



Reframing Hadith Authority in Contemporary Muslim Societies: Between Classical Transmission and Public Religious Interpretation

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Abstract

The transformation of religious authority has become a central concern in contemporary Islamic studies, particularly as classical forms of scholarly legitimacy encounter new interpretive environments shaped by hermeneutical developments and digital public spheres. This article examines how hadith authority is constructed, negotiated, and transformed between classical systems of transmission and contemporary forms of religious interpretation. Employing a qualitative historical-hermeneutical and textual analysis approach, this study examines classical hadith epistemology, modern Islamic hermeneutical approaches, and contemporary discussions on religious authority to analyze the interaction between transmission, interpretation, and public recognition. The findings demonstrate that classical hadith authority was not established solely through textual preservation but through interconnected processes of isnād-based transmission, epistemic validation, scholarly recognition, and interpretive communities. The study further reveals that contemporary transformations have shifted the basis of legitimacy from transmission-centered authority toward a more complex configuration involving contextual interpretation, ethical reasoning, digital accessibility, and public negotiation. Rather than replacing classical authority, contemporary developments reconfigure the mechanisms through which hadith becomes recognized as authoritative. This article contributes theoretically by proposing the concept of *reframed hadith authority*, which conceptualizes religious authority as a dynamic process involving the continuous interaction between inherited epistemological traditions, hermeneutical engagement, and social legitimacy. The study advances hadith studies and Islamic hermeneutics by moving beyond the binary opposition between preservation and modernization, demonstrating that contemporary hadith authority emerges through ongoing negotiation between tradition and changing social contexts.

Keywords: Hadith Authority, Islamic Hermeneutics, Religious Authority, Digital Islam, Hadith Interpretation

Introduction

The question of religious authority has become one of the central concerns in contemporary Islamic studies, particularly as Muslim societies experience profound transformations in the production, circulation, and validation of religious knowledge.



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Historically, religious authority in Islam was closely associated with scholarly institutions, chains of transmission, and mastery of classical Islamic sciences. However, globalization, mass education, migration, political transformation, and the expansion of digital communication technologies have significantly altered the landscape through which religious meanings are produced and contested. In contemporary Muslim societies, authority is no longer formed exclusively within traditional scholarly circles but is increasingly negotiated through interactions between scholars, religious institutions, media platforms, online communities, and public religious actors.¹ This transformation has generated new scholarly questions regarding how inherited forms of Islamic authority continue to function within increasingly plural, decentralized, and mediated religious environments.

Within Islamic intellectual traditions, hadith represents one of the most significant domains through which questions of authority, knowledge, and interpretation are negotiated. As the second primary source of Islamic normative discourse after the Qur'an, hadith has historically provided the foundation for legal reasoning, ethical guidance, theological reflection, and everyday religious practices among Muslims.² Classical Muslim scholars developed highly sophisticated epistemological frameworks to establish hadith authority through mechanisms of transmission (*isnād*), narrator evaluation (*jarḥ wa ta'dīl*), textual analysis (*naqd al-matn*), and scholarly verification. These methodologies demonstrate that hadith authority was not merely based on the existence of prophetic reports but was constructed through complex intellectual processes involving expertise, institutional recognition, and interpretive communities.³ Therefore, classical hadith scholarship should be understood not only as a preservation mechanism but also as a historical system of knowledge production that determined how religious claims acquired legitimacy.

Nevertheless, contemporary transformations in Muslim societies have challenged traditional assumptions regarding the location and operation of hadith authority. The emergence of digital Islam, online religious platforms, and transnational networks has enabled hadith texts to circulate beyond traditional scholarly institutions and reach broader audiences who may not possess formal training in classical hadith sciences.⁴ Social media platforms, online lectures, and digital repositories have created new spaces where prophetic traditions are selected, interpreted, and disseminated according to diverse social and ideological interests. As a consequence, contemporary hadith authority is increasingly shaped

¹ Peter Mandaville and Shahira Khondker, *Religion and Social Media in the Global South* (London: Routledge, 2016); Gary R Bunt, *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Heidi A Campbell, *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority* (London: Routledge, 2021); Dale F Eickelman, *Muslim Politics: The Transformation of Knowledge and Authority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

² Jonathan A C Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (Oneworld, 2014), <https://oneworld-publications.com/work/misquoting-muhammad/>; Scott Lucas, "Hadith Criticism and the Development of Sunni Hadith Scholarship BT - Classical Islam: A Sourcebook of Religious Literature," ed. Norman Calder, Jawid Mojaddedi, and Andrew Rippin (London: Routledge, 2018), 89–112.

³ Harald Motzki, *Hadith: Origins and Developments* (London: Routledge, 2016); Gregor Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam* (London: Routledge, 2019); Christopher Melchert, *Hadith, Piety and Law: Selected Studies* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁴ H Short and V A Anderson, "Standards Formation and the Implications for HRD," *European Journal of Training and Development* 45, no. 1 (2021): 74–94, <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-02-2020-0019>; Bunt, *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority*.

not only by scholarly credentials and inherited chains of transmission but also by visibility, communicative influence, audience acceptance, and digital legitimacy.⁵ This development raises fundamental questions regarding whether contemporary forms of interpretation represent a decline of traditional authority or rather a transformation of how authority is produced and recognized.

The debate surrounding contemporary hadith authority reflects a broader theoretical tension within Islamic hermeneutics concerning the relationship between text, tradition, and context. Traditional approaches generally emphasize continuity with inherited scholarly methodologies, arguing that legitimate interpretation requires engagement with established principles of hadith criticism and the accumulated intellectual heritage of Muslim scholarship (*turāth*). From this perspective, authority emerges through epistemic continuity, scholarly competence, and adherence to established interpretive frameworks. Conversely, contextualist and reform-oriented approaches argue that hadith interpretation must consider historical circumstances, linguistic contexts, ethical objectives, and contemporary social realities.⁶ Scholars within this perspective maintain that preserving the relevance of prophetic traditions requires interpretive approaches capable of addressing new moral, social, and political challenges rather than merely reproducing earlier formulations.

Recent scholarship has attempted to move beyond the binary opposition between textual preservation and contextual reinterpretation. Abou El Fadl, for example, argues that Islamic interpretation requires a balance between fidelity to revelation and interpretive responsibility, warning against both authoritarian readings and unrestricted subjectivism.⁷ Similarly, maqāṣid-oriented approaches developed by Auda and Kamali emphasize that Islamic texts should be interpreted through broader ethical objectives, including justice, human dignity, and social welfare.⁸ Meanwhile, scholars of Islamic intellectual history have demonstrated that interpretive flexibility has always existed within Islamic traditions, as Muslim scholars historically negotiated between textual inheritance and changing historical circumstances.⁹ These perspectives indicate that the central issue is not whether tradition should be preserved or abandoned, but how religious authority is continuously reconstructed through interaction between inherited knowledge systems and contemporary interpretive conditions.

Previous studies on hadith authority can broadly be categorized into three interconnected scholarly trajectories. The first trajectory focuses on historical-critical

⁵ Heidi A Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media* (Routledge, 2021); Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁶ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (London: Routledge, 2016); Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁷ Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age*.

⁸ Jasser Auda, *Maqasid Al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2015); Jasser Auda, *Re-Envisioning Islamic Scholarship: Maqasid Methodology and Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2020); Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Maqasid Al-Shari'ah Made Simple* (International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2019).

⁹ Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya and the Ethics of Islamic Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

approaches that examine the formation, transmission, and authentication of hadith literature. Although earlier debates initiated by Goldziher and Schacht questioned the historical reliability of hadith transmission,¹⁰ subsequent scholarship by Motzki, Schoeler and others has demonstrated the complexity of early Islamic transmission networks and highlighted the methodological sophistication of classical Muslim scholarship.¹¹ The second trajectory examines hadith through the lens of Islamic law and hermeneutics, emphasizing how hadith became integrated into broader systems of Islamic normativity and interpretation. The third trajectory investigates contemporary religious authority, particularly how digital environments and public religious discourse reshape the production and recognition of Islamic knowledge.¹² Together, these studies have significantly expanded understanding of hadith transmission, interpretation, and authority.

However, despite substantial contributions from these fields, an important unresolved issue remains. Existing scholarship often treats classical transmission authority and contemporary public interpretation as separate analytical domains. Studies on classical hadith sciences provide detailed explanations regarding authenticity, transmission, and scholarly validation but frequently pay limited attention to how these epistemological structures operate within contemporary public religious spaces. Conversely, studies on digital religion and contemporary Islamic authority explain the transformation of religious discourse but often overlook the continuing influence of classical hadith epistemology in shaping modern Muslim interpretations. Consequently, insufficient attention has been given to the processes through which classical transmission-based authority interacts with emerging interpretive regimes and how this interaction produces new configurations of hadith authority in contemporary Muslim societies.

This article addresses this gap by proposing the concept of reframed hadith authority, which views authority not as a fixed structure inherited from the past nor as a phenomenon completely transformed by modernity, but as a dynamic process involving transmission, interpretation, negotiation, and social recognition. Drawing upon theories of religious authority developed by Asad,¹³ Bourdieu's concept of symbolic authority,¹⁴ and contemporary studies on Islamic knowledge production,¹⁵ this study conceptualizes hadith authority as a relational process shaped by both epistemic traditions and contemporary social conditions. Furthermore, through Islamic hermeneutical perspectives,¹⁶ this study examines how meanings derived from prophetic traditions are continuously reconstructed through encounters between textual inheritance and changing contexts.

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer three research questions: (1) How has hadith authority historically been constructed through classical systems of transmission and scholarly validation? (2) How are these classical forms of authority negotiated within

¹⁰ Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, vol. 2 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971); Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950).

¹¹ Motzki, *Hadith: Origins and Developments*; Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*.

¹² Mandaville and Khondker, *Religion and Social Media in the Global South*.

¹³ Talal Asad, *Thinking About Religion, Belief, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Eickelman, *Muslim Politics: The Transformation of Knowledge and Authority*.

¹⁶ Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age*.

contemporary Muslim public interpretation? and (3) What theoretical implications emerge from the interaction between transmission-based authority and interpretive authority for understanding religious knowledge production in contemporary Islam? The objective of this study is therefore to analyze the transformation of hadith authority by examining the relationship between classical epistemological foundations and contemporary interpretive practices.

This study contributes to Qur'anic and Hadith studies, Islamic hermeneutics, and the sociology of religious authority in three ways. First, it provides a theoretical contribution by introducing the concept of reframed hadith authority as an analytical framework that integrates transmission, interpretation, and social legitimacy. Second, it challenges the assumption that contemporary developments represent either the decline of classical authority or the complete replacement of tradition by modern interpretation. Instead, it demonstrates that contemporary hadith authority emerges through continuous negotiation between inherited epistemologies and new public interpretive environments. Third, it offers a broader contribution to the study of Muslim societies by explaining how religious traditions maintain relevance through processes of adaptation, contestation, and reconstruction. Thus, the novelty of this article lies in reconceptualizing hadith authority as a dynamic and negotiated phenomenon rather than a static inheritance or a modern disruption.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design using a historical-hermeneutical and textual analysis approach to examine the transformation of hadith authority between classical systems of transmission and contemporary public religious interpretation. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand meanings, interpretive processes, and epistemological transformations rather than to measure variables or establish statistical relationships.¹⁷ Within Islamic studies, textual and historical approaches remain essential for analyzing how religious concepts are produced, transmitted, and reconstructed across different intellectual and social contexts.¹⁸ Therefore, this methodological design enables the study to investigate hadith authority as a dynamic intellectual and social phenomenon shaped by both classical scholarly traditions and contemporary interpretive environments.

The primary sources of this research consist of two interconnected categories. The first category includes classical and modern works on hadith transmission, authentication, and scholarly methodology. These sources are selected based on three criteria: (1) their historical significance in shaping hadith epistemology, (2) their methodological contribution to discussions of authenticity and authority, and (3) their influence within contemporary academic debates on hadith studies. Classical hadith scholarship is examined through concepts such as *isnād*, narrator criticism (*jarḥ wa ta'dīl*), textual evaluation (*naqd al-matn*), and scholarly validation, which represent the foundations through which hadith authority was

¹⁷ John W Creswell and Cheryl N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Sage, 2018); Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Sage Publications, 2018).

¹⁸ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); Asad, *Thinking About Religion, Belief, and Politics*.

historically constructed.¹⁹ Modern academic studies are also incorporated to analyze how these classical frameworks have been reassessed through historical-critical approaches and contemporary Islamic scholarship.²⁰

The second category consists of contemporary scholarship on Islamic hermeneutics, religious authority, and public religious interpretation. These sources are selected from studies published primarily between 2015 and 2026 to capture recent scholarly debates concerning the transformation of Islamic knowledge production. The selection emphasizes works that examine the relationship between tradition, interpretation, media, and authority, particularly studies addressing digital Islam, changing structures of religious legitimacy, and the decentralization of Islamic knowledge.

The analytical framework combines three theoretical perspectives. First, the study employs theories of religious authority to examine how legitimacy is constructed through scholarly expertise, institutional recognition, and social acceptance.²¹ Second, Islamic hermeneutical perspectives are utilized to analyze the relationship between textual tradition, interpretive methodology, and historical context.²² Third, the study adopts an epistemological perspective to understand hadith authority as a process of knowledge production rather than merely a fixed textual attribute.²³

The interpretive procedure follows three analytical stages. First, historical reconstruction is conducted to examine how classical Muslim scholars established criteria of hadith authority through transmission systems and scholarly practices. Second, thematic analysis is applied to identify recurring concepts in contemporary scholarship concerning reinterpretation, contextualization, and public religious discourse. Thematic analysis is employed because it provides a systematic method for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative textual data.²⁴ Third, comparative interpretation is conducted to analyze continuities, transformations, and tensions between classical transmission-based authority and contemporary interpretive authority.

This study modifies conventional approaches that often separate hadith historiography from contemporary sociology of religion by integrating historical, hermeneutical, and sociological perspectives within a single analytical framework. This integration is justified because contemporary hadith authority cannot be adequately understood only through questions of authenticity or textual interpretation but also through processes of social recognition and knowledge circulation. To maintain methodological

¹⁹ Motzki, *Hadith: Origins and Developments*; Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*; Melchert, *Hadith, Piety and Law: Selected Studies*.

²⁰ Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*; Lucas, "Hadith Criticism and the Development of Sunni Hadith Scholarship BT - Classical Islam: A Sourcebook of Religious Literature."

²¹ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*; Asad, *Thinking About Religion, Belief, and Politics*.

²² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2004); Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach*; Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991); Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age*.

²³ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (Pantheon Books, 1980); Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A History*, 2020.

²⁴ V Braun and V Clarke, "One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in Reflexive Thematic Analysis?," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18, no. 3 (2021): 328–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>.

transparency, the study applies explicit source-selection criteria, contextual reading, and systematic comparative analysis. Nevertheless, as a textual and conceptual study, its limitation lies in its dependence on published sources rather than direct empirical observation of Muslim communities. Future studies may extend this framework through ethnographic research or digital humanities approaches examining specific communities and online environments where hadith authority is actively negotiated.

Results and Discussion

Classical Transmission as the Epistemic Foundation of Hadith Authority: From Isnād-Based Legitimacy to Scholarly Recognition

The first finding demonstrates that classical hadith authority was constructed through an epistemic system in which transmission, authentication, and scholarly recognition functioned as interconnected mechanisms of religious legitimacy. The authority of hadith in classical Islamic scholarship was not derived solely from the existence of reports attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, but from a sophisticated knowledge system that established the conditions through which a report could become recognized as authoritative. In this sense, hadith authority was not merely a textual category but an epistemic formation produced through methodological procedures, scholarly institutions, and interpretive communities. The classical hadith tradition therefore represents a complex system of knowledge production in which authenticity was continuously negotiated through processes of preservation, verification, and recognition.

One of the most significant foundations of this epistemic system was the development of the *isnād* mechanism. The *isnād* provided a framework through which prophetic reports could be connected historically to their transmitters, allowing scholars to evaluate the reliability of transmission chains across generations. Unlike written texts that could be examined only through their content, hadith reports were evaluated through questions concerning who transmitted them, how they transmitted them, and whether the chain connecting them to the Prophet could be historically established. As Schoeler explains, the relationship between oral transmission and written documentation in early Islam was not characterized by a simple transition from oral to written culture but by a complex interaction between memorization, teaching networks, and textual preservation.²⁵ Therefore, the *isnād* functioned not merely as a record of origin but as an epistemological mechanism that transformed transmitted narratives into academically examinable forms of religious knowledge.

The significance of *isnād* became more apparent through the development of specialized disciplines such as *ʿilm al-rijāl* and *jarḥ wa taʿdīl*. These disciplines demonstrate that classical Muslim scholars developed systematic approaches for evaluating the reliability of transmitters. The assessment of narrators involved multiple dimensions, including moral character (*ʿadālah*), intellectual precision (*ḍabt*), memory capacity, geographical location, chronological possibility of transmission, and reputation among scholarly circles. Classical works such as al-Bukhārī's *al-Tārīkh al-Kabīr*, Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's *al-Kifāyah fī ʿilm al-Riwāyah*, and Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ's *Muqaddimah* illustrate how hadith scholars

²⁵ Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*.

developed sophisticated criteria for determining reliability. These methodologies indicate that classical hadith scholarship was not based on passive acceptance of inherited reports but involved critical investigation and systematic evaluation.²⁶

Moreover, the classical construction of hadith authority cannot be reduced exclusively to the evaluation of transmission chains. Although modern debates often emphasize the centrality of *isnād*, classical scholars also engaged with issues related to textual coherence, contradiction, and compatibility with established religious knowledge. Discussions surrounding *naqd al-matn* demonstrate that hadith criticism involved both external and internal evaluation. Reports could be questioned not only because of weaknesses in transmission but also because of problematic content, inconsistencies, or incompatibility with broader principles of Islamic knowledge.²⁷ This indicates that classical hadith epistemology operated through a multidimensional framework where authenticity emerged from the interaction between historical transmission and interpretive assessment.

The authority of hadith was further consolidated through the role of scholarly communities in recognizing and validating particular interpretations and collections. The acceptance of a hadith was not determined solely by individual scholars but developed through broader processes of scholarly reception. The concept of *talaqqī bi al-qabūl*, for example, reflects how collective scholarly acceptance contributed to establishing the legitimacy of particular traditions. Canonical collections such as al-Bukhārī's and Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ* gained authority not simply because of their authors' methodological efforts but also because later generations of scholars recognized, transmitted, taught, and incorporated them into Islamic intellectual traditions.²⁸ Thus, hadith authority was simultaneously epistemological and social: it depended upon methodological credibility as well as recognition within a community of qualified interpreters.

This relationship between knowledge and recognition can be further understood through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power. According to Bourdieu,²⁹ authority is not an inherent possession but a form of symbolic capital that becomes effective when recognized by a particular social field. Applied to classical hadith scholarship, authority was produced through the interaction between scholarly expertise, institutional legitimacy, and communal acceptance. A narrator, scholar, or hadith collection acquired authority because it was recognized within the field of Islamic scholarship according to established criteria. Therefore, the authority of hadith was not simply located within the text itself but within the social and intellectual processes that determined how texts became authoritative.

This perspective also corresponds with Talal Asad's understanding of religious traditions as historically formed discursive practices.³⁰ Asad argues that religious traditions should not be understood as static bodies of inherited beliefs but as historically situated systems through which communities define appropriate forms of knowledge, interpretation,

²⁶ Jonathan A C Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009); Lucas, "Hadith Criticism and the Development of Sunni Hadith Scholarship BT - Classical Islam: A Sourcebook of Religious Literature."

²⁷ Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*; Motzki, *Hadith: Origins and Developments*.

²⁸ Melchert, *Hadith, Piety and Law: Selected Studies*.

²⁹ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*.

³⁰ Asad, *Thinking About Religion, Belief, and Politics*.

and practice. From this perspective, classical hadith authority represents a discursive tradition in which concepts such as authenticity, reliability, and correct interpretation were continuously produced through scholarly practices. The authority of hadith was therefore neither purely textual nor purely social; rather, it emerged from the relationship between texts, methods, institutions, and communities.

Recent scholarship has increasingly challenged earlier assumptions that classical hadith scholarship represented either uncritical traditionalism or purely theological defense. Historical studies have demonstrated that Muslim scholars engaged in complex intellectual debates regarding transmission, chronology, reliability, and interpretation. Similarly, contemporary researchers have emphasized that classical hadith criticism possessed methodological sophistication comparable to other historical traditions of knowledge verification. These studies suggest that hadith authority should be analyzed not as an unquestioned inheritance but as an intellectual achievement produced through continuous processes of examination and validation.

The theoretical implication of this finding is that classical hadith authority should be understood as an epistemic formation rather than merely a collection of authenticated texts. The authority of hadith emerged through the interaction of transmission systems, critical methodologies, scholarly institutions, and communal recognition. This understanding is crucial for analyzing contemporary transformations of hadith authority because modern reinterpretations do not occur in an empty intellectual space but engage with an already established epistemological tradition. Consequently, the contemporary debate surrounding hadith authority should not be framed simply as a conflict between tradition and modernity, but as a continuing negotiation over how inherited epistemic structures are maintained, transformed, and reconstructed.

Therefore, classical hadith authority should be understood as an epistemic formation in which authenticity was inseparable from scholarly practices and communal recognition. The classical tradition established not only mechanisms for preserving prophetic reports but also a durable framework through which religious knowledge acquired legitimacy. This epistemic foundation subsequently became the reference point against which modern forms of hadith interpretation negotiate, challenge, and redefine authority in contemporary Muslim societies.

Digital Public Sphere and the Decentralization of Hadith Authority: New Actors, New Legitimacies

The third finding indicates that digital and public religious spaces have transformed hadith authority by introducing new actors and alternative mechanisms of religious legitimacy. The emergence of digital platforms has not eliminated traditional forms of hadith authority; rather, it has altered the conditions through which authority is produced, communicated, and recognized. In contemporary Muslim societies, prophetic traditions increasingly circulate through online environments that include YouTube lectures, Islamic websites, social media platforms, digital fatwa services, and searchable hadith databases. These developments have expanded access to hadith knowledge while simultaneously creating new forms of competition over who possesses the legitimate capacity to interpret and

disseminate prophetic traditions.³¹ Therefore, the contemporary transformation of hadith authority should be understood not as the disappearance of classical authority but as a process of decentralization in which new actors participate in the construction of religious legitimacy.

The expansion of digital media has fundamentally changed the relationship between religious knowledge producers and religious audiences. In previous periods, hadith interpretation was largely mediated through established scholarly institutions, mosques, educational networks, and printed publications controlled by recognized scholars. The authority of interpreters was closely associated with formal scholarly training, institutional affiliation, and recognition within traditional religious communities. However, digital environments have weakened the exclusive control of these institutions over the circulation of religious knowledge. Individuals and groups outside traditional scholarly structures can now access, reproduce, and interpret hadith materials through online platforms.³² This transformation has created a more open religious sphere in which authority is increasingly negotiated through interaction between experts, audiences, and digital networks.

The concept of the digital public sphere provides an important framework for understanding this transformation. Eickelman and Anderson argue that new communication technologies contribute to the emergence of broader Muslim public spheres where religious ideas circulate beyond traditional institutional boundaries.³³ In these spaces, authority becomes less dependent on hierarchical structures and more connected to processes of communication, participation, and public engagement. Applied to hadith studies, this means that the authority of a particular interpretation is increasingly influenced not only by scholarly credentials but also by accessibility, communicative effectiveness, and audience acceptance. The digital environment therefore introduces alternative mechanisms through which religious claims achieve legitimacy.

One significant example of this transformation is the emergence of online religious figures whose authority is constructed through digital visibility. Scholars, preachers, and religious influencers on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and podcasts often reach audiences far beyond the geographical limitations of traditional religious institutions. Their influence is shaped not only by their mastery of classical Islamic sciences but also by their ability to communicate effectively within digital cultures. As Campbell explains, digital religion transforms religious practice by creating new relationships between religious authority, media technologies, and individual participation.³⁴ In this context, digital competence becomes an additional dimension of religious authority alongside traditional scholarly expertise.

This transformation does not necessarily mean that classical scholarly qualifications have become irrelevant. Rather, digital spaces create a hybrid form of authority where traditional knowledge and contemporary communication strategies interact. Some online religious actors actively emphasize their connection to classical scholarship by presenting

³¹ Campbell and Tsuria, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*; Bunt, *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority*.

³² Dale F Eickelman and Jon W Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Jon W Anderson, *Lived Experience in Digital Religion: Technology, Authority and Religious Practice* (Routledge, 2018).

³³ Eickelman and Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*.

³⁴ Campbell and Tsuria, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*.

credentials, references to classical texts, and links to recognized scholarly traditions. Others gain authority primarily through their ability to simplify complex religious discussions and respond to contemporary concerns. As a result, digital religious authority operates through a combination of inherited knowledge, communicative performance, and public recognition.³⁵

The emergence of digital hadith databases further illustrates this transformation. Platforms providing searchable collections of hadith texts have significantly expanded public access to prophetic traditions. Digital databases allow users to search narrations, compare translations, examine classifications, and engage directly with hadith materials without necessarily depending on traditional scholarly mediation. While these technologies provide important opportunities for Islamic learning, they also raise epistemological questions regarding interpretation. Access to hadith texts does not automatically produce interpretive competence because understanding hadith requires knowledge of historical context, methodology of authentication, and principles of interpretation.³⁶ Therefore, digital accessibility expands participation in hadith discourse but simultaneously challenges traditional assumptions regarding who possesses interpretive authority.

The decentralization of hadith authority can be illustrated through a comparison between classical and digital models of legitimacy:

Classical Authority	Digital Authority
<i>Isnād</i> and scholarly genealogy	Digital networks and circulation
Scholar certification	Public recognition and audience engagement
Institutional legitimacy	Visibility and platform influence
Scholarly community validation	Online community acceptance

This comparison does not suggest that digital authority replaces classical authority entirely. Instead, it demonstrates a shift in the mechanisms through which legitimacy is produced. In classical contexts, authority was primarily established through scholarly communities that evaluated expertise and transmission. In digital contexts, authority increasingly depends on the interaction between expertise, media visibility, accessibility, and audience participation. The result is a more complex environment where multiple forms of legitimacy coexist and compete.

This phenomenon can also be understood through the broader sociology of religious knowledge. Turner argues that modernity often transforms religious authority by shifting its location from centralized institutions toward more dispersed networks of knowledge production.³⁷ Similarly, Hoover demonstrates that contemporary Islamic authority increasingly develops through processes of mediation, where religious meanings are shaped

³⁵ Pauline Hope Cheong, "The Internet and Religious Authority BT - Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures," ed. Pauline Hope Cheong et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 2017), 1–17.

³⁶ Johanna Pink, *Muslim Qur'anic Interpretation Today: Media, Genealogies and Interpretive Communities* (Equinox, 2019).

³⁷ Bryan S Turner, *Religion and Modern Society: Citizenship, Secularisation and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

through interactions between texts, technologies, and social contexts.³⁸ These perspectives indicate that authority is not simply transferred from one institution to another but continuously reconstructed according to changing conditions of communication.

Furthermore, the digital transformation of hadith authority reflects broader changes in the relationship between expertise and public participation. In networked societies, authority is increasingly evaluated through immediate interaction, responsiveness, and perceived relevance. This does not necessarily undermine scholarly expertise, but it changes how expertise becomes socially visible and accepted. As Zaman argues, Islamic knowledge authority has always been historically negotiated through relationships between scholars, institutions, and communities.³⁹ Digital environments represent a new stage in this historical negotiation, where technological infrastructures become significant spaces for the production of religious legitimacy.

The theoretical implication of this finding is that contemporary hadith authority should be analyzed through a multidimensional framework that includes both traditional epistemic structures and new digital forms of recognition. The transformation occurring within digital Muslim societies is therefore not a transition from authority to non-authority, but from centralized authority toward networked authority. Classical mechanisms such as scholarly training and methodological competence continue to provide important legitimacy, yet they now operate alongside new forms of visibility, accessibility, and public engagement.

Consequently, digital environments do not eliminate hadith authority but reshape the conditions through which authority is recognized and reproduced. The contemporary landscape of hadith interpretation is therefore characterized by negotiation between inherited scholarly traditions and emerging digital publics, producing new configurations of religious legitimacy in Muslim societies.

Reframing Hadith Authority: Toward an Integrated Model of Transmission, Interpretation, and Public Legitimacy

The final finding proposes that contemporary hadith authority should be understood as a reframed process combining classical transmission, interpretive negotiation, and public recognition. The analysis of previous sections demonstrates that hadith authority has never been a static or singular phenomenon. Historically, it was established through transmission networks, scholarly validation, and institutional recognition; however, contemporary transformations in hermeneutics and digital religious communication have introduced new forms of legitimacy based on interpretation, accessibility, and public engagement. Therefore, the contemporary transformation of hadith authority should not be interpreted as a replacement of classical authority by modernity, nor as the disappearance of traditional epistemologies, but rather as a continuous process of negotiation between inherited systems of knowledge and changing social contexts.

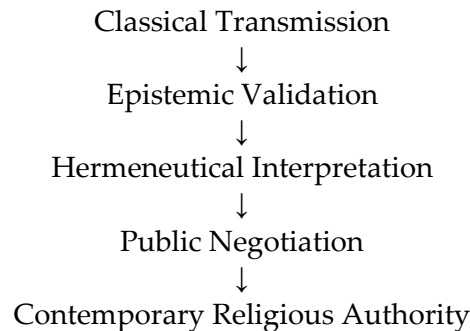
This study conceptualizes this process as reframed hadith authority, referring to the transformation of religious legitimacy through the interaction of three interconnected

³⁸ Stewart M Hoover, *The Media and Religious Authority* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).

³⁹ Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A History*, 2020.

dimensions: transmission, interpretation, and public recognition. The proposed model can be illustrated as follows:

Reframed Hadith Authority Model



The first dimension, classical transmission, represents the historical foundation through which hadith acquired epistemic legitimacy. As discussed previously, classical Muslim scholars developed sophisticated mechanisms of authentication through *isnād*, narrator criticism, and scholarly consensus. However, the significance of transmission within contemporary authority does not merely depend on preservation but on how inherited knowledge continues to function within new interpretive environments. This perspective challenges both traditionalist assumptions that authority exists only through uninterrupted transmission and modernist assumptions that inherited traditions become irrelevant under contemporary conditions.⁴⁰

The second dimension, epistemic validation, highlights that authority requires more than textual availability; it depends on processes through which knowledge claims become recognized as legitimate. Drawing upon Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital, authority emerges when particular forms of knowledge are acknowledged within a social field.⁴¹ In relation to hadith, this means that authenticity and authority are not produced exclusively through textual characteristics but through relationships between scholars, institutions, interpretive communities, and broader social recognition. This argument expands conventional understandings of hadith authority by demonstrating that legitimacy is simultaneously epistemological and sociological.

The third dimension, hermeneutical interpretation, reflects the increasing importance of interpretive competence in contemporary Muslim societies. While classical scholarship established frameworks for authentication, contemporary contexts require additional processes of contextual reasoning and ethical interpretation. As Gadamer argues, interpretation involves a continuous encounter between inherited traditions and contemporary horizons of understanding.⁴² Similarly, Ricoeur emphasizes that texts acquire new meanings as they enter different historical situations and interpretive contexts.⁴³ Within

⁴⁰ Gabriele Marranci, *The Anthropology of Islam* (Oxford: Berg, 2010); Armando Salvatore, *The Sociology of Islam: Knowledge, Power and Civility* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

⁴¹ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*.

⁴² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

⁴³ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*.

Islamic studies, this perspective has been developed by scholars who argue that religious texts must be approached through historically informed and ethically responsible interpretation.⁴⁴

The fourth dimension, public negotiation, emphasizes that contemporary authority is increasingly shaped through processes of social interaction. Religious authority in modern societies is not produced solely within formal institutions but through broader public spaces where interpretations are debated, circulated, and accepted. José Casanova's concept of public religion demonstrates that religious authority continues to operate within modern societies by engaging with public spheres rather than withdrawing from them.⁴⁵ Similarly, Charles Taylor argues that modern religious life is characterized by conditions of plurality where different forms of belief and authority coexist and compete.⁴⁶ In this context, hadith authority becomes a negotiated phenomenon shaped by interaction between scholars, communities, media platforms, and social expectations.

This integrated model challenges two dominant approaches in contemporary debates on Islamic authority. The first is the preservationist approach, which tends to understand authority primarily through continuity with inherited scholarly traditions. While this approach correctly emphasizes the importance of transmission and intellectual genealogy, it sometimes underestimates the role of changing historical contexts and new interpretive demands. The second is the rupture or modernist approach, which often assumes that modernization necessarily requires the abandonment or radical transformation of traditional authority structures. Although this approach highlights important issues concerning contextual interpretation, it may overlook the continuing influence and adaptability of classical epistemologies within contemporary Muslim societies.

The concept of reframed hadith authority offers an alternative framework beyond this binary opposition. Rather than viewing tradition and modernity as competing forces, this study argues that contemporary authority emerges through their interaction. This argument is consistent with Talal Asad's understanding of traditions as historically constructed formations that continuously evolve through practices of interpretation and discipline.⁴⁷ Religious traditions are neither frozen inheritances nor completely reconstructed inventions; they are dynamic processes through which communities negotiate continuity and change.

Furthermore, Michel Foucault's analysis of knowledge and power provides additional theoretical insight into the formation of religious authority.⁴⁸ Knowledge systems do not operate independently from social structures; rather, they are embedded within relationships of power, institutions, and practices that determine what forms of knowledge become legitimate. Applied to hadith authority, this perspective demonstrates that authority is shaped not only by textual authenticity but also by institutional structures, scholarly networks, and contemporary mechanisms of circulation.

The theoretical contribution of this study therefore lies in reconceptualizing hadith authority as a dynamic process rather than a fixed status. The framework of reframed hadith

⁴⁴ Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age*; Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach*; Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*.

⁴⁵ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁴⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁴⁷ Asad, *Thinking About Religion, Belief, and Politics*.

⁴⁸ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*.

authority integrates three dimensions that are often examined separately: classical transmission, hermeneutical interpretation, and public legitimacy. Through this integration, the study expands existing scholarship by demonstrating that contemporary hadith authority is produced through continuous negotiation between inherited epistemological systems and modern social conditions.

This model also provides methodological implications for future studies of Islamic authority. Instead of examining hadith solely through historical criticism or textual analysis, researchers should consider how authority operates across multiple levels: textual, institutional, interpretive, and social. Such an approach allows a more comprehensive understanding of how prophetic traditions continue to influence Muslim societies while simultaneously adapting to new intellectual and communicative environments.

Therefore, hadith authority in contemporary Muslim societies should be conceptualized as a dynamic process of negotiation where transmission, interpretation, and public recognition continuously interact. The future of hadith authority does not lie simply in preserving the past or rejecting tradition, but in understanding the complex processes through which inherited knowledge acquires renewed legitimacy within changing historical circumstances.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that hadith authority in contemporary Muslim societies cannot be understood as either a fixed inheritance preserved unchanged from the past or a tradition completely transformed by modern interpretive demands. Instead, hadith authority represents a dynamic process of negotiation in which classical transmission systems, interpretive practices, and public recognition continuously interact. The findings reveal that classical hadith authority was historically constructed through an epistemic framework involving *isnād*, narrator evaluation, scholarly validation, and communal recognition. These mechanisms established the foundations through which prophetic traditions acquired legitimacy within Muslim intellectual history.

The study further shows that contemporary developments have transformed the basis through which hadith authority is recognized. The emergence of contextual hermeneutics and digital religious environments has expanded the criteria of legitimacy beyond transmission-based authority toward interpretive competence, ethical reasoning, accessibility, and public engagement. However, these transformations do not indicate the disappearance of classical authority. Rather, they demonstrate that inherited epistemological structures continue to influence contemporary interpretation while being renegotiated within new social and intellectual contexts.

The principal theoretical contribution of this article is the formulation of the concept of reframed hadith authority. This framework moves beyond the conventional opposition between preservationist approaches, which emphasize continuity with classical scholarly traditions, and rupture-oriented approaches, which interpret modernity as requiring the replacement of inherited authority structures. Instead, the study argues that contemporary hadith authority emerges through the interaction of three interconnected dimensions: classical transmission, epistemic validation, and contemporary processes of interpretation and public legitimacy. Through this framework, the article contributes to hadith studies, Islamic

hermeneutics, and the sociology of religious authority by conceptualizing authority as a relational and negotiated process rather than a fixed possession.

The academic significance of this study lies in its ability to connect analytical domains that have often been examined separately. Previous approaches have frequently focused either on the historical formation of hadith transmission or on contemporary transformations of religious discourse. This study demonstrates that both dimensions are interconnected: contemporary interpretations of hadith continue to operate within inherited epistemological traditions while simultaneously responding to new interpretive environments, public spheres, and modes of knowledge circulation. Consequently, understanding hadith authority requires attention not only to textual authenticity but also to the social, institutional, and interpretive processes through which religious knowledge gains legitimacy.

The broader implication of this study is that religious authority in Islam should be examined as a continuously reconstructed phenomenon shaped by historical continuity and contemporary transformation. Rather than viewing tradition and modernity as opposing forces, this research highlights the productive interaction between inherited knowledge systems and changing social realities. Future research may extend this framework through empirical investigations of specific Muslim communities, digital religious networks, online hadith platforms, or institutional contexts to examine how reframed hadith authority operates in particular social environments. Such studies would further clarify how classical epistemologies, contemporary interpretive practices, and public negotiations collectively shape the future trajectory of hadith authority.

Ultimately, hadith authority in contemporary Muslim societies should be conceptualized as a dynamic process of negotiation in which transmission, interpretation, and public recognition continuously interact. The continuing relevance of hadith does not depend solely on preserving inherited forms of authority or adopting new interpretive models, but on understanding the complex mechanisms through which prophetic traditions acquire renewed legitimacy within changing historical circumstances.

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