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The Historical Approach in Islamic Studies: Asbab al-Nuzul, Social Context, Periodization, and Historical Criticism

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Abstract

Islamic studies cannot rely solely on a normative-doctrinal approach, because Islamic teachings were revealed, understood, and practised within particular times and places. This article explains the historical approach to Islamic studies through four of its core elements: asbab al-nuzul (occasions of revelation), social context, periodisation, and historical criticism. The study employs library research by examining classical works of Qur'anic sciences, works on historical methodology, and contemporary Islamic scholarship, analysed descriptively, analytically, and critically. The findings show that asbab al-nuzul serves as a micro-context for grasping the intent of a verse; social context provides a macro framework of seventh-century Arabian society, allowing the moral message of the Qur'an to be distinguished from its specific applications; periodisation organises Islamic history into meaningful units so that change and continuity can be observed; and historical criticism secures the validity of sources through external and internal criticism, in line with the tradition of isnad and matn criticism. These four elements complement one another and, when balanced with the normative approach, can produce an understanding of Islam that is both authentic and contextual.

Keywords Islamic Studies, Historical Approach, Historical Criticism, Periodisation, Asbab Al-Nuzul

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INTRODUCTION

Islam is understood as a revealed religion sent by Allah to guide humanity in conducting their lives. In its comprehensive understanding, Islam can be viewed from two inseparable dimensions. On the one hand, Islam represents divine revelation, which possesses normative authority and originates from Allah. On the other hand, Islam also constitutes a historical reality, as its teachings have been understood, interpreted, developed, and practiced by human beings within particular social, cultural, political, and temporal contexts. These two dimensions demonstrate that understanding Islam requires more than examining its normative doctrines. It also requires an analytical framework capable of connecting religious

revelation with the historical circumstances in which Islamic teachings emerged and developed. Therefore, the historical approach occupies an important position in Islamic studies because it enables scholars to examine the relationship between religious texts, historical events, and the experiences of Muslim communities throughout different periods.

The significance of historical awareness is not entirely new within the Islamic intellectual tradition. Muslim scholars have long recognized the importance of understanding the circumstances surrounding the emergence and transmission of religious teachings. The development of asbab al-nuzul (occasions of Qur'anic revelation), the classification of Qur'anic verses into Makkiyah and Madaniyah, the study of nasikh-mansukh (abrogation), and the examination of chains of transmission (sanad) in hadith studies demonstrate that historical considerations have become integral to Islamic scholarship. These disciplines provide methodological instruments for identifying when, where, and under what circumstances particular religious teachings were communicated. The works of al-Wahidi, al-Suyuti, al-Zarkasyi, and al-Zarqani, for example, illustrate the systematic efforts of Muslim scholars to establish the historical circumstances of Qur'anic revelation and develop appropriate interpretative principles (al-Wahidi, 1991; al-Suyuti, n.d.; al-Zarkasyi, n.d.; al-Zarqani, 1995). Accordingly, historical consciousness should not be regarded as an external element introduced into Islamic studies through modern scholarship, but rather as an established component of the Islamic intellectual heritage.

In general, historical circumstances influence the formation and development of human thought, institutions, and social practices. History provides evidence of past events while offering opportunities to understand the processes that shape contemporary realities. Within Islamic studies, historical investigation is particularly important because religious teachings have been received, interpreted, and implemented by Muslim communities under changing circumstances. Through historical analysis, scholars can examine the relationship between the original context of religious teachings and their subsequent interpretations. Haryanto (2017) emphasizes the importance of understanding religious teachings by considering the concrete situations and social conditions surrounding their emergence. Similarly, Afroni (2019) highlights the relevance of historical perspectives in examining Islam not merely as a textual and doctrinal system but also as a phenomenon connected with cultural and civilizational developments. These perspectives suggest that

historical investigation contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Islamic teachings and their manifestations in human society.

In contemporary Islamic scholarship, the historical approach has developed through its interaction with modern historical methodology and social sciences. The study of Islam is no longer restricted to questions concerning what religious texts prescribe, but also examines how particular teachings emerged, were interpreted, and influenced social developments across different historical periods. This perspective allows researchers to distinguish between the fundamental moral principles of Islamic teachings and their historically specific forms of implementation. Fazlur Rahman (1982), through his theory of the double movement, emphasizes the importance of understanding Qur'anic teachings within their original historical circumstances before relating their underlying moral principles to contemporary situations. Similarly, Saeed (2006) develops a contextualist approach that considers different levels of Qur'anic values when interpreting religious teachings. These perspectives demonstrate how historical and social considerations can contribute to the contextual interpretation of Islam without necessarily disregarding its normative foundations.

Nevertheless, the application of historical approaches also presents methodological challenges. Excessive emphasis on historical circumstances may lead to relativistic interpretations that regard all religious teachings merely as products of particular historical periods. Conversely, interpretations that disregard historical contexts may produce understandings that are detached from the circumstances surrounding the emergence of religious teachings. Therefore, historical analysis needs to maintain a constructive relationship with normative Islamic principles. Amin Abdullah (1996) emphasizes the importance of considering normativity and historicity as complementary dimensions in religious studies rather than treating them as mutually exclusive perspectives. This balance is necessary to ensure that historical interpretation remains academically critical while respecting the theological foundations of Islam.

Previous studies have examined the historical approach in Islamic studies from various conceptual and methodological perspectives. Afroni (2019) discusses the importance of historical approaches in understanding Islam as a cultural and civilizational phenomenon, while Haryanto (2017) emphasizes the relevance of historical circumstances in religious interpretation. More recently, Noeris and Supriyanto (2025) discuss the methodological framework, significance, functions, and stages involved in applying historical approaches to Islamic studies. Other

scholars have contributed to this discussion through different areas of inquiry, including historical periodization, source criticism, and Qur'anic contextual interpretation. Nasution (1985), for instance, provides a historical classification of Islamic civilization into classical, medieval, and modern periods, while Kuntowijoyo (1995) explains the methodological importance of historical research and source criticism. These contributions provide an important foundation for understanding the historical dimensions of Islamic scholarship.

Although previous studies have established substantial conceptual and methodological foundations, the discussion of historical approaches often remains focused on particular elements rather than examining their interconnected functions within a unified analytical framework. The relationship between asbab al-nuzul, social context, periodization, and historical criticism therefore deserves further systematic examination. These four elements represent interconnected dimensions of historical inquiry: asbab al-nuzul identifies the immediate circumstances surrounding Qur'anic revelation; social context explains the broader conditions of the society in which religious teachings emerged; periodization organizes historical developments into meaningful chronological frameworks; and historical criticism evaluates the authenticity and credibility of the sources used to reconstruct the past.

Based on this consideration, this article aims to examine the nature of the historical approach in Islamic studies, explain the position and functions of its four principal elements, and analyze their relevance and limitations in understanding Islamic teachings and intellectual developments. By integrating these elements into a coherent conceptual framework, this study seeks to demonstrate that historical analysis can provide a more comprehensive, contextual, and critical understanding of Islam while maintaining its relationship with normative religious principles.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a library research design, in which data and sources were obtained from written materials. This method was selected because the research focuses on concepts, theories, and historical records documented in various scholarly works. The data sources were divided into two categories. Primary sources consisted of classical and authoritative works in the fields of Qur'anic sciences ('Ulum al-Qur'an) and Islamic history, including Asbab al-Nuzul by al-Wahidi; Lubab al-Nuqul fi Asbab al-Nuzul and al-Itqan fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an by al-Suyuti; Manahil al-'Irfan fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an by al-Zarqani; Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk by al-Tabari; and al-Muqaddimah by Ibn Khaldun. Secondary

sources included books on Islamic studies methodology, works by historians and Islamic scholars, and relevant scholarly journal articles.

Data were collected through documentation techniques involving three stages: (1) identifying and selecting relevant literature based on specific keywords; (2) reading and recording information relevant to the four research focuses; and (3) classifying the collected data according to thematic categories. The data were analyzed using content analysis through three approaches: descriptive-analytical analysis to explain relevant concepts, comparative analysis to examine differences and similarities among the perspectives of scholars and intellectual traditions, and historical-critical analysis to assess the strength of arguments and the reliability of sources. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation by comparing similar ideas across works written by authors from different intellectual and scholarly backgrounds.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Nature of the Historical Approach in Islamic Studies

History plays a significant role in human life because it preserves past experiences, generates new perspectives, and provides valuable lessons for human development. The Qur'an, as the primary source of Islamic teachings, contains numerous historical values that offer meaningful lessons, particularly for Muslims. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, the discipline of tarikh (history) has an important position because it contributes to understanding the development of Islamic teachings, thought, and civilization. The study of history therefore has both general educational benefits and academic significance (Samdani, 2024).

Historians have proposed different definitions of history. Edward Freeman, for example, describes history as "past politics," while Ernst Bernheim defines it as the study of human development and human activities as social beings. Hasan views tarikh as a discipline that examines events according to their particular characteristics and chronological contexts, focusing on human beings, time, and the circumstances surrounding historical events (Haryanto, 2017). These perspectives indicate that history is not simply a record of past events but also an effort to understand human experiences within specific temporal and social settings.

The historical approach in Islamic studies is based on the assumption that Islam did not emerge in a historical vacuum. Rather, Islamic teachings developed within particular social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances. History should therefore be understood not merely as a chronological sequence of past events but as a dynamic process that influences the development of Islamic thought, practices, and

institutions. Through this approach, Islam can be studied not only as a normative religious system but also as a historical phenomenon and civilization that continuously interacts with human realities across different periods and geographical settings (Arif & Supriyanto, 2025). Accordingly, the historical approach seeks to understand Islamic teachings, intellectual traditions, institutions, and religious practices by examining their temporal, spatial, social, and historical backgrounds.

One important aspect of the historical approach is asbab al-nuzul, which refers to the circumstances or events associated with the revelation of Qur'anic verses. Al-Zarqani defines asbab al-nuzul as events that occur and are followed by the revelation of one or more verses addressing those events or explaining their legal implications. Similarly, al-Qaththan explains that the circumstances of revelation may involve particular events or questions directed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) (al-Zarqani, n.d.; al-Qaththan, n.d.). These definitions demonstrate that the revelation of certain Qur'anic verses was connected to specific situations experienced by the early Muslim community.

Knowledge of asbab al-nuzul must be based on authentic reports transmitted by the Companions who witnessed the revelation. Al-Wahidi emphasizes that explanations concerning the circumstances of revelation cannot be established merely through personal reasoning but must rely on reliable reports from those who directly witnessed the events surrounding the revelation (al-Wahidi, 1991). This principle reflects an early form of historical source criticism within Islamic scholarship. It establishes the importance of examining the authenticity and reliability of transmitted information before using it as a basis for interpretation.

The significance of asbab al-nuzul lies in its contribution to understanding the meaning, objectives, and legal implications of Qur'anic verses. Knowledge of the circumstances of revelation helps interpreters identify the wisdom behind particular legal provisions, understand the relationship between a verse and the situation it addresses, and avoid interpretations that disregard its historical background. Al-Shatibi considers knowledge of the circumstances of revelation essential for anyone seeking to understand the Qur'an properly (al-Shatibi, 1997). From a historical perspective, asbab al-nuzul represents the micro-context of revelation because it focuses on specific and immediate circumstances associated with particular verses. Nevertheless, not every verse has a specific occasion of revelation, and the available reports vary in their levels of authenticity. Therefore, the study of asbab al-nuzul needs to be complemented by a broader examination of social conditions.

Social context represents the macro-context of revelation, referring to the general circumstances of Arabian society during the seventh century CE. These circumstances included religious beliefs, tribal structures, economic activities, political organization, and cultural practices. The Qur'an was revealed in a society characterized by strong tribal solidarity, the existence of slavery, unequal social relations, and the central position of Mecca as a center of trade and religious worship. Understanding these conditions is important because Qur'anic teachings addressed real situations within the society in which they were revealed.

Social context also helps explain the differences between Makkiyah and Madaniyah verses. Generally, Makkiyah verses emphasize monotheism, faith, the Day of Judgment, and moral values. These themes correspond to the religious circumstances of Meccan society, where polytheistic beliefs remained dominant and Muslims constituted a minority. In contrast, Madaniyah verses contain more detailed discussions of legal provisions, social relations, and community organization because Muslims in Medina had developed a more established social and political community (al-Qaththan, n.d.; al-Zarkashi, n.d.). These differences demonstrate that the development of Qur'anic teachings cannot be separated from the changing conditions of the Muslim community.

The importance of social context is also reflected in contemporary approaches to Qur'anic interpretation. Fazlur Rahman, through his double movement theory, proposes that interpreters first examine the historical circumstances surrounding a verse to identify its underlying moral principles and general objectives. These principles are then applied to contemporary situations by considering present-day social realities. This approach seeks to prevent specific historical regulations from being understood without considering their broader moral purposes (Rahman, 1982). Abdullah Saeed similarly emphasizes the importance of contextual interpretation by distinguishing between different levels of Qur'anic values, including fundamental values and instructional values that are closely connected to the circumstances in which particular verses were revealed (Saeed, 2006). These perspectives demonstrate that historical and social analysis can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between Qur'anic teachings and contemporary realities.

Another important element of the historical approach is periodization, which refers to the division of historical developments into chronological periods characterized by particular features. Periodization is not simply a mechanical division of time but an analytical framework used by historians to identify significant

changes and continuities. Through periodization, extensive historical developments can be organized systematically, allowing researchers to understand the relationship between events, individuals, and institutions within particular historical settings (Kuntowijoyo, 1995).

In Qur'anic studies, the most fundamental periodization concerns the division of revelation into the Meccan period, which lasted approximately thirteen years, and the Medinan period, which lasted approximately ten years. This classification provides a framework for examining the development of Islamic teachings from the early propagation of faith and monotheism to the establishment of a Muslim community with more comprehensive social and legal regulations. Chronological knowledge of revelation also contributes to the study of nasikh-mansukh (abrogation), which requires an understanding of the sequence of revelation when examining verses that appear to contain different legal provisions (al-Zarkashi, n.d.).

In the broader history of Islamic civilization, Harun Nasution divides Islamic history into three major periods: the classical period (650–1250 CE), the medieval period (1250–1800 CE), and the modern period (1800 CE to the present). The classical period was characterized by expansion, integration, and intellectual achievements, while the medieval period witnessed political fragmentation and the development of major Islamic empires, including the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires. The modern period is associated with the revival and reform of Muslim societies (Nasution, 1996). Such periodization helps researchers identify historical transformations and understand Islamic intellectual and institutional developments in relation to their respective periods.

The fourth element is historical criticism, which functions as a means of examining the authenticity and reliability of historical sources. The study of asbab al-nuzul, social context, and periodization depends on the quality of the information used to reconstruct historical circumstances. In historical methodology, source criticism is an essential stage of research because historical information cannot be accepted without examining its origin, credibility, and consistency with other evidence. Kuntowijoyo identifies historical research as involving topic selection, source collection (heuristics), verification or source criticism, interpretation, and historical writing (historiography) (Kuntowijoyo, 1995).

Historical criticism generally consists of external and internal criticism. External criticism examines the authenticity of a source by investigating its origin, material characteristics, language, and authorship. Internal criticism, on the other hand, evaluates the credibility of the information contained in the source by examining the

competence of its author or witness and comparing its contents with other historical evidence (Gottschalk, 1985; Abdurrahman, 2011). These procedures are important in Islamic studies because historical narratives and religious reports must be evaluated carefully before being used as evidence.

The Islamic scholarly tradition has developed its own critical methodology through hadith studies, particularly sanad and matan criticism. Sanad criticism examines the chain of transmission by assessing continuity, the moral integrity (‘adalah) of narrators, and their accuracy (dhabt). Meanwhile, matan criticism evaluates the content of a report by considering its consistency with the Qur’an, stronger hadith reports, established historical information, and sound reasoning. These methods demonstrate that Islamic scholarship has long recognized the importance of evaluating both the transmitters and the contents of historical reports (al-Qaththan, n.d.; al-Suyuti, n.d.). Since reports concerning asbab al-nuzul are transmitted through narrations, they must also be examined using these critical principles.

In modern Islamic studies, historical criticism has generated debates concerning the reliability of classical Islamic sources. These debates demonstrate the importance of applying critical methods consistently while also recognizing the intellectual contributions of the Islamic transmission tradition. Excessive skepticism may overlook the methodological instruments developed by Muslim scholars, whereas uncritical acceptance may lead researchers to rely on reports whose authenticity has not been adequately established. Therefore, integrating classical hadith criticism with modern historical methodology offers a more balanced framework for examining Islamic sources.

Overall, the historical approach in Islamic studies involves four interconnected elements: asbab al-nuzul as the micro-context of revelation, social context as the macro-context, periodization as the chronological framework, and historical criticism as the method for evaluating source reliability. These elements should not be treated as separate analytical instruments but as complementary components of historical inquiry. Asbab al-nuzul identifies specific circumstances, social context explains broader societal conditions, periodization situates developments within a chronological framework, and historical criticism evaluates the reliability of the evidence. Their integration enables researchers to understand Islamic teachings and civilization more comprehensively while maintaining a balance between normative principles and historical realities (Arif & Supriyanto, 2025).

Integration, Relevance, and Limitations of the Historical Approach

The four elements discussed above constitute an integrated methodological framework. Historical criticism ensures the authenticity and reliability of the sources used. Asbab al-nuzul explains the specific circumstances underlying the revelation of Qur'anic verses. Social context provides a broader understanding of the society in which particular teachings emerged and developed. Periodization places these elements within a chronological framework, allowing historical changes and continuities to be identified. When one of these elements is neglected, the resulting interpretation may become incomplete or distorted. For example, using reports of asbab al-nuzul without examining their authenticity may lead to inaccurate conclusions. Similarly, analyzing social context without considering periodization may result in confusion between the circumstances of Meccan and Medinan society. Therefore, these four elements need to be applied together to produce a comprehensive understanding of Islamic history and the development of its teachings.

The relevance of the historical approach to contemporary Islamic studies can be identified in at least three aspects. First, it helps distinguish between fundamental religious teachings that are considered permanent and their forms of application, which may change according to social and historical circumstances. This distinction enables Muslims to respond to emerging challenges without abandoning the fundamental principles of Islam. Second, the historical approach encourages critical awareness of sources, enabling Muslims to evaluate religious information based on its origins, authenticity, and reliability rather than accepting claims without adequate examination. Third, it promotes appreciation of the diversity of Muslim experiences across different geographical locations and historical periods, including the development of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago. In this regard, historical analysis provides an important foundation for understanding how Islamic teachings interact with diverse cultural and social realities (Abdullah, 1996).

Nevertheless, the historical approach also has certain limitations. Historical analysis cannot independently determine the truth of divine revelation or the spiritual value of religious teachings because such questions extend beyond the scope of historical inquiry. If applied excessively or treated as the sole method of understanding religion, the historical approach may lead to historicism, namely, the assumption that all religious teachings are merely products of particular historical circumstances and are therefore entirely relative. Such a position risks overlooking the normative and theological dimensions of Islam. Consequently, the historical approach should be employed alongside the normative approach in a

complementary relationship, in which both perspectives critically inform one another rather than negate each other (Abdullah, 1996).

CONCLUSION

The historical approach in Islamic studies is a method of understanding Islamic teachings, thought, and practices by considering the elements of time, place, actors, and the background of events. This approach is not new to the Islamic intellectual tradition, as the disciplines of asbab al-nuzul, the distinction between Makkiyah and Madaniyah revelations, and hadith criticism have long reflected Muslim scholars' historical awareness. The development of modern historical and social sciences has further enriched this approach by providing broader analytical tools.

The findings indicate that the historical approach operates through four complementary elements. Asbab al-nuzul serves as a micro-context that helps clarify the meaning of Qur'anic verses and prevent misunderstandings while maintaining the principle that the general wording of a text remains applicable beyond its specific occasion of revelation. Social context functions as a macro-context that explains how the Qur'an brought about social transformation and helps distinguish enduring moral objectives from their forms of application. Periodization organizes historical developments into meaningful chronological units, although such divisions always involve interpretations that require critical examination. Historical criticism, through external and internal criticism, in conjunction with sanad and matan criticism and enriched by Ibn Khaldun's ideas, provides the basis for establishing the validity of the other three elements.

The historical approach remains relevant to addressing the challenges facing contemporary Muslim communities because it connects texts with their contexts, encourages critical attitudes toward sources, and promotes appreciation of the diversity of Islamic experiences. Nevertheless, this approach has limitations and cannot replace the normative approach. Therefore, this study recommends that the historical approach be applied in an integrated manner with normative approaches and the principles of ushul al-fiqh and 'ulum al-Qur'an. Future research may apply this four-element framework to more specific cases, such as the interpretation of verses on family law or the history of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago.

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