

Contesting the Meaning of Jihad Hadith: Text, Religious Discourse, and Social Practice in Contemporary Indonesian Islam

Kontestasi Makna Hadis Jihad: Teks, Diskursus Keagamaan,
dan Praktik Sosial dalam Islam Indonesia Kontemporer

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Abstract: *Jihad is frequently reduced in digital public discourse to military action and religious violence, thereby contributing to Islamophobia and social instability, even though the hadith corpus associates jihad with diverse forms of ethical, spiritual, social, political, and defensive struggle. Previous studies have extensively examined the theological meanings of jihad and its appropriation by extremist movements; however, limited attention has been given to how the authority of jihad hadiths is discursively produced, reproduced, and contested within contemporary digital social practices. This study analyzes the discursive construction of jihad hadiths in Indonesia using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, encompassing text, discursive practice, and social practice, based on data drawn from online media. The findings demonstrate that the meaning of jihad hadiths is not static but constitutes a dynamic arena of discursive contestation. Mainstream civic Muslim actors, particularly Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, recontextualize jihad narratives to legitimize humanitarian action, social transformation, constitutional advocacy, and peace, whereas militant-jihadist actors selectively reproduce the same religious repertoire to legitimize violence and armed struggle. The study further demonstrates that the authority of hadith in the contemporary digital public sphere is shaped not solely by classical evaluations of transmission (sanad), but also by processes of textual selection, intertextuality, institutional appropriation, circulation, and relations of power. Theoretically, this article contributes to contemporary hadith studies by positioning interpretation as an arena of contestation over religious authority and legitimate social action, thereby bringing hadith studies into closer dialogue with critical discourse analysis.*

Keywords: Discursive Construction; Jihad Hadiths; Critical Discourse Analysis; Contemporary Indonesian Islam; Religious Authority.



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Abstrak: *Jihad kerap direduksi dalam diskursus publik digital sebagai tindakan militer dan kekerasan atas nama agama, sehingga turut memperkuat islamofobia dan instabilitas sosial. Padahal, korpus hadis mengaitkan jihad dengan beragam bentuk perjuangan etis, spiritual, sosial, politik, dan defensif. Sejumlah penelitian sebelumnya telah banyak menjelaskan makna teologis jihad dan apropriasinya oleh gerakan-gerakan ekstremis, tetapi kajian mengenai bagaimana otoritas hadis-hadis jihad diproduksi, direproduksi, dan dikontestasikan secara diskursif dalam praktik sosial digital kontemporer masih terbatas. Penelitian ini menganalisis konstruksi diskursif hadis-hadis jihad di Indonesia dengan menggunakan kerangka Analisis Wacana Kritis (AWK) tiga dimensi Norman Fairclough, yang meliputi teks, praktik diskursif, dan praktik sosial, berdasarkan data dari media daring. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa makna hadis jihad tidak bersifat statis, tetapi menjadi arena kontestasi diskursif yang dinamis. Aktor Muslim arus utama yang berorientasi kewargaan, khususnya Nahdlatul Ulama dan Muhammadiyah, merekontekstualisasi narasi jihad untuk melegitimasi aksi kemanusiaan, transformasi sosial, advokasi konstitusional, dan perdamaian, sedangkan aktor jihadisme-militan secara selektif mereproduksi khazanah keagamaan yang sama untuk melegitimasi kekerasan dan perjuangan bersenjata. Penelitian ini juga menunjukkan bahwa otoritas hadis dalam ruang publik digital kontemporer tidak hanya dibentuk oleh penilaian klasik terhadap transmisi (sanad), tetapi juga oleh proses seleksi teks, intertekstualitas, apropriasi institusional, sirkulasi, dan relasi kuasa. Secara teoretis, artikel ini berkontribusi terhadap studi hadis kontemporer dengan menempatkan interpretasi sebagai arena kontestasi otoritas keagamaan dan legitimasi tindakan sosial, sekaligus mempertemukan studi hadis dengan analisis wacana kritis.*

Kata Kunci: Konstruksi Diskursif; Hadis Jihad; Analisis Wacana Kritis; Islam Indonesia Kontemporer; Otoritas Keagamaan.

Introduction

Jihad, as an ideology and driving spirit for Muslims in their everyday lives, has undergone a massive distortion of meaning in the public sphere. The meaning of jihad has continually been adapted, modified, and destabilized,¹ to the extent that it is often pejoratively reduced in global narratives to “holy war”.² This semantic reduction has directly contributed to the reinforcement of terrorism-related stigma³ and the escalation of global Islamophobia,⁴ which portrays Islam as a religion that legitimizes violence. In Indonesia, this phenomenon is no longer merely a theological debate within academic circles, but has shifted into an intense form of digital ideological contestation.

Contemporary cyberspace is now filled with competing narratives involving various religious actors who struggle for interpretive authority over sacred texts. Official websites, online sermons, news portals, social media posts, and propaganda archives circulate hadith quotations at great speed, detaching them from the pedagogical settings in which source criticism and contextual interpretation would normally take place. Therefore, digital media do not merely transmit existing

interpretations; they also reshape who is able to speak, which fragments become visible, how repetition generates credibility, and what forms of action appear religiously legitimate.⁵

The literature review indicates that previous research on jihad can be classified into two major trends. The first cluster tends to focus on classical theological-normative approaches and Islamic law (*fiqh*), seeking to redefine the “original” or “authentic” meaning of jihad in order to mitigate the stigma of radicalism.⁶ The second cluster is largely dominated by studies on security, global politics, secular radical movements, the ISIS phenomenon, and gender-specific involvement, particularly female jihad.⁷ Both strands are valuable, yet they often position hadith texts passively: either as repositories of stable and correct meanings or as doctrinal triggers whose literal interpretation produces militancy.

Previous studies tend to assume that a text possesses a single meaning independent of external influences, and then place absolute blame on the cognitive processes of its readers when deviations in practice occur. This constitutes both an academic void and a significant research gap in the existing literature. Studies examining how the authority of hadith texts is discursively constructed, reproduced, and contested by various interest groups in Indonesia’s digital sphere remain exceedingly rare. Hadith texts concerning jihad never exist in a vacuum; rather, they constitute active sites of discursive contestation in which the validity of classical transmission chains (*sanad*) is often set aside in order to secure dominance over public opinion.

This article proceeds from a different premise. A hadith quotation acquires social consequences through processes of selection, framing, intertextual linkage, institutional authorization, and circulation. The same textual repertoire may be shaped to legitimize military confrontation, personal discipline, filial piety, education, humanitarian service, or legal advocacy. Therefore, the analytical question is not merely what a hadith means in isolation, but how particular actors make it meaningful within a specific order of discourse. This shift does not negate the importance of *sanad* and *matn* criticism. Rather, it distinguishes the normative evaluation of a report within hadith scholarship from the social mechanisms through which a quotation acquires authority in digital public life.

The Indonesian context is particularly significant because militant-jihadist discourse coexists with powerful mainstream organizations that possess extensive educational, philanthropic, and media infrastructures. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah do not merely reject terrorism; they construct alternative semantic fields that associate jihad with human dignity, public welfare, education, economic empowerment, peace, and constitutional reform. Their interpretations compete with

militant discourse not only at the doctrinal level, but also through institutional capacity, national legitimacy, and communication networks.

Therefore, this study advances the central thesis that the sharp distinction between peaceful or humanitarian jihad movements and violent jihad does not arise solely from different hadith texts. Rather, the divergent outcomes of these movements result from the ways in which contemporary religious actors in Indonesia strategically select, interlink, contextualize, and disseminate these hadiths across different digital social spaces in order to compete for discursive dominance. Accordingly, the novelty of this research lies in its theoretical demonstration that, in the contemporary public sphere, authority over the interpretation of hadith is no longer determined by the text itself, but by the dynamics of power relations and the dominance of the surrounding sociopolitical discourse.

This study employs Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing on textual data from jihad-related hadiths circulated in Indonesian online media. Fairclough's CDA approach was selected because of its strong capacity to dialectically integrate linguistic analysis with sociopolitical analysis. Based on this theoretical framework, the article is designed to address three interrelated research questions; (1) How are lexical choices, agency, modality, representation, and intertextuality constructed in the digital presentation of jihad hadiths? (2) How do militant-jihadist actors and mainstream civic Muslim actors produce, contextualize, and distribute competing interpretations? (3) How are these discourses shaped by, and how do they simultaneously contribute to, broader social practices related to security, religious moderation, democracy, and civil society in Indonesia?

Accordingly, this article makes a twofold contribution. Empirically, it maps the discursive strategies through which jihad hadiths are made actionable in Indonesia's digital public sphere. Theoretically, it brings contemporary hadith studies into closer dialogue with critical discourse analysis by demonstrating that authority emerges from the interaction among texts, institutions, platforms, and social structures.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative digital textual research design using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the construction and contestation of meanings surrounding jihad hadiths in Indonesia's digital public sphere. Fairclough's framework was selected because it dialectically connects textual structures, processes of discourse production and circulation, and broader sociocultural practices.⁸ The primary data consist of jihad-related hadiths and their accompanying interpretive narratives published between 2015 and 2025 on the official websites of Nahdlatul Ulama (nu.or.id) and Muhammadiyah

(muhammadiyah.or.id), representing mainstream civic Muslim actors. Comparative materials were drawn from digital narratives produced or circulated by militant-jihadist actors and from relevant scholarly publications. Data were selected purposively using the keywords “jihad,” “jihad fi sabilillah,” and “war jihad.”

The data were analyzed according to Fairclough’s three interconnected dimensions. At the micro level, textual analysis focused on lexicalization, transitivity and agency, modality, representation, and intertextuality in the presentation of jihad hadiths. At the meso level, the analysis examined how religious actors select, contextualize, recontextualize, authorize, and circulate particular hadiths through their institutional and digital media. At the macro level, these competing discourses were situated within broader sociopolitical structures, including geopolitical conflict, digital radicalization, religious moderation, democracy, civil society, and humanitarian engagement in contemporary Indonesia. The three levels were interpreted dialectically to explain how similar hadith repertoires acquire different meanings and legitimize divergent forms of social action.

Micro-level Textual Analysis: The Diverse Corpus of Jihad Hadith Texts

Etymologically, jihad means bearing burdens, exerting one’s capabilities, and working hard; mobilizing energy and ability through words and actions;⁹ striving earnestly or making a strenuous effort;¹⁰ and experiencing strength, difficulty, or hardship, since jihad is inherently demanding and may cause exhaustion.¹¹ Jihad means devoting all one’s energy and capabilities amid difficulty in order to achieve a goal, including every form of obedience to Allah and the pursuit of goodness.¹² Thus, jihad is a struggle that involves mobilizing every possible effort and ability to obey Allah’s commands, avoid His prohibitions, and attain goodness in this world and the hereafter through *amar ma’ruf nahi munkar*.

In practice, *amar ma’ruf nahi munkar* is often manifested in two different and opposing ways. *Amar ma’ruf* is carried out through goodness, peace, public benefit, and humanitarian action, whereas *nahi munkar* is sometimes pursued in the opposite manner, through violence that legitimizes acts of terrorism in the name of religion. Accordingly, jihad is commonly represented in two forms: humanitarian jihad in the implementation of *amar ma’ruf* and military jihad in the implementation of *nahi munkar*. Both models of jihad appear in the narratives of the Prophet’s hadiths. Rather than endorsing a single lexical equivalence between jihad and warfare (*qitāl*), a comprehensive textual analysis of the jihad hadith corpus within the primary collections reveals five distinct discursive representations:

1. Ritual Jihad, such as an accepted pilgrimage (*hajj mabrur*) (al-Bukhārī, 2001, No. 1861) and consistency in prayer and fasting (al-Bukhārī, 2001, No. 2785);

2. Intellectual Jihad, consisting of seeking knowledge such as teaching and learning in the mosque (Ibn Mājah, 2009, No. 227) or leaving home in pursuit of knowledge (al-Tirmidzī, 1998, No. 2647);
3. Humanitarian Jihad, through devotion to parents (Muslim, 1955, No. 137) and earning a lawful livelihood to support one's family ('Abd al-Razzāq, 1983, No. 9578);
4. Political-Military Jihad, both in the form of verbal criticism against an unjust ruler (Ibn Mājah, 2009, No. 4012) and physical warfare to defend the community, intended sincerely to elevate the word of Allah (al-Bukhārī, 2001, No. 123) and accompanied by conviction in His promise of reward (Muslim, 1955, No. 1876); and
5. Spiritual Jihad, namely subduing one's lower desires (al-Bayhaqī, 1987, No. 373).

These five textual representations provide the semantic repertoire from which contemporary religious actors construct different meanings of jihad. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the corpus can be examined through lexicalization, transitivity and agency, modality, intertextuality, and representation. At the lexical level, terms such as *jihad*, *qitāl*, *fi sabīlillāh*, *jihad fi sabīlillāh*, and *mujāhid* do not constitute a single semantic field exclusively associated with warfare. The hadith corpus extends the meaning of jihad to ritual devotion, intellectual effort, humanitarian responsibility, political resistance, military defense, and spiritual self-discipline. For example, pilgrimage, sustained worship, and the pursuit of knowledge are represented as forms of jihad, while *fi sabīlillāh* is also associated with filial responsibility and earning a lawful livelihood. Likewise, the category of *mujāhid* extends beyond the combatant to include those who struggle intellectually and spiritually.¹³

At the level of transitivity and agency, the Prophet functions as the principal interpretive actor, while the Companions appear as participants whose questions arise from particular social circumstances. The meaning of jihad is therefore constructed dialogically rather than presented as a fixed and context-free command. Different responses are given according to the conditions of the interlocutors: pilgrimage for some, service to parents for others, the pursuit of knowledge, speaking truth before an unjust ruler, spiritual self-discipline, or armed defense. This pattern demonstrates that agency, circumstance, and the object of action are integral to the semantic construction of jihad.¹⁴

Modality further reveals different degrees of obligation and recommendation within the corpus. Not every reference to jihad functions as an unconditional command to fight. Some hadiths employ jihad as a designation of religious excellence, while others attach military action to specific conditions, intentions, and

social circumstances. Consequently, the normative force of jihad cannot be determined from the lexical item alone; it emerges from the relationship between the utterance, its interlocutor, and the situation in which the discourse is produced.¹⁵

Intertextuality is equally important because individual jihad hadiths acquire meaning through their relationship with other Prophetic reports and Qur'anic narratives. A hadith concerning warfare, when isolated from this broader textual network, may generate a predominantly militarized representation of jihad. When read alongside reports concerning pilgrimage, knowledge, parental devotion, lawful livelihood, political criticism, and self-discipline, however, a more multidimensional semantic structure emerges.¹⁶ This demonstrates that competing constructions of jihad depend not only on which texts are cited, but also on which texts are omitted and how particular reports are connected to one another.

The report concerning the “greater jihad” particularly illustrates the distinction between hadith authenticity and discursive authority. Although its attribution to the Prophet is widely regarded as weak and should therefore not be presented without qualification as an authentic Prophetic statement,¹⁷ its contrast between the “lesser” and “greater” jihad has acquired considerable rhetorical influence in Muslim spiritual and peace-oriented discourse.¹⁸ Hadith criticism determines the reliability of attribution, whereas discourse analysis explains how a report—regardless of its transmission status—may continue to produce religious meaning and social effects. The two approaches therefore address different but complementary dimensions of hadith authority.

Taken together, these five representations demonstrate that the hadith corpus does not construct jihad as a single and fixed concept. Rather, its meaning emerges through the interaction of lexical choice, agency, modality, intertextual relations, and contextual representation. Jihad thus operates as a multidimensional religious signifier encompassing ritual, intellectual, humanitarian, political-military, and spiritual dimensions. This semantic plurality subsequently provides the discursive resources through which mainstream civic Muslim actors and militant-jihadist actors selectively construct different understandings of jihad in the contemporary public sphere.¹⁹

Meso-Level Analysis: Practices of Production and Circulation

From the perspective of Fairclough's meso-level discursive practice, the meaning of jihad is produced by actors who possess both religious authority and communicative capacity in the public sphere, including Islamic organizations, religious scholars, and transnational ideological groups. This production of meaning occurs through the selective use of hadiths in accordance with each actor's ideological

orientation, as exemplified by ISIS jihadist groups, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and Muhammadiyah.

1. Islamic State Jihadists: Military Jihad

This group interprets jihad hadiths as referring to military jihad in the implementation of *nahy munkar*, thereby legitimizing violence, acts of terrorism, and suicide attacks. Military jihad is intended to prevent wrongdoing by rebelling against rulers regarded as unjust and fighting those perceived as enemies. Such actions are carried out through violence, anarchy, and terrorism, and are also directed against polytheist groups considered to have violated sociopolitical agreements with Muslims.²⁰ Jihad is often invoked as a religious justification for violent acts, which may tarnish the noble meaning of jihad, damage the image of Islam, and lead those who do not properly understand jihad to develop hostility toward Islam.²¹ This form of “jihad by the sword” is influenced by eschatological and apocalyptic ideas that provoke others to participate in jihad and encourage them to commit violent acts, including suicide attacks. They are willing to die in order to uphold the religion of Allah. This motivation is strongly reinforced by the belief that those killed on the battlefield will enter Paradise immediately.²² Thus, the mission of jihad conducted through warfare becomes an attraction for some individuals seeking to attain Paradise in the hereafter.

Texts are often used to reinforce the power hegemony of particular groups and establish their position as socially legitimate authorities in the public sphere. The Islamic State has employed jihad-related texts to recruit individuals for armed jihad in Muslim-majority countries such as Syria and Iraq, while disseminating its ideological agenda through the internet, a practice commonly described as *cyber jihad*. It uses hadiths to attract new recruits, motivate existing members, and reinforce the legitimacy of the organization.²³ For example, ISIS’s magazine *Dabiq* selectively and fragmentarily cites hadiths concerning the restoration of the caliphate, *hijrah*, and jihad to justify the group’s actions.²⁴ ISIS also employs diverse online platforms, forums, and media materials, including audio statements by its leaders, *nashids* (Islamic chants), websites and online magazines such as *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, videos hosted on YouTube, reports issued by the Amaq News Agency, images, and social media platforms such as Twitter, Telegram, Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr. These media were used to construct an online community of ISIS sympathizers known as the “Baqiya family”.²⁵

A textualist reading of jihad hadiths may lead to the misinterpretation, decontextualization, and distortion of religious doctrines and texts. A literal understanding of military jihad may contribute to the growing phenomenon of young people joining the Islamic State and engaging in suicide bombings, extremist

activities, and acts of terrorism. Throughout Islamic history, calls for holy war have resonated across the Muslim world whenever part or all of it was perceived to be threatened by internal or external forces. Such calls have persisted particularly since the nineteenth century, following the emergence of colonialism and the resulting threats to the existence of the Muslim world.

2. Nahdlatul Ulama: Humanitarian Jihad

Humanitarian jihad, or *jihad amr ma'ruf*, is based on the argument that Islam is a religion that spreads compassion and peace; therefore, a contextual interpretation of jihad is necessary.²⁶ Humanitarian jihad refers to forms of struggle undertaken to fulfill humanitarian responsibilities, promote virtue, strengthen empathy and social relationships, and improve personal character. It presents Islam as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* and seeks to provide solutions to humanitarian crises and social problems, thereby reinforcing the role of human beings as God's vicegerents on earth. Jihad may take the form of reviving weakened spirits and revitalizing a stagnant economy.²⁷ A student may engage in jihad by earnestly pursuing knowledge. A merchant may also engage in jihad by striving to earn income honestly and through lawful means. Likewise, a farmer may perform jihad in the way of Allah by working diligently in agriculture, and so forth.²⁸ Jihad is not intended to justify the killing of innocent people.

3. Muhammadiyah: Social and Constitutional Jihad

Social jihad aims to promote goodness and realize peace as part of humanity's responsibility as God's vicegerent on earth, whether undertaken individually or collectively within a community. Muhammadiyah practices humanitarian jihad collectively by understanding jihad as an earnest struggle involving one's soul, intellect, wealth, energy, and every possible effort to advance the lives of the Muslim community and the nation. Jihad is embodied in the establishment of charitable enterprises in the fields of education and the economy throughout Indonesia. Initiating and managing such institutions across various sectors is demanding work that requires perseverance and earnest commitment.²⁹ Accordingly, jihad has a very broad scope, including the struggle against one's lower desires and Satan, as well as striving with one's wealth for the sake of Islam, among other forms.³⁰ Jihad through religious outreach is conducted peacefully and enthusiastically, fostering fraternity and harmony in life while upholding truth and tolerance. In other words, engaging in jihad means glorifying Allah, the Exalted, and calling people toward the humanization of humanity through knowledge and wisdom.

Since filing a judicial review of Law No. 22 of 2001 on Oil and Natural Gas before the Constitutional Court, which resulted in the annulment of several

important provisions, Muhammadiyah has consistently employed the judicial review mechanism to challenge other laws considered contrary to the Constitution and the public interest, including regulations concerning natural resources, health, education, and state governance. This practice was subsequently conceptualized as constitutional jihad, namely a struggle conducted through legal and constitutional instruments to realize social justice and protect the public good. The constitutional jihad pioneered by Muhammadiyah continued through judicial reviews of other laws, including Law No. 7 of 2004 on Water Resources, Law No. 44 of 2009 on Hospitals, and Law No. 17 of 2013 on Mass Organizations, all of which were granted by the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Indonesia. Constitutional jihad, initiated by Muhammadiyah in 2009, was understood as a manifestation of *jihad amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*.³¹ From the perspective of Fairclough's meso-level discursive practice, constitutional jihad represents semantic recontextualization, namely a shift in the meaning of jihad from a religious signifier commonly associated with physical struggle toward an institutional form of struggle pursued through democratic mechanisms and the rule of law. This meaning is reproduced through fatwas, official documents, Constitutional Court decisions, organizational publications, and Muhammadiyah's digital media. Consequently, jihad is no longer understood as a confrontational act, but as institutional action oriented toward upholding the Constitution, protecting citizens' rights, and promoting the public good.

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that these discursive practices demonstrate that the use of hadith is not neutral. Rather, it functions as a mechanism for the production, reproduction, and circulation of meaning intended to legitimize particular social practices, whether violence in the name of religion in the case of ISIS, or social transformation, public service, and constitutional empowerment in the case of Muhammadiyah.

Macro-Level Analysis: Social Practice and the Order of Discourse

At the macro level, the contestation over jihad cannot be separated from the sociopolitical and institutional structures of each historical period that enable a particular discourse to become dominant. From this perspective, discourse does not emerge neutrally; rather, it is shaped by the surrounding social, political, cultural, and historical structures. Therefore, interpretations of jihad cannot be detached from the social conditions that allow a particular form of discourse to gain dominance at a given time.³² Changes in social structures will generate changes in the construction of jihad's meaning, the actors who articulate it, and the practices through which it is manifested in society. In this context, the formation of jihad discourse is influenced by three main elements: social agents, including actors and

participants; social structures, including texts and interpretations of the Qur'an and hadith; and social practices, namely actions manifested in real life. Social structures thus shape the dominance of jihad discourse.³³

In the early Islamic period, the social structures shaping the discourse of jihad were characterized by persecution, migration, and armed defense. Hadiths concerning jihad were narrated by the Prophet Muhammad within the sociohistorical context of seventh-century Arabian society, when Islam was still in the process of forming a community. During the Meccan period, the Prophet's mission focused on instilling monotheism and religious belief, which stood in opposition to the polytheistic traditions of Arab society. Resistance to the Islamic message gave rise to various forms of pressure, intimidation, and both physical and psychological persecution against the Prophet and his followers. Under these circumstances, jihad was not yet understood as warfare, but as a moral and spiritual struggle to preserve faith, control one's desires, restrain anger, remain patient in the face of oppression, and consistently continue the mission through exemplary moral conduct.³⁴

The transformation in the meaning of jihad occurred after the migration to Medina. The *hijrah* was not an offensive move intended to initiate warfare, but rather a strategy to avoid open conflict while safeguarding the Muslim community from persecution. Nevertheless, threats to the safety of Muslims continued, making warfare a defensive option that received religious legitimacy.³⁵ It was in this context that permission to fight was revealed, as stated in Q. al-Hajj [22]:39: "*Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, because they were wronged...*". The Battles of Badr and Uhud illustrate how armed jihad was understood as a form of defense aimed at protecting life, religion, and the continuity of the Muslim community. Verses such as Q. al-Baqarah [2]:216 and Q. al-Anfal [8]:72 demonstrate that the legitimacy of military jihad was closely connected to the protection of a persecuted community, rather than functioning as a universal principle of warfare detached from specific social circumstances.³⁶

In the modern context, the social structures shaping the discourse of jihad have undergone highly significant changes. Whereas in the Prophet's time jihad emerged from the direct experience of an oppressed community, the contemporary era has produced new configurations involving geopolitical conflict, identity crises, and digital propaganda that facilitate the development of armed-jihad discourse.³⁷ Globalization, conflicts in the Middle East, international political intervention, economic inequality, and the expansion of digital media have created new spaces for the production and reproduction of jihadist ideology.³⁸

One category of actors that has emerged consists of militant jihadist groups, such as the Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qaeda, which primarily interpret jihad as an armed

struggle to realize their political objectives. These groups employ particular interpretations of Qur'anic verses and Prophetic hadiths as ideological legitimation to gain support, construct a collective identity, and sustain relations of power.³⁹ From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, religious texts are produced and reproduced as ideological instruments that serve particular political interests. Therefore, within Islamist and jihadist discourse, jihad is understood not only as a religious teaching but also as an ideology used to legitimize power through selective interpretations of religious sources.

However, this discourse is not the only representation of jihad in Islam. In various countries, including Indonesia, counter-narratives have emerged that reject the reduction of jihad solely to warfare. Muslim scholars, intellectuals, and religious organizations reinterpret jihad-related texts by restoring them to the historical contexts in which they emerged. Accordingly, the use of violence is understood as an exception that can be justified only under particular circumstances, especially as a form of self-defense. In Indonesia, the dominant discourse of jihad is instead shaped by different social structures, namely democracy, a strong civil society, and participation in humanitarian missions. These social structures have generated discourses of social and constitutional jihad, which interpret jihad as a struggle to realize the public good through peaceful means and in accordance with the principles of the rule of law.⁴⁰

In this context, the formation of jihad discourse is also shaped by the relationship among social agents, social structures, and social practices. The principal actors who dominate this discourse are mainstream civic Muslim actors, namely moderate Islamic organizations, religious scholars, academics, and civil society activists who understand jihad as a struggle to uphold humanitarian values rooted in the Prophetic tradition. They maintain that hadiths concerning jihad reflect the social realities of the seventh century and therefore cannot be separated from their historical context. Consequently, contemporary interpretations of jihad must take into account changing social, political, and cultural conditions. At the level of social practice, jihad is manifested through *amar ma'ruf* in the forms of community empowerment, education, healthcare services, poverty alleviation, humanitarian assistance, and the strengthening of democracy and social justice. Organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama practice humanitarian jihad through the establishment of schools, hospitals, social institutions, community economic empowerment programs, disaster relief initiatives, and various philanthropic activities.⁴¹ These practices represent jihad as a constructive effort to realize the common good.

In Indonesia, one particularly influential discourse is the popular hadith concerning the greatest jihad as the struggle against one's own desires (*al-jihād al-*

akbar). Although the authenticity of this report remains contested within hadith scholarship, its widespread acceptance and reproduction in Islamic tradition have endowed it with considerable discursive power.⁴² The hadith has become one of the foundations for the development of a spiritual understanding of jihad that emphasizes self-control, moral improvement, and social transformation through virtuous conduct.⁴³ This demonstrates that the dominance of a particular jihad discourse is determined not only by textual validity, but also by processes of social acceptance, cultural reproduction, and social structures that provide space for the dissemination of particular meanings.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the authority and interpretation of jihad hadiths in the digital public sphere are no longer static or essentialist, but instead constitute a site of ideological contestation that is discursively constructed. Hadith texts do not independently determine the meaning of jihad. Rather, that meaning is formed through processes of selection, intertextuality, contextualization, and institutional appropriation. Hadith texts concerning jihad do not possess an autonomous power to dictate or impose a single interpretation upon society. Instead, the meanings of jihad circulating in the public sphere are the outcome of a series of strategic and manipulative discursive processes, including unilateral textual selection, the construction of intertextual networks among religious proofs, the imposition of new contexts through recontextualization, and institutional appropriation by religious actors seeking to legitimize their respective interests and power.

The same semantic field of jihad hadiths can potentially generate markedly different social practices, ranging from humanitarian service and constitutional advocacy to militant violence, depending on the interpreting actors, the interpretive strategies employed, and the sociopolitical structures surrounding the transmission and circulation of the hadiths. A similar corpus of texts may be transformed into movements of humanitarian service and constitutional legal advocacy on the one hand, while triggering armed militant violence on the other. These divergent outcomes depend on the religious actors involved, the linguistic interpretive strategies they employ, and the ways in which macro-level sociopolitical structures—such as democratic conditions versus geopolitical conflict—shape the circulation of these hadiths within s This study provides methodological evidence that the contestation over the meaning of jihad in contemporary Indonesia does not arise from inherent differences among hadith texts within Islam. Rather, the contestation essentially takes place between humanitarian-civic discourse promoted by mainstream organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, and militant-jihadist discourse advanced by extremist factions. This study contributes to

critical hadith scholarship by positioning interpretation as a struggle over religious authority and legitimate action. It also shifts the paradigm of conventional hadith studies, which have largely focused on classifying the types and meanings of jihad, toward a critical approach capable of explaining philosophically how religious authority, interpretive strategies, and social ecosystems interact in constructing diverse meanings of jihad hadiths in the digital age.

Endnotes

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