

## Inkar Al-Sunnah from Historical Roots to Indonesian Context: What Factors Explain Its Emergence and Persistence?

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the historical roots, theological and rational arguments, and socio-religious development of the Inkar al-Sunnah movement, which denies the Sunnah as an authoritative source of Islamic law. Employing a qualitative and library-based method with historical-discursive analysis, the research traces its emergence from the classical period to its modern manifestations and its specific trajectory in Indonesia. Findings reveal that Inkar al-Sunnah has persisted by combining selective Qur'anic interpretations with rationalist critiques of hadith transmission, often influenced by colonial legacies and modern reformist currents. In Indonesia, the movement surfaced openly in the 1980s, spearheaded by figures such as M. Ircham Sutarto, Lukman Saad, Abdurrahman, and Dalimi Lubis. Its spread was facilitated by publishing networks but was countered by strong resistance from religious authorities, the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), and state institutions. The study concludes that the persistence of Inkar al-Sunnah lies not only in theological debates but also in socio-political dynamics, making it a recurring intellectual challenge in Islamic history. Ultimately, this research contributes to the understanding of hadith rejection as both a theological deviation and a socio-religious phenomenon, emphasizing the enduring importance of the Sunnah in Islamic thought.

**Keywords:** Inkar al-Sunnah; Hadith Rejection; Islamic Thought; Indonesia

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### INTRODUCTION

The Sunnah or hadith, as the second primary source in Islamic teachings, holds an inseparable position from the Qur'an. The Sunnah functions as an explanation, reinforcement, and complement to the divine revelation enshrined in the Qur'an (Siregar, 2024, p. 194). Everything conveyed and practiced by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), insofar as it pertains to religious matters, is believed not to originate from his own desires but from divine guidance. The Qur'an itself affirms that Allah granted the Prophet the authority to interpret and clarify its verses, appointed him as a judge in resolving communal issues, and established obedience to the Prophet's rulings as a measure of faith (Hosen, 2019, p. 69). For this reason, the majority of Muslim scholars have unanimously agreed to recognize hadith as the second source of Islamic law after the Qur'an. This conviction is not only grounded in scriptural evidence from the Qur'an and Sunnah but is also logically justified, as all of the Prophet's sayings, actions, and approvals constitute a concrete implementation of the Qur'anic message (Ridwan et al., 2025, p. 234).

Nevertheless, socio-religious realities reveal significant intellectual anxieties. Alongside the development of Islamic discourses, groups have emerged that reject hadith as an authoritative source of law (Ramadhan et al., 2025, p. 86). This perspective, known as *Inkar al-Sunnah*, regards the Qur'an as the sole sufficient source of Islamic teachings while dismissing the Sunnah due to

doubts concerning its authenticity and authority. Such rejection ranges from total, denying all Sunnah, to partial, accepting only mutawatir hadith while rejecting ahad traditions. This phenomenon raises a fundamental concern, as belief in and adherence to the Sunnah is an integral component of faith in the Prophet himself (Fitra et al., 2024, p. 19).

Herein lies a clear academic gap. Normatively, the global Muslim community acknowledges the Sunnah as the second source of law after the Qur'an, yet in reality, minority groups have denied or questioned its legitimacy. The discourse on Inkar al-Sunnah is not merely theological but also intertwined with historical, rational, and socio-intellectual factors that shaped the mindset of hadith rejecters from the classical era to the modern context. Moreover, in Indonesia, this movement has developed with distinctive dynamics, influenced by local social, political, and cultural contexts. These circumstances call for a systematic scholarly inquiry into the phenomenon of Inkar al-Sunnah, tracing its historical roots, examining its theological and rational arguments, and analyzing its development in the Indonesian setting (Hakim et al., 2024, p. 272).

Against this background, this study is guided by three central research questions: *What are the historical roots of the Inkar al-Sunnah movement from classical to modern Islamic thought? Which theological, rational, and socio-intellectual factors explain its emergence and persistence? How has Inkar al-Sunnah developed and been contested within the Indonesian religious context?* To address these questions, this research employs a qualitative approach through library-based study, utilizing historical and discursive analysis. The data sources include classical texts, modern works, as well as official documents and fatwas related to the development of Inkar al-Sunnah in Indonesia.

Accordingly, this study aims to explain the historical roots of the Inkar al-Sunnah movement from classical to modern times, to analyze the theological, rational, and socio-intellectual factors underpinning its emergence and persistence, and to map its development and contestation within the Indonesian religious context. The findings are expected to contribute academically to the discourse of contemporary Islamic studies, clarify the authoritative role of the Sunnah within Islamic legal tradition, and provide a critical perspective on the phenomenon of hadith rejection that continues to persist today.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative approach in the form of library research, using a descriptive-analytical design and a historical-discursive method of analysis. This approach is selected because the primary objective of the research is to trace the historical roots, map the theological development, and analyze the socio-religious dynamics of the Inkar al-Sunnah movement from the classical period to the modern Indonesian context (Oflazoglu, 2017, p. 59). The focus of the study is directed toward authoritative texts, official documents, and relevant literature produced during the peak period of the movement's activity in Indonesia, namely from the 1980s to the contemporary era (Baharudin et al., 2020a, p. 1). Primary data are derived from the works of key Inkar al-Sunnah figures such as M. Ircham Sutarto, Lukman Saad, and Dalimi Lubis, as well as from the 1983 fatwa of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) and the decisions issued by the Attorney General of the Republic of Indonesia in 1983/1984. Secondary data are obtained from reputable journal articles and scholarly books relevant to the discourse on hadith rejection.

Data collection is conducted through systematic documentation of both classical and modern literature, as well as archival research on historical data concerning the spread of the movement across various regions of Indonesia. Data validity is ensured through source triangulation and theoretical triangulation, whereby the arguments of Inkar al-Sunnah proponents are critically juxtaposed with the responses of mainstream hadith scholars and state institutional policies in order to maintain objectivity. The data analysis process follows an interactive model consisting of data reduction, thematic data presentation categorized into theological, rational, and socio-political factors and conclusion drawing. Discourse analysis is employed to examine how selective interpretations of the Qur'an are utilized as instruments of ideological legitimation by the movement's proponents. This methodology is systematically designed to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the persistence of the movement as a recurring intellectual challenge within the history of Islam (Ardiansyah et al., 2023, p. 2).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Historical Roots of Inkar al-Sunnah from Classical to Modern Islamic Thought

Etymologically, the term Inkar al-Sunnah derives from two words, *inkar* and *sunnah*. The word *inkar* originates from the Arabic root *Ankara-yunkiru-inkaran*, which means to deny or to reject, either verbally or inwardly. It can also be associated with *al-juhud*, denoting the denial of something that is evident (Yuni Manuarsa, 2024, p. 40). Thus, a person may be categorized as a denier of the Sunnah if he refuses to acknowledge hadith as a valid source of authority, whether due to limited knowledge of 'ulum al-hadith or ideological conviction. Meanwhile, the term *sunnah* essentially refers to a way of life or a practice established by earlier generations and followed by later ones, whether praiseworthy or blameworthy. Literally, therefore, Inkar al-Sunnah means the denial of the Sunnah's existence, while in operational terms it refers to a religious doctrine that rejects hadith as the second source of Islamic teachings after the Qur'an. Those who embrace this doctrine often call themselves the Qur'aniyyun, as they rely solely on the Qur'an and dismiss the authority of the Prophet's hadith (Edy, 2014, p. 141).

The earliest traces of Sunnah rejection can be traced back to the time of the Companions. A well-known narration recounts that Imran ibn Husain encountered a man who insisted that only the Qur'an should be taught. Imran responded by pointing out that without the Sunnah, Muslims would not know the correct manner of performing prayer, including the number of rak'ahs, nor the proper way of circumambulating the Ka'bah or performing sa'i between Safa and Marwah. This illustrates that denial of the Sunnah existed from the early days, though it remained individual and unorganized (Maulida, 2014, p. 138). The debate reached its peak during the lifetime of Imam al-Shafi'i, who classified Sunnah deniers into three groups: those who rejected all Sunnah, those who accepted it only when in agreement with the Qur'an, and those who rejected solitary hadith (*ahad*) while accepting only mass-transmitted hadith (*mutawatir*) (Junaid, 2018, p. 7). In essence, all these groups shared the same position of refusing to regard the Sunnah as binding authority. Their reasoning was often based on Qur'anic verses which they interpreted as encompassing all religious rulings, such as Qur'an 16:89 and 6:38 (Mudrika & Nur, 2020, p. 132).

Some also rejected *ahad* hadith, arguing that they are *zhanni* (probabilistic) in nature and therefore unfit to serve as a legal foundation. They often cited Qur'an 10:36, which warns against relying on conjecture. This stance reinforced the belief that only the Qur'an and *mutawatir* hadith should be accepted. Nevertheless, scholars of hadith, including Imam al-Shafi'i, emphasized that *ahad* hadith can serve as valid proof as long as they meet the criteria of authenticity (Muslih, 2022, p. 290).

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the Inkar al-Sunnah movement re-emerged with new characteristics distinct from the classical period. Whereas early denials often stemmed from ignorance of the Sunnah's role, modern proponents advanced their claims using ideological arguments, often reinforced by the impact of colonialism and modernist reform (Ginting, 2025, p. 67). A prominent figure was Taufiq Sidqi, who published articles in *al-Manar*, the journal of Sayyid Rasyid Ridla, asserting that "Islam is nothing but the Qur'an." He argued that the Sunnah was unnecessary because the Prophet's conduct was not intended for total imitation. Similar views were expressed by other figures such as Ghulam Ahmad Parvez in India, Taufiq Sidqi in Egypt, Rashad Khalifa in the United States, and Kassim Ahmad in Malaysia. Despite differences in context, their arguments did not diverge significantly from those of earlier Sunnah deniers (Darussamin, 2012, p. 46).

In Indonesia, the Inkar al-Sunnah movement began to surface prominently in the 1980s, with figures such as Lukman Sa'ad, Dadang Setio Groho, Safran Batu Bara, and Dalimi Lubis (Mursidin, 2022, p. 3). Much like their counterparts abroad, Indonesian proponents relied on both *naqli* (scriptural) and *'aqli* (rational) arguments to support their position, often influenced by modernization, colonial legacies, and limited mastery of fundamental Islamic sciences. These factors contributed to the persistence of Inkar al-Sunnah not merely as a historical phenomenon but as a recurring and transforming discourse within diverse social and intellectual contexts (Khon, 2012, p. 57).

### B. Theological and Rational Factors Explaining the Emergence and Persistence of Inkar al-Sunnah

As a doctrinal current, both in its classical and modern forms, the Inkar al-Sunnah movement has developed a range of arguments to defend its position. These arguments generally fall into two

categories: *naqli* (scriptural) arguments based on Qur'anic verses, and *'aqli* (rational) arguments rooted in human reasoning. Interestingly, although they reject the authority of the Sunnah, proponents of Inkar al-Sunnah have at times referred to it to strengthen their claims (Nugroho & Amsori, 2022, p. 16).

One of their central arguments is the interpretation of Qur'anic verses that, in their view, establish that the Qur'an already encompasses all matters of religion. They frequently cite Qur'an 16:89 and 6:38 as evidence that the Qur'an explains everything and leaves nothing out (Zikri et al., 2025, p. 152). From this, they conclude that there is no need for further explanation from any other source, including the Sunnah. Within this framework, the Prophet Muhammad is perceived merely as a transmitter of revelation without the authority to clarify its meaning through his hadith. Furthermore, obedience to the Prophet, according to their reasoning, applied only during his lifetime when he held the role of *ulu al-amr*. Once he passed away, they argue, this obligation ceased (Arum et al., 2025, p. 167).

This claim, however, was challenged by scholars such as Prof. Dr. Abdul Ghani Abdul Khaliq of al-Azhar, who emphasized that the term *al-Kitab* in Qur'an 6:38 refers not to the Qur'an but to the *Lauh al-Mahfuz*, the Preserved Tablet, which indeed contains everything. Likewise, the assertion that the Qur'an explains "all things" in Qur'an 16:89 must be interpreted in light of the fact that the Qur'an provides only general principles of faith and law. Its explanations are *mujmal* (concise and universal), while the details of practice and law are elaborated through the Sunnah. Thus, the Sunnah functions as the necessary explication of the Qur'an (Johendra, 2024, p. 128).

Another argument advanced by Sunnah deniers is their reliance on Qur'an 10:36, which declares that most people follow conjecture, and conjecture is of no avail against the truth. They argue that the Qur'an is *qath'i* (definitive), whereas the Sunnah is *zhanni* (probabilistic). Since hadith were transmitted through human chains of narration that could be subject to error, fabrication, or distortion, they contend that the Sunnah lacks the certainty required to be a source of law. From this perspective, Sunnah cannot stand as an independent authority alongside the Qur'an. Yet scholars such as Imam al-Shafi'i firmly rejected this interpretation, acknowledging that solitary hadith (*ahad*) are indeed probabilistic in nature, but not all of them are unreliable. As long as they fulfill the criteria of authenticity, they remain valid as legal proofs (Johendra, 2024, p. 130).

Another claim concerns the Prophet's prohibition of writing down his sayings during the early years of Islam. A hadith reports that the Prophet instructed his companions not to record anything from him apart from the Qur'an, even commanding them to erase what had already been written. Inkar al-Sunnah adherents interpret this as evidence that the Prophet himself did not intend for his Sunnah to serve as an authoritative source (Suhandi, 2015, p. 105). In reality, however, the prohibition was temporary, intended to safeguard the purity of the Qur'an and prevent its confusion with hadith. In fact, the Prophet permitted specific companions to record his sayings for personal use, such as Abdullah ibn Amr ibn al-'As with his *al-Sahifah al-Sadiqah*. This shows that documentation of hadith existed even during the Prophet's lifetime, though its dissemination became systematic later (Fatihunnada & Khoirunnisak, 2020, p. 171).

Beyond scriptural arguments, Inkar al-Sunnah proponents have also employed rational justifications. They argue that since the Qur'an was revealed in clear Arabic, anyone who masters the language can understand its message without recourse to hadith. They claim that the decline of the Muslim community was caused by division, and that division itself stemmed from conflicting interpretations of hadith. Figures like Kassim Ahmad of Malaysia went so far as to assert that hadith are nothing but fables, since their compilation occurred long after the Prophet's death. The canonical collections of al-Bukhari and Muslim, they argue, cannot be trusted because they were compiled centuries later and allegedly contain fabrications (Baharudin et al., 2020b, p. 3).

They also criticize the science of hadith transmission, arguing that the methodology of *al-jarh wa al-ta'dil* (the evaluation of narrators' reliability) only emerged more than a century after the Prophet's death, and thus cannot guarantee the integrity of the hadith corpus. They reject the principle of *ta'dil al-sahabah* the assumption that all companions were inherently trustworthy considering it an idealization that obscures the possibility of error in their reports (Hermansyah et al., 2025, p. 50).

In response, Imam al-Shafi'i asserted that the Qur'an itself repeatedly commands Muslims to obey the Prophet, and after his death, this obedience is realized through adherence to his Sunnah as preserved in hadith. For al-Shafi'i, obedience to the Sunnah is equivalent to obedience to the Qur'an. He further pointed out that many Qur'anic commands are general in nature and require

clarification for their proper implementation (Rifai & Hasniran, 2022, p. 96). Without the Sunnah, Muslims would not know how to perform prayer, pay zakat, or conduct the pilgrimage correctly. The Sunnah therefore serves as the necessary elaboration and practical guide to the Qur'an's directives (Ali & Prajayanti, 2019, p. 255).

From this perspective, the theological and rational arguments advanced by Inkar al-Sunnah are based on misinterpretations of both Qur'anic texts and historical processes. Yet it is precisely their constant reliance on both scriptural reinterpretations and rational arguments that has enabled the movement to endure and evolve over time. This combination of ideological persistence and intellectual adaptation explains why Inkar al-Sunnah continues to appear as a recurring and challenging discourse within Islamic history and thought, even into the modern era (Khon, 2019, p. 24).

### **C. Development and Contestation of Inkar al-Sunnah within the Indonesian Religious Context**

The Inkar al-Sunnah movement in Indonesia began to emerge openly in the early 1980s. According to Zufan Rahman, a researcher of Inkar al-Sunnah thought and lecturer at IAIN Jambi, this phenomenon became apparent around 1982-1983. However, traces of its presence can be identified as early as 1981 through the activities of H. Endi Suradi in Bogor and the teachings of H. Sanwani from Pasar Rumput, which began in November 1982 (Assyahara et al., 2026, p. 231). This evidence suggests that Indonesia became the next target of the modern Inkar al-Sunnah wave after India and Egypt. Historically, the doctrine was cultivated in India by British colonial powers to weaken the spirit of jihad and undermine Islam from within, while in Egypt, orientalist scholarship strengthened the spread of anti-hadith ideas through academic publications and institutions such as al-Azhar University. Indonesia was then targeted because of its status as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, which made it strategically significant for the diffusion of such doctrines (Hidayat & Ahmad, 2025, p. 398).

The peak of Inkar al-Sunnah activities in Indonesia occurred between 1983 and 1985. The movement shocked the Muslim community, stirred widespread controversy, and became the subject of heated debate in the national media. A number of books promoting Inkar al-Hadith ideas circulated widely, provoking sharp responses from scholars and religious leaders. The situation escalated to the point that on June 27, 1983, the Indonesian Council of Ulama (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) issued a fatwa declaring the movement heretical and misleading. This fatwa was reinforced by the Attorney General's Office of the Republic of Indonesia, which issued two official decrees in 1983 and 1984 banning the spread of Inkar al-Sunnah. These decisions were justified on the grounds that the movement threatened religious harmony, caused public unrest, and endangered social stability (Nurfajriyani, 2015, p. 103).

Several prominent figures were instrumental in promoting Inkar al-Sunnah in Indonesia. Among them was Ir. M. Ircham Sutarto, Chairman of the Unilever Workers' Union in Cibubur, who emerged as a central figure and authored handwritten treatises outlining Inkar al-Sunnah doctrines. His ideas, which emphasized the Qur'an as the sole source of Islamic teachings and argued that obedience to the Prophet Muhammad was no longer binding after his death, gained traction through his writings. Ircham Sutarto's efforts were further supported by Lukman Saad, Director of PT Ghalia Indonesia, who played a crucial role in printing and disseminating Inkar al-Sunnah literature after acquiring modern printing equipment during his visits to the Netherlands. This marked a transition of the movement from informal sermons to a more organized effort supported by publishing networks (Handika, 2019, p. 35).

Another influential figure was Abdurrahman, a former member of the Persatuan Islam (Persis), who actively spread Inkar al-Sunnah teachings in Jakarta. He managed to control several key mosques, including the Asy-Syifa Mosque at Cipto Mangunkusumo Hospital. His rejection of the adhan and iqamah, along with his reduction of the obligatory prayers to two rak'ahs each, alarmed the Muslim community. His boldness in propagating these ideas eventually led to a government ban due to their disruptive impact on public order (Amrin, 2022, p. 61).

In West Sumatra, Dalimi Lubis, an employee of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, promoted the movement through his writings, books, and recorded lectures (Amrin, 2022, p. 61). Together with Nazwar Syamsu, a prolific writer, he produced numerous works that criticized hadith and their transmitters. Some of their publications contained Qur'anic interpretations that deviated

significantly from traditional exegetical standards, leading to accusations of misguidance. Their books, published by PT Ghalia Indonesia, were eventually banned from circulation due to concerns over their potential to mislead the Muslim community (Martono, 2024, p. 146).

Another figure, As'ad bin Ali Baisa from Tegal, Central Java, gained a following of several dozen adherents through the Islamic Study Club (ISC) in the mid-1980s. His teachings rejected key Islamic practices, including the Friday prayer, fasting during Ramadan, and even the authenticity of *sahih* hadith, which he dismissed as mere fabrications. Such radical doctrines provoked significant unrest in the local community and drew widespread condemnation. Similarly, H. Endi Suradi in Bogor, who had been active since 1981, interpreted the Qur'an based on his personal reasoning, rejected the shahadah, and altered the form of ritual prayer to align with what he claimed was the practice of Prophet Abraham. His teachings attracted a number of followers from diverse backgrounds but simultaneously triggered strong controversy (Hilabi, 2023, p. 78).

Overall, the Inkar al-Sunnah movement in Indonesia developed characteristics similar to its global counterparts in rejecting the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad as a secondary source of Islamic law. However, its spread in Indonesia carried broader implications, as it involved public figures, publishing institutions, and urban communities with access to education and media. The responses were also more structured, involving official state institutions, religious authorities, and Islamic organizations (Yuslem et al., 2022, p. 640).

These developments reveal that Inkar al-Sunnah in Indonesia is not merely a theological issue but also a social, political, and cultural phenomenon. Its presence posed a serious challenge to established religious authority and tested the resilience of the Muslim community in preserving the integrity of Islamic teachings. The debates between proponents of the movement and mainstream Islamic scholars reflected a complex intellectual dynamic in which rationalist arguments confronted the authoritative tradition of Islam. Thus, Inkar al-Sunnah in Indonesia must be understood not only as a deviation in creed but also as a socio-religious phenomenon that requires careful academic study and prudent policy responses (Afwadzi, 2018, p. 142).

## CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that the phenomenon of *Inkar al-Sunnah* cannot be understood merely as a rejection of prophetic traditions but as a multidimensional discourse shaped by historical, theological, rational, and socio-political contexts. From the classical era to the modern period, *Inkar al-Sunnah* has re-emerged in different forms, often exploiting ambiguities in Qur'anic interpretation and rationalist arguments to legitimize its stance. The persistence of this movement reveals how intellectual contestation in Islam is not static but constantly negotiated across time and space. In the Indonesian context, *Inkar al-Sunnah* gained traction in the 1980s, supported by charismatic figures, publishing networks, and urban communities. However, it also encountered firm resistance from state institutions, religious authorities, and Muslim organizations, underscoring that contestation over religious authority is both theological and political. This indicates that the resilience of mainstream Islamic thought in Indonesia is maintained not only through theological rebuttals but also through institutional regulation and communal vigilance. Therefore, this study concludes that the emergence and persistence of *Inkar al-Sunnah* are best explained through an interplay of scriptural reinterpretations, rational arguments, colonial legacies, and modern socio-intellectual currents. While its influence remains limited, its recurrence highlights the need for continuous scholarly engagement and public education on the authoritative role of the Sunnah within Islam. Future studies could further explore the sociological dimensions of hadith rejection, including its intersections with globalization, digital media, and contemporary Muslim identity.

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