

**Educational Institutions and the State in Medieval Islam: The  
Fatimid of Egypt as a Case Study**

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# Introduction

- ▶ “Wherever a man who knew how to read met another who was not quite so fortunate, yet willing to learn, a school was organized. It may have been under a palm tree, in a tent, or in a private house; nevertheless it was a school.”

*(Khalil A. Totah)*

# Objectives

- ▶ In Medieval Islam, religious schism reached its zenith due to the fact that it has taken the form of ideologies that fed the legitimacy of any political regime claimed by the many rival Muslim dynasties.
- ▶ Thus, it created several new educational challenges, which paved the way for the states to officially began, to participate in monitoring learning activities especially in terms of finance and the establishment of the different educational institutions..

# Objectives

- ▶ This presentation will discuss the role of the different educational institutions and their relationship with the state through the case study of the Fatimids of Egypt.

# The Fatimids (358/567 AH) (969/1171 AD) : History and Ideology

- ▶ They have been named the Fatimids because of their claim to be the descendants of Fatima, daughter of prophet Muhammad (pbuh), and wife of Ali bin Abi Talib the fourth rightly guided caliph and the first shi'a imam. They have also been called “ Ubaidis” in reference to the founder of the Fatimids dynasty ‘Ubayd Allah Al- Mahdi Billah.

# Education during the Fatimids

Education was looked upon as a mean to achieve the Following:

- ▶ To maintain the status quo and secure the continuity of the dynasty.
- ▶ To Reproduce the political regime
- ▶ To protect the official *madhab*.

# Relationship between Curriculum and the adopted Madhab

Therefore the special relationship between the political objectives of the regime and the educational system was demonstrated in the following:

- ▶ In their capacity as imams, the Fatimids caliphs used to personally supervise both , educational and da'wah activities inside and outside.

- ▶ Propaganda and education were inseparable: “It was not enough to formulate ideology; there was also the more practical business of disseminating it. In this respect, the mission performed many tasks which a modern observer, depending on his point of observation, might classify as education.” (*Bernard Lewis, Interpretation of Fatimid History, Cairo, Egypt: Colloque Internationale sur l’Histoire de Caire, 27 Mars-5 April 1969, Pg7* )



- ▶ If we consider the Fatimids' da'wah (missionary network), reflective of the Fatimids system of education and curriculum, then the main feature of the curriculum was its evident flexibility.

- ▶ The *ismaili madhab* (sect) is supreme and it must be served by all active social institutions including education. Thus, the hierarchy of the *da'wah* (call) structure was sacred, and every member of this structure regarded it as divine.
- ▶ There is a belief that the *ismaili da'wah* and *ilm* (knowledge) are of a universal nature. Thus, the curriculum was designed in a way that is catering to the needs of the whole society: Sunni majority and the minority *ismaili* ruling elite.

# Types of Curriculum and Murids(students)

- ▶ **Exoteric public** legal curriculum designed for the general public. It involved what was not politically embarrassing to the *Fatimids* in front of their *Sunni* subjects. It caters to the needs of Young learners, Adults(casual students & regular students)
- ▶ **Esoteric curriculum**, it was designed for *al- khassah* (elite)and the varying ranks of *da'is* (missionary), such as *da'i al Balagh* , *da'i al Mahsur*, *da'I al Mutlaq*, and also for the *mustajibs* (respondent). It involves all controversial knowledge, which they were not comfortable to display to the public. Target groups were :*Ahl al Bayt* (prophet's family), prominent people, *Shuyukh al dawlah* (state scholars) potential *mustajibs*.

- ▶ This curriculum was delivered in what was called: *Majalis al Hikmah* the later was looked upon with great veneration.
- ▶ **Heinz Halm (1997)** in his study about the *Fatimids* and their traditions of learning has given us a unique interpretation of the famous story of *al-Alim wa al-Ghulam*(the teacher and the pupil). This story emphasizes on the exclusivity of these *majalis* , how sophisticated is the selection of its *murids*, their stratification and the sacred process of initiation each *murid* has to pass through, in order to gain full membership. This long process of rites of passage symbolizes the student's new birth. It acquaints him with a new world of rituals and meanings.

# Major Academic Disciplines

- ▶ Theology
- ▶ Literary studies, syntax, rhetoric, composition, reading .
- ▶ Philosophy
- ▶ Military Sciences
- ▶ History
- ▶ Al –Taawil (Interpretation)

# Educational Institutions

- ▶ **Al Azhar Mosque.**
- ▶ **Dar Al Hikmah (House of Wisdom)**
- ▶ **Jami's ( Halaqas, Majalis al Ilm, Majalis al Munazarah).**
- ▶ **Maktabas (Libraries) and Markets of booksellers.**
- ▶ **Kuttabs**
- ▶ **Ribats**
- ▶ **Bimaristans**

# Lifelong Learning Principles as Demonstrated in Medieval Practices

- ▶ Flexibility of the curriculum
- ▶ The pivotal role of the scholars
- ▶ The liberal culture of learning
- ▶ No restrictions in adherence
- ▶ No restrictions in relation to age
- ▶ Different madhabs enjoyed freedom of expression: Learning by conviction
- ▶ Education was not controlled by the labor market requisites
- ▶ Non-credential Education
- ▶ AL-waqf

Thank you

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