



## AI AND ISLAMIC REFORM MOVEMENTS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JADIDISM AND CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL REFORMISM

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### **Abstract**

This article offers a comparative analysis of the Jadid movement in early twentieth-century Central Asia and contemporary forms of digital Islamic reformism influenced by artificial intelligence (AI). It examines how both movements employ emerging technologies—print culture and modern schooling in the Jadid era, and digital media and AI in the present—to advance education, rational inquiry, and moral renewal. Through an interdisciplinary framework combining intellectual history, digital humanities, and the sociology of technology, the study identifies continuities in reformist ideals of enlightenment and progress while noting key differences in epistemology, authority, and communication. The findings suggest that AI not only transforms how religious reform is expressed but also redefines the broader relationship between Islam, modernity, and technological innovation in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** Jadid movement; Islamic reform; artificial intelligence; digital reformism; Central Asia; modernity; digital humanities; Muslim intellectual history; technology and religion; postcolonial modernism.

Introduction. Throughout Islamic history, moments of profound technological and intellectual change have generated new waves of religious reform. One of the most influential was the Jadid movement, which emerged in Central Asia at the turn of the twentieth century under Russian colonial rule. The Jadids—modernist Muslim



intellectuals such as Ismail Gasprinski, Abdurauf Fitrat, Mahmudhoja Behbudi, and Munawwar Qari—sought to rejuvenate Muslim society through education, literacy, and rational inquiry. They viewed modern science and secular knowledge not as threats to faith but as essential instruments for renewal. Their reform agenda, known as *usul-i jadid* (“the new method”), represented one of the earliest and most systematic projects of Islamic modernism in the region, emphasizing cultural awakening through the technology of the printed word and new pedagogical institutions.

In the twenty-first century, a similar spirit of reform has resurfaced under the transformative power of digital technologies and artificial intelligence. Contemporary Muslim educators, preachers, and digital activists employ social media, online learning systems, and AI-driven applications to reimagine Islamic education, democratize access to knowledge, and challenge traditional hierarchies of interpretation. This evolving phenomenon, referred to here as digital reformism, reflects many of the intellectual ambitions of the *Jadids*—especially the pursuit of enlightenment through new media—while emerging from a radically different technological and epistemological landscape.

This study compares these two reformist trajectories to explore how technological innovation reshapes the production, transmission, and authority of religious knowledge. It asks:

- How do emerging technologies influence the structure and dissemination of Islamic reformist thought?
- In what ways do the *Jadid* and digital reform movements mirror each other’s goals and challenges?
- How does AI redefine concepts of authenticity, authority, and community within Islamic modernity?

By situating both movements within the continuum of Muslim engagements with modern knowledge systems, this paper argues that AI and digital media



function as the new “printing press” of the Muslim world—capable of both empowering and destabilizing religious reform.

Main Part. The Jadid movement arose during a time of colonial subjugation and cultural stagnation, when the Muslim societies of Central Asia faced both external domination and internal inertia. Jadid intellectuals recognized that survival and progress required embracing modern education and communication technologies. Their “new method” schools replaced rote memorization with analytical learning, integrating secular sciences and social subjects into the curriculum.

The Jadids viewed the printing press as a revolutionary medium for social awakening. Newspapers such as *Taraqqi* and *Hurriyat* became tools of intellectual resistance, spreading modernist interpretations of Islam and calls for social reform. Through these efforts, they cultivated a new public sphere in which Muslims could participate in debates about science, faith, and national identity.

Scholars of modern Islamic thought, such as Adeb Khalid and Stéphane Dudoignon, argue that Jadidism marked a pivotal turn toward vernacular modernity, wherein Muslim intellectuals adopted global ideas of rationalism and progress while grounding them in Islamic ethics.<sup>1</sup> The Jadids’ project thus reflected an early form of technological humanism—an attempt to reconcile faith with modern knowledge systems through the tools of their era.

In the twenty-first century, digital technology and AI have become the new engines of reform. Muslim scholars, educators, and lay intellectuals increasingly rely on AI-assisted translation, automated sermon generation, digital Qur’an applications, and online Islamic education platforms.<sup>2</sup> These tools expand access to knowledge, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to engage with sacred texts and scholarly debates without geographic or institutional barriers.

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<sup>1</sup> In N. De Troye & S. A. Dudoignon (Eds.), *Islam in Politics in Russia and Central Asia* (pp. 1–27). London: Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Bunt, G. R. (2018). *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority*.



However, this democratization introduces complex questions about authority and authenticity. When AI algorithms recommend religious interpretations or generate explanatory texts, they implicitly shape theological understanding. The question arises: can a machine-mediated hermeneutic preserve the spiritual and contextual nuance of human scholarship? This tension mirrors earlier debates during the Jadid era, when modern schools and print media were accused of undermining traditional authority.

Moreover, AI-driven personalization of content—through recommendation systems and predictive analytics—creates fragmented digital publics. While this enables pluralism and innovation, it also risks filter bubbles and misinformation, challenging the integrity of religious discourse. Digital reformism thus oscillates between empowerment and alienation: it opens unprecedented avenues for learning but also detaches users from traditional interpretive frameworks.

At the same time, many contemporary reformers use AI positively—to analyze patterns in Qur'anic semantics, identify intertextual connections, or preserve endangered manuscripts through computer vision. Such uses echo the Jadid ideal of knowledge as moral progress, suggesting that technology, when ethically guided, can serve spiritual as well as intellectual ends.

The continuities between the Jadid and digital reform movements lie in their shared emphasis on education, rationality, and moral renewal through new technologies. Both perceive innovation not as a threat to Islam but as a means to strengthen its intellectual and ethical foundations. Yet the differences are equally significant: the Jadids operated within localized, teacher-centered networks, whereas digital reformism unfolds in decentralized, algorithmic, and user-driven environments.

AI introduces a novel epistemological challenge. The Jadids sought to humanize modernity through moral pedagogy, while AI risks depersonalizing knowledge production through automation. Nevertheless, both contexts reveal a



persistent theme: the struggle to align technological power with ethical responsibility. The Jadid experiment in humanistic reform thus serves as a historical mirror for the dilemmas faced by digital reformers navigating an algorithmic world.

Conclusion. The comparison between the Jadid movement and AI-driven digital reformism illuminates a recurring pattern in Islamic intellectual history: each era of technological change inspires new efforts to harmonize faith, reason, and progress. The Jadids utilized print and schooling to revitalize Muslim consciousness under colonialism, while modern reformers employ digital networks and AI to renew Islamic discourse in an age of globalization.

Both movements demonstrate that technology is not merely an instrument but a catalyst of theological and social transformation. However, the lessons of Jadidism underscore that true reform must remain anchored in moral and humanistic values. As AI increasingly mediates religious experience, Muslim thinkers face the challenge of ensuring that innovation enhances, rather than replaces, human understanding.

Ultimately, by placing these two reformist projects in dialogue, this study argues that the quest for a just, enlightened, and rational Muslim society continues across generations and technologies. Whether through the Jadids' classrooms or today's digital platforms, the enduring mission remains the same: to cultivate an Islam that speaks confidently to modernity without losing its ethical soul.

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