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**THE REVIVAL OF HADITH STUDY IN MODERN TIME**

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***Abstract***

Hadith study has undergone an irreversible decline for centuries before reaching its lowest point in the 16th century. But after more than five centuries of stagnation, it reemerges until it reaches its tipping point in the middle of the 20th century. Contemporary scholars often refer to the phenomenon as “the revival of hadith (*al-nahda al-hadithiyya*)” which manifested in many forms. This paper provides a preliminary study that seeks to investigate and examine the main factors behind the revival of hadith study in modern time. It will elaborate on how and why hadith study successfully recaptured the attention of Islamic scholars after centuries of desertion. For that purpose, data has been collected from various historical literature and biographical dictionaries then analyzed qualitatively. The study finds that the revival of hadith study in modern time is caused by the accumulation of both internal and external factors. Three of which are worth in-depth analysis, namely the influence of reformist idea to liberate Muslim world from the state of ignorance and foreign occupation, the acceptance of printing press after centuries of rejection that leads to the rise of the Islamic book industry, and the need to repudiate destructive views on hadith offered by western orientalist that opposes the traditional stance.

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**Keywords:** Islamic reform, printing press, orientalist, hadith study, Salafism.



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## 1. Introduction

In his prelude of *Kitab al-Majruhin min al-Muhaddithin* (book of unreliable hadith transmitters), Ibn Hibban (1439H/2017) pointed out an important phenomenon that occurs in the 10th century. He said that the expertise in hadith study has declined as the titans passed away. Ibn Hibban was not alone as the observation is echoed by many of his contemporaries and successors. In the 13th century, al-Hafiz Ibn al-Salah (d. 1245) raised the issue again in the opening of his famous book of '*Ulum al-Hadith* (Hadith Sciences). He claimed that the expertise in hadith had almost extinct leaving only groups of hadith students who occupied themselves in hadith preservation without proper knowledge about its painstaking methodology (Ibn al-Salah, 2002).

The Hadith study falls into a state of stagnation starting from the 16th century as most of the Islamic world become parts of the Ottoman Caliphate. Islamic rational sciences such as theology, jurisprudence, and Sufism at that period undeniably soared but not for hadith-related sciences. These branches of knowledge remain understudied (see al-Nashuqati, 2012). Only a few have dedicated their effort to acquire what it takes to become the leading expert in hadith. In the following centuries, Muslims seem comfortable staying in the state of *taqlid* (blind following) and consider every idea of reform as a potential threat. This condition eventually divided the Muslim community into several contending sects and schools of thought. At the same time, western colonialism begins to expanding its military cause to invade Islamic territories.

Starting from the end of the 18th century, the spirit of reform increasingly spreads to cover the entire of the Muslim world. Many Islamic individuals aspired to seek an effective solution to remedy Muslim's socio-religious problems and restore their past glory. Lies at the heart of this reform is the spirit to return to the original teaching of al-Quran and Sunna, and eradicate all forms of heresies and innovations. Since hadith sciences are the only branch of knowledge in Islamic scholarship that deals with authenticity issues hence it begins to recapture the attention once again. Many reformists utilized its rigor methodology as a powerful tool in their purification agenda. The revival of hadith study reached its peak in mid of the 20th century so that 'İtr (1997) named this century "the period of awakening and awareness (*yaqaṣah wa tanabbuḥ*)". Others have called it "the period of revival (*nahḍah*)" (see for example al-Khawli 1987, Hamadah 2007).

Finally, the revival of hadith study in modern times has become an undeniable reality. As 'İşam Eido (2017) has pointed out, the hadith study in this period deserves a distinctive and specific category in hadith historiography. It should be placed under "the contemporary phase" (*marhala al-muāṣirīn*) which comes in the third row after *marhala al-mutaqaddimin* (the classical phase) and *marhala al-muta'akhirīn* (the later one). Hadith study in the contemporary phase has several features by which it distinguished from the previous ones. Scholarly works produced in this phase cover many unprecedented topics of discussions such as rebuttal of orientalist thesis, content criticism, and systematic effort to revive the methodology (*manhaj*) of past hadith scholars.

## 2. Problem Statement

Problem studied in this essay is the hidden factors behind the revival of hadith study in modern times. Topics on reform in Islam have been attracting both Western and Islamic scholars in countless studies

that uncovered its various aspects. However, the revival of hadith study as a modern phenomenon, despite its clear influence in contemporary Islamic discourses, remains understudied. So far, no academic essay has discussed on said topic comprehensively. Few studies undeniably have touched the phenomenon of hadith revival in modern time but without sufficient analysis. Nur al-Din ‘Itr (1997), for example, has linked the phenomenon with two factors, namely the contact of the Islamic world with the West and the East, as well as military and cultural clashes with the invaders. Hamadah (2007) adds on the acceptance of the printing press by the Islamic community. In the absent studies on this topic, the present article seeks to contribute to modern hadith historiography by presenting an investigative study on the matter.

### **3. Research Questions**

This essay aims at providing answers for the following questions:

- 3.1. How did the interest in hadith study re-emerge after centuries of desertion?
- 3.2. What were the main factors behind the revival of hadith study in modern time?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

- 4.1. To examine the revival of hadith study in modern time.
- 4.2. To investigate the main factors behind the phenomenon.

### **5. Research Methods**

This study is qualitative in nature. The data collection involves library research methodology and qualitative analysis by using inductive and deductive methods. The researcher is to pay special attention to modern hadith-related issues and the scholars involved. The discussion begins by examining the general state of the Islamic intellectual in the period of the 16th century from which the discussion will proceed to prove the revival of hadith study in modern time. The discussion continues with a thorough examination on main factors behind the said revival.

### **6. Findings**

#### **6.1. The state of hadith study in the pre-modern era**

In his monumental work titled *Madha Khasir al-‘Alam binhatat al-Muslimin* (What has the world suffered from the failing of the Muslims), Abu al-Hasan al-Nadwi (2015) noted that the 14th and 15th centuries are the last periods of great innovations in Islam which followed by a total stagnancy that took place at the beginning of 16th century. Compared to other Islamic and scientific sciences, Hadith studies were far from better. In this particular period, Hadith compilations are merely recited for spiritual purposes without effort to comprehend its legal content let alone verify its authenticity. Despite there are scholars who contributed works in hadith studies, but they were hardly regarded as hadith specialists due to their lack of expertise. Most of them are jurists or linguists who talked about hadith studies from their respective approaches. Based on Hamadah’s (2007) observation, multi-expertise (*mushārakah*) was apparent among

Islamic scholars at that time as reflected in titles that precede their names. One scholar is often praised as a *faqīh* (jurist) who at the same time is also a *muhaddith* (hadith scholar), *mufassir* (Quranic scholar), and *lughawī* (linguist).

Mediocrity in hadith study is also prevalent in Islamic educational institutions including Azhar University, one of the most reputable institutions in the Islamic world. Hadith study in Azhar after the time of Ibn Ḥajar and his pupils was generally weak (Abu Ghuddah, 1408H). Its curriculum was not designed to produce proficient hadith scholars. Hadith learning is conducted only by reciting selected classical works in Hadith without essential discussion to train students on how to identify and determine the authenticity of hadiths. Lectures on hadith mainly focused on extracting legal conclusions to defend and oppose particular *madhab* (legal school of thought). (al-Sharbini, 2017). This circumstance continues up to the early 20th century where many scholars voice out their concern on the matter. Azhari Reformist Amīn al-Khwālī asserted: “Al-Azhar and all its branches, as the Kaaba of the Islamic world, should have paid special attention to Sunnah and put its sciences above all. However, how a loss! Hadith sciences were not granted its proper position in this great institution” (Mamduh, 1438H/2017).

Azhar scholar's inadequate mastery in Hadith studies comes with a great price. They often have seen absurdly rejecting sound Hadiths based on unacceptable reasons such as the allegation that hadith's content is illogical or incompatible to modern scientific findings. They rejected many hadiths on Islamic creed due to its *ahad* status or the content has allegedly Jewish influence (*Israiliyat*). Noting this fact, The Marocco 'Abd Allah al-Ghumārī directed his strong criticism to Azhari scholars in general. He said that “Azhari scholars have no expertise in Hadith studies, and are incapable in differentiating sound hadiths from the weak ones, the one that should be accepted from the other that should be rejected. They are in fact the most ignorant people of this noble science!” (al-Ghumari, 2016).

Hadith study in the University of Qurawiyīn, the largest Islamic university in the western part of the Islamic world, did not display much difference. Hadith learning and teaching in this institution was based on certain hadith compilations which personally picked by a *sheikh* (teacher). He then sits on a chair next to a student who is in charge of reading out loud from the book (called: *sarid*). Other students gather around the *sheikh* in half-circle (*halagah*) and listen to the lecture attentively. Throughout the session, the *sarid* will read a certain part of the book which then the *sheikh* will elaborate. The lecture is concluded with a short question and answer session for students who wish to ask questions. Deep discussion or debate (*munazarah*) seldom happens due to the spirit of the blind following (al-Marakishi, 2017).

## 6.2. The Revival of Hadith Study and Its Main factors

Beginning from the 18th century, topics related to hadith studies recaptured the attention of Islamic scholars. Discussions on how hadith should be authenticated, interpreted, and applied in modern context reached its peak in the middle of the 20th century. According to Hamadah (2007), four indications mark the revival of Hadith study in modern times. First, a massive publication of academic books and journals on hadith and its related sciences. Second, the establishment of specific centers and faculties in major universities that offered specialization in hadith studies. Third, the rise of studies on comparative jurisprudence that refers to hadith as one of its most important references. Lastly, the produce of academic thesis problematizes Western theories on hadith and Islamic history.

The author learns that the revival of Hadith studies in modern times is a result of both internal and external factors. Three of which are profoundly important and decisive. First, the influence of Islamic reformists in their efforts to bring Islamic society out of the stagnation state. Second, the acceptance of the printing press that becomes the turning point in revolutionizing the book industry in the Islamic world. Third, the urgency to debunk orientalist's destructive speculation on the history of hadith. In the following, we will analyze and elaborate on each factor respectively.

### 6.2.1. The Influence of Islamic Reformist

Islamic dark-age that started from the 16th century has led most Muslims into a deep state of ignorance, superstition and heresy practices. Fabricated hadiths spread widely due to little religious figures who have adequate knowledge in hadith verification methods. Under these circumstances, some prominent scholars in the 12/18 century have initiated a reform movement that aims at bringing Islamic society out of this poor condition. The movement gives special effort in reviving ijtihad spirit and pays great attention in hadith authenticity. It is difficult to determine specifically the person behind the reform idea for the first time. All we know is the idea has spread out at that time in holy cities of Mecca and Medina where scholars from all over the Islamic world gathered and exchanged knowledge. Azra (2013: 124) described the two cities were like "a melting pot" where "small traditions" melted to give birth to a "new big tradition".

In this reform climate, neo-sufism becomes the trend among the activist of reform. It sought to reconstruct Islamic society by bringing it back to the original sources, namely Quran and Sunna. And the group of scholars who played the most important role in this trend is hadith scholars. One of them was a *muhaddith-hanafite* Muhammad bin Ḥayāt al-Sindi (d. 1750) who migrated from Sind to live and disseminate hadith sciences in the holy city of Medina. His reformist thought can be seen in his book titled *Tuhfa al-Anām fi al-'Amal bi ḥadīth al-Nabi 'Alayh al-Ṣalāt wa al-Salām* (The gift for mankind in suggesting to practice the hadith of the prophet) in which he strongly advocates the importance of practicing the legal content of hadiths even if it contradicts the ruling of traditional jurisprudence schools. Sindī's scholarship is often associated with the controversial Hijaz reformer Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1791). It is said that Sindī's teachings have left a deep influence on Ibn Wahhab's understanding of the basic concept of Islamic creeds.

Other than Hijaz, the reform idea finds its way to other parts of Islamic countries. In Yemen, there was a Zaydite scholar Muhammad bin Ismā'īl al-San'āni (d. 1768) whose reform project continued by the Judge Muhammad bin 'Ali al-Shawkānī (d. 1839). Both scholars censured *taqlid*, exercise an open mind attitude when discussing religious matters, and prefer hadith over rulings of traditional authorities. The wind of reform reaches India via Ahmad bin 'Abd al-Rahīm al-Fārūqī, better known as Shāh Wali Allah Dihlawī (d. 1762). He left for the holy city of Medina and Mecca to learn from the scholars of the holy cities in 1731. Two years later he returned to Delhi and started a reform agenda that focused on education sectors. Hadith studies were at the very heart of his reform movement. His hadith scholarship lied a strong foundation for the rise of hadith study in India from where it spread to the entire of the Islamic world (Al-Hasan, 2017).

Entering the 19th century, the spirit of reform begins its new chapter when it finds fertile ground in Egypt, the city of knowledge. Due to Western military and science superiority, the main focus of Egyptian

reformists was to find an appropriate solution to keep Islam relevant to modern challenges. Influenced by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), many Egyptian youths called on Islamic scholars to revamp their traditional views on Islam. One of whom was Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) who after his appointment as the grand mufti of Egypt he gives his best to make major reform in Azhar's education system. On the recognition of his reform efforts, many has refered him as "the maker of Modern Egypt" and "the founder of Modern Islam." Despite their strong emphasize on Islamic purity, both Afghani and 'Abduh did not touch directly on hadith related issues. It is 'Abduh's pupil, Rashid Riḍā (d. 1935) who subsequently rised up the discussions on hadith criticism through his *al-Manar* publication. As Charles Adams (1933) observes, Rida's mastery in hadith studies is one of the most outstanding characteristic in his personality. The way he scrutinizes the authenticity of hadiths from which he then concludes legal rulings has left a significant impact on the rise of hadith studies in Egypt and other Islamic countries. If 'Abduh is known as the father of new Egypt, then Rida without doubt is the reviver of hadith study in modern time. Due to his contribution, hadith sciences regained its proper position in every discussions regarding Islamic creed and jurisprudence. Riḍā's thought paves way for the birth of the most respected *muhaddith* among modern Salafi: Muhammad Naṣir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999) whose passion in hadith study ignited after reading Rida's works and convicted with his ideas. And along with the spreading of Albani's voluminous works, hadith study has come into its climax.

### **6.2.2. The Impact of Printing press**

If the discovery of paper has changed the way we preserve knowledge, the invention of the printing machine has changed the way we disseminate ideas in modern times. Long before the machine was invented, publishing a single book needs a long significant time and effort. Book publishing costs a reasonable time and energy not to mention the price (Behrens-Abouseif, 2018). Because of which the dissemination of knowledge is often limited only among intellectuals. In 1450, Johannnes Guttenberg invented a machine that could cut time and cost in the book production process. When this technology brought to Venice and Italy, it becomes one of the important tools to reshaping people's thought that leads to the European Renaissance. It is not surprising, therefore, if Francis Bacon (1993) named the printing press as one of the greatest tools that changed the face of the world.

The Islamic world has come into knowledge about the existence of the printing press since the 9/15 century. But it took three centuries for Muslims to accept the technology as part of their culture. For some reason, the use of the printing press is prohibited to print religious materials in all of the Islamic countries under the Ottoman Caliphate. However, it changes when Egyptian ruler Muhammad 'Ali Pasha successfully convinced to found a printing company called *Matbaa al-Emiriyya* (The Prince Printing Press) in 1819. When it was moved to Bulaq district, the company became popular with a new name: The Bulaq Printing Press. The company is benefitted from the expertise of prominent Azhar scholars, who was officially included in its editorial team, and valuable insights from Egyptian intellectuals such as Muhammad 'Abduh, Hamzah Fath Allah, Muhammad Khudari and Muhammad 'Abd al-Mu'alib (Tanahi 1984). By the end of the 19th century, Bulaq has managed to publish 603,890 manuscripts in various disciplines (Sarkis 1928). Apart from its large quantity, Bulaq's printing products earned wide recognition among Islamic and western scholars for its fine quality.

In term of Hadith publication, Bulaq has contributed to producing a high quality printed version of *Şahīh al-Bukhārī*. The voluminous book was published in 1897 based on a manuscript belongs to a prominent hadith scholar Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Ali bin al-Husayn al-Yunini (d. 1301). The book equipped with a careful comparison of various manuscripts in specific codes. Despite having limited facilities, the Bulaq version remains the best of its kind until today (Tanahi 1984). The other significant contribution by Bulaq is al-Shāfi‘ī’s *Kitāb al-Um* which was published for the first time by the funding of Ahmad Bik Ahmad al-Husayni. It was said that al-Husayni had to sell his piece of land to obtain the printing cost. The book was published in seven volumes in four years starting from 1903 until 1907. Printed at the side of this book three equally important books namely *Mukhtaṣar al-Muzanī*, *Musnad al-Shafīi*, and *Ikhtilāf al-Ḥadīth*.

In India, the largest publisher for Islamic materials is *Dā’ira al-Ma‘arif al-Uthmānijya* which located in Hyderabad. Since its foundation in 1888, the institution managed to obtain valuable manuscripts and microfilms from all over the world. It has a capable team of editors who are experts in Islamic studies besides many western orientalists who conducted their research in the Islamic manuscript. Among others, *Da’ira al-Ma‘arif* gives its greatest attention Hadith literature especially biographical dictionaries such as *al-Istiāb fī Ma’rifah al-Āshāb*, *Tadhkirah al-Huffāz*, *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb*, al-Bukhari’s *al-Tārīkh al-Kabīr*, and Ibn Makula’s *al-Ikmāl* (al-Tanahi 1984). Pertaining this matter, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Mu‘allimi noted: “Whoever observes material outcomes of Islamic revival in the 14/20 century in India, Egypt and Levant, he will find that India, especially Hyderabad al-Dakan, has given the greatest contributions through its publication in hadith literature and its transmitter dictionaries.” (al-Suaylik 1995)

The rise of the Islamic publishing industry in India could not be parted from outstanding efforts given by local reformists. One of them was the Bhopal ruler Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān (d. 1890) who deliberately founded four printing companies, namely Sakandari Printer, al-Shāh-Jahani Printer, Sultan Printer and Ṣiddiqi Printer. He also built a strong relationship with foreign Islamic publishers to obtain rare manuscripts. He has spent 600 gold dinars to acquire *Fath al-Bari* manuscript written in the handwriting of a hadith scholar: Muhammad ‘Ali Ibn ‘Allan (d. 1647). He then has it published in 14 volumes in Egypt. He also spent 20 thousand rupees to publish Ibn Kathir’s famous book of *tafsīr*, and another 25 thousand rupees to publish al-Shawkānī’s *Nayl al-Awqār* (Tanaji 1984). These books subsequently sold to the public at an affordable price or granted as gifts to certain scholars. This effort indirectly contributed to facilitating the revival of hadith study in modern times.

### 6.2.3. The Challenge of Orientalism

In addition to internal factors described above, the revival of hadith study in modern time is also a result of certain external factors. One of which is orientalist’s theories on Islamic history and creeds that challenge the traditional views. As an agent of colonialism, orientalism is mainly to provide information that helps colonial governments in their effort to sustain their grip on occupied Islamic countries. It is why studies published by the orientalist concerning Islam and Muslims are generally biased (Said 2003). Nevertheless, they have contributed partly to the preservation of Islamic heritage through the publication of classical manuscripts and documents.

The earliest orientalist known to conduct critical studies in hadith is Alois Sprenger (d. 1893). He then becomes the first to state that most hadiths associated with the prophet should be regarded as

fabricated. Nevertheless, his western colleagues such as Gustav Weil (d. 1889), William Muir (d. 1905), and Rienhart P. A. Dozy (d. 1883) hold a more positive stance. They asserted that at least half of the hadiths in *Sahih al-Bukhari* can be considered as authentic (Brown 1996). However, the most influential orientalist in hadith studies is Hungarian Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921) who conducted a comprehensive work on Islamic history in his *Muhammedanische Studien*. He concludes that it is hard to find hadiths that reflected the actual sayings of the Prophet. Most of the hadiths are the product of religious, historical and social evolution of the first two centuries of Islam. Goldziher's legacy subsequently developed by Joseph Schacht (d. 1969), a German scholar, in his book entitled *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. Supporting past orientalist's opinion, Schacht noted that most of the Hadiths are false and only a few can be academically attested as actual words of the Prophet. He also added that the *isnad* (hadith's chain of transmission) tends to grow backward.

Orientalist's theories on hadith drew long debate and criticism from both Muslim and Western scholars alike. In their rebuttal, Islamic scholars highlighted severe mistakes and fact distortions allegedly found in orientalist theories. This project was spearheaded by Syrian scholar and activist Muṣṭafā al-Siba'i (d. 1967) since he was a student in the postgraduate program at Azhar University. He wrote an extensive study to contend the opinion of Golziher and other orientalists on hadith in his thesis entitled *al-Sunnah wa Makānatuhā fī al-Tashrī 'al-Islāmī* (Sunna and its position in Islamic jurisprudence). His research marked the beginning of systematic movement among Muslim academicians in their effort to clarify negative conception about hadith. More studies have been produced ever since to finish what al-Siba'i has started. As Hamādah (2007) pointed out, although the number of studies on this topic still relatively limited but yet it is effective in clearing up misconceptions. It undoubtedly contributes to the rise of modern hadith studies as we have seen today.

## 7. Conclusion

Due to unconducive political and economic conditions, Hadith study almost reaches the brink of extinction in all of the Islamic countries. However, it somehow manages to revive in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and reaches its tipping point in the 20th century. Thousands of books and scholarly papers have been published to explore every aspect of hadith sciences. More scholars and public members become hadith-literate and deliberately eschew false hadiths. As this study has shown, the revival of hadith studies was caused by several factors. In summary, reform idea that supported by proper technology has successfully served as an effective mean to face internal and external challenges. It, in turn, has eventually brought the Islamic society out of their long dark-age to a promising future.

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