Madrasah as the Central Educational Institutions during the Abbasid Era

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Abstract

This article critically analyzes the madrasah as a central institutional apparatus in the formation and development of Islamic education during the Abbasid period. Rather than functioning merely as sites of knowledge transmission, madrasahs operated as epistemic and socio-political institutions that shaped intellectual authority, religious orthodoxy, and social stratification. Employing a qualitative library research design, this study conducts a critical historiographical analysis of classical and contemporary sources. The findings reveal that, particularly through the Nizamiyyah Madrasah, the Abbasid educational system underwent a process of institutional consolidation marked by curriculum standardization, the integration of revealed (*naqlī*) and rational (*ʿaqlī*) sciences, and the professionalization of pedagogical practices. Moreover, madrasahs functioned as mechanisms of ideological reproduction, contributing to the consolidation of Sunni orthodoxy and the stabilization of Abbasid political authority. This study argues that the Abbasid madrasah represents a foundational model for the structural and epistemological configuration of formal Islamic education, offering enduring theoretical implications for contemporary Islamic educational institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Studies on the history of Islamic education cannot be separated from the role of educational institutions in shaping the intellectual tradition and civilization of the Muslim community (Ardiansyah et al., 2023; Raharjo & Yahdi, 2025; Adnan & Haramaini, 2025). One of the most significant periods in the development of Islamic educational institutions was the Abbasid Dynasty (750–1258 CE), which is frequently regarded as the golden age of Islamic civilization. During this period, the madrasah underwent a transformation from an informal learning space into a formal, structured, and systematic educational institution with strong socio-political legitimacy.

In the Abbasid era, madrasahs functioned not only as centers for the transmission of Islamic sciences but also as strategic institutions in the formation of scholarly orthodoxy, the reproduction of intellectual elites, and the reinforcement of the state's religious and political hegemony (Andhika et al., 2024). The establishment of the Nizamiyah Madrasahs by Nizam al-Mulk, for example, illustrates how

madrasahs became essential instruments for consolidating Sunni ideology and standardizing the Islamic scholarly curriculum. Thus, madrasahs should not be understood merely as educational institutions, but as entities operating within complex relations of power, political interests, and the social dynamics of Abbasid society.

Nevertheless, existing scholarship tends to position madrasahs as supporting institutions within the broader narrative of Islamic civilizational progress, rather than as primary actors actively shaping the social and intellectual structures of society (Muid et al., 2025; Engkizar et al., 2024; 2025). Historical studies have often emphasized the biographies of individual scholars or the development of specific disciplines, while institutional analyses of madrasahs as formal educational systems remain relatively limited, particularly with regard to the relationship between knowledge, power, and religious legitimacy.

Therefore, this study seeks to critically examine the role of the madrasah as a central institution during the Abbasid Dynasty through a historical-sociological approach and institutional analysis. This research is expected to reveal how madrasahs functioned as centers for the production and dissemination of knowledge, as well as instruments for shaping social structures and Islamic discourses that exerted a long-term influence on the development of Islamic education up to the modern era.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using library research. Data were collected from relevant books, academic journals, historical documents of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, and the works of classical Muslim scholars related to Islamic civilization and education. Data collection was conducted through documentation techniques. The collected data were analyzed using content analysis to identify patterns and meanings concerning the influence of Islamic civilization on the development of educational systems up to the modern era (Engkizar et al., 2022; 2023; Htay et al., 2025; Masudah & Nur, 2024; Rizky, 2024; Suryani, 2018; Ummah et al., 2025; Murtopo, 2014).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
The Historical Emergence of the Madrasah

The madrasah as a formal educational institution developed significantly during the Abbasid Dynasty (750–1258 CE). Prior to the emergence of madrasahs, Islamic education was generally conducted in mosques, *halaqah* (study circles), or the private residences of scholars. However, as the demand for more organized and systematic education increased, a new institutional system known as the madrasah gradually emerged (Listari & Alimni, 2025; Syaifuddin, 2024; Farikhah et al., 2024).

Throughout the history of Islamic education, various educational institutions and learning centers existed, each with distinct characteristics, levels, and functions. Ahmad Syalabi, in his work *al-Tarbiyah al-Islamiyyah: Nuzumuha, Falsafatuha, Tarikhuha*, identifies several classical educational institutions, including *al-Kuttāb*, *al-Qushur*, *Hawānit*, *al-Warrāqīn*, *Manāzil al-'Ulamā'*, and madrasahs. He categorizes these institutions into two major groups: pre-madrasah educational institutions and post-madrasah institutions.

In the early phase of Islamic history, educational traditions were primarily sustained through institutions known as *Kuttāb*, which functioned as elementary schools focused on literacy skills and basic religious instruction. The *Kuttāb* served as the foundation of elementary education in early Muslim society before the development of more formal and complex institutional systems.

Regarding the historical transformation from mosques as centers of education to the establishment of madrasahs, scholars have proposed various theories that are not entirely uniform. One of the most influential theories was advanced by George Makdisi. Based on his historical analysis, Makdisi argues that the transformation of Islamic educational institutions did not occur abruptly but evolved gradually. He identifies three major phases in the development of the madrasah: the mosque phase, in which educational activities were conducted in a general and informal manner; the *mosque-khān* phase, a transitional stage in which mosques were equipped with lodging facilities to support students; and the madrasah phase, characterized by the emergence of independent and structured educational institutions distinct from mosques.

Accordingly, the development of the madrasah as a formal educational institution can be understood as a complex evolutionary process involving shifts in the social and religious functions of mosques and the growing need for more specialized and organized educational institutions (Hasib, 2024; Karimah & Khasanah, 2025).

The second stage in this institutional evolution was the *mosque-khān*, a mosque integrated with a *khān* (hostel or dormitory). Unlike ordinary mosques, mosque-khāns functioned not only as places of worship and basic learning but also as residential facilities for students from various regions. This institutional form expanded rapidly during the tenth century, parallel to the increasing mobility of scholars and students within the tradition of *riḥlah 'ilmiyyah* (scholarly travel).

After passing through these stages, the madrasah emerged as a fully developed formal educational institution. Essentially, the madrasah represented a refinement that combined the mosque's religious and intellectual functions with the residential function of the *khān*. Madrasah complexes typically consisted of classrooms, dormitories, and a mosque that served as the spiritual and intellectual center.

According to Hasan Asy'ari in *The History of Islamic Education*, the emergence of the madrasah should be understood as the result of gradual institutional evolution from the mosque as the earliest educational center to a more structured institution integrated with residential facilities. Thus, the madrasah represented a response to the need for a systematic, organized, and comprehensive educational institution.

Zuhairini further outlines several reasons for the establishment of madrasahs outside mosques: Study circles (*halaqah*) conducted in mosques often disrupted worship activities; the expansion of knowledge led to an increasing number of *halaqah* that could no longer be accommodated within mosques; the growing influence of the turks in abbasid governance encouraged investment in education to maintain political stability, including salaried teachers and improved facilities; the desire of political elites to seek religious merit and divine forgiveness; concerns regarding inheritance and the preservation of wealth; and efforts to preserve and promote particular religious schools of thought (Karim, 2019; Muhajir, 2003).

In general, one of the main factors driving the establishment of madrasahs was the overwhelming growth of *halaqah* activities in mosques, which complicated mosque functions and necessitated the creation of more structured educational institutions. A prominent example is al-Azhar, which in 378 AH underwent a transformation from a grand mosque into a formal educational center.

Similar developments occurred throughout the Islamic world, with educational institutions attracting students from both eastern and western regions. In the context of higher education, one of the earliest institutions with an advanced academic structure was *Bayt al-Ḥikmah* (the House of Wisdom), established by Caliph al-Ma'mun in 830 CE in Baghdad. In addition to serving as a translation center, it developed into a major research institution equipped with a large public library and an observatory that functioned as a center for astronomical studies.

Observatories that later emerged in the Islamic world served not only as research facilities but also as educational institutions facilitating systematic knowledge transmission. Consequently, the emergence of madrasahs and other scholarly institutions reflected both rapid intellectual growth and the need for more focused and organized learning environments than mosques alone could provide.

Initially, these educational institutions primarily served local communities. Over time, however, they expanded and played a crucial role in supporting governmental structures and the caliphal system. This significant transformation began during the tenure of Niẓām al-Mulk al-Ṭūsī, a prominent statesman of the Seljuk Dynasty.

Through his policies, Niẓām al-Mulk established a network of state-sponsored schools known as *al-Madāris al-Niẓāmiyyah*. He provided financial support (*infāq*) for the construction of educational institutions across various regions and introduced professional standards in education, including official attire for teachers. These reforms strengthened institutional legitimacy and affirmed the role of educational institutions as centers of knowledge production and bureaucratic training.

One of the most influential madrasahs in Islamic educational history was the Niẓāmiyyah Madrasah, founded in the eleventh century by the Seljuk vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (1018–1092 CE). Its central institution in Baghdad was constructed between 457–459 AH and quickly gained widespread recognition across the Islamic world. The expansion of its network established the Niẓāmiyyah as a model of higher education with well-defined institutional standards.

The Niẓāmiyyah Madrasah played a crucial role in educating students by providing not only academic instruction but also financial support, including food and, in many cases, monthly stipends. This system ensured learning stability and attracted highly qualified students. *Niẓām al-Mulk* placed strong emphasis on academic quality, with even Abbasid caliphs participating in the appointment of teachers. The madrasah became a gathering place for leading intellectuals, most notably Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, author of *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and a central figure in Islamic intellectual history.

With its systematic institutional structure and curriculum focused primarily on jurisprudence and hadith, the *Niẓāmiyyah* is widely regarded as the first major madrasah in Islamic history. It became a reference model for subsequent madrasahs in major cities such as Nishapur, Balkh, and Mosul.

Beyond religious education, madrasahs also developed into centers for the dissemination of general knowledge. Alongside Islamic sciences, they provided instruction in rational sciences and natural philosophy. Prominent scholars such as al-Khwārizmī, Ibn Sīnā (*Avicenna*), and al-Rāzī utilized madrasahs as platforms for teaching and advancing disciplines such as mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and philosophy. Their works later became integral components of madrasah curricula, contributing to the formation of a comprehensive Islamic intellectual tradition.

In addition to serving as centers of scholarship, madrasahs played a strategic role as professional and administrative training institutions. They prepared future state officials, judges, and administrators through formal education in fiqh, Islamic law, *siyāsah shar'iyyah*, and principles of public administration. Thus, madrasahs functioned dually as multidisciplinary centers of learning and as institutions for bureaucratic formation in the classical Islamic world.

Curriculum

The madrasah curriculum during the Abbasid Dynasty was comprehensive and integrative in nature. Madrasahs did not limit their instruction to religious sciences alone but also incorporated general sciences that supported the advancement of Islamic civilization.

Broadly speaking, the madrasah curriculum during this period encompassed

two major categories of knowledge: *Naqli* (Revealed/Religious Sciences): Quranic studies and exegesis (*tafsir*), Hadith, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and its principles (uṣūl al-fiqh), theology (*'aqīdah*) and Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), as well as Arabic language studies, including grammar and rhetoric (*balāghah*). Aqli (Rational/Intellectual Sciences): Philosophy and logic (*manṭiq*), mathematics, astronomy, medicine, natural sciences, and chemistry.

The balance between religious and rational sciences demonstrates that Islamic education during the Abbasid period had not yet experienced a dichotomy between sacred and secular knowledge. Knowledge was viewed as an integral part of worship and as a means of understanding the greatness of Allah.

The Islamic educational curriculum of the Abbasid era was systematically structured and differentiated according to educational levels and institutional functions. At the most basic level, education was conducted in *kuttāb*, elementary institutions that served as the foundation of learning for children, followed by secondary and higher levels of education. Secondary education curriculum and higher education curriculum: elementary education curriculum (*Kuttāb*) At the *kuttāb* level, the curriculum focused on developing basic religious knowledge and early literacy skills. Core subjects included reading and memorizing the Quran; instruction in fundamental Islamic practices such as ablution, prayer, fasting, and other essential acts of worship; writing skills; narratives of prominent figures in Islamic history; reading and memorizing poetry and simple prose; basic arithmetic; and introductory lessons in Arabic grammar (*naḥw* and *ṣarf*) appropriate to children's cognitive abilities. This curriculum aimed to establish a strong religious, moral, and intellectual foundation for subsequent levels of education.

Secondary education curriculum at the secondary level, there was no standardized curriculum uniformly applied across the Islamic world. Nevertheless, secondary educational institutions generally offered a broader and more integrative range of subjects. Instruction expanded beyond basic religious studies to include a combination of religious and rational sciences, reflecting the intellectual needs of students preparing for advanced study.

Higher education curriculum at the level of higher education, Islamic institutions typically organized instruction into two major fields of specialization. The first field focused on religious sciences and Arabic language and literature, commonly referred to as *Naqli sciences*, including Quranic exegesis, Hadith, fiqh and uṣūl al-fiqh, Arabic grammar (*naḥw* and *ṣarf*), rhetoric (*balāghah*), and Arabic literature. The second field emphasized *Aqli sciences*, encompassing logic (*manṭiq*), natural sciences and chemistry, music, mathematics, measurement sciences, astronomy (*'ilm al-falak*), theology (*'ilm al-ilāhiyyāt*), zoology, botany, and medicine.

Teaching Patterns

At the Nizāmiyyah Madrasah, pedagogical practices placed strong emphasis on memorization (*taḥfīẓ*) as a primary instrument for knowledge internalization. Memorization was not merely regarded as a basic skill but was cultivated intensively under the condition that all memorized materials were derived from texts possessing clear scholarly legitimacy and authoritative authenticity. This reflects the institution's epistemological orientation toward the primacy of authoritative texts within the Islamic scholarly tradition.

In addition to memorization, instructional practices in higher educational institutions, including the *Nizāmiyyah* Madrasah, integrated lecturing, dialogic inquiry, and structured discussion. One distinctive pedagogical model was the *ḥalaqah*, a traditional instructional setting in which a teacher or scholar sat on a mat surrounded by students. This model facilitated close intellectual interaction between teachers and learners while enabling direct, personal, and continuous transmission of knowledge.

In the academic tradition of the Nizāmiyyah Madrasah, a teacher delivered

instruction openly to all attending students without formal administrative restrictions. Student participation in a particular learning session was largely determined by the scholarly reputation and intellectual authority of the instructor. Renowned scholars with strong academic credibility attracted large audiences, whereas instructors lacking broad recognition tended to draw fewer students. This phenomenon indicates that scholarly legitimacy significantly influenced learning participation dynamics in medieval Islamic higher education.

Furthermore, the concept of the educator in the Islamic intellectual tradition extended beyond the role of knowledge transmitter to include a continuous commitment to *tazkiyat al-'ilm* the purification and development of knowledge. An educator who became complacent with their scholarly achievements was viewed as intellectually stagnant. An ideal educator was expected to remain an active learner, continuously seeking knowledge, expanding insight, and improving competence throughout life. This attitude reflects an early form of self-regulated learning, whereby teaching and learning were inseparable aspects of scholarly identity.

Teaching Methods in Higher Education Teaching methods employed in Islamic higher education institutions included the following: Lecturing Method (*al-muḥāḍarah*) In this method, instructors delivered course material through systematic repetition to strengthen students' memorization. Knowledge transmission relied on structured repetition as a means of internalization. This method took two main forms: *al-imlā'* (dictation), in which the teacher dictated material to be written down and memorized by students; and *al-qirā'ah 'alā al-shaykh* or *al-'arḍ*, whereby students read texts aloud before the teacher for verification, correction, and authorization. Both methods emphasized textual accuracy, scholarly validation, and continuity of intellectual transmission (*sanad*).

Discussion Method (*al-munāẓarah*) This method aimed to test students' argumentative strength through critical examination of ideas. Knowledge was constructed through students' intellectual engagement and experiential learning. The discussion practices at the Nizāmiyyah Madrasah closely resembled modern problem-based and contextual learning approaches, focusing on argumentation, problem-solving, and real-world relevance. Expected competencies included critical thinking, research skills, decision-making, idea organization, creative reasoning, and logical integration of concepts.

Distance Correspondence Method (*al-ta'līm al-murāsalah*) This method involved students submitting written questions to scholars located in distant regions. It allowed scholarly consultation beyond geographical boundaries and facilitated broader intellectual networks.

Scholarly Travel (*riḥlah 'ilmiyyah*) This method required students individually or in groups to travel long distances to consult scholars at their residences. Such visits were especially common when scholars were no longer actively teaching in mosques or madrasahs but remained authoritative figures in specific disciplines. Students voluntarily sought their guidance to resolve complex scholarly issues.

Overall, teaching practices at the Nizāmiyyah Madrasah primarily employed dictation (*al-imlā'*) and reading with question-and-answer sessions (*al-qirā'ah 'alā al-shaykh / al-'arḍ*). These approaches fall within direct instruction models, as teachers delivered material accompanied by explanations that students were required to comprehend thoroughly.

During the Seljuk period, madrasahs emerged as highly influential educational institutions. Their establishment was closely linked to political interests, particularly the Seljuk rulers' efforts to counter Shi'ite influence and strengthen Sunni orthodoxy. Through the *Nizāmiyyah* Madrasahs, Sunni religious doctrines were embedded into the curriculum, resulting in the dominance of religious subjects within the instructional structure. Teaching methods therefore played a strategic role in

transmitting both knowledge and ideological traditions from teachers to students (Rahman et al., 2023; Kamsi, 2022; Isbir, 2017).

Teaching Methods during the Abbasid Period Educational methods during the Abbasid era can be broadly categorized into three types:

Oral Methods, including dictation (*imlā'*), lecturing (*al-samā'*), reading (*qirā'ah*), and discussion. Dictation was considered effective and reliable, as students produced written records to compensate for limited memorization capacity. Lecturing involved teachers reading or explaining texts from written sources or memory, while students listened, took notes, and engaged in scheduled questioning. Reading methods were used primarily to train textual literacy, whereas discussion was particularly prominent in disciplines requiring deep reasoning, such as philosophy and jurisprudence.

Memorization Methods, which occupied a central position in Islamic education. Memorization enabled students not only to master texts verbally but also to contextualize them during scholarly debates. A strong memorization foundation supported analytical reasoning, critical response, and the generation of new ideas in academic discourse.

Writing Methods, which were essential in an era preceding printing technology. Manuscript copying served both as a means of textual preservation and intellectual engagement. This practice led to the development of *ta'līqah*, a scholarly tradition involving annotations, commentaries, and marginal notes that advanced intellectual discourse.

Instructional content was divided into compulsory and elective subjects. Compulsory subjects included Quranic studies, ritual practices such as prayer and supplication, basic Arabic grammar, and literacy skills. Elective subjects encompassed arithmetic, advanced Arabic grammar, and Arabic literature, including poetry, narratives, and history. This structure reflects a curriculum balancing foundational religious instruction with linguistic and intellectual development (Masudah & Nur, 2024).

The dominance of religious sciences within the *Niẓāmiyyah* Madrasah is further evidenced by its *waqf* (endowment) documents, which stipulated that: The madrasah was endowed specifically for adherents of the *Shāfi'ī* school in fiqh and uṣūl al-fiqh; Endowed assets were allocated for the benefit of Shāfi'ī scholars and students; Key institutional officials including instructors, preachers, and librarians were required to adhere to the Shāfi'ī school; The madrasah was required to employ a Quranic studies instructor; It was required to employ an Arabic language instructor; and All staff received designated shares of income derived from the madrasah's waqf assets.

CONCLUSION

The madrasah as an Islamic educational institution developed rapidly during the Abbasid Dynasty and reached its peak with the establishment of the *Niẓāmiyyah* Madrasah by *Niẓām al-Mulk* in the eleventh century CE. This institution became the first well-organized model of formal education in Islamic history. The *Niẓāmiyyah* Madrasah successfully integrated the functions of the mosque, student residence (*khān*), and instructional spaces into a unified and systematic educational system. The curriculum implemented in Abbasid madrasahs was comprehensive and integrative, encompassing both *naqli* (revealed/religious) and *'aqli* (rational/secular) sciences, including jurisprudence, Quranic exegesis, Hadith, medicine, astronomy, and mathematics. This demonstrates that Islamic education during this period had not yet experienced a dichotomy between religious and rational knowledge.

The *Niẓāmiyyah* Madrasah also played a crucial role in producing prominent scholars such as Imām al-Ghazālī and served as a foundational model for the development of Islamic educational systems across the Muslim world, including Indonesia. The institutional principles, curricular structure, and managerial practices

established at the *Niẓāmiyyah* Madrasah have inspired the formation of modern madrasahs in Indonesia, which today constitute an integral component of the national education system. Therefore, it can be concluded that the *Niẓāmiyyah* Madrasah made a significant contribution to the development of Islamic education in terms of institutional structure, curriculum design, and the integration of religious and rational sciences principles that continue to underpin Islamic education in the contemporary era.

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