to accumulate meanings beyond its original referent, a process he documented for the word *turath* but that applies equally to sunnah.[3]

This article addresses two related questions: how should the term sunnah be understood given the diversity of its usages, and what happens when it is restricted to a single meaning? The argument proceeds from the position that reducing sunnah to formal normative prescription alone carries methodological and cultural costs that hadith scholarship has generally sought to avoid. The article draws on a descriptive-analytical method with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to read prophetic texts in relation to the social and ideological contexts in which they circulate.

The discussion moves through three stages: a reconciliation of the major reading models applied to hadith; a close examination of the semantic contest between sunnah as normative rule and sunnah as prophetic lifestyle; and an analysis of the authority claims at stake in that contest. The concluding section argues that the second reading is more adequate to Islam's stated mission of universal applicability across all times and places.

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[1] Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāh, 1422), 184.

[2] Sanip Nasrullah and Reza Pahlevi Dalimunthe, "Segmentasi Term Sunnah di Indonesia," *At-Tibyan: Journal of Qur'an and Hadis Studies* 2, no. 2 (December 2019): 12.

[3] Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *al-Turāth wa-al-Ḥadāthah: Dirāsah wa-Munāqashah* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-ʿArabiyyah, 1991), 21-23.

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2. Method

This study employs a descriptive-analytical method combined with the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework developed by Norman Fairclough.[4] CDA is selected because the central object of inquiry is not merely the textual content of hadith but the social and ideological processes through which sunnah terminology is produced, contested, and deployed in contemporary Muslim life. Fairclough's framework operates at three mutually reinforcing levels.

The first level is textual analysis. At this level, hadith texts are examined through their original diction, grammatical structure, and internal discursive logic. Particular attention is paid to verb forms, deixis, and contextual markers that indicate whether a given statement is prescriptive, descriptive, or situational. The second level is discursive practice, which traces how hadith texts are produced, distributed, and consumed within contemporary Islamic public discourse, including popular media, fatwa literature, and community preaching. The third level is social practice, which situates discursive choices within broader configurations of power, authority, and cultural negotiation, asking what interests are served when sunnah is interpreted one way rather than another.

Data for the study are drawn from two main sources. The primary source consists of hadith texts in the canonical collections, selected on the basis of their relevance to the semantic range of sunnah and the thematic questions raised by contemporary usage. The secondary source comprises methodological writings by contemporary hadith scholars, including Al-Qaraḍāwī's *Kayf Nataʿāmal maʿa al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah* and Ali Mustafa Yaqub's *al-Ṭuruq al-Ṣaḥīḥah fī Fahm al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah*, as well as classical jurisprudential texts. The analytical procedure applies the three levels of CDA to each dataset in sequence, moving from close textual reading through contextual and ideological analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Reconciling the Two Major Models of Hadith Reading

Approaches to religious texts in Islamic thought have historically clustered around two orientations. The first, broadly designated puritanism, insists that religious expression must follow the sources directly. As Sutiyono defines it, puritanism is a movement committed to an original, text-anchored form of religiosity.[5] Its proponents point to Quranic verse 53:3-4 as evidence that the Prophet's conduct was divinely guided rather than culturally conditioned. It is important to note that puritanism here is a descriptive analytical category rather than a pejorative label. In Arabic scholarly tradition, terms like *salafi* and *ahl al-hadith* carry their own internal dignities and debates; the label puritanism is employed in its technical sociological sense, to denote an approach that prioritises

[4] Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Longman, 1995), 74-75.

[5] Sutiyono, *Benturan Budaya Islam: Puritan dan Sinkretis* (Jakarta: Kompas, 2010), 8.

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formal textual correspondence over contextual adaptation. Two well-known historical representatives of this orientation are the Madinah-based school of hadith (*ahl al-hadith*) and the later Salafi current, both of which share a commitment to textual fidelity and a suspicion of interpretive innovation.

The second orientation, broadly designated syncretism, approaches religious practice through the lens of actualisation and integration with local cultural forms. Sutiyono defines syncretism as a mode of religiosity that involves the mingling of religious doctrine with local culture.[6] This mingling does not necessarily produce assimilation, in which one tradition is absorbed into another at the expense of its identity. It more commonly produces acculturation, a process in which two cultural systems interact and influence one another while each retains its core characteristics. The distinction is methodologically important: syncretist readings of hadith do not abandon prophetic norms but translate their substance into culturally legible forms.

These two orientations, when applied specifically to texts, correspond to what scholars call textual and contextual reading. Contemporary hadith scholars have developed methodological tools to operationalise the contextual mode without losing textual grounding. Both models have historical roots traceable to the divergence between the schools of *ahl al-hadith* and *ahl al-ra'y* in the formative period of Islamic jurisprudence.[7]

Al-Qaraḍāwī proposes distinguishing between the variable medium (*al-wasīlah al-mutaghayyirah*) and the fixed aim (*al-hadaf al-thābit*) of a hadith.[8] The medium is what the text prescribes as a specific means; the aim is the underlying objective the means was intended to serve. He illustrates this with medical hadiths. A literal reading of the hadith commending black seed (*habbatus sauda'*) as a cure for every illness would put it in direct conflict with modern pharmacology and could cause harm.[9] Al-Qaraḍāwī reads the hadith's aim as an injunction to care for the body and to use appropriate remedies, leaving the specific medium open to scientific determination.[10]

Ali Mustafa Yaqub introduces a geographical approach to hadith reading, observing that many prophetic statements presuppose specific environmental and topographical conditions.[11] He illustrates this with the supplication *Allāhumma ḥawālaynā wa-lā ʿalaynā*, in which the Prophet asked God to divert rain away from Madinah to the surrounding areas. Read literally by someone in Jakarta, the prayer would divert rainfall to Bogor, a highland area from which water would flow back and

[6] Sutiyono, *Benturan Budaya Islam: Puritan dan Sinkretis*, 9.

[7] Muḥammad Abū Zahrah, *Tārīkh al-Madhāhib al-Islāmiyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, n.d.), 248.

[8] Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Kayfa Nataʿāmal maʿa al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah* (Virginia: Dār al-Wafāʾ, 1990), 139.

[9] Abū ʿĪsā al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1998), 453.

[10] Al-Qaraḍāwī, *Kayfa Nataʿāmal*, 142.

[11] Ali Mustafa Yaqub, *al-Ṭuruq al-Ṣaḥīḥah fī Fahm al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah* (Ciputat: Maktabah Darus-Sunnah, 2016), 62-63.

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flood the city. The geographical approach recognises that the prayer's aim was to protect residents from flood damage, and recommends adapting its wording to local geography.[12]

A third instrument is Hilmy Firdausy's adaptation of al-Jabiri's concepts of *fasl* and *wasl*.[13] *Fasl*, meaning separation, designates the first move in reading: the interpreter maintains critical distance from the text, allowing it to speak in its original context before bringing personal assumptions to bear. *Wasl*, meaning connection, designates the second move: the interpreter brings text and present context into dialogue. Firdausy applies this to the hadith reporting that the Prophet consoled a companion by saying that both their fathers were in hell. The word *qaffa*, meaning that the companion turned away showing the back of his neck[14], is read through *fasl* as an expression of grief, which then motivates the Prophet's pastoral addition.[15]

None of these tools dissolves the distinction between the two orientations. They establish that neither is adequate on its own. Exclusive literalism risks historical romanticism and generates cultural friction. Unchecked contextualisation risks dissolving the normative core of prophetic teaching. The productive zone lies in proportionality: distinguishing matters of *uṣūl,* in which the text must be followed as given, from matters of *furūʿiyyah*, in which *ijtihad* applies and the aim may be separated from the specific medium.[16]

3.2. Sunnah as Normative Rule or Prophetic Lifestyle

At the level of legal terminology, Muslim scholars have long used sunnah in a technical sense to designate a recommended act whose performance earns reward and whose neglect, without legitimate excuse, constitutes a departure from the preferred course (*khilāf al-awlā*).[17] This normative-legal sense is deeply embedded in Islamic jurisprudence. What this article examines is the interpretive pressure that results when this technical sense is applied as the exclusive reading of every hadith that bears the word sunnah, or when prophetic precedent is taken to mandate imitation in every dimension. Two hadiths bring the issue into focus. First:[18]

عَنْ أَنَسٍ أَنَّ نَفَرًا مِنْ أَصْحَابِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ ... لَكِنِّي أُصَلِّي وَأَنَامُ، وَأَصُومُ وَأُفْطِرُ، وَأَتَزَوَّجُ النِّسَاءَ، فَمَنْ رَغِبَ عَنْ سُنَّتِي فَلَيْسَ مِنِّي.

Second:[19]

[12] Yaqub, *al-Ṭuruq al-Ṣaḥīḥah*, 63.

[13] Hilmy Firdausy, *Ngaji Hadis Ngaji Tradisi* (Ciputat: Maktabah Darus-Sunnah, 2020), 21-23.

[14] Yaḥyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Muslim*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1987), 84.

[15] Firdausy, *Ngaji Hadis Ngaji Tradisi*, 96-98.

[16] Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustaṣfā fī ʿIlm al-Uṣūl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1993), 286.

[17] ʿAbd al-Razzāq, "Khilāf al-Awlā ʿinda al-Uṣūliyyīn: Dirāsah Uṣūliyyah Muqāranah" (master's thesis, Islamic University of Gaza, 2011), 41.

[18] Aḥmad ibn Shuʿayb al-Nasāʾī, *Sunan al-Nasāʾī*, vol. 6 (Aleppo: Maktabah al-Maṭbūʿah al-Islāmiyyah, 1986), 60.

[19] Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1998), 342.

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إِنَّهُ مَنْ أَحْيَا سُنَّةً مِنْ سُنَّتِي قَدْ أُمِيتَتْ بَعْدِي، فَإِنَّ لَهُ مِنَ الْأَجْرِ مِثْلَ مَنْ عَمِلَ بِهَا...

Two readings of sunnah are available in these texts. In the first, sunnah designates formal normative prescription binding all Muslims regardless of cultural context. In the second, sunnah designates the Prophet's personal conduct and lifestyle, shaped by his human and social existence. Both readings are textually defensible, and both carry real consequences. The second reading is, in fact, the etymologically primary one. Classical lexicographers consistently gloss sunnah as denoting a way, a manner of conduct, or a habitual practice.[20]

Imam Malik, as observed by Yasin Dutton, understood sunnah as the living practice of the Madinah community, a practice that had evolved through the contributions of the Companions, the Successors, and their successors, provided it remained aligned in principle with what the Prophet established.[21] Ahmad Hasan extends this observation to early Islamic jurisprudence more broadly, arguing that sunnah in the first generations denoted the established practice of the Muslim community inherited from the previous generation.[22] Schacht further notes that it was al-Shafi'i who pioneered the identification of sunnah specifically with prophetic hadith, a development that narrowed the term's semantic range.[23]

The question of which reading applies in a given case requires methodological indicators rather than arbitrary choice. One reliable indicator is the grammatical form: a statement framed as a general prohibition or command typically establishes a normative rule, while a statement using the construction *kāna yafʿalu* ("he used to do") more likely documents a lifestyle trait. A second indicator is the presence of clear contextual framing in the surrounding hadith corpus. A third, following Al-Qaraḍāwī's *wasīlah-hadaf* distinction, is whether the specific practice can be separated from its underlying aim without loss of that aim. When the specific practice is tied to a particular environment or historical circumstance, the contextual reading is methodologically appropriate. These indicators constrain subjectivity by anchoring the analysis in textual and contextual evidence.

3.2.1. Zakat Fitrah: A Test Case

عَنِ ابْنِ عُمَرَ رَضِيَ اللهُ عَنْهُمَا، قَالَ: فَرَضَ رَسُولُ اللهِ صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ زَكَاةَ الْفِطْرِ صَاعًا مِنْ تَمْرٍ، أَوْ صَاعًا مِنْ شَعِيرٍ، عَلَى الْعَبْدِ وَالْحُرِّ...

[20] Al-Khaṭīb, *Uṣūl al-Ḥadīth*, 13–14.

[21] Yasin Dutton, *The Origin of Islamic Law: The Qur'an, the Muwatta', and Madinah 'Amal* (London: Curzon Press, 1999), 255-56.

[22] Ahmad Hasan, *The Early Development of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1970), 87.

[23] Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 77.

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The hadith specifies two commodities: dates and barley.[24] Ibn Rushd in *Bidayah al-Mujtahid* and Wahbah al-Zuhaili in *al-Fiqh al-Islami* document the spectrum of jurisprudential responses.[25] One position holds that payment must use only the named commodities. A second holds that the staple food of each region may substitute. A third allows payment in currency. Neither Ibn Rushd nor al-Zuhaili declares one position preponderant precisely because each has substantial argumentative support. Their awareness that dates and barley were the Prophet's cultural context, and that Islam was intended for communities with different food economies, led them to distinguish the specific medium from the underlying aim of ensuring adequate provision for the poor.

3.2.2. Breaking the Fast: Cultural Habit or Sacred Rule?

عَنْ أَنَسِ بْنِ مَالِكٍ يَقُولُ: كَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يُفْطِرُ عَلَى رُطَبَاتٍ قَبْلَ أَنْ يُصَلِّيَ، فَإِنْ لَمْ تَكُنْ رُطَبَاتٌ فَعَلَى تَمَرَاتٍ، فَإِنْ لَمْ تَكُنْ تَمَرَاتٌ حَسَا حَسَوَاتٍ مِنْ مَاءٍ.

The grammatical form *kāna yuftirul*,[26] using the imperfect aspect of *kana* plus a present-tense verb, indicates habitual action: "he was accustomed to break his fast with fresh dates." Classical jurists derived from this a recommendation (*istiḥbāb*) to begin the fast-breaking meal with dates.[27] The question this article raises is whether the recommendation exhausts what the hadith conveys, or whether its wisdom extends to beginning with something sweet, nutritive, and quickly absorbed, qualities that nutritional science associates with carbohydrate-rich foods generally and that cultures worldwide meet through their own culinary traditions.

Contrast this with the hadith reporting that the Prophet's favourite drink was sweet and cold.[28] Al- Mubārakfūrī explains this preference by noting that cold drinks are particularly refreshing in hot climates.[29] The preference is thus explicitly linked to the Arabian Peninsula's environmental conditions. No classical scholar derived a normative recommendation from this hadith obliging Muslims in cold climates to prefer cold beverages. The cultural-contextual dimension was recognised instinctively, even if it was not theorised.

[24] Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 2, 30.

[25] Ibn Rushd, *Bidāyat al-Mujtahid wa-Nihāyat al-Muqtaṣid*, 5th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2013), 259; Wahbah al-Zuḥaylī, *al-Fiqh al-Islāmī wa-Adillatuh*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2011).

[26] Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, vol. 4 (n.p.: Dār al-Risālah al-ʿĀlamiyyah, 2009), 39.

[27] Abū Bakr Shaṭā, *Ḥāshiyat Iʿānat al-Ṭālibīn*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 246.

[28] Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, vol. 3, 371.

[29] Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mubārakfūrī, *Tuḥfat al-Aḥwadhī*, vol. 6 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, n.d.), 16.

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3.2.3. Archery and Riding: Toward What Aim?

اِرْمُوا وَارْكَبُوا، وَلَأَنْ تَرْمُوا أَحَبُّ إِلَيَّ مِنْ أَنْ تَرْكَبُوا، كُلُّ مَا يَلْهُو بِهِ الرَّجُلُ الْمُسْلِمُ بَاطِلٌ، إِلَّا رَمْيَهُ بِقَوْسِهِ، وَتَأْدِيبَهُ فَرَسَهُ، وَمُلَاعَبَتَهُ أَهْلَهُ، فَإِنَّهُنَّ مِنَ الْحَقِّ[30].

Some contemporary authors have derived from this a classification of archery and horse-riding as distinctively sunnah sports, recommending them over other physical activities on the grounds that the Prophet endorsed them.[31] This interpretation does not account for the broader corpus of related hadiths. Al-Tirmidhi classifies the relevant chapter under "the merit of archery and riding in the path of God,"[32] and the surrounding hadiths make clear that the context is military preparation:

مَنْ رَمَى بِسَهْمٍ فِي سَبِيلِ اللهِ فَهُوَ لَهُ عِدْلُ مُحَرَّرٍ. وَأَعِدُّوا لَهُمْ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ مِنْ قُوَّةٍ، أَلَا إِنَّ الْقُوَّةَ الرَّمْيُ، أَلَا إِنَّ الْقُوَّةَ الرَّمْيُ، أَلَا إِنَّ الْقُوَّةَ الرَّمْيُ[33].

The aim of these hadiths is military readiness in service of the community's defence. The specific medium was the military technology of seventh-century Arabia. Read through this lens, the sunnah of these hadiths today is not horse archery as such but proficiency in whatever means of collective defence a community commands: the spirit of readiness, not the specific instrument. To treat traditional archery as distinctively sunnah while treating other physically demanding disciplines as merely secular misreads the hadith's aim entirely.

3.3. Authority Claims in the Contest over Sunnah

Academic discussion of *maqasid al-sunnah*, the objectives underlying prophetic hadith, remains underdeveloped relative to the parallel literature on *maqasid al-shari'ah*. Scholars such as Ṭāhā Jābir,[34] Al-Qaraḍāwī,[35] al-Raysūnī,[36] and Jaser Audah[37] have written extensively on the objectives of Islamic law without producing dedicated treatments of the objectives of hadith. This is partly because *al-shari'ah* is understood to encompass both the Quran and sunnah, so the *maqasid al-shari'ah* literature implicitly covers hadith as well.

Al-Qarāfī's framework for reading the Prophet's statements is instructive. Al-Qarāfī identifies three roles that the Prophet inhabited simultaneously: supreme religious leader (*al-imām al-aʿẓam*),

[30] Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, vol. 3, 326.

[31] Yoga Suwadam, Agus Basri Saptono, and Rika Cheris, "Islamic Sport Center di Pekanbaru: Berkuda, Memanah, dan Berenang," *Jurnal Arsitektur: Arsitektur Melayu dan Lingkungan* 7, no. 1 (January 2020): 15.

[32] Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, vol. 3, 226-27.

[33] Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, vol. 6 (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, n.d.), 52.

[34] Ṭāhā Jābir, *Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah* (Lebanon: Dār al-Hādī, 2001).

[35] Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Dirāsah fī Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2006).

[36] Aḥmad al-Raysūnī, *Madkhal ilā Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah* (Cairo: Dār al-Kalimah, 2010).

[37] Jāsir ʿAwdah, *Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah ka-Falsafah li-l-Tashrīʿ al-Islāmī* (Beirut: Maktab al-Tawzīʿ, 2012).

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judge (*qāḍī al-aḥkām*), and jurist (*muftī al-ʿlam*).[38] These roles do not always produce the same kind of statement. Some prophetic utterances function as legal rulings; others as pastoral guidance; others as culturally embedded practice. Al-Qarāfī's corollary is equally important: [39]

الْجُمُودُ عَلَى الْمَنْقُولَاتِ أَبَدًا ضَلَالٌ فِي الدِّينِ، وَجَهْلٌ بِمَقَاصِدِ عُلَمَاءِ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالسَّلَفِ الْمَاضِينَ.

Rigid adherence to transmitted texts, without regard for the purposes of Muslim scholars and the preceding generations, is itself a form of religious error. This is not a licence for arbitrary reinterpretation; it is a warning that the letter of a text cannot be applied without reference to the context that gave it meaning.

The contest over who holds legitimate authority to apply this principle is real and consequential. In Indonesia, the state has designated the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) as the formal issuer of shari'ah opinions in economic matters, as stipulated in Article 26(2) of Law No. 21 of 2008 on Islamic Banking, with Bank Indonesia required to incorporate its fatwas into banking regulation. Other organisations, including Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, operate beneath this institutional ceiling.

Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im argues that state management of religious authority is inherently distorting, because it subjects the production of religious meaning to political imperatives.[40] Khaled Abou El Fadl distinguishes between coercive authority, which operates through compulsion and threat, and persuasive authority, which operates through moral credibility and epistemic competence.[41] Genuine religious authority, on this account, must be earned through demonstrated knowledge, sound reasoning, and social trust, and cannot be granted by institutional fiat.

This matters for the sunnah debate because the most damaging misreadings documented in this article have occurred at the level of popular preaching and community practice, far from the institutional authority structures of MUI or the major legal schools. Said Aqiel Siradj traces the violence carried out by extremist groups in the name of jihad to hadiths read without the surrounding corpus, without the tools of *asbab al-wurud*, and without recognition that interpretive authority in hadith studies carries genuine epistemic requirements.[42] The relevant hadiths on jihad are read in isolation,[43] with redactional emphasis on the command form and promised reward, rather than in light of the historical context and the complete prophetic teaching on the sanctity of life. The solution is not to suppress interpretation but to insist that it be grounded in the full methodological tradition.

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[38] Aḥmad ibn Idrīs al-Qarāfī, *Anwār al-Burūq fī Anwāʿ al-Furūq* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1998), 205.

[39] al-Qarāfī, *Anwār al-Burūq*, 321.

[40] Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam dan Negara Sekuler: Menegoisasikan Masa Depan Syariah*, trans. Sri Murniati (Bandung: Mizan, 2007), 18.

[41] Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 10.

[42] Said Aqiel Siradj, *Tasawuf Sebagai Kritik Sosial* (Bandung: Mizan, 2006), 102.

[43] Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, vol. 6, 49.

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4. Conclusion

The term sunnah resists reduction to any single meaning. Its etymological core, designating a way of conduct or habitual practice, is broad enough to encompass both the Prophet's normative religious prescriptions and the cultural practices that shaped his daily life as an Arab of the seventh century. Both dimensions are real; what varies is which dimension a given hadith principally expresses, and this is a question that requires methodological tools rather than categorical assumptions.

When sunnah is read exclusively as normative prescription, the effect is to bind Muslim communities worldwide to the specific material and cultural forms of seventh-century Arabia. This produces the patterns of commodification and cultural Arabisation documented in this article. It also, paradoxically, reduces the term's authority by making it hostage to cultural specificity.

When sunnah is also read as prophetic lifestyle, understood in its etymological sense as the Prophet's manner of living shaped by his human and cultural context, it becomes possible to distinguish the specific medium from the enduring aim. Zakat fitrah is payable in the staple food of the community because the aim of the institution is solidarity with the poor, not the preservation of Hijazi dietary culture. Breaking the fast with something sweet and nutritive reflects the Prophet's sound instinct about the body's needs after fasting, not a prescription for a specific fruit. Archery and horse-riding express the prophetic value of physical and martial readiness, not the sanctification of particular sports.

The sacredness of prophetic sunnah is not diminished by this reading. It is, rather, extended: the Prophet's way becomes available for implementation in every cultural context, in forms that carry the substance of his teaching while speaking the language of local life. This is what the classical formula *al-Islām ṣāliḥ li-kulli zamān wa-makān* means in practice. It requires not the erasure of cultural difference but the methodological discipline to distinguish what belongs to the prophetic aim from what belongs to the prophetic context.

Future research may develop the methodological indicators proposed here into a more systematic framework for distinguishing normative and cultural dimensions in hadith, contributing to the nascent field of *maqasid al-sunnah* and to the broader project of articulating a living Islamic tradition that neither romanticises the past nor surrenders to the pressures of the present.

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