The Reality of Islamic Education in Egypt : The Social History of Al-Azhar Institution

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Abstract: *This study examines the reality of Islamic education in Egypt through a social-historical approach to the Al-Azhar institution as the oldest Islamic educational institution that has continuously survived to the present day. Unlike previous studies that tend to emphasize institutional structures, curricula, or educational modernization in a descriptive manner, this research offers originality by analyzing Al-Azhar's education as the product of a dialectical interaction between political power, social structures, and Islamic scholarly authority. The study employs a qualitative research design using a historical approach, involving critical examination and analysis of relevant primary and secondary sources. The findings indicate that Al-Azhar has undergone multilayered transformations, beginning as a center of Ismaili Shi 'a propagation during the Fatimid Dynasty, later transitioning into a Sunni educational institution under the Ayyubid rule, reaching its intellectual peak during the Mamluk era, experiencing conservative tendencies during the Ottoman period, and eventually entering a phase of modernization from the nineteenth century onwards. The main finding of this study asserts that the modernization of Al-Azhar should not be understood as a form of Westernization of Islamic education, but rather as a process of epistemological reconstruction that integrates classical Islamic scholarly heritage (turāth) with the spirit of renewal (tajdīd). This study proposes an adaptive, tradition-based transformation paradigm as a model of Islamic education that remains relevant and contextual in responding to the challenges of modernity and globalization.*

Keywords*: Al-Azhar, Islamic Education, Social History, Modernization*

Introduction

Egypt has long been recognized as one of the central hubs of Islamic civilization, playing a crucial role in the development of knowledge, education, and culture in the Muslim world. Numerous educational institutions emerged in Egypt, with Al-Azhar University standing out as the most prominent. The reality of Islamic education in Egypt, particularly through Al-Azhar, cannot be separated from its social, political, and cultural contexts. As the oldest Islamic educational institution in the world that has continuously survived to the present day, Al-Azhar possesses a long social history in shaping Muslim intellectuality and religiosity, both within Egypt and beyond. Its role has extended beyond the production of religious scholars to include the dissemination and development of moderate Islamic values that bridge tradition and modernity.

The modernization of Islamic education in Egypt developed in parallel with broader civilizational and cultural transformations. Contact with modern Western civilization during Napoleon's expedition awakened Egyptian reformers to the socio-political decline of their society. This encounter generated the conviction that to overcome backwardness and compete with Western powers, Egypt needed comprehensive reform, particularly in the field of education. These reform efforts materialized through the modernization of Islamic educational institutions. Reformist thinkers sought to make Islamic education more adaptive to changing times by establishing new schools and incorporating modern sciences into the (Alam & Cahyono, 2022). Among Islamic institutions, Al-Azhar played a particularly significant role. It not only provided religious education but also introduced programs in medicine, engineering, and pharmacy, and established specialized faculties such as Dār al-ʿUlūm, which focus on Islamic studies. These developments indicate that the dichotomy between religious and secular sciences gradually diminished, replaced by an integrative model of Islamic education, especially at Al-Azhar (Takwil, 2023).

Since its establishment in the tenth century, Al-Azhar has functioned as an influential center of Islamic scholarship in the Muslim world. However, its social history also reveals various challenges that have shaped the reality of Islamic education in Egypt. Al-Azhar has frequently been positioned within tensions between political authority and educational ideals, from the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods to the modern Egyptian state. Furthermore, tensions have emerged between classical Islamic scholarly traditions rooted in turāth and the demands of modernization. These dynamics have become increasingly complex

due to social inequalities, state intervention, and the pressures of globalization, all of which require Al-Azhar to preserve its scholarly authority while simultaneously adapting to contemporary developments

Several previous studies have examined the reality of Islamic education in Egypt, particularly the social history of the Al-Azhar institution. Azmiyah, Salman Yafi Zulmuqim, and Fauza Masyhudi (2024) investigated the dynamics of Al-Azhar University and educational reform in Egypt and its influence on the Muslim world, using a literature-based approach. Their findings highlight the continuity of Al-Azhar from the Fatimid period to the present as a source of motivation for Muslims to pursue knowledge and advance Islamic (Azmiyah et al., 2024).

Similarly, Abdul Farid, Zulmuqim, and Muhammad Zalnur (2024) explored the dynamics of Al-Azhar and Islamic reform in Egypt through library research, concluding that Al-Azhar not only produces competent scholars but also contributes to the development of global civilization (Farid et al., 2024). Other studies include the work of Abrar, Andi Takdir, and Firdaus (2021), who examined the existence of Al-Azhar and the role of Shaykh Mahmūd Shaltūt as a key reformer. Their research demonstrates that Al-Azhar underwent a significant transformation from an Ismaili Shiʿa institution under the Fatimid Dynasty to a Sunni institution under the Ayyubids, with Shaltūt playing a pivotal role in reconciliation and modernization efforts. (Abrar et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Febrina Asmiralda, Haidar Putra Daulay, and Sholihah Titin Sumanti (2024) analyzed Islamic cultural history during the reform period using a historical-descriptive approach, concluding that modern Islamic development began around the nineteenth century, when Muslims became increasingly aware of their weaknesses and the need for reform (Asmiralda et al., 2024). Comparative studies by Roby Ariatma, Mukhlis, and Jamaludin (2024) reveal that the modernization of Islamic education in Egypt emphasizes the preservation of classical learning while selectively adopting modern curricula and technologies. (Ariatman et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Putri et al. (2023) highlights that Al-Azhar's curriculum incorporates modern sciences to help scholars engage with contemporary culture and address emerging social challenges (Putri et al., 2023).

Conceptually, the reality of Islamic education may be understood as a social-historical process emerging from the interaction between Islamic normative values, educational institutions, and socio-political and cultural dynamics. Islamic education is not merely pedagogical in nature but also involves continuous negotiation with power and

scholarly traditions. Its ultimate objective is the formation of the insān kāmil through taʿlīm, tarbiyah, and taʾdīb, oriented towards the aims of Islamic education (maqāṣid al-tarbiyah al-islāmiyyah). This study employs Al-Azhar as a case study to critically examine the reality of Islamic education in Egypt, analyze its social transformations, and emphasize its implications for contemporary Islamic education.

Based on the above background, this study seeks to examine in depth the reality of Islamic education in Egypt, particularly through the social history of the Al-Azhar institution. Unlike previous studies that are largely descriptive-historical in nature, this research positions itself as a form of historical-critical reflection on Islamic education in Egypt, using Al-Azhar as its primary case study. It does not merely reconstruct Al-Azhar's historical trajectory but also analyses its social meanings and educational implications for contemporary Islamic education. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its attempt to interpret the social history of Al-Azhar as a reflective foundation for current Islamic educational development, especially in responding to the challenges of modernity, state intervention, and the globalization of knowledge.

The argument regarding the reality of Islamic education in Egypt can be strengthened by engaging with the thoughts of both classical and contemporary figures in Islamic educational philosophy. For instance, Ibn Khaldun emphasized the importance of education as a process of human formation through social and civilizational stages, which is highly relevant to the historical dynamics of Al-Azhar (Nur Fahmi & Sukandar, 2025). Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas proposed the concept of taʾdīb as the essence of Islamic education, namely the cultivation of adab that unites knowledge, faith, and practice within an integrative (Hidayat & Tarsono, 2021). Ismail Raji al-Faruqi stressed the integration of knowledge with Islamic values through the idea of Islamization of Knowledge, which in recent studies has been understood as an effort toward epistemological decolonization and the integration of modern sciences with Islamic tradition. The engagement with these perspectives demonstrates that the modernization of Al-Azhar is not merely a structural adaptation but rather an epistemological endeavor to integrate turath (classical heritage) with tajdid (renewal), ensuring that Islamic education remains relevant in addressing the challenges of modernity and globalization (Afandi & Muhyidin, 2025).

The objective of this study is to describe and analyze the reality of Islamic education in Egypt, especially through the social history of the Al-Azhar institution. It is expected that this research will enrich academic discourse on the history of Islamic education while also

providing practical insights for the development of Islamic education that remains relevant to contemporary challenges. By examining not only institutional modernization but also the influence of Egypt's social, political, and cultural structures on the formation of Islamic intellectual traditions at Al-Azhar, this study seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of how social-historical realities have shaped Islamic education in Egypt. The findings are expected to contribute both to scholarly debates and to practical reflections on developing adaptive Islamic educational systems that remain rooted in tradition while engaging constructively with modernity.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design employing a historical approach (historical research). The historical approach is used to systematically, accurately, and objectively reconstruct past events through normative and interpretative perspectives (Nasution, 2023). Al-Azhar University was selected as the object of study due to its status as one of the oldest and most influential Islamic educational institutions in the world. By examining the social history of the Al-Azhar institution, this study seeks to understand how historical dynamics have shaped the reality of Islamic education in Egypt up to the present day. The primary data source for this research is a book authored by Fazlurrahman Hadi entitled Rifa'ah Thahtawi: Sang Pembaharu Pendidikan Islam (Hadi, 2018). which provides an in-depth discussion of Islamic educational reform and intellectual transformation in Egypt. Secondary data sources consist of books and scholarly journal articles that are relevant to the topic of this study, particularly those addressing the history of Islamic education, the development of Al-Azhar, and educational reform in Egypt.

This research is focused on investigating, understanding, and explaining historical conditions and events that occurred in the past. The objective of historical research is to formulate conclusions regarding the causes, impacts, and developments of past events that may be used to explain present conditions and anticipate future trends. According to Cohen and Manion, historical research involves systematic and objective investigation, evaluation, and synthesis of evidence to establish reliable facts and draw valid conclusions about past phenomena (Nasution, 2023).

The historical research process in this study follows four main stages. The first stage is heuristics, which involves the collection of relevant and reliable data sources necessary for analyzing and understanding the phenomena under investigation. The second stage is

verification, or source criticism, which aims to assess the authenticity, credibility, and limitations of the sources used. The third stage is interpretation, in which the collected data are analyzed and presented in the form of narratives, chronological accounts, and thematic analyses to generate meaningful insights. The final stage is historiography, which involves synthesizing the analyzed data and reconstructing historical facts into a coherent and systematic scholarly narrative (Machali, 2021).

The research process in this study follows four systematic stages that are consistent with established historical research methodology. First, heuristics involves the collection of relevant and reliable sources to provide a comprehensive foundation for analysis. Second, verification (source criticism) is conducted to assess the authenticity, credibility, and limitations of the collected materials. Third, interpretation entails analyzing and synthesizing the data into meaningful narratives, thematic accounts, and contextual insights. Finally, historiography reconstructs the findings into a coherent scholarly narrative that reflects both normative and interpretative perspectives. These stages ensure that the study is methodologically rigorous and firmly grounded in the principles of historical inquiry (Ravico et al., 2023).

Result and Discussion

The Establishment of Al-Azhar Institution

The history of Al-Azhar dates back to the year 970 CE in Cairo when it was founded by the Fatimid Dynasty as the centre for the propagation of the Ismaili Shi'a teachings. Over time, this institution evolved into an inclusive scholarly centre accommodating various Islamic schools of thought and intellectual traditions. Its status as the oldest university still in existence has made it a symbol of intellectual authority and a meeting point for religious sciences, philosophy, language, and modern knowledge. With its extensive network of scholars, Al-Azhar has long served as the principal reference in religious authority, fatwas, and the development of Islamic educational curricula from the classical to the contemporary period(Yafi & Masyhudi, 2024). Several dynasties witnessed the establishment and growth of Al-Azhar as a centre of Islamic education, namely:

Al-Azhar during the Fatimid Dynasty

The Fatimid Dynasty was founded in 297 AH / 910 CE in North Africa by Sa 'id ibn Ḥusain before relocating to Egypt. As the only Shi 'a dynasty in Islamic history, the Fatimid Caliphate rapidly expanded its political and territorial power, conquering key regions and designating Cairo as its capital. Early education was centered in mosques, including the construction of Al-Azhar Mosque during the reign of Caliph Al-

Aziz, which later developed into a center for Islamic studies. The Fatimid period represented a golden age characterized by strong political, military, and cultural influence before it ended in 567 AH / 1171 CE (Permatasari & Ulya, 2022).

The Fatimids consolidated their power in Egypt through the educational institution of Al-Azhar, founded during the rule of Caliph Muizz Li Dinillah in 970 CE. Initially built as a mosque by General Jauhar as-Siqili Al-Azhar developed into both an educational hub and a propaganda tool for disseminating Shi'a doctrines. The success of the Fatimids was supported by their strong military, effective governance, advanced scientific progress, and a stable economy—factors that enabled Al-Azhar to become an international educational institution capable of adapting to change and addressing the challenges of its time (Muhammad, 2020). The decline of the Fatimids began after the death of Caliph Al-Zahir and the succession of his young son Ma'ad al-Muntashir. His reign was marked by power struggles, economic crises, tax increases, and political instability. The situation deteriorated further due to attacks by the Crusaders and retaliatory campaigns by the King of Jerusalem. Ultimately, the dynasty fell in 1171 CE when Shalahuddin Al-Ayyubi deposed the last Fatimid caliph (Manan, 2020).

The educational reality of Al-Azhar during the Fatimid era was characterized by its dual function as a mosque and a center for Ismaili Shi 'a propagation. The curriculum focused on religious sciences such as Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir), Ismaili jurisprudence (fiqh), theology (kalam), Arabic grammar, and philosophy. Al-Azhar Mosque soon evolved into a major madrasa employing the ḥalaqah system, where scholars directly instructed students in study circles. In its socio-historical context, Al-Azhar functioned not only as a center of learning but also as a political-religious instrument of Fatimid propaganda. Hence, Islamic education during this period reflected the close interconnection between knowledge, ideology, and political power (Sutrisno, 2023).

Al-Azhar during the Ayyubid Dynasty

The Fatimid Dynasty came to an end in 1171 CE when Shalahuddin Al-Ayyubi seized power. He closed all educational activities at Al-Azhar in order to eradicate Shi'a influence and subsequently founded a number of madrasas in its vicinity to teach Islam according to the four Sunni schools of law(Sani, 2021). After gaining control of Egypt in 1171 CE, Shalahudddin transformed Al-Azhar from a Shi 'a center into a Sunni educational institution. The curriculum was revised to align with Sunni principles, replacing the Fatimid intellectual framework. He also ordered the destruction of Shi

'a books housed in the royal library to eliminate the remnants of that doctrine. From then on, Al-Azhar evolved into a key center of Sunni Islamic education, while Shi'a literature became extremely rare and survived only in a few areas such as Yemen and India (Tamia & Indra, 2024).

The educational landscape of Al-Azhar during the Ayyubid period was defined by a significant transformation from an Ismaili Shi 'a institution into a Sunni one, particularly of the Shāfi'ī school. The curriculum focused on the Qur'an, Hadith, jurisprudence, and Arabic language studies, while maintaining the ḥalaqah system to strengthen Sunni doctrine and law. This transformation established Al-Azhar as an intellectual bastion of Sunni Islam and a leading center of religious authority across the Muslim world (Sani, 2021).

Al-Azhar during the Mamluk Dynasty

The transfer of power from the Ayyubids to the Mamluks occurred following the death of al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ. His wife, Shajar al-Durr, briefly ruled with the support of the Mamluk soldiers until Turanshah was killed. After approximately eighty days in power, she was asked by the Caliph to abdicate. She then married the commander Izz al-Dīn Aybak and handed over power to him. Aybak later killed Shajar al-Durr to seize full control of the government, marking the beginning of the Mamluk Dynasty (Zaimuddin, 2022).

Al-Azhar was reopened in 665 AH during the reign of Sultan Baybars I, after having been closed for ninety-eight years. This era marked a golden age as scholars from Baghdad and Córdoba migrated to Egypt, enriching Al-Azhar's intellectual environment. The Mamluk rulers provided substantial financial support and infrastructure development. With the Shāfi'ī school and Ahl al-Sunnah as the official doctrinal basis, Al-Azhar flourished as a center of Sunni Islamic scholarship. The curriculum expanded to include Qur'anic exegesis, Hadith, jurisprudence, legal theory (usul al-fiqh), linguistics, logic, and other disciplines, while the waqf (endowment) system ensured the sustainability of educational activities. This period consolidated Al-Azhar's position as a stronghold of Sunni orthodoxy, especially in response to external challenges following the Crusades and Mongol invasions (Tambak, 2017).

Al-Azhar during the Ottoman Dynasty

During the Ottoman period, Al-Azhar experienced significant changes, most notably the establishment of the position of Shaykh al-Azhar, first held by Shaykh Muḥammad Al-Kharasyi Al-Malik (1690 CE). The early years of Ottoman rule saw a major exodus of scholars to Turkey, leading to a temporary decline in intellectual activity. Despite

limited governmental attention, Al-Azhar grew closer to the populace and achieved financial independence through effective waqf management, enabling it to act as a critical opposition voice against state authority. A dark period ensued during the French occupation (1798–1802), when many Al-Azhar scholars were hunted and executed daily, leading to a temporary paralysis of the institution. Several scholars fled for their lives, among them Shaykh Ibrahim Al-Bajuri(Qodir, 2021).

The Education System after Modernization at Al-Azhar

Overall, Al-Azhar not only symbolises the advancement of Islamic education but also serves as a bridge between the Eastern and Western worlds in the transmission of knowledge. Its educational system, which combines classical and innovative approaches, has endured into the twenty-first century, demonstrating its resilience and ongoing contribution to intellectual and social welfare (Azmiyah et al., 2024).

In the modern period, Al-Azhar's educational system underwent substantial reform as a response to internal demands for renewal and external pressures stemming from Western modernity. Educational reforms initiated during the rule of Muhammad ʿAli Pasha and later intensified by reformist scholars such as Muhammad ʿAbduh aimed to modernise curricula, teaching methods, and institutional structures. These reforms sought to move beyond the exclusive reliance on the traditional halaqah system by introducing more structured classroom-based instruction, formal curricula, and assessment mechanisms. Nevertheless, the classical halaqah model continued to coexist with modern pedagogical approaches, creating a hybrid educational system that balanced tradition and innovation.

Historically, Al-Azhar's educational development has been closely intertwined with political authority. During the Fatimid period, the halaqah system served as the primary mode of instruction and later evolved into a university-like institution with the establishment of Dār al-Ḥikmah and the inclusion of rational sciences (ʿulūm ʿaqliyyah). Under Ayyubid rule, educational activities at Al-Azhar were suspended for nearly a century as part of a broader strategy to eradicate Shiʿa influence, while Sunni madrasas were established to promote orthodox teachings. The subsequent Mamluk period witnessed a revival of educational activities at Al-Azhar, driven by large-scale migration of scholars seeking refuge from political upheavals in Baghdad and al-Andalus. This influx of intellectual capital significantly enhanced Al-Azhar's scholarly reputation and global standing (Abdel Dayem et al., 2024).

In its early pedagogical practices, teaching at Al-Azhar closely resembled that of other traditional Islamic educational institutions,

relying predominantly on the halaqah system. Students were free to choose their teachers and move between study circles according to their academic interests. Typically, the teacher (shaykh) sat among the students or occasionally on a low chair while dictating texts and responding to questions. Discussion-based learning was also encouraged, with students engaging in peer-to-peer debates under the guidance of a facilitator. In certain learning settings, senior students were appointed to teach their peers under institutional supervision, reflecting a decentralised and participatory model of education (Rinjani & Napu, 2022).

After nearly two centuries of being used by the Fatimid dynasty as a center for education and the dissemination of Shi'a doctrines, al-Azhar was taken over by Shalahuddin Al-Ayubi and transformed into a Sunni-oriented mosque-madrasa. Unlike the Fatimids, who emphasized philosophical and theological instruction, the Ayyubids like other Sunni rulers and scholars prioritized the teaching of jurisprudence in the madrasas they established, including Al-Azhar. This takeover effectively reduced Al-Azhar's supra-local orientation into a narrower institution, shaped by the local political scope of the Ayyubid dynasty. Only because of Cairo's strategic role in Islamic history was Al-Azhar able to regain and preserve its significance, particularly in the modern era Following the Ayyubid conquest of Egypt in 1171 CE, Al-Azhar remained vacant for nearly a century (1171–1267 CE). During this period, Friday prayers were prohibited at Al-Azhar and transferred to the Mosque of al-Hakim, as the prevailing view held that there should not be two sermons within one city. With this, the Fatimid dynasty came to an end, and al-Azhar was transformed into a Sunni university. It went on to achieve remarkable success and a lasting reputation as an authority in religious scholarship, a status it continues to hold today. During the reign of Caliph al-'Aziz Billah in 387 AH/988 CE, with the efforts of his vizier Ya'qub ibn Killis, Al-Azhar was established as an Islamic university teaching religious sciences, rational sciences (logic), and other general disciplines. To support educational activities, Al-Azhar was equipped with dormitories for the fuqaha (teachers and scholars), with all their needs provided by the caliph(Amaliyah, 2013).

The reality of education at Al-Azhar during the Ottoman period, prior to modernization, was that it retained its position as a center of Sunni Islamic scholarship, particularly in the fields of Qur'anic exegesis, hadith, jurisprudence, legal theory, and Arabic language. Nevertheless, this era is often described as a phase of stagnation, in which Al-Azhar focused more on conserving classical scholarly traditions than on innovation. The learning system remained based on halaqah (study

circles) led by scholars, with the granting of ijazah (authorization of knowledge) rather than formal degrees as recognized in modern education. Historians note that during the centuries of Mamluk and Ottoman rule, Al-Azhar functioned as a bastion of Sunni Islam and an intellectual safeguard for the Muslim community, though it was less engaged with the development of modern sciences (Gubara, 2014).

Even so, Al-Azhar continued to play a central role in maintaining the continuity of Islamic scholarly traditions. Under the Ottomans, the political legitimacy granted to Al-Azhar further strengthened its authority as a center of fatwa and education. Yet, the need for reform gradually emerged through interaction with the wider world, making this period a bridge between the classical era and the beginnings of Al-Azhar's modernization (Gubara, 2014). The modernization of Al-Azhar was not merely the adoption of Western education but rather a process of epistemological reconstruction, combining the legacy of turath (classical tradition) with the spirit of tajdid (renewal) within an Islamic framework. The historical-sociological approach highlights that modernization at al-Azhar was essentially an effort to synthesize religious and rational sciences without negating spiritual values.

The model of modernization at al-Azhar offers a new paradigm for modern Islamic education, namely "adaptive transformation based on tradition"—an approach that views renewal not as an antithesis to tradition but as its evolutionary continuation. In this way, al-Azhar can be understood as a prototype of Islamic education that is resilient, integrative, and globally oriented, serving as an inspiration for the development of Islamic educational systems in various countries, including Indonesia.

Social Transformation of Islamic Education at Al-Azhar

Since its establishment during the Fatimid Dynasty (969–1171 CE), Al-Azhar initially functioned as a mosque and a center for Ismaili Shiʿa propagation. At this stage, the educational orientation of Al-Azhar focused on Shiʿa doctrines, philosophy, Arabic grammar, and theology. The political dynamics of the Fatimid state positioned Al-Azhar as both an ideological instrument and a scholarly institution that legitimized political authority. This early phase illustrates that the social transformation of education at Al-Azhar was inseparable from the broader political context in which it operated (Nasution & Zalnur, 2024).

A significant transformation occurred during the Ayyubid period (1171–1250 CE), when Sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī firmly re-established Sunni orthodoxy at Al-Azhar. The educational curriculum was redirected towards Qur'anic studies, Hadith, and jurisprudence,

particularly within the Shafiʿi legal school. This transformation reinforced Al-Azhar's role as a bastion of Sunni scholarship and strengthened the position of Sunni scholars within the social structure of Egyptian society. Educational authority at Al-Azhar thus became an important means of legitimizing the new political order, shaping long-term patterns of Islamic education in Egypt (Nasution & Zalnur, 2024).

During the Mamluk period (1250–1517 CE), Al-Azhar experienced significant expansion supported by an extensive waqf system. This financial stability enabled the institution to broaden its curriculum by incorporating rational sciences alongside traditional religious disciplines. As a result, Al-Azhar attracted students from across the Muslim world and functioned as a center of intellectual mobility and social advancement. Graduates of Al-Azhar gained scholarly legitimacy that enabled them to serve as jurists, judges, and religious leaders, thereby reinforcing the institution's influence within Islamic society (Tambak, 2017).

Under Ottoman rule (1517–1798 CE), Al-Azhar continued to serve as a center of Sunni Islamic education, primarily oriented towards the preservation of classical scholarly traditions. The continued reliance on the halaqah system and the granting of ijazah reflected a conservative approach to knowledge transmission. Although this period is often described as one of intellectual stagnation, Al-Azhar maintained its vital social role as the guardian of Islamic orthodoxy and a source of religious authority. The limited incorporation of new forms of knowledge highlights the institution's emphasis on continuity over innovation during this era (Gubara, 2014)

A major transformation began in the nineteenth century under the leadership of Muhammad ʿAli Pasha, when exposure to Western educational models and scientific advancements prompted calls for reform. Al-Azhar gradually introduced new subjects such as mathematics, natural sciences, and social sciences, although these reforms initially faced resistance from traditionalist scholars. This phase marked a shift in Al-Azhar's social function, as it began to evolve from a purely religious institution into a modern Islamic university capable of engaging with contemporary challenges (Minem, 2024) .

In the twentieth century, educational reforms at Al-Azhar accelerated in response to colonial influence, state intervention, and global intellectual exchange. The establishment of modern faculties alongside traditional religious studies enabled Al-Azhar graduates to pursue careers beyond the religious sphere, including law, medicine, and public administration. This transformation produced a new class of Muslim intellectuals who played significant roles in political, social,

and academic arenas, both in Egypt and internationally, particularly in Southeast Asia (Jamiluddin, 2019). The social transformation of Islamic education at Al-Azhar should therefore be understood not merely as a chronological sequence of institutional changes, but as a dialectical process involving political power, scholarly authority, and societal dynamics. Each historical phase—from the Fatimid period to the modern era—reflects shifts not only in doctrinal orientation and curriculum, but also in broader social paradigms regarding the purpose and function of Islamic education. This perspective highlights Al-Azhar's enduring capacity to negotiate continuity and change, positioning it as a resilient and globally influential model of Islamic education.

Conclusion

The social history of Al-Azhar demonstrates that the development of Islamic education in Egypt has been deeply shaped by political, social, and cultural dynamics. Established during the Fatimid period as a center of Ismaili Shiʿa education, Al-Azhar was later transformed under the Ayyubid Dynasty into a Sunni institution that reinforced Islamic orthodoxy. The Mamluk era marked the intellectual peak of Al-Azhar, supported by a strong waqf system that enabled curricular expansion, while the Ottoman period focused primarily on preserving classical scholarly traditions.

A significant transformation occurred from the nineteenth century onwards, when Al-Azhar responded to the challenges of modernity by integrating religious sciences with modern disciplines. This process indicates that the modernization of Al-Azhar should not be understood as Westernization, but rather as an epistemological reconstruction that combines classical Islamic heritage (turāth) with renewal (tajdīd). Through this adaptive, tradition-based approach, Al-Azhar has maintained its relevance as a leading Islamic educational institution in the modern era.

The findings of this study suggest that contemporary Islamic education can benefit from Al-Azhar's model of adaptive transformation, which emphasizes the integration of knowledge, institutional resilience, and education's role as an agent of social change. Al-Azhar thus offers a valuable reference for developing Islamic education systems that remain rooted in tradition while constructively engaging with global challenges.

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