Advancing Islamic Studies: Exploring Diversity, Dynamics, and Dialogue Contributions to Global Civilization

Abdunrohman Mukem^{1*}

¹Institute of Asian Studies Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand Correspondence ⊠ abdunrohman.M@chula.ac.th

Keywords:

Islamic Education, Thailand, Pondok School, and Islamic Private School (Madrasa) Abstract: Islamic education in Thailand has evolved to balance religious traditions with modern academic frameworks and governmental policies. This study examines its structure, challenges, and prospects, focusing on traditional Pondok schools, Islamic private schools (madrasas), higher education institutions, and lifelong learning programs. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, this research utilizes document analysis, field observations, and comparative studies to examine how Islamic educational institutions navigate government regulations, curriculum integration, accreditation, and financial sustainability. Findings reveal that while Pondok schools remain vital centers of Islamic learning, they face increasing pressures from state-led standardization policies. Madrasas have integrated secular and religious curricula, yet concerns over government intervention persist. Higher education institutions struggle with accreditation and degree recognition, limiting graduates' career opportunities. Meanwhile, lifelong learning programs provide community-based education and vocational training but face challenges in securing sustained funding and policy support. To ensure the sustainability and relevance of Islamic education in Thailand, this study recommends modernizing curricula, strengthening collaboration between stakeholders, improving accreditation systems, and integrating technology. Addressing these challenges will allow Islamic educational institutions to preserve religious traditions while equipping students with essential academic and professional skills for the modern world.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid globalization of knowledge and socio-political transformations have widened the gap between classical Islamic scholarship and contemporary interdisciplinary research (Muttaqin & Suyurno, 2024; Sibawaihi et al., 2024; Редькин & Берникова, 2020). While Islamic educational institutions have historically served as centers of knowledge, they often struggle to integrate contemporary methodologies that align with the demands of modern academia (Mohiuddin, 2020; Thahir, n.d.). The perception of Islamic studies within global academia is also shaped by stereotypes and historical misrepresentations, further complicating the field's relevance in a rapidly evolving world. A recent survey conducted in 10 European countries revealed that more than 50% of Europeans hold negative perceptions of Islam, affecting not only individual Muslims but also Islamic educational institutions (Esposito & Esposito, 2016). This gap in perception underscores the urgent need for Islamic studies to actively engage with the broader society to challenge misconceptions and misrepresentations. Additionally, Pew Research Center found that only 36% of Muslims in the United States report having a majority of close friends who are also Muslim,

compared to a global average of 95% in 39 surveyed countries (Pew Research Center, 2022). This demonstrates a higher level of integration among American Muslims and raises challenges in preserving Islamic identity in pluralistic societies.

The historical evolution of Islamic education is marked by the establishment of influential institutions that have shaped intellectual discourse across the Islamic world (Makdisi, 1981; Berkey, 1992; Dhanani, 2015; Gutas, 2001; Rosenthal, 1975; Atay, 2017; Ahmed, 2016). Among these, three institutions stand out for their profound impact on Islamic scholarship: Al-Azhar University, the Nizamiyya Madrasas, and the Dar al-Ulum Deobandi movement. Despite their geographical and historical differences, these institutions share fundamental similarities in their role as centers of Islamic learning, their promotion of Sunni jurisprudence, and their response to socio-political challenges.

Al-Azhar University, founded in 970 CE under the Fatimid Caliphate, initially served as a Shi'i institution and a vehicle for religious and political propagation. However, with the emergence of centralized state structures in the 19th century, Al-Azhar and its scholars were progressively marginalized. Studies by Makdisi (1981), Berkey (1992), and Bloom & Blair (2002) emphasize Al-Azhar's long-standing role in shaping Islamic legal and theological discourse, while Reid (1993) and Zeghal (1996) document the institution's restructuring in response to colonial and nationalist influences.

The Nizamiyya Madrasas, founded in the 11th century by Nizam al-Mulk, institutionalized Islamic legal education and played a pivotal role in consolidating Sunni jurisprudence, particularly within the Shafi'i and Hanafi traditions. These madrasas, established across the Seljuk Empire, represented the first state-sponsored higher educational institutions in Islamic history, aligning religious scholarship with political governance (Makdisi, 1981; Berkey, 1992; Bulliet, 2004; George, 2018; Ephrat, 2000). Their structured curriculum and pedagogical methods set a precedent for future Islamic educational institutions.

The Dar al-Ulum Deobandi movement, established in India during the 19th century, sought to revive a purist interpretation of Islam, countering localized cultural influences and reinforcing the theological foundations laid by earlier scholars such as Shah Waliullah (1703–1762). Unlike Al-Azhar and the Nizamiyya Madrasas, which had significant state patronage, the Deobandi movement developed as an independent grassroots effort to preserve Islamic knowledge in the face of British colonial rule (Metcalf, 1982; Moosa, 2015; Reetz, 2007; Zaman, 2010; Robinson, 2001). Despite their differing historical contexts, these institutions collectively contributed to the formalization of Islamic scholarship and continue to influence contemporary Islamic education.

In Thailand, where Muslims constitute approximately 4.9% of the total population, Islamic education faces unique challenges related to integration, identity, and state regulation (Azizah & Raya, 2021; Ma & Narongraksakhet, 2023; Mohiuddin, 2020). A study by some reserachers found that only 4.2% of Thailand's total student population is enrolled in Islamic schools, reflecting both the limited access and societal marginalization faced by the Muslim community (J. C. Liow, 2009a; Pattaravanich et al., 2005; Sateemae et al., 2015; Zehner, 2017). Additionally, research indicates that Muslim-majority provinces such as Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat experience lower educational attainment and economic development compared to other regions, further exacerbating the difficulties faced by Islamic educational institutions (J. C. Liow, 2009a; J. C. Liow & Raya, 2020).

Liow, Raihani, Ma & Narongraksakhet also state that Islamic education in Thailand plays a vital role in preserving religious knowledge, shaping cultural identity, and integrating Muslim communities within the broader national framework. The educational landscape consists of traditional pondok schools, modern Islamic private schools (madrasa), higher Islamic education institutions, and lifelong education programs that cater to the diverse needs of the Muslim population. However, these institutions face several challenges, including government regulation, curriculum standardization, financial sustainability, and accreditation issues (J. C. Liow, 2009a; Ma & Narongraksakhet, 2023; Raihani, 2017).

Historically, pondok schools have been the backbone of Islamic education in Thailand, offering intensive religious instruction in subjects such as Tauhid, Fiqh, and Tafsir (Lapidus, 2014). Over time, madrasa and Islamic private schools emerged, integrating secular subjects into their curricula to align with national education policies (Salaeh, 2023). Despite these developments, some studies (Azizah & Raya, 2021; Khamis, 2024; Sahin, 2018)mention that the Thai government's efforts to regulate Islamic education have sparked debates regarding the balance between religious autonomy and state oversight. In response to modernization, Thailand's Islamic higher education institutions, such as Fatoni University and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences at Prince of Songkhla University, have expanded academic opportunities for Muslim students. However, issues related to accreditation, recognition of Islamic degrees, and career prospects for graduates remain pressing concerns. Additionally, lifelong education programs have become instrumental in providing flexible learning options for adults while fostering community development.

This study aims to analyze the structure, challenges, and prospects of Islamic education in Thailand. By examining both traditional and modern Islamic education models, this research provides insights into how Thailand's Muslim minority navigates educational opportunities while preserving their religious identity. The study also explores how Islamic education adapts to modernization and government regulations, ensuring its continued relevance in contemporary Thai society. Additionally, comparisons with international Islamic education models will highlight best practices that Thailand can adopt to improve the quality and recognition of its Islamic education system.

This study assumes that the Islamic education system in Thailand has a diverse structure, encompassing traditional models such as pondok and madrasa, as well as modern models integrated into the national education system. Over time, Islamic education in Thailand has faced various challenges, including government policies that influence its administration, limited resources, and the difficulty of maintaining Islamic identity within a predominantly non-Muslim society. Nevertheless, there are positive prospects for the adaptation and modernization of Islamic education, whether through curriculum development, innovative teaching methods, or the use of technology to enhance educational quality. Government regulations also play a crucial role in shaping the direction of Islamic education, presenting both opportunities and obstacles in ensuring its relevance and recognition within the national education framework. Furthermore, by comparing Thailand's Islamic education system with international models, this study assumes that best practices can be adopted to improve the quality and recognition of Islamic education in the country.

METHODS

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the development and challenges of Islamic education in Thailand. The data sources for this study consist of document analysis and field observations, while the research methods include document analysis, field observation, and comparative analysis. The document analysis involves reviewing official policies, historical records, and academic literature on Islamic education in Thailand, as well as international Islamic education models. Key sources include reports from the Office of the Private Education Promotion Commission (2017) on the regulation of madrasa institutions and statistics from the National Statistical Office of Thailand (2021) regarding Muslim education demographics. Additionally, Liow (2009) provides insights into government interventions in Islamic education, while Ghani (2017) offers comparative perspectives between Thailand and Malaysia. Meanwhile, field observations were conducted by visiting pondok schools, madrasa, and Islamic universities in Thailand to examine teaching methods, curriculum implementation, and institutional challenges. Additionally, a comparative analysis was used to evaluate how Thailand's Islamic education system aligns with or differs from established Islamic institutions in countries such as Malaysia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia (Makdisi, 1981; Berkey, 2003).

For data analysis, this study applies content analysis and comparative analysis. Content analysis was used to examine educational policies, institutional reports, and observation notes to identify patterns, themes, and recurring challenges in the development of Islamic education (Pew Research

Center, 2021). Meanwhile, comparative analysis was conducted to assess the similarities and differences between Thailand's Islamic education system and international best practices, identifying potential improvements and strategies for strengthening the academic and institutional framework (Zaman, 2012; Nasr, 2002). Through these methods, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of Islamic education in Thailand, highlighting both its challenges and opportunities for future development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the research findings based on the collected data, integrating descriptive statistics and qualitative observations. The findings highlight the diversity of Islamic educational institutions in Thailand and their adaptation to social, cultural, and governmental influences.

1. Traditional Pondok Schools

Pondok schools serve as fundamental institutions for Islamic education in Thailand. Established as early as 1624, these schools focus primarily on religious subjects such as Tauhid (Islamic theology), Figh (Islamic jurisprudence), Tasawwuf (Islamic mysticism), and Arabic language studies. These schools are traditionally run by Muslim scholars (Tok-Kuru) who have studied in the Middle East and returned to Thailand to teach Islamic knowledge (J. C. Liow & Raya, 2020; J. C. Y. Liow, 2004; Nuruzzahri, 2023; Permana et al., 2023; Porath, 2014).

The table below presents the growth of *pondok* schools over time, indicating the increasing number of institutions, students, and teachers involved in this traditional Islamic education system.

No.	Year	Number of Pondok Schools	Number of Students	Number of Teachers
1.	2004	255	-	-
2.	2012	412	36,611	1,178
3.	2017	489	43.767	1.802

Tabel 1: The Growth of *Pondok* Schools Over Time in Thailand

While pondok schools remain significant in the Muslim community, they have faced scrutiny due to security concerns and their perceived resistance to modernization. The Thai government introduced policies requiring standardized curricula, integrating secular subjects such as mathematics, science, and social studies into the traditional religious syllabus (J. C. Liow, 2009a). This move aims to ensure that pondok graduates have the necessary skills to integrate into the broader workforce while preserving Islamic teachings. However, some Muslim scholars argue that these policies threaten the autonomy and traditional role of pondok schools in preserving Islamic identity and Malay culture in Southern Thailand (Varisco, 2020).

2. Islamic Private Schools (Madrasa)

Islamic private schools (Madrasa) offer an education system that balances religious and secular subjects. Unlike Pondok schools, which primarily focus on religious teachings, Madrasa institutions provide a more structured curriculum incorporating subjects such as Thai language, science, English, mathematics, social sciences, health sciences, and vocational studies (Dueramae et al., 2020; Harahap et al., 2022; Srinio et al., 2024).

The following table illustrates the number of Islamic private schools, both registered and nonregistered, highlighting the official recognition and expansion of these institutions.

Registerd Schools Non-Registered School 288 2013 227 112

Tabel 2: The Number of Islamic Private Schools

The introduction of secular subjects in Islamic private schools has been driven by the Thai government's education policies, which aim to create a standardized education system across the country (Azizah & Raya, 2021; Harahap et al., 2022). This integration allows Muslim students to acquire a well-rounded education while maintaining their Islamic identity. However, challenges remain in terms of funding, curriculum standardization, and government oversight. Some Muslim educators argue that government intervention may lead to a dilution of religious teachings, while others see it as a positive step towards improving career opportunities for Muslim students (J. C. Liow, 2009b, 2009a; Zehner, 2017).

3. Higher Islamic Education

Islamic higher education in Thailand has expanded over the years, with several universities offering specialized programs in Islamic studies. These institutions aim to produce scholars and professionals who are well-versed in both religious and modern disciplines, equipping them with the knowledge to contribute to various sectors, including education, governance, and community leadership. The table below provides a list of universities in Thailand that offer Islamic studies programs, demonstrating the availability of higher education opportunities for Muslim students.

No	University	Location
1.	Prince of Songkhla University – Faculty of Islamic Sciences	Pattani
2.	Fatoni University	Yala
<i>3</i> .	Yala Rajabhat University	Yala
4.	Princess of Naradhiwas University	Narathiwat
<i>5</i> .	Mahidol University	Bangkok
6.	Krirk University	Bangkok
7.	Rangsit University	Bangkok

Table 3: List of Universities in Thailand that Offer Islamic Studies Programslah jare

Despite their contributions, Islamic universities in Thailand face several challenges. One major issue is the recognition and accreditation of Islamic studies degrees by national educational authorities. Many graduates from Islamic universities find it difficult to secure employment in mainstream sectors due to the limited recognition of their qualifications (J. C. Liow, 2009a; J. C. Liow & Raya, 2020). Additionally, funding remains a concern, with many institutions relying on private donations and limited government support. Nevertheless, these universities play a crucial role in preserving Islamic scholarship and providing higher education opportunities for Muslim students in Thailand.

4. Lifelong Education and Community-Based Learning

Lifelong education programs cater to Muslim adults aged 25-60, providing flexible learning opportunities in mosques and community centers. These programs focus on religious education, vocational training, and adult literacy programs, aiming to enhance the social and economic inclusion of Muslim communities.

This type of education is primarily administered by the Islamic Center committees in each province, ensuring that the curriculum aligns with the needs of the local Muslim population. Subjects taught in these programs include:

- Basic Islamic teachings (Tauhid, Figh, and Tafsir)
- Qur'anic recitation and memorization (Hafiz training)
- Vocational skills (e.g., handicrafts, agriculture, and small business management)
- Adult literacy and Thai language proficiency

Lifelong education programs serve as a bridge for older generations to enhance their knowledge and skills while preserving their Islamic faith. These programs also help integrate Muslim communities into the broader Thai society by promoting bilingual proficiency and vocational skills that improve employment opportunities (J. C. Liow, 2009b, 2009a). The success of these programs depends on community support, government policies, and the availability of resources to sustain continuous learning initiatives (Pojanapunya et al., 2024; Zehner, 2017).

Discussion

This section analyzes the findings on Islamic education in Thailand by identifying key themes, trends, and challenges. The discussion explores how different types of Islamic educational institutions—ranging from *Pondok* schools to higher Islamic education—have evolved, adapted to modernization, and responded to governmental regulations. The analysis also considers the role of lifelong education and community-based learning in preserving Islamic identity while ensuring social integration.

1. The Role of *Pondok* Schools in Preserving Islamic Traditions

Traditional *Pondok* schools have long served as the foundation of Islamic education in Thailand. These institutions primarily focus on religious studies, including *Fiqh*, *Tauhid*, and *Tafsir*, and have historically functioned independently from government influence (J. C. Liow, 2009b). However, over the years, the Thai government has introduced policies aimed at integrating secular subjects into the *Pondok* curriculum.

While modernization efforts have led to some curriculum adaptations, many *Pondok* institutions continue to resist full government standardization. The expansion of *pondok* schools, as indicated by the increase from 255 schools in 2004 to 489 schools in 2017, suggests that demand for traditional Islamic education remains strong. However, challenges persist, including funding limitations, curriculum standardization conflicts, and concerns over government regulations affecting institutional autonomy (Medrano, 2007; Muttaqin & Suyurno, 2024; Raihani, 2017).

2. The Emergence of Islamic Private Schools (Madrasa) and Government Integration Efforts

Islamic private schools (*Madrasa*) in Thailand provide an alternative education model that integrates both religious and secular subjects. Unlike *pondok* schools, these institutions follow a structured curriculum that includes Thai language, mathematics, science, and social studies alongside Islamic teachings (Dueramae et al., 2020; Medrano, 2007; Srinio et al., 2024).

The Thai government has supported the development of *madrasa* by formalizing registration processes, as seen in the distinction between registered (227 schools in 2013) and non-registered (112 schools in 2013) institutions (Srinio et al., 2024). However, this formalization has also introduced new challenges, including discrepancies in government funding and differences in educational quality between registered and non-registered schools.

A key issue in *madrasa* education is the balance between religious and secular studies. While integration with national education standards allows Muslim students broader career opportunities, some Islamic educators argue that government involvement could dilute the religious aspects of the curriculum. This ongoing tension highlights the need for a policy framework that respects both Islamic traditions and national educational objectives.

3. Higher Islamic Education: Expanding Opportunities and Challenges in Recognition

The establishment of Islamic higher education institutions in Thailand, such as Fatoni University and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences at Prince of Songkhla University, represents a significant step toward providing advanced Islamic studies within an academic framework. These universities offer degrees in Islamic law, Arabic studies, and other disciplines that combine Islamic knowledge with modern academic methodologies (J. C. Liow, 2009b; Makdisi, 1984; Salaeh, 2023) (Joseph Chinyong Liow, 2009).

Despite these advancements, challenges remain in the recognition and accreditation of Islamic degrees. Many graduates face difficulties in securing employment in mainstream sectors, as degrees from Islamic institutions are sometimes not fully acknowledged by national education authorities. Additionally, funding constraints and limited research opportunities hinder the expansion of Islamic higher education in Thailand. To address these issues, greater collaboration between Islamic universities and government agencies is needed to improve academic recognition and career pathways for graduates.

4. Lifelong Education and Community-Based Learning: Strengthening Social and Religious Identity

Lifelong education initiatives, including community-based Islamic education programs, play a crucial role in bridging generational gaps and ensuring that Islamic knowledge remains relevant in contemporary society (Said, 1978; Srinio et al., 2024). These programs cater to adults aged 25-60 and are often conducted in mosques or Islamic centers. Subjects range from Qur'anic memorization to vocational training and adult literacy programs.

The success of lifelong education programs highlights the adaptability of Islamic education in Thailand. By offering flexible learning opportunities, these programs contribute to social cohesion, empower Muslim communities with practical skills, and reinforce religious identity. However, sustainability remains a challenge, as many of these programs rely on limited funding and community support.

5. The Future of Islamic Studies in Thailand: Opportunities and Recommendations

Islamic education in Thailand faces both opportunities and challenges as it navigates modernization and government policies. Moving forward, several key recommendations can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of Islamic studies in Thailand (Harahap et al., 2022; Kurniawan et al., 2024; Lessy & Chemo, 2019; Rukspollmuang, 2024):

- a. Strengthening Curriculum Development: Ensuring that both Pondok and Madrasa curricula maintain strong religious foundations while incorporating essential secular knowledge.
- b. Enhancing Government Collaboration: Encouraging dialogue between Islamic education stakeholders and government agencies to address accreditation, funding, and policy concerns.
- c. Expanding Research and Higher Education Opportunities: Promoting partnerships between Islamic universities and national/international institutions to improve academic recognition and research capabilities.

Sustaining Lifelong Education Programs: Increasing funding and institutional support for community-based learning initiatives to expand educational access for all age groups. Islamic education in Thailand remains a dynamic and evolving system that balances tradition with modernization. While *pondok* schools continue to serve as strongholds of religious education, *madrasa* institutions offer integrated curricula that align with national education standards. Higher Islamic education provides new academic and career opportunities, though challenges in recognition and funding persist. Lifelong education initiatives further contribute to community development and social inclusion.

To ensure the continued growth of Islamic studies in Thailand, a collaborative approach involving educators, policymakers, and community leaders is essential. By addressing current challenges and leveraging opportunities for innovation, Islamic education in Thailand can strengthen its role in preserving religious identity while preparing students for contemporary academic and professional environments.

CONCLUSIONS

Islamic education in Thailand has evolved to balance religious traditions with modern academic and governmental demands. Traditional *pondok* schools remain vital for preserving Islamic identity but face challenges like standardization and state intervention, while Islamic private schools (*madrasa*) have integrated secular subjects, improved career prospects but raising concerns about the dilution of religious teachings. Higher education institutions, such as Fatoni University and Prince of Songkhla University, provide academic and professional pathways, though challenges in accreditation, funding, and employment persist. Lifelong education programs also play a crucial role in equipping adult learners with religious knowledge and vocational skills, helping Muslim communities navigate modern society while maintaining their Islamic identity.

To enhance the quality and relevance of Islamic education in Thailand, it is recommended to: (1) develop an integrated curriculum that combines religious and secular subjects, involving both Islamic education experts and national curriculum specialists; (2) establish a joint committee

between the government and *pondok/madrasa* leaders to formulate policies that respect the autonomy of Islamic education while meeting national standards; (3) create a specialized accreditation system for Islamic degrees recognized by the Ministry of Education, enabling graduates to compete in the job market; (4) expand lifelong education programs focused on mosque-based vocational training and online platforms for communities in remote areas; and (5) leverage technology by developing Islamic learning applications and providing technology training for *pondok* and *madrasa* teachers.

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