



## History of Islam in Contemporary America

<sup>1</sup>Indah Sari Dewi <sup>2</sup>Hasaruddin

<sup>1,2</sup> Pascasarjana UIN Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia

Email: [1indahsaridewi289@gmail.com](mailto:indahsaridewi289@gmail.com), [2hasaruddin@uin-alauddin.ac.id](mailto:hasaruddin@uin-alauddin.ac.id)

### Abstract

*Islam in the United States has developed within a pluralistic, democratic social context that is fraught with global political dynamics, particularly in the contemporary era following the events of September 11, 2001. These conditions have placed the Muslim community as a minority group facing challenges such as Islamophobia, structural discrimination, and negative representation in the public sphere, while also opening up opportunities for social participation and citizenship. This study aims to analyze the development of Islam in the United States in the contemporary era, identify the main challenges faced by Muslims, and examine the adaptation strategies and social contributions developed in a pluralistic society. This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research method through the examination of relevant scientific books, journal articles, and research reports. The data is analyzed descriptively and analytically with an emphasis on historical, social, and political contexts. The results of the study show that Islam in America has developed through a process of creative adaptation characterized by the strengthening of religious institutions, increased political and civil society participation, and active engagement in interfaith dialogue and social justice issues. Despite facing external pressures and internal challenges, American Muslim communities have been able to establish a contextual and inclusive Islamic identity. This study concludes that Islam in America not only survives as a minority identity, but also contributes significantly to building a fair and democratic multicultural society.*

**Keywords:** American Islam, Minority Islam, Pluralistic Societ

## **INTRODUCTION**

Islam in the United States developed within a unique social context, marked by religious pluralism, liberal democracy, and the ever-changing dynamics of global politics. The presence of Islam in America is not merely a modern migration phenomenon, but has historical roots dating back to the 16th century, with African Muslims brought as slaves. Although their Islamic practices were eroded by the system of slavery and forced assimilation, this historical footprint demonstrates that Islam was part of the early history of American society (Smith 2010). Significant growth of Islam in America occurred in the second half of the 20th century, with increasing immigration from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, and the growth of a generation of American-born Muslims.

This situation fostered the formation of a Muslim community that was increasingly ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse. However, this diversity also presents internal challenges in the form of differences in religious orientation and cultural identity, which require a continuous process of negotiation in social and religious life (Cesari 2014). In the contemporary era, the dynamics of Islam in America have become increasingly complex following the events of September 11, 2001, which marked a turning point in the relationship between Islam and the American public sphere. These events not only impacted state security policy but also shaped social perceptions fraught with suspicion and stigma toward Muslims. Islamophobia subsequently emerged as a structural issue affecting Muslims' access to civil rights, political participation, and representation in mainstream media (Esposito 2011).

However, American Muslims are not passive. They are responding to these challenges by strengthening Islamic institutions, increasing participation in civil society, and actively engaging in interfaith dialogue and social justice issues. Mosques, community centers, and advocacy organizations

serve not only as places of worship but also as media for the formation of a contextual and inclusive American Muslim identity. This process demonstrates that Islam in America develops through creative adaptation without losing its theological commitments (Smith, 2010). Based on this reality, this research problem focuses on how Islam in America develops in the contemporary era, the social and political challenges Muslims face, and the strategies for adaptation and social participation they develop in a pluralistic society. This research aims to comprehensively analyze the dynamics of Islamic development in the United States in the contemporary era as an academic contribution to the study of minority Islam, religious pluralism, and the relationship between Islam and Western modernity.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach with library research, which aims to analyze the development of Islam in the United States in the contemporary era through a review of relevant academic literature. Data sources were obtained from scholarly books, reputable journal articles, and reports from research institutions discussing Islam, the Muslim community, religious pluralism, and Islamophobia in America. Data collection was conducted through a systematic literature search, considering the relevance and credibility of the sources. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive-analytical techniques.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **A Brief History of the Presence of Islam in America**

The presence of Islam in the United States can be traced back to the 16th century through African Muslims who were forcibly brought as slaves to the Americas. Several historical studies indicate that approximately 10–15 percent of West African slaves were Muslim and came from communities that already had strong religious traditions and Islamic literacy before being

enslaved (Diouf 1998; Gomez 2005). This fact suggests that Islam is not a new phenomenon in American history, but rather part of the early legacy of the formation of its society. However, the repressive system of slavery significantly diminished the practice of Islam among Muslim slaves. Prohibitions on religious expression, forced conversions, and family separation contributed to the weakening of the transmission of Islamic teachings across generations. In many cases, Islamic identity persisted only in symbolic forms, such as the use of names, moral values, or traditions that were obscured within African-American culture (Smith 2010).

The next wave of Islam in America occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through immigration from the Middle East, South Asia, and the Balkans. Muslim immigrants came from diverse ethnic backgrounds and sects, bringing with them more organized religious practices. Their arrival marked a new phase in the development of Islam, marked by efforts to establish permanent communities in various regions of the United States (Haddad, Smith, and Moore 2006).

During this period, early mosques and Islamic organizations began to emerge, serving as centers of worship, education, and social solidarity for immigrant Muslim communities. These institutions played a crucial role in maintaining religious identity amidst the pressures of American cultural assimilation. Furthermore, the existence of Islamic institutions also provided an initial means for Muslims to interact with the wider community in a social and religious context (Cesari 2014).

The development of Islam in America accelerated significantly in the mid-20th century, particularly among African Americans through the emergence of the Nation of Islam movement. This movement served not only as a religious expression but also as a response to the structural racism and social injustice experienced by the Black community. Despite its theological differences with mainstream Islam, the Nation of Islam played a significant

role in awakening a sense of Islamic identity and social solidarity among African Americans (Curtis 2009). In the next phase, particularly since the 1970s, a significant transformation occurred when most Nation of Islam followers converted to Sunni Islam under the leadership of Warith Deen Mohammed. This process strengthened integration between African-American Muslims and immigrant Muslim communities and marked the consolidation of mainstream Islam in the United States (Hilalludin, H., & Haironi, A. 2024).

This historical dynamic serves as a crucial foundation for the development of Islam in America in the contemporary era, both in terms of institutional aspects, identity, and the social participation of Muslims in plural American society (Turner 2003). Overall, this brief history of Islam's presence in America demonstrates that Islam developed through a long, layered, and contextual process. From the traumatic experience of slavery and the immigration phase to the rise of Islamic identity in the modern era, Islam in America was shaped through the interaction of mutually influencing historical, social, and political factors. This historical process serves as a crucial foundation for the development of Islam in America in the contemporary era, both in terms of institutional aspects, identity, and the social participation of Muslims in plural American society.

### **Islam in Contemporary America**

The Muslim community in the United States in the contemporary era is estimated to number between 3.5 and 7 million, making it the third-largest religious group after Christians and Jews. This uncertainty stems from the US census policy of not collecting data based on religious affiliation, so estimates of the Muslim population rely on independent surveys and academic research (Pew Research Center 2014).

Despite their minority status, American Muslims have demonstrated relatively high growth rates and social visibility compared to other religious

groups, particularly in large urban areas. One of the most striking characteristics of the American Muslim community is its extraordinary ethnic and racial diversity. No single ethnic group constitutes a majority, as American Muslims come from more than 80 countries with diverse cultural, linguistic, and historical backgrounds. African-American Muslims are estimated to comprise approximately 20–30 percent of the total Muslim population and are largely converts or subsequent generations who affiliated with Sunni Islam after leaving the Nation of Islam (Curtis 2009).

Furthermore, Muslim communities from South Asia, particularly Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, are estimated to comprise approximately 30–35 percent and play a significant role in the professional sector and higher education (Smith 2010). Arab Muslim groups from the Middle East and North Africa comprise approximately 25–30 percent, while communities from Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, and the increasing number of converts from Caucasian and Hispanic backgrounds further enrich the landscape of American Islam (Cesari 2014).

This diversity is not only demographic but also reflected in the sectarian and ideological spectrum. The majority of American Muslims are affiliated with the Sunni school of thought, but there is a significant Shia community, particularly from Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Furthermore, there are Ahmadiyya groups, Sufi communities, and various religious movements that present local and cultural expressions of Islam (Haddad, Smith, and Moore 2006). Ideologically, American Muslims display a broad spectrum of views, ranging from progressive groups emphasizing social justice and gender equality to conservative groups maintaining traditional religious practices. This variation reflects the negotiation of Islamic identity within the context of a secular and pluralistic society (Jamal 2011).

The growth of the Muslim population, particularly after the enactment of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, has spurred the rapid growth

of Islamic institutions and organizations in the United States. Currently, there are more than 2,700 mosques and Islamic community centers that serve not only as places of worship but also as centers for religious education, social services, family counseling, and intergenerational community activities (Pew Research Center 2011).

In addition to mosques, hundreds of private Islamic schools and Islamic studies programs at leading universities contribute to the knowledge production and intellectual formation of American Muslims. At the national level, organizations such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), and the Muslim American Society (MAS) play a strategic role in civil rights advocacy, public education, and strengthening interfaith dialogue (Limnata, R. B., al et.2024)

These organizations serve as political and social representatives of Muslim Americans, particularly in responding to issues of discrimination, Islamophobia, and public policies that impact the Muslim community (Cesari 2014). Furthermore, the halal-based economic sector, including the food industry, Islamic finance, and tourism, is growing, reflecting the integration of religious needs with the modern economic system (Smith 2010). In American socio-political life, Muslim Americans are demonstrating increasingly active and strategic involvement. Political participation is increasing, both as voters, activists, and public officials at the local, state, and federal levels. This involvement often focuses on issues of social justice, civil rights, religious freedom, and equitable foreign policy (Jamal 2011).

In the social and philanthropic spheres, the Muslim community is actively involved in charitable activities, humanitarian aid, and interfaith cooperation, strengthening its position as a civil society actor. Meanwhile, Muslim Americans' contributions to art, literature, music, and intellectual

thought have enriched the American cultural landscape and affirmed Islam as an integral part of contemporary multicultural society (Cesari 2014).

### **Challenges for Islam in Contemporary America**

In the contemporary era, the greatest challenge facing Muslims in the United States is the rise in Islamophobia and various forms of discrimination, particularly after the events of September 11, 2001. Islamophobia not only manifests itself in individual attitudes but also manifests structurally in social and political life. Various reports indicate an increase in hate crimes, such as physical attacks, threats, and vandalism against Muslim individuals and Muslim property, including mosques and community centers (Pew Research Center 2017).

This phenomenon creates a persistent sense of insecurity and impacts the quality of social life for Muslims in America. In addition to hate crimes, American Muslims also face systemic discrimination in various sectors of life. Racial and religious profiling at airports, excessive surveillance by security forces, and discrimination in the workplace and housing are experiences frequently reported by the Muslim community (Cainkar 2009). This discrimination is often legitimized by national security discourse that links Islam to terrorism, thereby narrowing the space for Muslims to participate as equal citizens (Sugari, D., & Hilalludin, H. 2026).

State policies also reinforce marginalization, as seen in the immigration restrictions imposed on citizens from Muslim-majority countries, known as the Muslim Ban, during the Donald Trump administration (Cesari 2014). Another equally complex challenge is the influence of political rhetoric and media representations that tend to be negative toward Islam and Muslims. Mainstream media often portray Islam in a context of conflict, extremism, and violence, while the positive contributions of Muslim Americans in the social, economic, and cultural spheres receive less attention (Said 1981).

This type of representation reinforces public stereotypes and creates a negative collective perception, forcing Muslim Americans to continually clarify and defend their religious identity. At the personal and social identity levels, young Muslim Americans face significant integration challenges. They often find themselves in a dilemma between maintaining their Islamic identity and adapting to dominant American cultural values. This process of identity discovery encompasses sensitive issues such as gender roles, religious practices, interfaith marriage, and the expression of Islam in public spaces (Jamal 2011).

This tension demonstrates that integration does not necessarily mean total assimilation, but rather a continuous process of identity negotiation. In addition to external pressures, Muslims in America also face internal challenges within their own communities. While diverse ethnicities, sects, and cultural backgrounds are strengths, they sometimes give rise to fragmentation and a lack of social cohesion. Differences in religious interests and orientations can impact organizational effectiveness and internal solidarity within Muslim communities (Haddad, Smith, and Moore 2006). Furthermore, the need for inclusive, visionary leadership that is responsive to contemporary challenges is crucial for maintaining community sustainability (Zulkarnain, M. F., al et 2024).

Another internal challenge relates to the involvement of young people in Islamic institutions, such as mosques and community organizations. Popular culture, assimilationist pressures, and generational distance often cause some young Muslims to feel alienated from traditional religious institutions. This situation demands innovation in approaches to da'wah, education, and community management to remain relevant to the social realities of young American Muslims (Cesari 2014). Thus, the challenges facing Islam in contemporary America are multidimensional, encompassing external aspects such as structural discrimination and negative representation, as well

as internal aspects such as strengthening identity, leadership, and community cohesion.

### **Opportunities and Contributions of Islam in American**

Society Amidst various social and political challenges, Islam in the United States has a strategic opportunity to contribute substantively to building a just and inclusive society. Islamic values such as social justice (al-'adl), solidarity (ukhuwwah insāniyyah), and concern for vulnerable groups strongly align with the principles of democracy and human rights that underlie American society (Esposito, 2018). This alignment of values creates space for Muslims to actively participate in public life without having to relinquish their religious identity.

One tangible opportunity and contribution is seen in the involvement of American Muslims in issues of social justice and civil rights. Several studies show that the Muslim community, particularly African-American Muslims, has a long history of fighting against racial discrimination and structural injustice (Curtis, 2009). In the contemporary era, Muslim involvement in racial justice movements, advocacy for immigrant rights, and defense of religious freedom emphasizes Islam's role as a source of social ethics that encourages the transformation of society toward a more egalitarian one (Jackson, 2011).

Islam's contributions are also significant in the fields of philanthropy and humanitarianism. Muslim organizations such as Islamic Relief USA and various community-based zakat organizations are actively involved in disaster relief, free healthcare, and food distribution to the poor, regardless of religious background (Benthall, 2016). These philanthropic practices not only reflect Islamic teachings on social responsibility but also strengthen Muslims' position as important actors in America's social welfare network (Smith, 2014). In the realm of interfaith dialogue, the American Muslim community has taken advantage of the openness of civil society to build cooperative relationships with Christian and Jewish communities. Interfaith dialogue

activities, joint social service projects, and mosque involvement in local community activities have become effective means of building mutual understanding and reducing religious prejudice (Patel, 2012).

These initiatives demonstrate that Islam contributes directly to maintaining social cohesion amidst America's religious plurality. Other opportunities for contribution are evident in political participation and citizenship. The increasing involvement of American Muslims in electoral politics, both as voters and as public officials, reflects a maturing process of civic integration (Cainkar, 2009). The presence of Muslim politicians at the local and national levels allows the aspirations of the Muslim minority to be voiced institutionally, while also affirming the compatibility between Islamic identity and the principles of democratic citizenship (Cesari, 2014). Furthermore, Islam's contribution to America is also growing in the fields of education and intellectual endeavors. The establishment of Islamic study centers at universities, the increasing number of Muslim academics, and the production of progressive Islamic discourse in the public sphere demonstrate that Islam plays a role in enriching America's intellectual heritage and multicultural discourse (Safi, 2003). Thus, Islam exists not only as a religious identity but also as a source of critical thinking relevant to the challenges of modern society.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research demonstrates that the development of Islam in the United States in the contemporary era is a dynamic historical and social process, marked by the adaptability of the Muslim community in responding to structural challenges while simultaneously exploiting the opportunities available in a pluralistic and democratic society. The research objective of analyzing the dynamics of the development, challenges, and adaptation strategies of Islam in America is achieved by demonstrating that Islam not only

persists as a minority religious identity but also develops as an active and contributing social force.

Amidst pressures of Islamophobia, discrimination, and negative representation, American Muslims demonstrate resilience through institutional strengthening, civic participation, civil rights advocacy, and involvement in interfaith dialogue and social justice movements. These findings confirm that Islam in America is moving toward a model of religiosity that is contextual, inclusive, and compatible with democratic values without losing its theological commitment. Thus, Islam in America cannot be understood solely as a marginalized community, but rather as a crucial actor in the formation of a just and multicultural civil society. Further research is recommended to empirically examine the experiences of young American Muslims in constructing Islamic identity, as well as the role of American Muslims in global issues and foreign policy to enrich the perspective of minority Islamic studies in the Western world.

## **REFERENCES**

- Benthall, J. (2016). *Islamic charities and Islamic humanism in troubled times*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Cainkar, L. (2009). *Homeland insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American experience after 9/11*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Cesari, J. (2014). *The awakening of Muslim democracy: Religion, modernity, and the state*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (4th ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Curtis, E. E. (2009). *Muslims in America: A short history*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Diouf, S. A. (1998). *Servants of Allah: African Muslims enslaved in the Americas*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

- Esposito, J. L. (2011). *Islamophobia: The challenge of pluralism in the 21st century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Esposito, J. L. (2018). *Islam and democracy after the Arab Spring*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gomez, M. A. (2005). *Black crescent: The experience and legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Haddad, Y. Y., Smith, J. I., & Moore, K. M. (2006). *Muslim women in America: The challenge of Islamic identity today*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Hilalludin, H., & Haironi, A. (2024). Nilai-nilai perjuangan pendidikan karakter Islam KH Abdullah Sa'id. *Jurnal Manajemen Dan Pendidikan Agama Islam*, 2(3), 283-289.
- Hilalludin, H., Wiresti, R. D., Maryani, E. D., & Khaer, S. M. (2025). Syura sebagai Model Pendidikan Kepemimpinan Islam: Membangun Komunikasi Efektif dalam Pengambilan Keputusan Kolektif. *Jurnal Ar-Ruhul Ilmi: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pemikiran Islam*, 1(01), 16-29.
- Jackson, S. A. (2011). *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the third resurrection*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Jamal, A. A. (2011). *Of empires and citizens: Pro-American democracy or no democracy at all?*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Limnata, R. B., Hilalludin, H., & Haironi, A. (2024). Kompetensi kepribadian dan bahasa santun guru pendidikan agama Islam. *Dewantara: Jurnal Pendidikan Sosial Humaniora*, 3(3), 147-159.
- Patel, E. (2012). *Sacred ground: Pluralism, prejudice, and the promise of America*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Pew Research Center. (2011). *Faith in flux: Changes in religious affiliation in the U.S.* Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.
- Pew Research Center. (2014). *Religious landscape study*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.

- Pew Research Center. (2017). U.S. Muslims concerned about their place in society, but continue to believe in the American dream. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.
- Sugari, D., & Hilalludin, H. (2026). Optimalisasi Fungsi Masjid Sebagai Pusat Ibadah, Pendidikan, dan Sosial Masyarakat Melalui Program Pengabdian di Masjid Al-Muttaqin Semin, Gunungkidul. *IQOMAH: Jurnal Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat*, 1(01), 50-63.
- Zulkarnain, M. F., Hilalludin, H., & Suny, F. S. A. (2024). Relevansi pengampunan korupsi dalam perspektif islam dengan hukum yang berlaku. *ALADALAH: Jurnal Politik, Sosial, Hukum dan Humaniora*, 2(4), 139-147.