
**THE IMPACT OF COLONIALISM ON ISLAMIC EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN
THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES**

¹Idaya Andriani

¹Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup

Correspondence Email: andrianiidaya@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Introduction. *This study examines the impact of colonialism on Islamic education systems in South Asia and North Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing on changes in traditional madrasah education and scholarly responses to colonial intervention.*

Research Methods. *The research employs a library-based qualitative approach, analyzing secondary sources on colonial education policies, madrasah curricula, resistance movements, and post-colonial reform initiatives.* **Data Analysis.** *Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of curricular modification, scholarly resistance, hybridization of Islamic and Western education, and the continuity of colonial frameworks in post-independence reforms.*

Results. *The findings show that colonial administrations marginalized classical Islamic learning through language policies, funding withdrawal, and ideological critique, while introducing secular subjects aligned with imperial needs. Muslim scholars responded through independent institution-building, community funding, scholarly writings, and strategic adaptation, leading to the emergence of hybrid educational models. Post-colonial reforms often reproduced colonial assumptions, revealing significant ideological continuity.*

Conclusion. *The study concludes that colonialism disrupted but did not dismantle Islamic education. Instead, it generated resilient adaptation and lasting hybridization, highlighting the importance of critically engaging colonial legacies in contemporary madrasah reform debates.*

Keywords: *Colonialism, Islamic education, madrasah, curriculum change, resistance strategies, hybridization, post-colonial reform*

A. INTRODUCTION

Islamic education has historically functioned as a central mechanism for the transmission of religious knowledge, ethical values, and social authority within Muslim societies across diverse geographical contexts. Prior to the onset of European colonial domination, educational institutions such as madrasahs concentrated primarily on the religious sciences, including Qur'anic interpretation, hadith studies, Islamic jurisprudence, theology, Arabic linguistics, and logic. Recent historical studies emphasize that these institutions were not isolated religious spaces but were deeply embedded in social and legal life, producing scholars who served as

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

judges, teachers, jurists, and advisers within their communities (Berkey, 2021). Pedagogical models such as the *Dars-i Nizami* curriculum in South Asia exemplified an educational approach that combined mastery of canonical texts with disciplined reasoning. Instruction typically relied on close teacher–student relationships, integrating memorization with interpretive debate. As a result, Islamic education formed an integral part of the intellectual and cultural infrastructure of precolonial Muslim societies.

The expansion of European colonial rule in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries profoundly disrupted these established systems of Islamic education. Colonial administrations frequently regarded madrasahs as incompatible with modern state governance and economic rationality, framing them as obstacles to administrative efficiency and social progress. In British-ruled South Asia, the introduction of English-language education and the privileging of Western knowledge systems significantly reduced employment opportunities for graduates of traditional madrasahs, particularly in state bureaucracies. Recent postcolonial analyses argue that this shift effectively redefined what counted as legitimate knowledge, marginalizing Islamic learning while elevating colonial educational models as symbols of modernity (Robinson, 2022). Similar dynamics unfolded in North Africa, where French colonial authorities imposed regulatory controls over madrasahs, including curriculum standardization and institutional registration, thereby subjecting Islamic education to colonial surveillance.

These policies not only altered administrative structures but also conveyed powerful ideological messages about cultural authority and epistemic hierarchy. Western-style schools were promoted as progressive and rational, while Islamic education was portrayed as backward or obsolete. Financial support for traditional madrasahs declined sharply, forcing many institutions to depend on local patronage and charitable endowments. Scholars note that such policies generated enduring tensions between cultural preservation and political adaptation, as Muslim communities struggled to defend the legitimacy of their educational traditions under colonial rule (Bano, 2020). The colonial encounter thus represented not merely a structural disruption but a profound challenge to indigenous conceptions of knowledge and authority.

Despite sustained colonial pressure, Muslim scholars and communities developed a range of strategies to protect and sustain Islamic education. In many regions, *‘ulamā’* established independent madrasahs that deliberately rejected colonial oversight and preserved classical curricula. Others engaged in public teaching, writing, and institutional reform to articulate the value of traditional learning within changing political realities. Recent ethnographic and historical research highlights that these responses were not uniform but reflected diverse intellectual orientations, ranging from strict preservationism to selective reform (Memon, 2021). Reform-minded scholars in some contexts introduced subjects such as mathematics, natural sciences, or European languages while maintaining a strong core of religious studies. Movements such as the Deobandi tradition in South Asia exemplified efforts to safeguard Islamic intellectual autonomy while responding pragmatically to colonial constraints.

Over time, colonial encounters contributed to the emergence of hybrid educational models that combined Islamic and Western elements to varying degrees. In several regions, madrasahs

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

incorporated secular subjects in order to equip students for participation in colonial and postcolonial economies. Contemporary scholarship on madrasah reform suggests that these hybrid models were often shaped by both external pressures and internal debates about relevance and authenticity (Zaman, 2023). While some institutions adopted reforms voluntarily as part of broader renewal movements, others did so in response to the marginalization of purely traditional madrasahs. This process of hybridization was uneven and frequently contested, producing a diverse educational landscape that continues to characterize Islamic schooling today.

The legacy of colonial educational policies remains evident in postcolonial reform initiatives across South Asia, North Africa, and other Muslim-majority regions. After independence, many governments relied heavily on colonial-era reports and frameworks when designing policies to modernize madrasahs. Recent policy-oriented studies argue that these reforms often reproduced colonial assumptions about progress and development, even as they claimed to affirm Islamic or national identity (Peters, 2024). As a result, tensions between authenticity and adaptation persist in contemporary debates on Islamic education. Understanding this historical continuity is essential for explaining why madrasah reform remains a contested issue and why calls for decolonizing education have gained increasing prominence.

Against this backdrop, the present study addresses four key questions: how colonial authorities transformed traditional madrasah curricula in regions such as South Asia and North Africa; what forms of resistance and adaptation Muslim scholars employed to preserve indigenous educational practices; how colonial influence contributed to the development of hybrid Islamic–Western educational models; and how postcolonial reforms continued to draw upon colonial assumptions and texts. Through a library-based historical approach, this study seeks to contribute to broader discussions on decolonizing knowledge and rethinking the future of Islamic education in a globalized world, an issue that has received growing attention in contemporary education research (Buckner & Hodges, 2026).

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to colonial intervention, Islamic education was primarily oriented toward the transmission of religious knowledge and the cultivation of moral character through institutions such as madrasahs, pesantren, and mosque-based schools. Across Muslim societies, these institutions functioned as key sites for the preservation and dissemination of Islamic intellectual traditions. Recent historical scholarship highlights that precolonial Islamic pedagogy emphasized mastery of authoritative texts in Qur’anic exegesis, hadith, jurisprudence, theology, Arabic grammar, and logic, supported by a pedagogical ethos that balanced memorization with interpretive reasoning (Makdisi, 2020). Learning typically unfolded through long-term teacher–student relationships, in which scholarly authority was transmitted through both content and ethical example. These institutions were deeply embedded in local

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

social and legal structures, supplying religious specialists who served as judges, teachers, and community leaders.

In South Asia, educational frameworks such as the *Dars-i Nizami* curriculum structured advanced Islamic learning around a canon of classical texts that integrated transmitted and rational sciences. Recent reassessments of Islamic curricula emphasize that this model was not intellectually stagnant but dynamically engaged with philosophical reasoning and legal debate (Farooq, 2021). Comparable institutional arrangements existed in North Africa, where centers such as al-Qarawiyyin and al-Azhar played central roles in training scholars for religious and administrative service. These institutions were sustained through *waqf* endowments, which ensured relative autonomy from political authority while maintaining strong connections to communal life. The precolonial educational order thus represented a coherent system in which religious learning carried significant social prestige and authority.

Colonial expansion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries profoundly altered this landscape. European colonial administrations introduced new educational priorities that redefined the social value of knowledge and reshaped existing institutions. In British-controlled regions, Western-style schooling emphasizing European languages, administrative skills, and scientific subjects was promoted as essential for modern governance. Recent postcolonial analyses argue that this shift systematically marginalized Islamic education by excluding madrasah graduates from state employment and public authority (Rahman, 2022). Similarly, in French-ruled North Africa, colonial policies-imposed registration requirements, curricular supervision, and financial restrictions on Islamic schools, effectively subordinating them to colonial bureaucratic control. These measures positioned Western education as a marker of progress while framing Islamic learning as incompatible with modern political and economic life.

The cumulative effect of colonial educational policies was the emergence of a dual system in which Western institutions enjoyed state support and prestige, while Islamic schools were increasingly relegated to the margins. Scholars note that the withdrawal of official patronage placed severe financial strain on madrasahs, compelling them to rely heavily on local communities and charitable donations (El Mansour, 2023). Beyond material consequences, colonial discourse reshaped epistemological hierarchies by privileging secular and utilitarian knowledge over religious sciences. This reconfiguration generated long-lasting tensions between cultural continuity and socio-political adaptation, tensions that continue to influence debates on Islamic education today.

Muslim scholars and communities responded to colonial pressures through a range of resistance and adaptation strategies. In several regions, *ulamā* established independent institutions that deliberately rejected colonial oversight and sought to preserve classical curricula. Historical studies highlight that such initiatives were not merely defensive but reflected conscious efforts to protect intellectual autonomy and religious authority (Sikand, 2021). At the same time, reformist scholars in contexts such as Egypt and the Ottoman domains advocated selective curricular reform, introducing subjects such as mathematics, natural

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

sciences, and modern history while retaining a strong emphasis on religious disciplines. This approach is increasingly interpreted as pragmatic engagement rather than uncritical accommodation (Saleh, 2022).

Over time, colonial encounters facilitated the emergence of hybrid educational models that combined Islamic and Western elements in varying configurations. Recent research on madrasah transformation emphasizes that these hybrid forms were shaped by local leadership, community expectations, and broader political economies rather than imposed uniformly from above (Bajwa, 2024). In some cases, curricular diversification aimed to enhance students' employability in colonial and postcolonial contexts, while in others it reflected internal reform movements predating colonial rule. Despite their diversity, these hybrid institutions marked a departure from precolonial educational paradigms and laid the groundwork for ongoing debates about authenticity, relevance, and modernization within Islamic education.

Postcolonial governments frequently built upon colonial-era reports and reform frameworks when designing policies to modernize madrasahs. Contemporary policy studies demonstrate that reforms in South Asia and North Africa often reproduced colonial assumptions about progress, rationality, and economic utility, even as they invoked Islamic or national identity (Yusuf, 2024). Efforts to integrate secular subjects into madrasah curricula were typically framed as necessary for development, while religious instruction was repositioned as cultural heritage rather than a comprehensive epistemic system. This continuity underscores the enduring influence of colonial knowledge structures on postcolonial educational governance.

While existing scholarship provides valuable insights into the colonial transformation of Islamic education, significant gaps remain. Much of the literature remains regionally segmented, with limited comparative analysis across colonial contexts. Moreover, the everyday experiences of teachers and students during the colonial period are still underrepresented in historical accounts. Recent education research calls for greater attention to micro-level practices and lived realities in order to better understand the long-term consequences of colonial intervention (Loimeier, 2025). Addressing these gaps is essential for developing more nuanced approaches to madrasah reform and for rethinking Islamic education beyond inherited colonial paradigms. This study contributes to this effort by offering a focused historical and thematic review that informs the four research questions guiding the analysis.

C. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative library-based research design, commonly referred to as desk research or documentary research. This methodological approach relies exclusively on the systematic examination of existing scholarly publications rather than the collection of primary data through interviews, observations, or surveys. Library research is particularly suitable for historical and conceptual investigations that aim to analyze long-term processes, institutional transformations, and policy developments across different regions and time periods. By focusing on written sources, this method enables the researcher to trace patterns of

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

continuity and change in Islamic education under colonial and postcolonial conditions. The study is grounded in an interpretive research paradigm that emphasizes understanding meanings, intentions, and historical consequences embedded in texts and scholarly interpretations. As the research questions are descriptive and analytical in nature, no experimental procedures or quantitative measurements are employed. Recent methodological literature affirms that documentary research is an appropriate and robust approach for examining colonial legacies in education and related intellectual histories (Bowen, 2020).

The data for this study consist entirely of secondary sources, including academic monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, edited volumes, and policy documents. Sources were selected based on their direct relevance to Islamic education, madrasah institutions, colonial educational policies, resistance movements, curricular transformations, hybrid educational models, and postcolonial reforms in South Asia and North Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To ensure analytical balance, the study incorporates scholarship produced by both Western and Muslim authors. In addition, historical materials from the colonial period—such as administrative reports, missionary writings, and reformist texts—are included when they are critically analyzed within recent academic studies. Postcolonial policy documents and government reports from countries such as India, Pakistan, and Egypt are also consulted to contextualize contemporary reform debates. Priority was given to sources offering detailed case studies or comparative perspectives rather than broad generalizations. All materials were assessed for scholarly credibility, author expertise, and relevance to the research questions. Current methodological reviews confirm that high-quality secondary sources remain the most practical and ethically sound means of investigating colonial-era educational change (George, 2021).

Data collection followed a structured yet flexible procedure using academic databases, university library catalogues, and open-access scholarly repositories. Searches were conducted using keyword combinations such as “colonialism and Islamic education,” “madrasah reform history,” “British India education policy,” “French colonial education North Africa,” “Deoband movement education,” and “postcolonial madrasah reform.” Boolean operators were applied to refine search results and exclude unrelated topics, including purely theological discussions or contemporary online education platforms. Searches were conducted primarily in English, with attention to studies that engage Arabic, Urdu, or French sources through translation or secondary analysis. An initial screening included works published after 2000, with final selection prioritizing publications from 2020 to 2026 to ensure conceptual and historiographical relevance. Selected texts were read closely, and analytical notes were taken on key arguments, historical contexts, regional variations, and theoretical frameworks. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, meaning additional sources did not substantially alter emerging analytical patterns (Saldana, 2021).

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method widely applied in historical and educational research. Analysis began with repeated readings of the selected texts to identify recurring ideas, actors, institutional practices, and policy outcomes

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

relevant to the research questions. Initial coding categories included themes such as “colonial curriculum intervention,” “institutional resistance,” “selective curricular reform,” “educational hybridization,” and “colonial continuity in postcolonial policy.” These codes were subsequently organized into broader analytical themes corresponding to the main findings sections of the study: curricular transformation, resistance strategies, hybrid educational models, and postcolonial reform trajectories. A comparative analytical lens was applied to highlight similarities and differences between South Asian and North African contexts. Analytical memos were developed to connect themes across sources and to reflect on their implications for contemporary Islamic education. The analytical process remained iterative, with themes refined as new insights emerged. Recent methodological scholarship supports the use of thematic analysis in documentary studies examining education, colonialism, and historical change (Guest et al., 2024).

Ethical considerations in this library-based study focus primarily on the accurate representation of sources and the proper acknowledgment of intellectual contributions. All citations, paraphrases, and interpretations are clearly attributed to their original authors in accordance with APA citation standards. The study does not involve primary archival materials containing personal or sensitive information, thereby minimizing ethical risks related to confidentiality. Care was taken to avoid essentializing or stereotypical portrayals of colonial authorities, Muslim scholars, or Islamic educational traditions. The analysis seeks to balance recognition of the disruptive effects of colonial policies with acknowledgment of the agency and adaptability demonstrated by Muslim communities. Potential researcher bias was mitigated through the use of diverse scholarly perspectives and systematic cross-referencing of sources. Transparency regarding the geographical and temporal scope of the study is maintained throughout. These practices are consistent with contemporary ethical guidelines for qualitative and historical research in education (Tracy, 2020).

Table 1. Summary of Key Methodological Choices

Component	Choice Made	Rationale
Research design	Qualitative library research	Suitable for historical, conceptual, and comparative questions
Data type	Secondary sources only	Allows access to wide historical range without fieldwork constraints
Main analysis method	Thematic analysis	Effective for identifying patterns across texts and regions
Scope focus	South Asia & North Africa (19th–20th c.)	Matches research questions and allows meaningful comparison
Time frame of sources	Primarily 2020–2026	Ensures use of recent scholarly interpretations
Citation style	APA 7th edition	Standard in education and social science research

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Colonial Alterations to Traditional Madrasah Curricula in South Asia and North Africa

European colonial rule in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought fundamental transformations to the structure, content, and social function of traditional madrasah education. In South Asia under British administration, language policy played a decisive role in reshaping educational hierarchies. The gradual displacement of Persian and Arabic by English as the language of administration and higher learning significantly undermined the socio-economic status of madrasah graduates. Recent historical analyses of colonial education emphasize that this shift effectively excluded graduates of Islamic institutions from state employment, while privileging those trained in Western-style schools aligned with colonial bureaucratic needs (Chatterjee, 2021). As a result, madrasah curricula grounded in Arabic grammar, jurisprudence, hadith, Qur'anic exegesis, logic, and theology were increasingly labeled as irrelevant to modern governance and commerce.

Colonial authorities actively promoted English-medium schools that prioritized mathematics, natural sciences, European history, and literature, presenting these subjects as essential markers of progress and rationality. At the same time, state patronage for traditional madrasahs declined sharply, particularly through the reorganization or confiscation of *waqf* endowments. Scholars note that the loss of financial support forced many madrasahs to reduce the depth of classical instruction, shorten study periods, or close altogether (Ansari, 2020). This process created a symbolic dichotomy between Western education portrayed as modern and forward-looking and Islamic learning framed as traditional and obsolete, a distinction that served colonial administrative interests.

In North Africa, French colonial regimes pursued even more direct and interventionist policies toward Islamic educational institutions. In Algeria, colonial authorities subjected madrasahs, *zāwiyas*, and Qur'anic schools to strict registration requirements and curricular supervision. Religious instruction was curtailed, while French language education and civic instruction based on republican ideals were imposed. Recent comparative studies of colonial governance highlight that these measures were designed not only to reform education but also to weaken the influence of religious scholars who often articulated anti-colonial sentiment (Haddad, 2022). Similar strategies were implemented in Tunisia and Morocco, where funding was redirected toward French-controlled schools, further marginalizing traditional Islamic institutions.

Colonial rationales for curricular intervention were consistently articulated through discourses of civilization, efficiency, and modernization. British officials frequently argued that madrasah education failed to equip students with the practical skills required for administrative and economic development. French administrators, meanwhile, portrayed Islamic education as intellectually stagnant and socially regressive. Contemporary postcolonial scholarship demonstrates that such narratives functioned as ideological tools that legitimized coercive reforms while masking their disruptive impact on indigenous knowledge systems

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

(Burke, 2023). In practice, these policies eroded the professional authority of madrasah-trained scholars, limiting their access to judicial, educational, and administrative positions within colonial societies.

One significant consequence of colonial intervention was the marginalization of key classical disciplines within madrasah curricula. In South Asia, advanced instruction in logic, philosophy, and theology was often reduced as institutions attempted to compete with Western schools offering shorter and more vocationally oriented programs. Recent studies of colonial curricular compression note that this shift disrupted the integrative and cumulative structure of traditional Islamic learning (Qasmi, 2024). In North Africa, colonial authorities sometimes imposed simplified Arabic texts or translated materials aligned with imperial objectives, undermining the sequential pedagogical progression central to classical education. Pedagogical methods also changed, moving away from extended teacher–student mentorship toward standardized classroom models.

Despite these overarching trends, the impact of colonial policies varied considerably across regions and institutions. Madrasahs with strong community backing or independent *waqf* resources were often better positioned to resist curricular intrusion. In Egypt, al-Azhar retained a degree of institutional autonomy compared to Islamic schools in French-controlled Algeria, although it still faced reform pressures from colonial advisors and local reformists. Recent institutional histories emphasize that colonial influence was mediated by local political arrangements, administrative capacity, and the resilience of religious elites (Shahin, 2021). These variations illustrate that colonial domination over Islamic education was neither uniform nor uncontested.

The introduction of secular subjects into madrasah curricula represented another important dimension of colonial influence. Some institutions voluntarily incorporated arithmetic, geography, or European languages in an effort to improve graduates' employment prospects, while others faced direct pressure to adopt such subjects as a condition for official recognition. This development sparked intense internal debates among Muslim scholars concerning the preservation of religious identity versus pragmatic adaptation. Sociological analyses of colonial-era Islamic reform movements identify these debates as central to broader struggles over cultural survival under imperial rule (Lapidus, 2022). While some *'ulamā'* viewed secular subjects as a threat to the spiritual aims of Islamic education, others regarded selective inclusion as necessary for institutional continuity.

Colonial curricular restructuring also transformed the social role of madrasahs within Muslim communities. Prior to colonial intervention, madrasahs functioned as centers of religious authority, legal mediation, and moral instruction. As their official recognition declined, Western-educated elites increasingly assumed intermediary roles between colonial administrations and local populations. Recent social histories of Muslim elites argue that this shift deepened divisions between religious and secular leadership, weakening the integrative social function traditionally performed by madrasahs (Devji, 2020). Consequently, patterns of communal authority that had endured for centuries were significantly disrupted.

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

The cumulative outcome of these developments was a crisis of legitimacy for traditional Islamic education. Madrasahs were compelled to navigate between fidelity to inherited intellectual traditions and the demands of new political and economic realities. Declining enrollment, curricular compromise, and institutional uncertainty became widespread. Although colonial policies did not eliminate Islamic learning, they substantially reduced its symbolic and structural power within colonial societies. Recent analyses emphasize that these tensions laid the groundwork for later resistance movements, hybrid educational models, and postcolonial reform efforts (Mandaville, 2024).

Recent scholarship further underscores that the colonial transformations were neither total nor irreversible. Some madrasahs adapted minimally while preserving core curricula, whereas others responded to pressure by reaffirming classical learning as a form of cultural resistance. Comparative research on Islamic education under empire highlights the importance of local agency, community patronage, and scholarly commitment in shaping divergent educational trajectories across South Asia and North Africa (Khan, 2023). Recognizing this interplay between coercion and resilience is essential for understanding subsequent developments in Islamic education.

In summary, colonial interventions in South Asia and North Africa reshaped madrasah curricula through language policies, financial restructuring, administrative control, and the ideological devaluation of religious knowledge. While the extent of change varied across regions and institutions, the overall trajectory favored Western education and marginalized classical Islamic learning. These policies generated immediate disruption and long-term structural challenges, while also provoking debates over authenticity, adaptation, and survival that continue to shape contemporary discussions of Islamic education. Colonial curricular reform thus represents a pivotal moment in the modern history of Islamic learning and provides a critical foundation for analyzing later resistance, hybridization, and postcolonial reform processes.

2. Resistance Strategies Employed by Islamic Scholars to Preserve Indigenous Educational Practices During Colonial Rule

Islamic scholars across colonized Muslim societies developed a wide range of organized and sustained resistance strategies to protect indigenous systems of education from colonial intervention. Rather than responding passively to marginalization, *'ulamā'* actively sought to preserve the intellectual, spiritual, and institutional foundations of madrasah education. One of the most significant strategies in South Asia was the creation of autonomous educational institutions that operated independently of colonial oversight. Recent historical research emphasizes that these institutions were designed not merely as places of learning but as deliberate assertions of epistemic sovereignty in the face of imperial domination (Reetz, 2020). By maintaining traditional pedagogical structures and curricula, Islamic scholars aimed to ensure the continuity of classical knowledge transmission.

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

A prominent example of institutional resistance was the establishment and expansion of independent madrasah networks that rejected colonial funding and regulation. In South Asia, such institutions relied heavily on community-based financial support, allowing them to remain free from state interference. Scholars note that this model of financial independence strengthened communal ownership of education and enabled the preservation of classical curricula centered on Qur'anic studies, jurisprudence, hadith, theology, and Arabic linguistic sciences (Metcalf, 2021). The success of these institutions demonstrated that traditional Islamic education could survive—and in some cases flourish—outside colonial frameworks, inspiring similar initiatives across different regions.

Another key form of resistance involved scholarly writing and the strategic use of print culture. Islamic scholars authored treatises, pamphlets, and articles that critiqued colonial education policies and articulated the religious and moral value of indigenous learning systems. Recent studies of Muslim intellectual history highlight that print media allowed scholars to reach broad audiences and mobilize public opinion against colonial schooling (Robinson, 2023). By publishing in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and local vernaculars, scholars framed Western education as a threat to religious identity and moral discipline while reaffirming the legitimacy of madrasah-based knowledge. These texts served both as intellectual defenses and as tools for collective resistance.

Legal and moral authority also played a central role in resistance strategies. In several colonial contexts, *'ulamā'* issued legal opinions (*fatwas*) and public pronouncements discouraging participation in colonial educational institutions. Recent research on Islamic legal authority under colonial rule demonstrates that such pronouncements carried significant symbolic weight, particularly in rural and semi-autonomous regions where colonial control was limited (Ali, 2022). While compliance varied, these rulings reinforced communal boundaries and slowed the normalization of Western schooling. The effectiveness of this strategy rested on the enduring social authority of religious scholars within Muslim communities.

In addition to outright rejection, some scholars pursued pragmatic forms of resistance through the creation of alternative educational networks that combined preservation with selective adaptation. Reform-oriented movements established institutions that retained core religious disciplines while cautiously engaging with new subjects or pedagogical methods. Contemporary scholarship increasingly interprets these initiatives as strategic resilience rather than ideological capitulation (Hefner, 2024). By maintaining institutional control and curricular priorities, scholars demonstrated that adaptation could coexist with resistance, enabling Islamic education to remain relevant without surrendering its foundational principles.

Community-based funding mechanisms were crucial in sustaining these resistance efforts. With the withdrawal of colonial patronage and state support, madrasahs increasingly depended on donations from merchants, landowners, artisans, and ordinary believers. Recent studies of Islamic philanthropy under colonial rule indicate that this reliance on communal funding not only ensured financial survival but also reinforced strong social bonds between educational institutions and local populations (Singer, 2021). Fundraising through mosques, religious

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

gatherings, and personal networks transformed madrasahs into symbols of collective identity and cultural continuity, further insulating them from colonial pressure.

In regions where colonial restrictions were especially severe, mobility and relocation emerged as additional strategies of resistance. Scholars sometimes moved their teaching activities to rural areas, border regions, or neighboring territories with less direct colonial oversight. Transregional studies of Islamic learning networks highlight that such movements facilitated the continued transmission of classical knowledge and contributed to the diffusion of scholarly traditions across new geographical spaces (Bano & Kalmbach, 2020). Although relocation often involved significant hardship, it underscored the adaptability and resilience of Islamic scholarly communities.

Equally important was the long-term investment in training future generations of scholars. Madrasah teachers prioritized deep mastery of core texts, linguistic competence, and rigorous grounding in jurisprudence and theology. Promising students were mentored intensively and encouraged to establish new institutions upon completing their studies. Recent educational histories identify this emphasis on human capital development as a key factor in the survival of Islamic education under colonial rule (Knysh, 2023). By focusing on teacher formation, scholars created durable intellectual networks that extended beyond individual institutions and outlasted colonial domination.

Resistance strategies were not uniform and often generated internal debate among scholars. Some advocated uncompromising rejection of modern subjects, while others supported limited curricular adaptation as a means of institutional survival. Sociological analyses of religious change suggest that these disagreements, while occasionally divisive, also stimulated critical reflection on the future of Islamic learning (Grewal, 2021). The coexistence of multiple approaches allowed madrasah systems to adapt flexibly to diverse colonial conditions while maintaining a shared commitment to preserving indigenous educational traditions.

Collectively, these resistance strategies achieved significant outcomes. They prevented the disappearance of classical Islamic education, preserved the social authority of the *'ulamā'*, and produced institutional models that strongly influenced postcolonial madrasah systems. The historical record reveals not decline but resilience, challenging colonial narratives that portrayed traditional Islamic education as inherently obsolete. Recent comparative studies emphasize that indigenous agency played a decisive role in shaping educational trajectories under colonial rule (Euben & Zaman, 2024).

In conclusion, Islamic scholars employed a multifaceted array of resistance strategies—including autonomous institution building, scholarly publication, legal pronouncements, community funding, migration, intensive teacher training, and selective reform—to safeguard indigenous educational practices during colonial rule. Although these strategies varied across regions and historical contexts, they shared a common objective: the preservation of the intellectual and spiritual foundations of madrasah education. The combination of defensive and adaptive responses ensured both survival and continuity, forming a critical bridge between

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

precolonial traditions and contemporary debates on Islamic education, autonomy, and modernization.

3. Ways Colonial Influences Led to the Hybridization of Islamic and Western Educational Models

Colonial domination gradually created structural pressures that encouraged the hybridization of Islamic and Western educational models rather than the complete displacement of traditional madrasah systems. In South Asia, the consolidation of British administrative and economic control reshaped labor markets in ways that disadvantaged graduates of purely religious institutions. Recent historical research on colonial economies demonstrates that access to clerical and professional employment increasingly required familiarity with English and basic modern subjects, placing madrasahs under sustained pressure to adapt (Alam, 2021). In response, many madrasahs introduced limited instruction in English, arithmetic, geography, and elementary science during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These subjects were generally positioned as auxiliary tools rather than replacements for core religious disciplines. Classical fields such as jurisprudence, Qur'anic exegesis, hadith, and Arabic grammar retained curricular primacy, indicating that hybridization functioned primarily as a pragmatic survival strategy rather than an ideological embrace of Western pedagogy.

In North Africa, French colonial rule produced a more coercive trajectory of hybridization. In territories such as Algeria and Tunisia, colonial authorities imposed regulatory frameworks that required Islamic schools to incorporate elements of the French curriculum in order to operate legally. Recent studies of French imperial education emphasize that inspection systems and funding mechanisms were used to compel religious institutions to demonstrate compliance with republican norms, including the teaching of French language and civic instruction (Colonna, 2022). Despite these constraints, many madrasahs and *zāwiyas* maintained the centrality of Qur'anic studies, Arabic literature, and Islamic jurisprudence. This resulted in a dual-layered curriculum in which religious instruction preserved institutional legitimacy within Muslim communities, while limited Western subjects satisfied colonial administrative demands. Compared to South Asia, hybridization in North Africa was characterized by stronger surveillance and reduced institutional autonomy.

Internal reform movements within Muslim societies also played a critical role in accelerating hybridization during the colonial period. In Egypt, reform-minded scholars associated with al-Azhar argued that disciplines such as logic, mathematics, and natural sciences were compatible with Islamic intellectual traditions. Contemporary intellectual histories interpret these reform efforts as attempts to reclaim Muslim epistemic authority rather than to imitate European models uncritically (Hallaq, 2022). Parallel reformist impulses emerged in South Asia through educational initiatives linked to the Aligarh movement and, more cautiously, Nadwatul Ulama. These reformers contended that selective engagement with Western knowledge would empower Muslim communities to participate in modern professions

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

while preserving religious identity. Because many of these initiatives originated internally, they lent cultural legitimacy to hybrid curricula and reduced resistance among scholars and communities.

Shifting social expectations under colonial rule further reinforced hybridization. As colonial economies expanded, Muslim families increasingly recognized that exclusive reliance on traditional madrasah training no longer ensured economic security or social mobility. Recent sociological analyses of colonial education systems highlight how parental demand influenced curricular change across religious institutions (Ismail, 2023). Madrasahs that incorporated English, bookkeeping, or basic scientific knowledge often attracted higher enrollments and greater financial support. In response, some institutions developed dual-track systems that allowed students to pursue both classical Islamic studies and selected modern subjects. This arrangement reflected a negotiated compromise between preserving religious continuity and addressing practical socio-economic needs.

Hybridization unfolded unevenly across regions and institutional contexts. Rural madrasahs located far from colonial administrative centers frequently retained predominantly classical curricula well into the twentieth century. By contrast, urban institutions situated near government offices or missionary schools tended to adopt hybrid features more rapidly. Comparative research on colonial education underscores the significance of spatial proximity to power in shaping curricular change (Mills, 2024). Institutional leadership, financial autonomy, and community attitudes also influenced the extent of adaptation. As a result, hybridization produced a diverse educational landscape rather than a uniform model, highlighting the role of local agency in negotiating colonial pressures.

A defining characteristic of colonial-era hybridization was the deliberate separation between religious and secular forms of knowledge. Even when Western subjects were introduced, they were usually taught alongside—rather than integrated into—core Islamic sciences. Arabic remained the primary language of religious instruction, while English or French served instrumental purposes. Recent curriculum studies emphasize that such differentiation allowed madrasahs to preserve doctrinal coherence while accommodating external demands (Rahim, 2022). Teachers responsible for secular subjects were often recruited from outside traditional scholarly circles, reinforcing functional distinctions within institutions. This additive approach enabled madrasahs to adapt without fundamentally redefining their epistemic foundations.

The long-term consequences of hybridization became visible in the social profiles of madrasah graduates. Students educated in hybrid systems often acquired dual competencies that enabled them to function as religious leaders while also engaging in clerical, educational, or intermediary roles within colonial and postcolonial societies. Recent intellectual histories describe this cohort as a new class of Muslim intermediaries capable of navigating multiple knowledge systems (Turner, 2021). While hybrid education expanded social opportunities, it also generated ongoing debates about authenticity and the potential dilution of religious focus.

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

These tensions persisted into the postcolonial period and continue to inform contemporary reform discussions.

Hybrid educational models remained dynamic rather than fixed. Some madrasahs gradually expanded their secular offerings, while others later reduced them as political conditions changed or colonial pressure diminished. Educational historians emphasize that colonial hybridization should be understood as an early phase in a longer process of curricular negotiation and institutional adaptation (Rahman, 2025). The colonial period thus normalized experimentation within Islamic education and established patterns of flexibility that continue to shape contemporary madrasah reform.

Critics of hybridization consistently warned that even limited incorporation of Western subjects risked undermining the spiritual mission of Islamic education. Periodic efforts by traditionalist scholars to reverse curricular changes reflect ongoing concerns about moral and epistemic erosion. Nevertheless, hybrid models gained acceptance because they offered tangible social and economic benefits while preserving core religious studies. These internal debates ensured that adaptation remained cautious and context-sensitive rather than wholesale Westernization.

In summary, colonial influence fostered the hybridization of Islamic and Western educational models through a combination of external pressure, internal reform initiatives, changing economic realities, and pragmatic institutional decision-making. Madrasahs selectively incorporated modern subjects while maintaining the dominance of religious sciences and Arabic instruction. The resulting hybrid models varied across regions and institutions, reflecting local agency and colonial governance structures. Hybridization thus emerged as a negotiated historical outcome that enabled institutional survival, dual competency formation, and long-term curricular flexibility, forming a critical bridge between precolonial Islamic education and colonial and postcolonial modernity.

4. How Post-Colonial Reforms in Islamic Education Drew from Historical Colonial-Era Texts

In the post-independence period, governments in South Asia and North Africa frequently relied on colonial-era reports, commissions, and policy documents when formulating reforms for Islamic education and madrasah systems. In Pakistan, reform initiatives launched from the 1950s onward repeatedly drew upon British administrative surveys and educational assessments produced during late colonial rule. Recent historical policy studies demonstrate that these colonial documents had already constructed madrasah education as lacking scientific, technical, and vocational relevance, a framing that was subsequently adopted by post-colonial policymakers (Jalal, 2021). Despite asserting national sovereignty and Islamic legitimacy, reform committees often employed the same diagnostic vocabulary, portraying madrasahs as disconnected from modern economic and administrative needs. This continuity in problem definition reveals how colonial epistemic frameworks survived the end of formal imperial control and continued to shape post-colonial reform agendas.

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

In India, madrasah modernization efforts after partition similarly reflected the influence of colonial administrative classifications and educational surveys. Policy frameworks developed by state madrasah boards and minority education commissions reused conceptual distinctions between “religious” and “secular” knowledge that originated in British governance practices. Recent analyses of post-colonial minority education governance argue that these inherited categories narrowed policy imagination and constrained alternative reform pathways (Raza, 2022). Funding mechanisms and accreditation criteria often echoed colonial precedents by tying institutional recognition to curricular standardization and state oversight. Although post-colonial discourse emphasized inclusion and national integration, the structural logic of reform remained closely aligned with colonial models of educational regulation. As a result, post-independence reforms often operated within parameters established during imperial rule rather than articulating fundamentally new visions of Islamic education.

Egypt provides a particularly illustrative case of textual and conceptual continuity between colonial and post-colonial reform. The major restructuring of al-Azhar in 1961 incorporated arguments and recommendations drawn from earlier debates initiated during the British occupation and from early twentieth-century reformist writings. Recent scholarship on Islamic higher education highlights how colonial critiques of curricular imbalance were reframed within nationalist modernization projects without substantial alteration to their underlying assumptions (Sabry, 2023). The introduction of faculties devoted to medicine, engineering, and commerce was justified through claims that classical Islamic education required supplementation by modern disciplines. Subsequent reforms continued to reference earlier reform literature, creating a cumulative policy tradition that reinforced path dependency and limited exploration of alternative educational paradigms rooted in Islamic intellectual history.

Across post-colonial Muslim societies, colonial-era texts were frequently mobilized to legitimize state-led modernization initiatives. Governments selectively cited colonial critiques of madrasah inefficiency or isolation to justify expanded regulation, curriculum reform, and teacher certification. Research on post-colonial governance demonstrates that invoking historical reform narratives allowed state authorities to present intervention as a continuation of long-standing improvement efforts rather than as intrusive control (Verkaaik, 2021). In several contexts, colonial classifications of knowledge were repurposed to support national schooling agendas, reinforcing the perception that integration with state education systems was both necessary and inevitable. This selective appropriation of colonial texts functioned as a political strategy that reduced resistance by framing reform as internal evolution rather than external imposition.

Nevertheless, post-colonial engagement with colonial texts was not uniformly uncritical. In some cases, reformist scholars and madrasah leaders reinterpreted colonial reports to argue for greater institutional autonomy rather than deeper integration. Recent historiographical work emphasizes that colonial documents could be deployed as evidence of historical marginalization and epistemic injustice, not only as reform blueprints (Qureshi, 2024). In Egypt, certain Azhari scholars referenced early reform debates to defend the continued

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

centrality of classical disciplines while accepting limited curricular expansion. These contested readings highlight the plurality of post-colonial responses and the strategic flexibility with which historical texts were employed in ongoing struggles over authority and educational direction.

The enduring reliance on colonial frameworks in post-colonial reform had several long-term consequences for madrasah systems. It reinforced a binary view of religious and secular knowledge as inherently separate domains requiring artificial linkage rather than organic integration. Recent curriculum studies argue that this binary shifted reform efforts toward adding subjects rather than rethinking pedagogical philosophy or epistemological coherence (Farooq, 2025). It also intensified tensions between state authorities and independent madrasah networks resistant to extensive regulation. Moreover, the continued use of colonial language portraying traditional education as backward shaped public discourse well into the twenty-first century, limiting the scope of imaginative reform grounded in indigenous educational traditions.

Colonial-era writings also influenced how reform success was evaluated in post-colonial contexts. Criteria such as graduate employability, alignment with national curricula, and inclusion of science and technology closely resembled colonial benchmarks of educational utility. Recent policy analyses suggest that these indicators marginalized core objectives of Islamic education, including moral formation, spiritual discipline, and transmission of religious sciences (Karim, 2022). This mismatch generated persistent dissatisfaction among traditional scholars, who perceived reform initiatives as prioritizing state and economic demands over religious and communal values. Continued reliance on colonial-derived metrics further constrained the development of evaluation frameworks rooted in Islamic educational philosophy.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly calls for a critical reassessment of colonial-era texts in planning future reforms. Comparative studies of decolonizing education argue that such documents should be treated primarily as historical evidence of disruption rather than as normative guides for reform (Sayed & El-Attar, 2026). Reframing colonial texts in this way could enable policymakers and scholars to recover pre-colonial Islamic educational principles while addressing contemporary social and economic challenges. Greater awareness of textual continuity offers an opportunity to interrupt cycles of inherited assumptions and to design reform agendas grounded in indigenous epistemologies rather than colonial legacies.

In conclusion, post-colonial reforms in Islamic education drew extensively from colonial-era texts through inherited problem definitions, binary categorizations of knowledge, and recurring policy solutions. Governments in South Asia and North Africa frequently referenced colonial surveys and reform proposals when justifying curriculum integration and increased regulation. While some actors used these texts to resist excessive secularization, the dominant pattern involved reproduction rather than rejection of colonial frameworks. This fourth research question thus reveals the enduring influence of colonial textual inheritance on the language, assumptions, and boundaries of madrasah reform long after independence,

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

underscoring the difficulty of constructing fully autonomous educational visions in post-colonial Muslim societies.

E. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the complex and far-reaching impact of colonialism on Islamic education systems, with particular attention to developments in South Asia and North Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The analysis shows that colonial authorities profoundly reshaped traditional madrasah education through language replacement, withdrawal of financial support, administrative intervention, and ideological marginalization of religious knowledge. These measures narrowed the scope of classical Islamic sciences, weakened the social and economic standing of madrasah graduates, and introduced secular subjects under varying degrees of pressure. At the same time, Muslim scholars and communities responded with a wide range of deliberate and effective strategies, including the establishment of independent institutions, reliance on community-based funding, production of scholarly writings, issuance of religious rulings, strategic relocation, and sustained investment in teacher training. Together, these efforts preserved the core of indigenous educational traditions and prevented the disappearance of classical Islamic learning under colonial rule. The encounter with colonial education systems also initiated a gradual process of hybridization within madrasah curricula. Rather than fully rejecting or wholly adopting Western educational models, many institutions selectively incorporated modern subjects such as languages, mathematics, and basic sciences while maintaining the centrality of religious disciplines. This process unfolded unevenly across regions and institutions and cannot be explained solely as an external imposition. Instead, hybridization emerged from the interaction of colonial pressures, internal reform initiatives, economic realities, and evolving community expectations. The result was a diverse range of educational models that combined elements of continuity and change, reflecting both adaptation and resistance. The post-colonial period did not mark a complete break from colonial educational thinking. Instead, many reform efforts continued to rely on colonial-era reports, classifications, and diagnostic frameworks when designing policies for Islamic education. Even as newly independent governments sought to assert national and religious identities, they often reproduced earlier assumptions about modernization and educational deficiency. This continuity reveals the enduring influence of historical texts and concepts in shaping policy debates and reform agendas. Colonial legacies thus extended beyond institutional structures to affect the language, priorities, and evaluative criteria of post-independence educational reform. Overall, the legacy of colonialism in Islamic education is best understood as one of disruption accompanied by resilience. Colonial interventions created deep structural and ideological challenges, yet they did not succeed in dismantling Islamic educational traditions. Instead, these pressures stimulated creative responses that ranged from defensive preservation to pragmatic adaptation. The hybrid models that developed during this period established lasting precedents for negotiating the relationship between religious authenticity and contemporary relevance. The persistence of colonial

El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

frameworks in later reforms further underscores the long-term power of inherited ideas in shaping educational discourse. This study also carries important implications for contemporary discussions on Islamic education reform. Any meaningful effort to reform madrasahs must take seriously the historical legacies of colonialism rather than treating reform as a purely technical exercise. The experiences of resistance and adaptation during the colonial period demonstrate the potential of community-driven initiatives and internally guided change. They also highlight the importance of critically reassessing inherited assumptions and recovering pre-colonial educational philosophies as sources of inspiration. The history of hybridization suggests that integration of modern knowledge can be constructive when it is selective, context-sensitive, and respectful of religious identity. Future research could expand this analysis by including additional regions, such as Southeast Asia, West Africa, or the eastern Mediterranean, in order to identify broader patterns and local variations. Studies based on oral histories and ethnographic methods could offer deeper insight into the lived experiences of teachers and students within madrasah communities. Further investigation of specific historical texts and their role in shaping post-colonial reform debates would also enhance understanding of how ideas travel across time. Research on contemporary student perspectives could help connect historical developments with present educational realities.

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El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

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El Wafa: Islamic Studies Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, (December 2025), pp. 36-58

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