

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo. 21707418

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND SYSTEMS IN FATIMID EGYPT (466 AH/1074 CE - 567 AH/1171 CE)

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Received: 25/04/2026
Accepted: 13/05/2026

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ABSTRACT

The history of education in Fatimid Egypt presents significant civilizational and cultural dimensions. This study investigates the educational institutions and systems in Egypt during the late Fatimid period, spanning from 466 AH/1074 CE to 567 AH/1171 CE. This era witnessed profound political and sectarian transformations that directly impacted educational methodologies and structures. While the Fatimid state was initially founded on Ismaili doctrine, it subsequently experienced significant interactions with Sunni and Hanafi currents. The objective of this research is to trace the emergence and evolution of elementary schools (kuttabs), analyze the pivotal roles of major mosques and the Fatimid palace, document the establishment of formal schools, and examine the transformation of private residences and ministerial palaces into vibrant centers of learning. Employing a descriptive-analytical approach, this study relies on a comprehensive review of historical sources, including chronicles, biographical dictionaries, travel accounts, and jurisprudential texts. The findings reveal a widespread network of kuttabs across urban and rural areas, providing foundational education in reading, writing, arithmetic, and Qur'anic recitation to children from diverse social classes. Major mosques, such as Al-Azhar, the Old Mosque (Amr ibn al-As), and Al-Aqmar, evolved into prominent scientific institutes focusing on jurisprudence, linguistics, and Qur'anic sciences. Concurrently, the Fatimid palace and Dar al-Hikma initially served as centers for Ismaili teachings before transitioning to broader Qur'anic studies. Formal schools emerged later in Alexandria and Cairo, primarily emphasizing Sunni jurisprudence. The educational trajectory typically progressed from kuttabs to mosque-based study circles, culminating in the attainment of a scientific license (Ijaza). Ultimately, the late Fatimid period fostered a diverse and expansive educational landscape, blending Ismaili and Sunni influences to create multifaceted curricula that preserved Islamic sciences and laid the groundwork for the subsequent educational renaissance during the Ayyubid era.

KEYWORDS: Educational Offices, Educational Mosques, Fatimid Schools, Dar Al-Hikma, Scientific License, Ismaili And Sunni Education, Late Fatimid Period.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of the history of education in Fatimid Egypt constitutes a vital scientific field that reveals significant civilizational and cultural dimensions. Between the mid-fifth century AH and the end of the sixth century AH (1074-1171 CE), Egypt underwent profound political and sectarian transformations that directly influenced its educational institutions and methodologies (Al-Qadi, 2008). Although the Fatimid state was established on the foundation of the Ismaili doctrine, it later experienced dynamic interactions with Sunni and Hanafi intellectual currents. This ideological convergence resulted in a multiplicity of intellectual sources and a diversity of educational platforms (Sayyid, 1992). Consequently, this period witnessed the proliferation of *kuttabs* (elementary schools) and the expansion of primary education, alongside the growing prominence of mosques, palaces, and newly established formal schools. Furthermore, many scholars increasingly relied on their private residences as venues for disseminating knowledge (Ali Khattab, 1946). This study aims to analyze these educational phenomena within their historical context, identify the factors driving their development, and understand the role these institutions played in shaping the cultural and cognitive identity of Egyptian society.

Education in Egypt between 466 and 567 AH (1074-1171 CE) experienced remarkable development, introducing new systems unfamiliar during the early Fatimid period. While *kuttabs* appeared early in the Fatimid era, they became significantly more expansive during this later period. Their educational scope broadened, with students dedicating themselves to mastering reading, writing, and arithmetic. These institutions spread extensively throughout Egypt, making education accessible to children across all social strata (Abd al-Aati, 1984). The ambition of these students grew as they utilized *kuttabs* as a foundational stage, preparing them for advanced studies under the tutelage of esteemed sheikhs to complete the memorization of the Holy Qur'an.

Concurrently, the Fatimid palace and the Al-Azhar Mosque emerged as two preeminent educational centers. They were joined by several other significant mosques, notably the Old Mosque (Amr ibn al-As), the Al-Zafiri Mosque in Fustat, and the Al-Attarin Mosque in Alexandria (Abu Sudaira, 1989). Subsequently, formal schools were introduced, bringing structured systems and methodologies for teaching religious sciences. To fully comprehend these institutions and systems in Egypt, it is necessary to examine each category individually.

2. METHODS

This research employs a descriptive-analytical methodology to investigate the educational landscape of Fatimid Egypt. The study relies on a rigorous examination of primary historical sources, including chronicles, biographical dictionaries, travelogues, and jurisprudential treatises from the period (Al-Silafi, n.d.). Information regarding the organization of *kuttabs*, the curricula and pedagogical methods employed in mosques and schools, and the nature of study circles and their relationships with political authorities was systematically extracted and analyzed. A comparative approach was utilized to contrast these institutions with those of preceding and subsequent eras, thereby identifying patterns of continuity and evolutionary development. Furthermore, the methodology carefully assesses the respective influences of Ismaili doctrine and Sunni thought on the formulation of educational programs and curricula during this transitional historical phase.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 KUTTABS (ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS)

In accordance with the principles of the Islamic faith, which strongly advocate for learning reading, writing, and the pursuit of knowledge—as emphasized in numerous Qur'anic verses and Prophetic Hadiths, such as "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" (Ibn Abd al-Barr, 1995)—Muslims prioritized the educational and moral upbringing of their children. The primary focus was on teaching the Holy Qur'an and the fundamentals of the Arabic language (Ibn Khaldun, 1992). Consequently, specialized places for teaching children, known as *makatib* or *kuttabs*, proliferated. A *maktab* is defined as a room, courtyard, or shop where a teacher instructs young students. The teacher (*mu'addib*) was required to possess honesty and integrity, and often expected to be married. The curriculum centered on Qur'anic instruction, writing, Islamic rituals, and moral education (Al-Ahwani, n.d.).

Parents typically enrolled their children at the age of seven, though exceptionally bright children might begin at five or six (Abd al-Aal, 1985). The *mu'addib* operated independently, renting the space and negotiating fees directly with parents based on the number of Qur'anic parts to be memorized and the specific skills to be taught (Mujahid, 1984). While some jurists debated the permissibility of charging for Qur'anic instruction, the majority permitted it, provided the funds were from legitimate sources (Ibn

al-Hajj, n.d.). These kuttab were community-supported and operated independently of state control, although the market inspector (muhtasib) monitored the teachers' conduct to prevent excessive physical discipline (Al-Maqrizi, 1991).

Mosques also played a role in elementary education through evening circles, though jurists preferred kuttab for young children to maintain the mosque's sanctity (Ibn al-Hajj, n.d.). A typical kuttab accommodated at least thirty students, divided into three stages based on age and proficiency (Ibn Abi Usaybi'a, 1998). The first stage focused on short Qur'anic chapters, the alphabet, and basic arithmetic. The second stage emphasized calligraphy, grammar, and literature, sometimes including sectarian poetry depending on the teacher's affiliation. The final stage culminated in the complete memorization of the Qur'an and instruction in Islamic jurisprudence and rituals (Mujahid, 1984). Education was not limited to the affluent; historical records indicate that children of commoners and artisans also attended these schools (Al-Dhahabi, 1996).

For the elite—children of caliphs, ministers, and high-ranking officials—education occurred privately at home. Esteemed scholars and linguists were employed as private tutors, enjoying high social status and significant financial rewards (Al-Ahwani, n.d.). Notable tutors during this period included the grammarian Muhammad bin Barakat al-Sa'idi and the prominent linguist Abu al-Qasim bin al-Qatta' al-Tamimi (Al-Hamawi, 1991).

3.2 MOSQUES

Mosques served as paramount institutions for advanced education (Table 1). Al-Azhar Mosque,

founded by the Fatimid commander Jawhar al-Siqilli in 358 AH/969 CE, was initially established as the official state mosque for the Ismaili doctrine (Al-Suyuti, n.d.). It hosted lectures on Ismaili jurisprudence, notably the works of Qadi al-Nu'man. However, as Cairo opened to the general public, Sunni influences permeated Al-Azhar, and by the late Fatimid period, Sunni scholars began holding teaching circles there (Al-Maqrizi, 1996). This shift culminated in Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi abolishing Ismaili lectures at Al-Azhar in 566 AH/1170 CE (Badawi, n.d.).

The Amr ibn al-As Mosque (The Old Mosque) in Fustat, the oldest mosque in Egypt, remained a stronghold of Sunni sciences despite Fatimid efforts to introduce Ismaili teachings (Ibn Khallikan, 1972). It hosted numerous study circles in Maliki and Shafi'i jurisprudence, grammar, and linguistics. Renowned scholars such as the grammarian Tahir bin Babshadh and the linguist Jamal al-Din Abd Allah bin Barri taught there (Al-Maqrizi, 1980). The mosque's scientific activity peaked during the late Fatimid period, attracting scholars from across the Islamic world, as documented by the Hafiz al-Silafi (Khusraw, 1983).

Other significant educational mosques included the Al-Zafir Mosque (The Supreme Mosque), built by Caliph al-Zafir, and the Al-Aqmar Mosque, constructed by Minister al-Ma'mun bin al-Bata'ih (Badawi, n.d.). In Alexandria, the Al-Attarin Mosque, built in 479 AH/1086 CE, became a major center for Maliki jurisprudence and grammar (Zaytoun, 1972). The proliferation of these mosques created a robust network of educational venues that sustained Islamic scholarship.

Table 1: Prominent Educational Mosques in Fatimid Egypt.

Mosque Name	Location	Founder/Era	Primary Focus/Doctrine
Al-Azhar	Cairo	Jawhar al-Siqilli (358 AH/969 CE)	Ismaili Jurisprudence (later Sunni)
Amr ibn al-As (Old Mosque)	Fustat	Early Islamic Era	Sunni Sciences (Maliki & Shafi'i)
Al-Zafir (Supreme Mosque)	Cairo	Caliph al-Zafir	General Islamic Studies
Al-Aqmar	Cairo	Minister al-Ma'mun bin al-Bata'ih	General Islamic Studies
Al-Attarin	Alexandria	479 AH/1086 CE	Maliki Jurisprudence & Grammar

3.3 THE FATIMID PALACE

The Fatimid Caliph's palace in Cairo transcended its role as a royal residence to become a critical educational center. The caliph, holding both temporal and religious authority, supervised the Ismaili da'wa (mission) directly from the palace (Badawi, n.d.). Specific areas, such as the "Mahwal," were designated for lectures tailored to different

audiences, including the elite, state officials, and women. Furthermore, Caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah established "Dar al-Ilm" (House of Knowledge) within the palace complex, featuring numerous halls for instruction (Badawi, n.d.). Although its activities fluctuated based on political circumstances, the palace remained a central hub for Ismaili theological and philosophical education until the end of the Fatimid era.

3.4 SCHOOLS (MADRASAS)

The formal school (madrasa) system, which originated in Khurasan in the fourth century AH, was introduced to Egypt relatively late (Table 2) (Ma'ruf, n.d.). The first formal school in Egypt was established in Alexandria in 532 AH/1137 CE. This delay was partly due to Cairo being the seat of the Ismaili Fatimid caliphate. The influx of Sunni scholars from the Maghreb and Al-Andalus to Alexandria facilitated the establishment of these institutions (Sa'd al-Din, 1995).

Notable schools included the Madrasa of al-

Turtushi, which began informally in the home of the Maliki jurist Muhammad bin al-Walid al-Turtushi (Badawi, 1988). The first officially state-sponsored school was the Awfiyya School, established in 532 AH by the Sunni minister Ridwan bin Walakhshi for Maliki jurisprudence (Badawi, n.d.). Subsequently, the Adilite (Salafiyya) School was founded in 544 AH/1149 CE for Shafi'i jurisprudence, famously headed by the Hafiz al-Silafi (Al-Nu'aymi, 1990). These schools featured structured curricula, designated faculty, and endowments, marking a significant evolution in Egyptian educational organization.

Table 2: Early Formal Schools (Madrasas) in Fatimid Egypt.

School Name	Location	Establishment Year	Founder	Dominant Madhhab
Madrasa of al-Turtushi	Alexandria	Informal (late 5th C.)	Muhammad bin al-Walid al-Turtushi	Maliki
Madrasa of Ibn Hadid	Alexandria	488 AH/1095 CE	Qadi Zayd bin al-Hasan bin Hadid	Maliki
Awfiyya School	Alexandria	532 AH/1137 CE	Minister Ridwan bin Walakhshi	Maliki
Adilite (Salafiyya) School	Alexandria	544 AH/1149 CE	Al-Adil Ali bin al-Sallar	Shafi'i

3.5 HOMES OF SCHOLARS AND MINISTERS

In addition to mosques and formal schools, the private residences of scholars and ministers served as vital educational spaces. During periods of sectarian tension, Sunni scholars often retreated to their homes to teach (Ibn Farhun, 1973). The homes of prominent physicians and scientists, such as Al-Mubashshir bin Fatik and Ephraim bin al-Zaffan, housed extensive libraries and hosted specialized scientific inquiries (Abu Shama, 1997). Furthermore, the palaces of learned ministers, notably Ya'qub bin Killis and Tala'i' bin Ruzzik, functioned as vibrant salons where scholars, jurists, and poets convened for intellectual debates and theological discussions (Al-Isfahani, 1951).

3.6 EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS AND EVALUATION

Upon completing their foundational education in the kuttabs, students advanced to the study circles (halaqat) in mosques or schools. Students enjoyed the autonomy to select their teachers, areas of specialization, and attendance schedules (Ibn al-Imad, n.d.). The pedagogical methods varied, with dictation (imla') and discussion (munaqasha) being

the most prominent. In the dictation method, the sheikh or a designated assistant would dictate texts, which students meticulously transcribed (Ibn al-Imad, n.d.). The discussion method involved rigorous debate on jurisprudential and linguistic issues, often resulting in students compiling detailed notes known as "ta'liqat" (Al-Ishbili, 1990).

The evaluation of a student's proficiency was entirely at the discretion of the teaching sheikh. There were no standardized examinations. Instead, upon mastering a text, the student would request an "Ijaza" (scientific license) from the sheikh. The sheikh would write a certification on the student's manuscript, attesting to their comprehension and granting permission to transmit or teach the material (Al-Qifti, 1986). The Ijaza system evolved significantly during this period, expanding from Hadith transmission to encompass all disciplines (Table 3). Various forms of Ijaza emerged, including direct handing over of texts (munawala), certification of student copies, and even general licenses granted via correspondence to scholars in distant regions such as the Maghreb and Al-Andalus (Al-Khatib Al-Baghdadi, 1985). This system facilitated the widespread dissemination of knowledge and established a robust network of scholarly accreditation.

Table 3: Types of Scientific Licenses (Ijazas) in the Late Fatimid Period.

Type of Ijaza	Description	Notable Example/Practitioner
Munawala (Direct Handover)	Sheikh gives student an original manuscript or section to transmit.	Imam Tahir Babshadh

Student Copy Certification	Student submits copied text; sheikh corrects it and certifies permission.	Abd Allah bin Rifa'a (556 AH)
General License (All Works)	Sheikh grants permission to transmit all his narrations and books.	Abu Hamid al-Ghazali
Correspondence License	Ijaza sent via letter to scholars in distant regions (e.g., Al-Andalus).	Al-Hafiz al-Silafi

4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of educational institutions and systems in late Fatimid Egypt demonstrates that this era was a crucial transitional phase in the history of Islamic education. The widespread establishment of kuttabs democratized basic literacy and foundational religious knowledge across various social strata. Concurrently, major mosques evolved into sophisticated scientific institutes hosting diverse study circles in jurisprudence, exegesis, and linguistics. The Fatimid palace and the newly introduced formal schools provided structured, state-supported educational opportunities. Furthermore, the private residences of scholars and

ministers played an indispensable role in sustaining the scientific movement, particularly in mitigating sectarian constraints and preserving Sunni scholarship. The dynamic interplay between Ismaili doctrine and Sunni thought enriched the curricula and pedagogical methodologies. Ultimately, these diverse institutions preserved the Islamic sciences and established the foundational framework for the profound educational renaissance that flourished during the Ayyubid era and beyond. Future research should further investigate the role of informal education and conduct detailed examinations of extant manuscripts documenting study circles and Ijazas to deepen our understanding of Egypt's intellectual history and its enduring impact on subsequent educational paradigms.

Acknowledgements: The author extends gratitude to Al al-Bayt University for its support of this research.

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