Jurnal Pendidikan Islam 12 (1) (2026) 89-104
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v12i1.49782
http://journal.uinsgd.ac.id/index.php/jpi

p-ISSN: 2355-4339
e-ISSN: 2460-8149

REFRAMING MADRASAS IN AFGHANISTAN: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION AND SOCIETAL CHANGE

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Received: January 2024. Accepted: November 2025. Online First: January 2026. Published: June 2026.

ABSTRACT
In global academic and policy discourse, madrasas in Afghanistan are often represented through securitized and reductionist frameworks that conflate Islamic education with extremism, obscuring their historical depth and educational diversity. This article seeks to reframe such narratives by examining the historical development of Afghan madrasas from the pre-modern period to the post-2001 era, situating them within broader trajectories of Islamic education and societal change. Employing a qualitative historical approach through a systematic review of scholarly literature, historical sources, and policy reports, the study analyzes madrasa institutions using an integrated framework that combines the sociology of knowledge, historical institutionalism, and Islamic educational concepts of *tarbiyah*, *taʿlīm*, and *turāth*. The findings show that Afghanistan historically functioned as a significant center of Islamic learning, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sustained by locally embedded institutions and transnational scholarly networks. While critical junctures, most notably the Soviet invasion of 1979 and subsequent conflicts, reconfigured madrasa functions and politicized religious education, these transformations were contingent on structural disruption, state fragility, and conflict rather than inherent features of madrasa pedagogy. The study concludes that Afghan madrasas are adaptive, context-responsive educational institutions whose continuity and change can only be understood through historically grounded analysis. The findings have broader implications for Islamic education globally, highlighting the importance of historicizing madrasa traditions, resisting securitized interpretations, and recognizing Islamic educational institutions as enduring contributors to moral formation, social resilience, and educational reform in conflict-affected and post-conflict societies.

Keywords: Historical Institutionalism, Islamic Education, Madrasa in Afghanistan, Sociology of Knowledge, Tarbiyah and Ta'lim

INTRODUCTION
Madrasas occupy a contested position in global debates on Islamic education, particularly in the post–9/11 era, where they are frequently framed through securitized narratives that conflate Islamic education with extremism and violence. In international media, policy, and academic discourse, madrasas, especially those located in conflict-affected regions such as Afghanistan, are often portrayed as "jihad factories," a depiction that obscures their historical, educational, and social functions (Noor et al., 2008; Stern, 2000; Singer, 2001; International Crisis Group, 2002). Such representations have contributed to a global misunderstanding of Islamic educational institutions, reducing complex pedagogical traditions to monolithic and politicized symbols and reinforcing fear-driven interpretations of religious schooling (Malik, 2007; Lewis, 2001). Within this global context, there is an urgent need to revisit madrasa institutions through

historically grounded and educationally informed analyses that recognize their roles in shaping religious knowledge, social ethics, and community life (Moosa, 2015; Hefner, 2010).

Despite the growing body of literature on Islamic education, the madrasa as a distinct educational institution remains insufficiently examined in terms of its historical evolution and contextual adaptability. Madrasas have long functioned as centers for the transmission of Islamic sciences, including Qur'anic studies, *fiqh, tafsir, and hadith*, serving as foundational institutions for the training of ulama and the preservation of Islamic scholarly traditions (Ahmed, 1987; Khan, 2010; Qasmi, 2002). However, their transformations across different socio-political settings are often overlooked, leading to reductionist perspectives that equate madrasas with "backwards-looking medievalism" or militancy rather than recognizing them as dynamic institutions shaped by broader historical, economic, and political forces (Moosa, 2015; Haqqani, 2002). This lack of contextual analysis is particularly evident in discussions of Afghan madrasas, which are frequently detached from their longer intellectual and educational trajectories (Samadi, 2001; Dupree, 1977).

Several scholars have sought to challenge these misconceptions by critically examining the relationship between madrasas, politics, and violence. Hefner (2010) and Hefner and Zaman (2010) argue that associations between madrasas and terrorism are largely products of political conflict, colonial legacies, and contemporary security discourses rather than outcomes of madrasa pedagogy itself. Nevertheless, much of the existing scholarship continues to emphasize links between religious seminaries and militancy, particularly in South Asia and Afghanistan (Blumör, 2014; Malik, 2007; International Crisis Group, 2002). Some policy-oriented studies portray madrasas as potential incubators of extremism (Singer, 2001; Stern, 2000), while others highlight the social and educational contributions of madrasas, including community cohesion, moral formation, and non-formal education provision (Arif et al., 2017; Blanchard, 2007). More recent research further demonstrates the role of madrasas in supporting women's religious education and social agency under restrictive political conditions (Rahimi & Din, 2024). Collectively, this body of work reveals a fragmented field marked by competing interpretations and limited historical depth.

Equally important is the recognition of the institutional diversity of madrasas across the Muslim world. Comparative scholarship demonstrates that madrasas are neither uniform nor static but encompass a wide range of educational models shaped by local histories, state policies, and transnational intellectual currents (Noor et al., 2008; Hefner, 2010). Studies from South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa illustrate how madrasas range from advanced centers of jurisprudence to state-regulated religious universities and hybrid institutions integrating Islamic and modern curricula (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008; Aziz & Shamsul, 2004). This "teeming plurality" underscores the contextual embeddedness of Islamic education and challenges the notion of a singular, global madrasa model detached from local social realities (Zaman, 2002).

Within this broader literature, Afghanistan remains relatively underexplored from a historical and educational perspective. While some studies have examined Afghan madrasas and their contemporary governance and reform efforts (Abdulbaqi, 2008; Baiza, 2014; Choudhury, 2017), these analyses often privilege recent developments and policy concerns while neglecting the longue durée of madrasa history. As Malik (2007) observes, Afghan madrasas are frequently discussed primarily in relation to terrorism, reinforcing simplified associations that obscure their intellectual foundations and institutional diversity. This gap highlights the need for a comprehensive historical account that situates Afghan madrasas within shifting socio-economic, political, and cultural landscapes rather than treating them as ahistorical or inherently problematic institutions (Barfield, 2010; Olesen, 1995).

Against this backdrop, the present study traces the historical development of madrasas in Afghanistan from the medieval period to the contemporary era, drawing on Mannheim's (2013) sociology of knowledge to analyze the interplay between education, power, and social context. By systematically reviewing relevant historical scholarship, educational studies, and policy reports, this article demonstrates that Afghanistan historically functioned as an important center of Islamic learning, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, before experiencing significant institutional reconfiguration following the Soviet invasion of 1979 (Samadi, 2001; Gregorian, 1969; Borchgrevink, 2010). Through this analysis, the study contributes to Islamic education scholarship by offering a historically grounded, context-sensitive understanding of Afghan madrasas and by challenging dominant global narratives that reduce Islamic educational institutions to security concerns, thereby highlighting their broader implications for Islamic education worldwide.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) to examine the historical development of madrasas in Afghanistan through an integrated theoretical framework combining the sociology of knowledge, historical institutionalism, and the Islamic educational tradition. The SLR approach was chosen for its ability to provide a rigorous and transparent synthesis of existing scholarship through systematic identification, appraisal, and integration of relevant studies (Khan et al., 2003). Analytically, Mannheim's sociology of knowledge frames madrasas as socially constructed educational institutions whose meanings and functions are shaped by changing socio-political conditions (Mannheim, 2013), while historical institutionalism enables the identification of continuity, transformation, and critical junctures in madrasa development across historical periods, particularly in relation to major political disruptions (Thelen, 1999; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). To ensure coherence with Islamic education scholarship, the analysis is further grounded in the concepts of *tarbiyah*, *taʿlīm*, and *turāth*, which frame madrasas as institutions of moral formation, knowledge transmission, and scholarly continuity (Azra, 2006; Hashim & Langgulung, 2008; Moosa, 2015).

Data were collected through a systematic review of academic articles, books, and policy reports on madrasas in Afghanistan retrieved from major scholarly databases using carefully selected keywords and Boolean operators. All sources were screened for relevance, quality, and alignment with the study's scope using explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria (Carrera-Rivera et al., 2022) and organized in a literature matrix to map historical periods and thematic focus. The selected literature was then coded and synthesized thematically, with themes identified inductively and interpreted deductively through the combined framework. This process enabled the analysis of shifting social meanings of madrasas, patterns of institutional continuity and adaptation, including critical junctures such as the Soviet invasion of 1979, and the preservation and transformation of *tarbiyah*, *taʿlīm*, and *turāth*, yielding a nuanced, historically grounded understanding of madrasas beyond securitized narratives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Madrasas as Foundations of Islamic Knowledge and Religious Authority in Pre-Modern Afghanistan

The reviewed literature indicates that, long before the emergence of the modern Afghan state, madrasas functioned as foundational institutions for Islamic knowledge production and religious authority. Afghanistan's strategic location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East facilitated the development of prominent centers of Islamic learning in cities such as Balkh, Ghazni, and Herat, which produced influential Muslim scholars, poets, and intellectuals across different historical periods (Samadi, 2001). Within these urban and semi-

urban settings, mosques and madrasas served as interconnected sites for the transmission of Islamic sciences, enabling the circulation of religious knowledge across regions and embedding Islamic education within local social and cultural life.

From an institutional perspective, Sunni Islam, particularly the *Hanafi madhhab of fiqh*, came to dominate religious education in Afghanistan, a position that was later reinforced through state recognition of Hanafi jurisprudence as the official legal school (Baiza, 2014). This institutional preference strengthened Sunni Hanafi madrasas and contributed to the consolidation of religious authority within specific interpretive traditions, while minority religious communities experienced more limited access to state-supported educational resources. These dynamics illustrate how Islamic education was shaped not only by theological commitments but also by political and administrative structures, reflecting broader understandings of Islam as simultaneously a religious, social, and cultural system (Nasr, 2002; Alatas, 2005).

Madrasas in pre-modern Afghanistan operated primarily as sites of *taʿlīm*, focusing on the systematic transmission of Qur'anic studies, fiqh, tafsir, and hadith, while also preserving *turāth* through the reproduction of scholarly lineages and textual traditions. Instruction was closely tied to mosque-based learning, particularly in rural areas, where religious education was integrated into everyday communal life and supported by local social structures (Hanan, 2005). Through this process, madrasas contributed to *tarbiyah* by cultivating ethical discipline, piety, and moral authority among students, many of whom later assumed roles as imams, teachers, and local religious leaders.

Importantly, the literature emphasizes that pre-modern madrasas coexisted with diverse cultural practices and customary forms of learning rather than operating as isolated or rigid institutions. Religious education was embedded in local norms, languages, and social relations, allowing madrasas to function as flexible, adaptive institutions responsive to community needs. Prior to sustained modern state intervention, the authority and legitimacy of madrasas were largely negotiated at the local level, demonstrating that Islamic education in Afghanistan historically evolved through an ongoing interaction between religious tradition, social context, and political authority rather than through centralized control.

Institutional Continuity, Local Autonomy, and Transnational Scholarly Networks (18th–Early 20th Century)

The literature shows that madrasa education in Afghanistan demonstrated strong institutional continuity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and persisted well into the early twentieth century, even as modern forms of schooling were gradually introduced. Although contemporary public education began to emerge in the early 1900s and expanded during the reform period of King Amanullah in the 1920s, these initiatives did not displace traditional madrasas (Gregorian, 1969; Olesen, 1995). Instead, modern schools developed primarily in urban centers, while madrasas continued to dominate rural areas and remained central to religious learning and leadership formation. This coexistence reflects a pattern of institutional layering rather than replacement, in which older educational institutions adapted to new conditions while maintaining their core functions.

A defining characteristic of this period was the absence of a centralized national madrasa administration. The Afghan state lacked the bureaucratic capacity to regulate religious education uniformly, resulting in madrasas operating largely under local community governance (Barfield, 2010). Authority over curriculum, pedagogy, and financing was negotiated between local religious elites, community leaders, and regional power structures rather than imposed by the central state. From a historical institutionalist perspective, this decentralized arrangement

reinforced path dependency, as established patterns of instruction, scholarly authority, and governance continued largely unchanged despite broader political reforms.

At the same time, the period witnessed the expansion of transnational scholarly networks that linked Afghan madrasas with major centers of Islamic learning in South Asia. Afghan students increasingly pursued advanced religious education in Deobandi institutions in British India, drawn by reformist efforts to revitalize Islamic learning in response to colonial rule (Eickelman, 1985; Metcalf, 1982). These unidirectional flows of knowledge contributed to the circulation of curricula, pedagogical models, and religious orientations across borders, strengthening intellectual ties between Afghanistan and the wider Hanafi-Deobandi world. Afghan rulers later viewed these networks as valuable resources for standardizing Islamic education and consolidating religious authority aligned with state interests (Rashid, 2001; Rizvi, 1980).

Overall, the findings indicate that madrasa development during this period was shaped by continuous negotiation between local autonomy and limited state intervention, with transnational scholarly exchanges playing a critical role in reinforcing institutional continuity. Rather than representing a static or isolated system, Afghan madrasas evolved through historically embedded processes in which local governance structures, inherited educational practices, and cross-border intellectual currents interacted to sustain religious education in the face of emerging modern institutions.

State Intervention and the Deobandi Influence on Madrasa Standardization

The reviewed literature indicates that, by the early to mid-twentieth century, Afghan rulers increasingly turned to state intervention as a means of standardizing Islamic education, with the Deobandi tradition emerging as a key external reference point. Drawing on reformist currents from South Asia, Afghan political leaders viewed Deobandi educational models as a structured and disciplined approach capable of stabilizing religious instruction and consolidating religious authority in line with state objectives (Rashid, 2001). From a historical institutionalist perspective, this marked a gradual shift from predominantly localized governance of madrasas toward more centralized forms of oversight, without fully displacing established institutional practices.

State-sponsored engagement with Deobandi scholars became particularly pronounced during the reign of King Muhammad Zahir Shah (1933–1973). In 1933, the Afghan monarchy formally invited scholars associated with Darul Uloom Deoband to assist in reforming madrasa education, granting them an unprecedented role in shaping curricula, pedagogical strategies, and instructional materials (Rizvi, 1980). Through this collaboration, Deobandi scholars influenced the content and structure of madrasa instruction, reinforcing a standardized model rooted in Hanafi jurisprudence, disciplined study of Islamic sciences, and moral rigor. This process illustrates how knowledge production within madrasas was increasingly shaped by transnational intellectual authority and state patronage, rather than solely by local scholarly traditions.

As a result of these reforms, madrasa curricula and textbooks were reconfigured to reflect the Deobandi *Dars-e Nizami* framework, which emphasized Qur'anic studies, hadith, fiqh, Arabic grammar, and rational sciences, while also promoting a coherent pedagogical sequence (Nizami, 1965; Majrooh, 1988). This curricular standardization contributed to the formation of a new generation of religious scholars whose educational trajectories were closely aligned with state-sanctioned interpretations of Islam. Many Sunni leaders who later rose to prominence during the political upheavals of the late twentieth century were shaped by these reformed madrasa networks, underscoring the long-term implications of these educational policies for religious leadership formation (Rashid, 2001).

From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, the standardization of madrasa education under Deobandi influence also redefined the public meaning of madrasas within Afghan society. Madrasas increasingly functioned not only as institutions of religious authority but also as instruments of governance through which the state sought to regulate religious discourse and legitimize its political authority. This dual role positioned madrasas at the intersection of education, power, and ideology, highlighting how Islamic educational institutions in Afghanistan were shaped by ongoing negotiations between religious tradition and state control rather than by fixed doctrinal imperatives.

Critical Junctures and the Politicization of Madrasas during Conflict (1979–2001)

The literature consistently identifies the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 as a critical institutional and educational rupture that fundamentally altered the role of madrasas within Afghan society. From a historical institutionalist perspective, this event constituted a decisive critical juncture that disrupted existing educational arrangements and reoriented the function of religious institutions. The widespread destruction of school infrastructure during the conflict, coupled with growing public resistance to state-controlled secular education under communist influence, led to the collapse of much of the formal schooling system (Burde et al., 2015; Karlsson & Mansory, 2008). In this context, madrasas emerged as the most accessible and resilient educational institutions, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas where state presence was minimal or absent.

As secular schools closed or became inaccessible, madrasas expanded rapidly and increasingly served as the primary sites of education for many Afghan children and youth. This expansion was not initially driven by ideological radicalization but by structural necessity, as madrasas offered continuity of learning, social support, and moral guidance amid prolonged instability. However, the politicization of the conflict gradually reshaped madrasa functions, transforming them from primarily educational institutions into spaces of political, ideological, and social mobilization (Giustozzi, 2010). Religious instruction became intertwined with narratives of resistance, jihad, and moral obligation, reflecting the broader militarization of Afghan society during this period.

Cross-border madrasa networks with Pakistan played a significant role in this transformation. Large numbers of Afghan students sought religious education in Pakistani madrasas, particularly those aligned with the Deobandi tradition, before returning to Afghanistan as teachers, preachers, or community leaders (Karlsson & Mansory, 2008; Borchgrevink, 2007). These transnational networks facilitated the circulation of religious texts, pedagogical models, and ideological orientations shaped by the conditions of exile and warfare. While such networks strengthened access to religious education, they also contributed to the alignment of madrasa learning with political and military objectives during the conflict years.

The long-term consequence of these developments was the emergence of new forms of religious leadership, most notably within the Taliban movement. Many Taliban leaders and fighters were educated in madrasas during the 1980s and 1990s, a fact that later fueled global narratives equating madrasa education with militancy (Stern, 2000; Singer, 2001; ICG, 2002). The findings of the reviewed literature, however, suggest that this association was historically contingent rather than intrinsic. Madrasas became politicized because of the structural collapse of the state, the demands of prolonged conflict, and the absence of viable educational alternatives, underscoring the importance of understanding madrasa transformation as a product of critical junctures rather than as a reflection of their foundational educational purpose.

Securitization, Global Discourse, and the Reframing of Afghan Madrasas after 9/11

The reviewed literature shows that the events of 11 September 2001 marked a significant epistemic shift in how Afghan madrasas were understood and represented within global media, policy, and academic discourse. In the aftermath of the attacks, madrasas, particularly those associated with Afghanistan and the Pakistan–Afghanistan borderlands, were increasingly portrayed as sites of extremism and ideological indoctrination. Prominent media narratives and policy reports framed madrasas as "jihad factories" or breeding grounds for terrorism, often drawing direct and uncritical links between religious education and political violence (Stern, 2000; Singer, 2001; ICG, 2002). From a sociology of knowledge perspective, these representations reflect the production of knowledge under conditions of global insecurity, where complex educational institutions were reduced to simplified security threats.

This securitized discourse fundamentally altered the public meanings of both "madrasa" and "Taliban" within Western knowledge regimes. As Noor et al. (2008) argue, the term *madrasa* became a diabolized signifier for "everything Islamic," detached from its historical function as a place of learning and moral formation. Similarly, *Taliban*, a term originally denoting students of religious schools, was redefined almost exclusively as a marker of militancy. Moosa (2015) contends that these shifts were shaped by the "fogs of military and cultural wars," in which Islamic educational institutions were interpreted through geopolitical anxieties rather than educational analysis. As a result, historical diversity and institutional plurality within madrasa traditions were largely erased from global narratives.

Policy responses informed by these securitized interpretations subjected Islamic education to heightened scrutiny and regulatory pressure. International donors, governments, and security agencies increasingly called for the separation of "religious" and "worldly" curricula, arguing that modern subjects should be promoted as a counterweight to religious instruction (Pohl, 2006; Milligan, 2006). In Afghanistan, these policy frameworks often overlooked the realities of local educational provision, where madrasas continued to function as accessible and socially embedded institutions, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas. The disjunction between global representations and local educational realities became evident as reform agendas failed to account for community needs, institutional histories, and the absence of viable educational alternatives.

The consequences of this reframing were far-reaching for the legitimacy, autonomy, and mobility of Islamic educational institutions. Securitization restricted the transnational movement of scholars and students, disrupted traditional networks of learning, and subjected madrasas to external surveillance and regulation (Moosa, 2015). At the same time, the erosion of institutional autonomy undermined the capacity of madrasas to define their own educational priorities and respond organically to social change. These findings underscore that the post-9/11 reframing of Afghan madrasas was not merely descriptive but constitutive, reshaping how Islamic education was governed, evaluated, and constrained within global and national policy regimes.

Persistence, Adaptation, and Fragmentation of Islamic Education in the Post-2001 Period

The reviewed literature indicates that, following the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2001, Islamic education through madrasas persisted as a core component of the country's educational landscape despite intensified reform agendas and prolonged political instability. Formal state-run madrasas, registered private institutions, and a large number of informal madrasas continued to operate nationwide, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas where access to public schooling remained limited (Borchgrevink, 2010; Karlsson & Mansory, 2018). From a historical institutionalist perspective, this persistence

reflects strong path dependency, as long-standing community-based governance and religious authority structures continued to shape madrasa organization despite new regulatory frameworks introduced by the state.

At the curricular level, foundational elements of the Islamic educational tradition were largely maintained. Qur'anic memorization, fiqh, and advanced studies in tafsir and hadith remained central across different types of madrasas. Institutions such as *Darul Hifaz* focused primarily on Qur'anic memorization, while *Darul Uloom* offered higher-level Islamic education and produced graduates recognized as *maulawi* or religious scholars (Borchgrevink, 2010; Durr, 2016). These practices demonstrate the continued prioritization of *taʿlīm* and the preservation of *turāth* as core educational objectives, even as madrasas adapted to changing political and administrative conditions.

The post-2001 period also witnessed a notable expansion of female-only madrasas, reflecting both community demand and policy efforts to broaden access to religious education for women. By 2015, approximately 40,000 girls and women were enrolled in such institutions, underscoring their growing importance in both rural and urban contexts (Khousary, 2018). However, access to Islamic education for women remained uneven and politically contingent, with shifts in governance after 2021 significantly constraining educational opportunities and revealing the fragility of earlier gains.

In response to reform initiatives, state-supported madrasas began to partially incorporate modern subjects alongside traditional religious instruction, particularly following the 2004 syllabus revision. Subjects such as Persian, Pashto, English, mathematics, science, history, psychology, and pedagogy were introduced with the aim of aligning Islamic education more closely with the national education system (Abdulbaqi, 2008). Nonetheless, implementation remained uneven, hindered by limited state capacity, inadequate infrastructure, shortages of qualified teachers, and resistance from local communities and religious authorities (Siddikoglu, 2018).

Overall, the findings point to a fragmented Islamic education landscape in post-2001 Afghanistan, characterized by coexistence rather than integration. While some madrasas adapted to state-led reforms and expanded their curricular scope, many informal institutions continued to operate beyond effective state oversight. This fragmentation reflects enduring tensions between central regulation and local autonomy and highlights how Islamic education in Afghanistan has evolved through incremental adaptation rather than comprehensive institutional transformation.

Typologies and Governance of Madrasas in Contemporary Afghanistan

The reviewed literature identifies a differentiated madrasa landscape in contemporary Afghanistan that can be broadly classified into three institutional types based on governance and regulatory status: state-run madrasas, registered private madrasas, and informal (unregistered) madrasas. State-run madrasas operate under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, which provides standardized curricula, instructional materials, and salaried teachers, and formally recognizes their certificates (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Fayaz, 2019). Registered private madrasas, while allowed a degree of curricular flexibility, typically up to a limited proportion of locally selected content, remain subject to periodic monitoring and degree recognition by the state. In contrast, informal madrasas function outside official regulatory frameworks, particularly in remote areas with limited state presence, and are largely governed by local religious authorities and community structures (Kousary, 2018; Karlsson & Mansory, 2018).

Across these governance types, madrasa education is organized into distinct educational tiers. *Darul Hifaz* institutions focus primarily on Qur'anic memorization, often without extensive

engagement with other religious texts. Provincial and district-level madrasas provide primary and secondary Islamic education, while *Darul Uloom* institutions offer advanced studies equivalent to upper-secondary or bachelor-level qualifications, producing graduates recognized as *maulawi* or religious experts (Borchgrevink, 2010; Durr, 2016). *Darul Uloom* curricula typically progress from Arabic grammar and Islamic jurisprudence to Qur'an, hadith, and the six canonical collections of hadith, reflecting established pedagogical sequences within the Hanafi–Deobandi tradition (Abdulbaqi, 2008).

Curriculum governance has been shaped by successive state-led syllabus reforms aimed at balancing religious instruction with modern subjects. An initial standardized syllabus developed in 1930 drew heavily on the Deobandi *Dars-e Nizami* tradition and emphasized devotional subjects such as Qur'anic recitation, tafsir, hadith, fiqh, and Arabic language studies, while also including limited contemporary subjects such as mathematics and Persian (Ilmi & Zahir, 1960, cited in Abdulbaqi, 2008). Subsequent revisions in 1954 and 1973 expanded both religious and modern components, introducing subjects such as English, psychology, science, and administration, shortening program duration, and aligning madrasa certification more closely with the national education system (Abdulbaqi, 2008). The 2004 reform further integrated modern subjects alongside religious studies from the fourth grade onward, seeking to harmonize madrasa education with state schooling structures.

Despite these reforms, the findings reveal persistent tensions between standardization, institutional autonomy, and ideological control. While state authorities have sought to regulate curricula and institutional practices, their capacity to enforce compliance has remained uneven, particularly among informal madrasas operating beyond effective oversight (Vestenskov et al., 2018). Local resistance, limited infrastructure, and divergent religious orientations have constrained the reach of centralized governance, resulting in a fragmented system in which standardized and autonomous models coexist. This institutional plurality underscores the ongoing negotiation between state authority and local religious actors, illustrating how madrasa governance in contemporary Afghanistan continues to balance educational regulation with deeply rooted traditions of community control and religious independence.

Madrasas as Historically Embedded, Context-Responsive Islamic Educational Institutions

Bringing together the findings across historical periods, the reviewed literature demonstrates that madrasas in Afghanistan are best understood as adaptive educational institutions shaped by shifting configurations of political authority, conflict, and community needs rather than as static or ideologically fixed entities. Across pre-modern, modern, and contemporary contexts, madrasas have continually adjusted their institutional roles in response to changing socio-political conditions, including weak state capacity, external intervention, and prolonged warfare. From a historical institutionalist perspective, these adaptations reflect both continuity and change, as inherited educational structures persisted while their functions were reoriented during moments of crisis and reform.

This synthesis challenges monolithic and securitized interpretations that portray madrasas primarily as sites of extremism or political indoctrination. The evidence shows that the politicization of madrasas emerged from specific historical junctures, most notably the Soviet invasion and the post-9/11 security environment, rather than from the foundational purposes of Islamic education. Viewed through the sociology of knowledge, global representations of Afghan madrasas were shaped by power-laden discourses that privileged security concerns over educational analysis, obscuring institutional diversity and historical depth.

At the core of madrasa continuity lies the enduring interaction between *tarbiyah*, *taʿlīm*, and *turāth*. Despite periods of disruption and external regulation, madrasas consistently maintained their commitment to moral and ethical formation (*tarbiyah*), the transmission of religious knowledge (*taʿlīm*), and the preservation of Islamic scholarly heritage (*turāth*). Institutional change, such as curricular reform, governance restructuring, or political instrumentalization, did not erase these educational foundations but instead reshaped how they were expressed and practiced under different historical constraints.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Islamic education in Afghanistan cannot be reduced to singular narratives of tradition or radicalization. Rather, madrasas function as historically embedded and context-responsive institutions whose trajectories illuminate broader dynamics of Islamic education in conflict-affected and post-conflict societies. Recognizing this complexity has important implications for scholarship and policy, underscoring the need for historically grounded, educationally informed approaches that respect institutional diversity, community agency, and the adaptive capacities of Islamic educational traditions.

The findings affirm the value of combining the sociology of knowledge, historical institutionalism, and the Islamic educational tradition to interpret Afghan madrasas as historically situated educational institutions rather than as ideologically fixed entities. Mannheim's sociology of knowledge helps explain how madrasas' educational meanings and public reputations are produced within shifting socio-political conditions, including periods of state intervention, war, and externally driven reform agendas (Mannheim, 2013). Historical institutionalism sharpens this analysis by foregrounding continuity and change over time, especially the institutional persistence of community-based governance alongside moments of rupture and policy redirection, thus enabling a periodized reading of madrasa trajectories rather than a linear or moralized one (Barfield, 2010; Olesen, 1995; Baiza, 2014). Anchoring the analysis in Islamic educational concepts clarifies that, across institutional transformations, madrasas remain oriented toward *taʿlīm* (knowledge transmission) and *tarbiyah* (moral formation) within inherited scholarly traditions (*turāth*), even when curricula and governance arrangements shift (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008; Moosa, 2015; Zaman, 2002). This integrated lens aligns directly with Islamic pedagogy, institutional reform, and the sociocultural embeddedness of education, and it avoids reducing madrasa history to either apologetics or securitized suspicion (Noor et al., 2008; Arif et al., 2017).

A core implication of the results is that madrasa education in Afghanistan has long been intertwined with political authority and social order, but not in a simplistic "religion produces violence" sense. The evidence of state preference for Sunni Hanafi institutions and later attempts at curriculum standardization demonstrates how governments have historically sought to shape religious authority and educational legitimacy through madrasa regulation (Baiza, 2014; Roy, 1986; Abdulbaqi, 2008). From a sociology-of-knowledge perspective, this shows that what counts as "proper" Islamic education is not only a theological question but also a social and political one, negotiated among rulers, local religious actors, and transnational scholarly networks (Mannheim, 2013; Borchgrevink, 2010; Choudhury, 2017). The Deobandi connection further illustrates how cross-border flows of teachers, texts, and credentials contributed to the circulation of authoritative knowledge and to the formation of religious elites linked to broader regional movements (Metcalf, 1982; Rizvi, 1980; Nizami, 1965). Importantly, these dynamics support regional and comparative insights that "madrasa" denotes diverse institutional forms whose political entanglements vary by context rather than reflecting a uniform global model (Noor et al., 2008; Hefner, 2010; Moosa, 2015).

Across periods of reform and conflict, the results indicate notable continuity in the educational purposes of madrasas: preserving inherited scholarship (*turāth*), transmitting religious knowledge (*taʿlīm*), and cultivating ethical and religious dispositions (*tarbiyah*) (Syarif et

al., 2024; Mareta et al., 2024; Rusmana et al., 2025). Even where state-led reforms introduced administrative oversight and added modern subjects, the curriculum's religious core, Qur'anic learning, jurisprudence, Arabic grammar, and advanced textual study, remained central, consistent with broader understandings of madrasa education as a longstanding institution for training ulama and sustaining Islamic intellectual life (Abdulbaqi, 2008; Durr, 2016; Zaman, 2002). This continuity also resonates with comparative discussions of Islamic curriculum reform, where integration of "modern" content tends to be partial and uneven, shaped by state capacity and local legitimacy rather than by policy design alone (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008; Baiza, 2014; Karlsson & Mansory, 2018). At the same time, the evidence that mosque-based learning remains widespread, especially in remote areas, highlights how Islamic education operates through layered institutional ecologies in which formal schooling and religious instruction coexist, sometimes complementarily, sometimes competitively (Burde & Linden, 2012; Burde et al., 2015). The expansion of women's religious education through female madrasas further complicates simplistic views of madrasas as uniformly restrictive, showing how religious learning can also become a domain of agency and community formation under constrained conditions (Rahimi & Din, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2017).

The Afghan case contributes to international discourse on Islamic education by demonstrating that the politicization of madrasas is best understood as a historically contingent response to institutional rupture, state fragility, and prolonged conflict, rather than as an inherent characteristic of madrasa pedagogy. The findings show that during periods of educational collapse, most notably following the Soviet invasion and subsequent wars, madrasas and mosque schools emerged as accessible and socially legitimate educational systems when state schooling was either unavailable or distrusted (Burde et al., 2015; Giustozzi, 2010; Karlsson & Mansory, 2008). By situating madrasa expansion within these structural conditions, this study challenges dominant international narratives that portray Islamic education as a primary driver of radicalization, and instead reframes madrasas as adaptive institutions responding to educational need. This perspective extends comparative scholarship on Islamic education by highlighting how local educational ecologies, rather than doctrinal content alone, shape institutional trajectories (Hefner, 2010; Moosa, 2015).

At the same time, the study reveals how post-9/11 securitization profoundly reshaped global interpretations of Islamic education. External scrutiny and policy interventions increasingly framed madrasas through threat-based narratives, producing a sharp disjunction between international representations and local educational realities (Stern, 2000; Singer, 2001; International Crisis Group, 2002; Noor et al., 2008). These findings contribute to broader debates in Islamic education by demonstrating how knowledge–power relations influence not only policy responses but also scholarly agendas, often privileging security concerns over pedagogical analysis. For international reform efforts, the evidence suggests that meaningful engagement with Islamic education requires historically informed and context-sensitive approaches that strengthen teacher preparation, curriculum quality, and institutional accountability while working with, rather than against, existing religious-educational infrastructures (Baiza, 2014; Karlsson & Mansory, 2018; Kousary, 2018).

Despite these contributions, the present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. As a qualitative systematic literature review, the analysis is necessarily dependent on the scope, quality, and availability of existing studies, many of which are shaped by policy-oriented or conflict-focused research agendas. The reliance on secondary sources limits the ability to capture everyday pedagogical practices and lived experiences within madrasas. Future research would benefit from ethnographic fieldwork, curriculum analysis, and comparative studies across conflict-affected Muslim societies to further examine how *tarbiyah*, *taʿlīm*, and *turāth* are negotiated in practice. Longitudinal and cross-regional research could also deepen

understanding of how Islamic educational institutions adapt over time, thereby enriching international Islamic education scholarship beyond securitized and monolithic frames (Hefner, 2010; Moosa, 2015; Arif et al., 2017; Arifuddin et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that madrasas in Afghanistan are best understood as historically embedded and context-responsive Islamic educational institutions whose roles have evolved through continuous interaction with political authority, social structures, and periods of conflict. By integrating the sociology of knowledge, historical institutionalism, and the Islamic educational tradition, the analysis demonstrates that reductions of Afghan madrasas to securitized or monolithic narratives obscure their enduring educational purposes and institutional diversity. Across pre-modern, modern, and contemporary periods, madrasas have consistently functioned as sites of *taʿlīm*, *tarbiyah*, and the preservation of *turāth*, even as their governance, curricula, and public meanings were reshaped by state intervention, war, and global discourse. The Afghan case thus contributes to broader Islamic education scholarship by illustrating how madrasa transformation is historically contingent rather than ideologically inherent, and by underscoring the need for historically informed, educationally grounded approaches to understanding and engaging Islamic education in conflict-affected and post-conflict societies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP), Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Indonesia, for financial support through the Universitas Islam International Indonesia (UIII) Scholarship Program, as well as the Pendidikan Kader Ulama (PKU) Masjid Istiqlal Scholarship Scheme, which made this research and its completion possible.

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