

## ON THE NATURE OF THE BAGHDAD NIZAMIYA MADRASA

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### Introduction

The aim of this study is to examine the nature of the Nizamiya madrasa of Baghdad founded by the famous Saljuqid wazir, Nizam al-Mulk, as a part of the high educational institution, namely the Nizamiya madrasas.

Before examining the subject in detail, it would be better first to have a look at the foundation of Baghdad Nizamiya madrasa briefly and then to sum up the arguments pointed out by scholars on the nature of Baghdad Nizamiya madrasas.

Nizam al-Mulk, the famous wazir and administrator of the Saljuquids, contributed to Islamic civilisation and culture by founding the Nizamiya madrasas as a complex of high educational system in the mediaeval period of Islam. In fact, Nizam al-mulk was not the first founder of the madrasa as an instituion. However, due to his interest this institution gained so much popularity that it spread widely over the whole Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt. Above all, the Nizamiya of Baghdad contributed to the spread of these institutions in Egypt and also Syria (1).

Incidentally, as it has been pointed out by Maqdisi, eleventh century Baghdad, like Paris of the modern century, was a great center of learning in the Muslim East. 'Ulama' from all parts of the Islamic lands were visiting Baghdad and also it was a regular stop for Muslims on their way to or from their pilgrimage to Mecca (2).

As far as the foundation of the Nizamiya of Baghdad is concerned, Ibn al-Jawzi gives this account:

In the month of Dhü'l-Hijja [of the year 457], work was begun on (the constitution of) the Nizamiya College in Baghdad. The remainder of the riverside palaces located on Mashra'at al-Zawaya, on the Furda (Lower Harbour), at Bab al-Sha'ir and on Darb al-Za'faran, were torn down (and their materials were used) for its construction (3).

Two years later, in the year 459/1067, the construction of the madrasa was completed (4). It is said that Nizam al-Mulk spent more than sixty thousand dinars

on its construction (5), and according to sources it was built for Abu Ishaq al-Shirazi. Nevertheless, it is told that he declined to take over the new professorship for the reason that it was rumoured that the ground of the building had been taken over by force. So Ibn al-Ṣabbagh was appointed in his place, but after some weeks Abu Ishaq overcame his misgivings (6).

Among the 'ulama' who were appointed as principal teacher (mudarris), Ghazali, known among Western scholars as theologian, philosopher and mystic, was the most famous figure. He arrived in Baghdad in the month of Jumada I 484, returning from Isbahan. Nizam al-Mulk gave him the title of Ornament of Religion and sent him to Baghdad. Ghazali was appointed to the chair of fiqh and taught this subject at the Nizamiya for a period over four and half years (7).

As far as the second point is concerned, Goldziher held the idea that the Nizamiya madrasas were basically public schools to teach the doctrine of Ash'ari theology (8). Goldziher believes that the Shafi'i professors who were Ash'ari in creed were hired to teach Ash'ari theology; and consequently he concluded that the Saljuqid state was sanctioning Ash'arism as the new theology of the State (9).

A. Talas had the opinion that the Nizamiya was an official institution to oppose the nascent Isma'ilite Batinism of that time. Nizamiya was going to destroy their doctrines and raise the prestige of the Ash'arism and also spread their doctrines (10).

Adnan Sayılı expressed his ideas in the same way that the madrasas in general and Baghdad madrasa in particular were Shafi'i schools for Shafi'i fiqh (11).

M. Jawad advocated the idea that it was also center for fighting Shi'ism as a part of Nizamiya network (12).

Richard Bulliet indicated that according to the most popular theory, it "was a kind of Sunni college designed to produce orthodox bureaucrats for a Seljuq crusade against Shi'ism" (13).

On the other hand, Hodgson and A. Schimmel pointed out that it also served as training institution for Shafi'i faqihs as well as theologians and proved to be model for later colleges in the Muslim world (14).

Briefly, what we have said so far can be summarized as follows:

Nizamiya Madrasa of Baghdad, as a part of Nizamiya educational institutions, was:

- (a) an official public school for teaching Ash'ari theology,
- (b) and also Shafi'i school of fiqh,
- (c) centre for fighting Shi'ism,
- (d) Sunni college for producing orthodox bureaucrats of Saljuqs.

However, main discussion on the nature of this madrasa, occurred between G. Maqdisi and A. Tibawi. Therefore, in the following pages I will present and discuss their arguments.

### **George Maqdisi's and A. Tibawi's Arguments.**

As a response to Goldziher, Maqdisi declared that in fact the Nizamiya madrasas were basically private schools for teaching Shafi'i fiqh and the Ash'ari theology was not taught officially except the fact that Ash'aris used the wa'z sermons for their purposes. In addition, he argued that Nizam al-Mulk founded these madrasas as a means to serve his political goals (15).

As far as the fact that Nizamiya of Baghdad was school of fiqh is concerned, Maqdisi followed these steps:

The root term is *drs*. The term for law was fiqh. A fiqh lesson was referred to by the term *dars*; the professors of fiqh was a *mudarris*; and *darrasa* meant to teach fiqh. So, the term madrasa is the name of place wherein a fiqh lesson was the main activity of teacher and student (16).

According to Tibawi, even though Maqdisi cites other supporting evidence, this linguistic evidence has not been universally accepted and moreover Maqdisi himself stated that Qur'anic science, traditions, grammar, adab literature, dogmatic theology and sermons were also taught at the Nizamiya (17).

All these subjects were taught by the principal teacher as well as by the others. However, that the principal teacher was a jurist may be explained by two considerations. First of all, as a continuing custom, madrasa had been conducted by a principal *mudarris*, and secondly the principal teacher combined with teaching the function of administering and supervising the scholastic function of the institution (18). So, since the *mudarris* of the madrasa was a *faqih* and fiqh became largely accepted for its utility in regulating the community life, the madrasa had been identified with fiqh.

Concerning the fact that Baghdad Nizamiya was not public institution. Maqdisi argues that it was strictly private and exclusive (19). As long as Nizam al-Mulk lived, he held ultimate authority to designate professors and administrators. Upon the death of the founder this authority passed on to the state (20). He argues that the Nizamiya of Baghdad is usually referred to as a state institution simply because the *wazir* Nizam al-Mulk was its founder. But according to Maqdisi, he founded it in his capacity as a *Muslim*. Being a charitable trust of private origin and also subject to the terms of a deed of private origin, it could not by any means be a state institution (21)

In Tibawi's view, the building of Baghdad Nizamiya commenced in 457, two years after he came to power, so he could not have grown so rich to support the madrasas. It means that the money did not come from private source. Basically, they were supported largely by the income of assigned waqf properties (22). In other words, even though it is said that Nizam al-Mulk spent more than sixty thousand dinars on the construction of Baghdad Nizamiya, this is not correct (23). On the contrary, he, as the highest administrator of the empire, provided the madrasa with waqf for the financial support.

As far as the second point is concerned, that is it belonged only to the Shafi'ites, first of all it seems better to have a look at the endowment of the Baghdad Nizamiya.

As it has been preserved by Ibn al-Jawzi, the endowment charter gives us these clues:

(1) The Nizamiya constitutes an endowment for the benefit of Shafi'ite school in both fiqh and usul a-fiqh,

(2) The possessions of the madrasa were for the benefit of the Shafi'ites as well,

(3) Also the professor (mudarris); the preacher (wa'iz) and the librarian must be Shafi'ite,

(4) There should be a teacher of Qur'anic science and a grammarian to teach the Qur'an and the Arabic language.

(5) Each member of the madrasa staff receives a definite portion of revenue coming from the endowment properties (24).

To support this idea Maqdisi argues that Nizam al-Mulk had the right to restrict this madrasa to Shafi'i teachers and students. He says that if Nizam had founded this madrasa as an agent of the Sultan, then we would expect the madrasa to have been a Hanafi school due to the fact that sultan was Hanafi and the students of Hanafi school of law would have been allowed to study there; but that was not the case (25).

As historical evidence Maqdisi pointed out that Sultan Alp Arslan and his financial minister were Hanafi. On the other, Nizam al-Mulk was Shafi'i. These two ministers competed with each other in founding two madrasas; one for Hanafis and the other for Shafi'is and the construction for both was completed in the same year (26).

In Faruqi's view, these stipulations may imply that its beneficiaries were exclusively to belong to Shafi'i school of law. Nevertheless, it does not mean that there were no Hanafis or Hanbalis among the employees. As a historical fact, the

members of the other school of law were employed both during the lifetime of Nizam al-Mulk and afterwards. To support this idea, he argues as follows:

If it is true that Nizam's objectives, by establishing the madrasas, were to gain the favour of the 'ulama', to rehabilitate Ash'arism and propagate Sunni Traditionism against Shi'i and Mu'tazili heresies and produce the necessary and suitable personnel for the implementation of his broad-based administrative reforms, then it is certain that he, being a shrewd administrator and statesman, could not exclude the non-Shafi'is altogether from the Nizamiyas (27).

Here, it seems to me necessary to examine the reason why Nizam al-Mulk established the Nizamiya.

Maqdisi indicates that he Nizam al-Mulk founded these institutions "to implement his political policies throughout the vast lands of the empire under his sway" (28). Moreover, he was providing himself with a great power to control the masses and provided for the future of the supported school of law by attracting students (29).

On the other hand, Tibawi raised the question that if Nizam was not primarily moved by piety to establish these institutions then what was his motive?

He argues that if we hold the idea that as chief minister to a conquering race, he needed to educate his subjects and to provide the state with efficient religious and civil servants, this is not an unreasonable assumption (30). Upon this consideration, he, by criticizing the idea that Nizam al-Mulk sought to control the 'ulema' to control the masses, concludes that there were a mixture of the desires to emulate the Fatimids, in order to gain favour with the 'ulama', and secondly from the point of practice, he aimed to provide his administrative reforms with the necessary judges and clerks (31).

When we consider the arguments and the facts presented by both Tibawi and Faruqi, it may be pointed out that even for the practical reasons Baghdad Nizamiya like the others did not belong to the Shafi'ites alone.

As far as the curriculum of Baghdad Nizamiya is concerned, as it has been pointed out before, according to Maqdisi it was an institution designed for the teaching of fiqh. As an charitable and traditional institution, he says, it had to be in conformity with the tenets of Islam. Greek philosophy could not be taught in a waqf institution because of the fact that this philosophy denied certain main beliefs of Islam. Also the foreign sciences were excluded from the curriculum and Kalam was excluded with philosophy as well (32).

On the other hand, Tibawi says that we have no direct evidence of the content of what exactly was taught. But we are reasonably sure that the teaching of falsafah was excluded since the fact that the madrasa symbolized the victory of

orthodox theology over speculative and natural philosophy. Apart from this restriction, the whole range of religious sciences was included in the syllabus. By the same token, in the absence of actual curriculum, it can not be claimed that the principal professor, mudarris, was excluded from teaching all the other related religious and also auxiliary linguistic subjects. al-Ghazali, the teacher of Baghdad Nizamiya, is the most sufficient example of this fact (33).

As for teaching Ash'arism at the Nizamiya of Baghdad, in spite of the fact that it was a school of law and had no public chairs of theology, Maqdisi says that Nizam al-Mulk could not ignore Ash'arism and brought this theology into the madrasa by the back door. The learned Ash'arite was assigned as preacher to the Nizamiya. However, one cannot say that Ash'arite theology was taught officially there. Only the preachers tried to make this theology acceptable in Baghdad through the propaganda system (34). He pointed out that Shirazi, mudarris of the Nizamiya of Baghdad for a period of close to two decades from 459/1066 to 476/1083, was anti-Ash'ari in legal theory and methodology. If indeed this madrasa was an Ash'ari college, how could an anti-Ash'ari have been allowed to teach there for the first seventeen years (35).

As another proof to support this idea, he indicates that Ghazali could not have taught Ash'arism in the madrasa even if it had been possible. He was a professor of Shafi'i law and taught this subject (36).

Also he argues that Ash'arism cannot be said to have gained victory against Mu'tazilism and conservative orthodoxy. On the contrary, Hanbalism brought about the retreat of Mu'tazilism (37).

Maqdisi indicates that Nizam al-Mulk acted contrary to the policy of his predecessor, 'Amid al-Mulk al-Kunduri, and as a result of his tolerant policy the exiled Ash'ari 'ulama' were brought back from exile and also the persecution of Ash'arism was ended (38).

According to Tibavi, war against the rationalist Mu'tazilah and the Hellenistic falsafah, which were both already in retreat or on the defensive before the era of the madrasa, had been carried by the Hanbalites. On the other hand, Ash'arism had already existed in Baghdad as well. After the appointment of al-Ghazali as the principal teacher of Baghdad Nizamiya, who was known to favour Ash'arism and to deprecate Hanbalism, the strife between them had been eventually settled by the caliph himself. Even Nizam al-Mulk himself declared that he had no intention to exclude the other madhhabs and he did build this madrasa for the protection of the 'ulama' and the unity (39).

This fact gives an explanation to the fact that there was no official chair of theology at the Nizamiya of Baghdad. However, because of the fact that Ash'ari theology became popular and spread among the community, as it has been indi-

cated also by Faruqi (40), he allowed the preachers to deliver homilies in the premises of the Nizamiya as well as outside in Baghdad.

In addition to the points which have been discussed so far, Maqdisi makes a comparison between the Nizamiya of Baghdad and the other madrasas in Baghdad.

He indicates that there were 24 madrasas belonging to the three major schools of law: five for the followers of Hanafites, eight for the Shafi'ites and eleven for the Hanbalites.

First, the Nizamiya was larger than the others, it had living quarters for the students. As for the revenue, the annual income from the endowments of the Nizamiya was 15,000 dinars.

Secondly, there were no less than 14 appointments given to 11 different mudarris at the Nizamiya. The point is that these appointments were both frequent and newsworthy.

Thirdly, the professors were normally appointed from Persia, not from Baghdad as were the professors of the other madrasas (41).

From the point of administrative organization, the Nizamiya of Baghdad differed from the others. The difference was that Nizam al-Mulk kept himself and his descendants the administrative control of the institution. In other words, he effectively controlled over the appointments for the position of mudarris (42). After his death, this authority passed on to the state (43), alternatively to the Sultan and the Caliph depending upon the power held at that time (44).

### **Conclusion**

As a part of Nizamiya madrasas, Baghdad Nizamiya madrasa served as a high institution of Muslim education in the medieval Islam. It can be said that in this madrasa which was basically founded for the Shafi'i school of law the followers of this madhhab were taught Islamic law (fiqh) as well as other Islamic sciences such as teaching of Qur'an and Arabic. But it was the Islamic law which was intensively taught due to the fact that this branch of Islamic science needed to be learnt for the daily practice of the religion of Islam.

It began as an individual and private institution. However, it does not mean necessarily that it was established with the personal and private money. It was supported by an endowment as a religious practice. As it has been indicated by the Prophet, if one has a desire to get rewarded even after the death, he or she can achieve this purpose by establishing religious or social institutions of having the aim

to serve the people. So, it may be concluded that Nizam al-Mulk, as a Muslim, had also this kind of purpose in his mind in founding these madrasas.

This madrasa like the other Nizamiya colleges served to teach and spread the Sunni Islamic teachings among the muslim peoples against the heretics of Islam. Moreover, as an institution, there has been educated state officials such as jurists (qadis), clerks and also the Muslim scholars who are going to educate the others.

As far as the teaching of theology is concerned, even though the mudarris of the madrasa was Ash'ari, the theology of Ash'arism was not officially taught. Nevertheless, it can be said that the principals of Islamic belief seem to be explained in accordance with this theology.

#### DİPNOTLAR

- \*. Selçuk University, İlahiyat Faculty, Research Assistant.
1. J. Pedersen, "Some Aspects of the History of the Madrasa", *Islamic Culture*, (1929), vol. 3, p. 525. Nizam al-Mulk founded several madrasas in Nishapur, Balkh, Mawsil, Herat and in Baghdad (p. 534). After the establishment of the Nizamiya madrasas, the sultan and the men of high rank were interested in it, and the type evolved by Nizam al-Mulk, a school in which the students were boarded, became the prevailing one after his time. (J. Pedersen-[G.Maqdisi], "Madrasa", **Encyclopaedia of Islam**, (Leiden, 1986), vol. V, p. 1126).
  2. G. Maqdisi, "Madrasa and University in the Middle Ages", **Studia Islamica**, (1970), vol. 32, p. 258.
  3. G. Maqdisi, "Muslim Institutions of Learning in Eleventh-Century Baghdad", **BSOAS**- (1961), vol. 24, p. 31.
  4. The Nizamiya of Baghdad survived the destruction of Baghdad by Hulagu; it is mentioned at the beginning of the 8 th/14th century by Ibn Battuta. Pedersen-Maqdisi, "Madrasa", **Encyclopaedia of Islam**, vol. V, p. 1127.
  5. Ziyaul Hasan Paruqi, "Madrasa Nizamiya of Baghdad", **Studies in Islam**, (1980), vol. 17, p.4.
  6. Pedersen, op. cit., p. 534. Also see A. Tibawi, "Muslim Education in the Golden Age of the Caliphate", **Islamic Culture**, (1954), vol. 28, p. 436.
  7. Maqdisi, "Muslim Institutions", p. 40.
  8. George Maqdisi, "Muslim Institutions", pp. 2-3. Also see Goldziher, "Education (Muslim)", **Hasting's Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics**, vol. V, p. 199.
  9. G. Maqdisi, **The Rise of Colleges Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West**, (Edinburgh, 1981), p. 301.
  10. See, Maqdisi, "Muslim Institutions", p. 33.
  11. Adnan Sayılı, "Higher Education in Medieval Islam The Madrasa", **Ankara Üniversitesi Yılığ**, (1947-1948), vol. 2, p. 50).
  12. As narrated by Murtada al-Naqib, "Nizam al-Mulk: An Analytical Study of His Career", (Ph.D. dissertation, McGill University, 1978), vol. II, p. 368. As it has been pointed by also Leiser, the Saljuqs, under the direction of Nizam al-Mulk, crushed the Buyids and drove the Fatimids out of Syria. For the new defenders of orthodoxy, madrasas became the primary ideological tool for rooting out Shi'ism. Gary Leiser, "The Madrasa in Medieval Islamic Society", **The Muslim World**, (1986), vol. 76, p. 18.
  13. Richard W. Bulliet, **The Patricians of Nishapur**, (USA, 1972), p.
  14. M. Hodgson, **The Venture of Islam**, (Chicago, 1974), vol. 2, p. 180; A. Schimmel, **Mystical Dimensions of Islam**, (USA, 1975), p. 92.
  15. al-Naqib, op. cit., vol. II, p. 367.
  16. Maqdisi, "Muslim Institutions", pp. 10-11.
  17. See *ibid.*, p. 16.
  18. A. Tibawi, "Origin and Character of Al-Madrasah", **BSOAS**, (1962), vol. 25 p. 231.
  19. Maqdisi, "Muslim Institutions", p. 47.
  20. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
  21. G. Maqdisi, "The Madrasa As A Charitable Trust and the University As A Corporation in the Middle Ages", **V Congress International D'Arabists et D'Islamists**, (Bruxelles, 1970), pp. 332-333.



22. Tibawi, op. cit., pp. 231-232.
23. Faruqi, op. cit., p. 4.
24. Maqdisi, "Muslim Institutions", p. 37.
25. Maqdisi, "Madrasa and University", p. 263.
26. G. Maqdisi, "The Sunni Revival", **Islamic Civilisation 950-1150**, ed. D.S. Richards, (London, 1973), p. 158.
27. Faruqi, op. cit., p. 6.
28. Maqdisi, "Muslim Institutions", p. 51.
29. Ibid., p. 53.
30. Tibawi, op. cit., p. 234.
31. Ibid., p. 236.
32. Maqdisi, "The Madrasa As A Charitable Trust", p. 333.
33. Tibawi, "Origins", pp. 227-228.
34. Maqdisi, "Muslim Institutions", p. 47. However, Tritton argues that it was founded for one professor of Shafi'i law but within a very few years it had teachers of theology, tradition and grammar though it is calimed that these were inferior in standing to the professor of law. (A.S. Tritton, **Materials On Muslim Education In the Middle Ages**, (London, 1957), p. 103.
35. G. Maqdisi, "The Sunni Revival", p. 159.
36. Ibid., p. 160.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., p. 157.
39. Tibawi, op. cit., p. 237-238.
40. Faruqi, op. cit., p. 7.
41. Maqdisi, "Muslim Institutions", op. cit., pp. 44-47.
42. Ibid., p. 55.
43. Ibid., p. 16.
44. Ibid., p. 56.

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