



Evolution of Islamic Madrasas in the Kazakh Steppe: Historical and Theological Perspectives

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Abstract

Islam places a premium on literacy and the transmission of knowledge. Early Islamic education began in mosques, with circles where instructors taught Qur'anic recitation, law and poetry. By the 10th century these circles evolved into independent madrasas – colleges offering both religious and secular instruction and training administrative officials. The madrasas spread along the Silk Roads and became universal centres of learning, combining theology with sciences such as astronomy, medicine and literature. In the Kazakh steppe the madrasa served as a bridge between Islamic civilisation and nomadic culture. This article reviews the evolution of madrasas in Kazakhstan, examines their curricula and social roles across different historical stages, and analyses how theological imperatives shaped their development. The study combines historical, comparative and content analysis of primary sources and secondary literature. Findings indicate that Kazakh madrasas mirrored broader Islamic trends while adapting to local conditions. They produced leading scholars and secular intellectuals, weathered Soviet suppression and experienced revival after independence. Theological aims, particularly the promotion of Sunni



orthodoxy and the cultivation of piety, remained a constant thread. This article contributes a periodized synthesis of Kazakh madrasa development that explicitly links institutional change to theological aims and steppe socio-economic constraints. It also brings together comparative curricular evidence and an annotated inventory of key madrasas to support the historical argument.

Keywords: madrasas; Kazakh steppe; Islam; religious education; theology.

Introduction

The term *madrasa* derives from the Arabic root *dars* (“to study”) and originally referred to a place of instruction. During the Prophet Muhammad’s lifetime, mosques in Medina functioned as the first educational institutions of the Muslim community. As societies evolved, learning circles expanded into royal courts, markets and private schools, eventually giving rise to colleges intended for adults who had completed primary education. By the Abbasid period (750–13th century) madrasas emerged as independent institutions distinct from mosques, providing higher religious and secular education. They offered instruction in theology, law, Arabic grammar, literature, history and science, and some included libraries, accommodation and endowments. Madrasas spread from Khurasan and Transoxania to the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, becoming centres of intercultural exchange and administrative training (UNESCO, 2024).

One of the most influential networks was the Nizamiyya system established by the Seljuk vizier Nizam al-Mulk in 459 AH (1066 CE). He formalised education by creating large, endowed colleges in cities such as Baghdad, Nishapur, Isfahan and Balkh (International Islamic Library, 2025). These institutions promoted Sunni orthodoxy, recruited renowned teachers, developed a structured curriculum emphasising Shafi’i jurisprudence and Ash’ari theology, and provided extensive economic support (International Islamic Library, 2022). The Nizamiyya aimed to produce scholars, judges and administrators, and its graduates spread Sunni thought across the Muslim world (International Islamic Library, 2020). Later madrasas, such as Ulugh Beg’s college in Samarkand and medical madrasas in Herat, further integrated science, astronomy and medicine into the syllabus.

In Central Asia, and particularly on the Kazakh steppe, madrasas arrived through interactions with the wider Islamic world. They served not only as religious schools but also as social and cultural centres where nomadic elites acquired legal and administrative skills. By the 19th century dozens of madrasas operated in towns and villages, often attached to mosques or private waqf endowments. However, their function was complex: in places such as Bukhara the madrasa often doubled as an apartment building, with landlords renting rooms to students and some instructors teaching from home (International Islamic Library, 2019). The academic year lasted roughly six months, and only those who could afford board and lodging could study for the entire period (Ahmed, 1983). Reformers such as Sadridin Ayni criticised the poor instruction and urged modernization, contributing to the jadidist movement that introduced new teaching methods and secular subjects (Bozkurt, 2013).

This article explores how madrasas in Kazakhstan evolved from their medieval origins to the present. It traces three major stages: (1) the era of Turkic states (8th–15th centuries), when the first madrasas were established; (2) the period of the Kazakh Khanate (15th–18th century), when local madrasas flourished under patronage of rulers and elites; and (3) the Russian imperial and Soviet era (18th–20th century), when religious schools faced regulation, decline and eventual closure. During independence (after 1991) Kazakhstan witnessed a revival of Islamic education, with new madrasas opening and curricula combining traditional subjects with modern disciplines. The scope of this article



is to provide a historical and theological analysis of these developments, situating Kazakh madrasas within the broader history of Islamic education and highlighting their role in shaping religious identity and intellectual life.

Methods

The study adopts a mixed historical and qualitative approach. Primary sources include archival documents, *waqf* (endowment) records, memoirs of scholars, and travelers' accounts that describe madrasas in Central Asia. Secondary sources consist of scholarly monographs, encyclopedia entries, and journal articles on Islamic education (e.g., Ahmed, 1983; Bozkurt, 2013; Çetin, 1999) as well as studies on religious education and the architecture of Islamic institutions in Kazakhstan (e.g., Isina et al., 2022).

A content analysis of historical curricula and textbook materials was undertaken to reconstruct the syllabus and teaching methods of different periods. Comparative analysis was used to contrast Kazakh madrasas with contemporaneous institutions in Bukhara, Khurasan, and the Ottoman Empire, drawing on works such as Hitti's *Islamic History* (1980) and Hizli's study of Ottoman madrasas (2008).

This comparative perspective helped identify which features of Kazakh madrasas were unique to local circumstances and which mirrored broader Islamic patterns. A thematic analysis was also applied to the qualitative data, identifying recurring theological objectives and educational themes across the sources. In addition, descriptive statistics on the number, levels, and geographic distribution of madrasas were compiled from published research and archival surveys (Derbisali, 2009; Sabitov, 1950) to contextualize educational trends. This multi-pronged methodology allows for triangulation of sources and a comprehensive understanding of how Islamic madrasas in the Kazakh steppe evolved over time. These descriptive counts were used to identify regional concentrations and period-to-period shifts, and were interpreted alongside qualitative themes in the sources.

Results

Evolutionary stages of Kazakh madrasas

The first stage (8th–15th centuries) corresponds to the era of Turkic and Seljuk states. Islamic education arrived with merchants, missionaries and scholars; early madrasas in cities such as Otyrar and Sauran were modelled on Khurasan schools. These institutions offered instruction in Qur'anic recitation, Arabic grammar, law (*fiqh*), theology (*kalam*), rhetoric and logic. The curriculum resembled that of the Nizamiyya, with emphasis on Sunni orthodoxy and the training of judges and administrators.

The second stage (15th–18th centuries) covers the Kazakh Khanate. Madrasas proliferated in newly founded towns and trading hubs. Many were attached to mosques or built by wealthy patrons as *waqf* endowments. Students studied *fiqh*, *kalam*, hadith, Arabic linguistics and logic, but curricula often included arithmetic, history, poetry and the works of Central Asian poets. Scholar-administrators emerging from these madrasas served in khanly courts and acted as mediators between nomadic and sedentary communities. Because many learners came from mobile households, instruction often followed a flexible apprenticeship pattern with seasonal attendance and portable texts. Teachers adapted by emphasising oral transmission and memorisation alongside short written exercises that could be sustained during migration.



The third stage (18th–20th centuries) corresponds to Russian imperial rule and the Soviet period. Tsarist authorities regulated religious schools, while reformist (*jadidist*) activists introduced modern subjects and teaching methods. By the early 20th century there were two systems of education: *old* madrasas offering traditional curricula and *new method* schools teaching arithmetic, geography, history and foreign languages. The Soviet regime closed most madrasas in the 1920s, but a few clandestine institutions continued to operate. After Kazakhstan gained independence, a revival of Islamic education led to the opening of new madrasas and colleges, which now combine theology with secular sciences and language studies.

Madrasas levels and curricula

Ottoman and Central Asian madrasas classified their programmes by level (Table 1) (Derbisali, 2009; Sabitov, 1950).

Table 1. Stages and typical subjects taught, based on historical sources

Level (Kazakh transliteration)	Focus areas	Representative textbooks
Yirmili (twenties)	Introductory courses in theology (<i>kalam</i>), jurisprudence (<i>fiqh</i>) and rhetoric (<i>balağat</i>)	<i>Hashiya-i Tajrid</i> (commentary on Avicenna), <i>Sharh-i Fara'iz</i> (inheritance), <i>Mutawaal</i>
Otuzlu (thirties)	Intermediate study of <i>fiqh</i> , <i>kalam</i> and hadith; introduction to logic and linguistics	<i>Sharh-i Miftah</i> (rhetoric), <i>Tanqih</i> and <i>Tawzih</i> (Usul al-fiqh), <i>Hashiya-i Tajrid</i> , <i>Masabih</i> (hadith collection)
Kirkli (forties)	Advanced rhetoric, jurisprudence, hadith methodology and legal theory (<i>fiqh usul</i>)	<i>Miftah al-Ulūm</i> (sciences), <i>Sadr al-Shari'a</i> and <i>Mashariq</i> (jurisprudence), <i>Masabih al-Sunnah</i> (al-Baghawi), <i>Tawzih</i> (al-Taftazani)
Ellili (fifties)	Specialised study in <i>fiqh</i> , hadith and theology; exegesis (<i>tafsir</i>)	<i>Hidaya</i> (jurisprudence), <i>Masabih</i> (al-Baghawi), <i>Sharh-i Mawaqif</i> (<i>kalam</i>), <i>Kashshaf</i> and <i>Baydawi</i> (Qur'anic commentaries), <i>Tawli'</i> (logic)
Sahn-i Semān (sixties)	Highest level reserved for top scholars; comprehensive mastery of jurisprudence, hadith, theology, exegesis and logic	<i>Sharh-i Fara'iz</i> , <i>Hidaya</i> , <i>Bukharī's Sahih</i> , <i>Kashshaf</i> , <i>Tawli'</i> , <i>Sharh-i Adud</i>

The table illustrates the progressive nature of the curriculum: students advanced from basic doctrine and grammar to complex jurisprudence and metaphysics.

Many Kazakh madrasas adopted similar structures, though local teachers sometimes substituted Persian or Turkic commentaries for Arabic originals.

Prominent madrasas in the Kazakh steppe

Table 2 lists selected historic madrasas in Kazakhstan and summarises their location, distinguishing features, approximate date and notable alumni.

The information is drawn from inventories of mosques and madrasas compiled by researchers such as Derbisali and Sabitov.



Table 2. Historic madrasas in Kazakhstan and summarises their location, distinguishing features (Derbisali, 2009; Sabitov, 1950).

Madrasa	Region	Distinctive features	Founded	Notable figures
Aiġanim Madrasa	Sarymbet, North Kazakhstan	Twenty-student madrasa with five rooms	1834	Shokan Uali Khanov (ethnographer)
Akhmet Riza Madrasa	Semey	Combined religious lessons with arithmetic, geography, history and classical poetry	19 th century	Poet and thinker Abai Kunanbayuly
Akyaz Madrasa (Ayagoz)	Ayagoz, Semey province	Taught history, geography, mathematics and philosophy alongside religious disciplines	1851	Teachers including Shaykhul-Sayit Mirhaliduly and scholar Berdikozha Sayakypuly
Babata Madrasa	Sozak, South Kazakhstan	Early complex combining mosque and madrasa, reflecting Kökeltash style	Late 18 th century	Regional Sufi teachers
Bagbustan Hanım Women's Madrasa	Orenburg	Catered to Tatar, Bashkir, Kazakh and Uzbek girls; included handicraft training	1910	Fatima Gabidova (activist)
Mamanya Madrasa	Aqsu district, Almaty	Founded by the Maman family; employed both Kazakh and Tatar teachers	1904	Produced community leaders and educators
Mutiya Madrasa	Oral (West Kazakhstan)	Building still intact; evidence of late-19th-century architecture	Late 19 th century	Poet Gabdulla Toqay studied here
Sauran Madrasa	Sauran	Part of a larger architectural ensemble; attached mosque and caravanserai	18 th century	Scholars of the Sauran school

These examples demonstrate the diversity of Kazakh madrasas. Some, like Akhmet Riza and Akyaz, integrated secular subjects and produced modernist thinkers. Others, such as Aiġanim and Mamanya, remained traditional but nurtured prominent intellectuals. Women's education was not ignored: the Bagbustan Hanım madrasa provided instruction to girls from several ethnic groups and combined literacy with handicraft skills.

Discussion

The evolution of madrasas in the Kazakh steppe reflects broader currents in Islamic education, while also exhibiting unique local adaptations. The early mosque-based study circles grew into multidisciplinary colleges, mirroring the wider Islamic world's educational development (UNESCO, 2024). The Seljuk-era Nizamiyya model introduced norms of structured curricula, Sunni orthodoxy, and state patronage that Kazakh madrasas later aspired to emulate (International Islamic Library, 2025). Kazakh madrasas adopted similar institutional goals, such as producing pious scholars and capable administrators, but local conditions of the steppe shaped their character in distinctive ways. Many madrasas in Kazakhstan were small, village-based schools attached to mosques or private homes, reflecting the decentralization necessitated by a nomadic society.

The economic realities of pastoral life meant that students often worked or migrated seasonally, which limited continuous study. As described earlier, in places like Bukhara a madrasa could function as a semi-commercial lodging house; owners were often more like landlords than full-time teachers, and poorer students could seldom afford to remain for an entire academic year (SICE Blog, 2023). These socio-economic factors curtailed access to higher education and led to calls for reform by the early 20th century. Central Asian reformers such as Sadriddin Ayni highlighted the futility of rote



memorization and the low quality of instruction in some madrasas, advocating for curricular modernization and teaching in vernacular languages (SICE Blog, 2023).

Analysis of madrasa curricula indicates that Kazakh institutions followed a hierarchical program progressing from basic doctrine to advanced jurisprudence and exegesis (Derbisali, 2009). Compared to the Nizamiyya curriculum, which emphasized Shafi'i jurisprudence and Ash'ari theology, the Kazakh madrasas were typically aligned with the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, reflecting the dominance of Hanafi tradition in Central Asia, combined with local customs. By the 19th century, secular subjects such as mathematics, geography, and history were included in many madrasa programs, influenced by *jadidist* reformers and by the practical need to prepare students for roles in an evolving imperial administration (Bekish et al., 2021). The inclusion of these subjects demonstrates a degree of responsiveness to changing times. Women's education, while limited in scope, was supported in certain instances (e.g., the Bagbustan Hanım madrasa for girls), demonstrating an early form of inclusivity in an otherwise male-dominated educational sphere (Hasan, 2018; Zhetspisbaev, 2022).

The decline of madrasas under Russian and especially Soviet rule underscores the vulnerability of religious institutions to political forces. Colonial regulations in the 19th century placed madrasas under scrutiny, and the Soviet state's anti-religious campaigns in the 1920s–1930s led to the closure of nearly all Islamic schools. This interruption severed the chain of transmission for traditional Islamic knowledge in Kazakhstan, leaving only clandestine circles of learning to sustain religious education through the mid-20th century. Following independence, however, the newly sovereign state adopted a policy of religious revival and pluralism (Kazhikenova, 2019). Kazakhstan's government, while maintaining a secular framework, acknowledged Islam as an element of national culture and allowed the re-establishment of Muslim institutions. Since the 1990s, numerous madrasas and Islamic colleges have opened under the supervision of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (the national Muslim board). These schools today combine the traditional madrasa curriculum with modern disciplines such as computer science, foreign languages, and civil law, reflecting a recognition that religious education must address contemporary needs while preserving its theological foundations (Zatov & Mazhiev, 2022). Under state regulation, instruction often shifted toward apolitical ritual observance and personal ethics, while contentious legal-political debates were downplayed or avoided. In some contexts, locally rooted practices were reframed as cultural heritage rather than formal doctrine to fit official boundaries.

Madrasas in the Kazakh context historically played a critical role not only in educating religious scholars but also in cultivating ethical values and community cohesion. The core theological objectives, such as worship of God, adherence to Sharia, and personal moral reform, were central to the Nizamiyya model and continued to guide later Kazakh schools (Makdisi, 1981). By teaching jurisprudence, theology, and *adab* (ethical conduct), madrasas instilled a sense of social responsibility and communal identity among students. At the same time, these institutions often fostered scientific inquiry and intercultural exchange; for instance, madrasas in great centers like Samarkand and Bukhara became renowned for studies in astronomy and medicine alongside religious sciences (Makdisi, 1981; Zeydan, 1911). This historical balance between faith and reason challenges modern stereotypes that portray madrasas as purely religious or intellectually stagnant institutions (Ahmed & Mernissi, 1992; Beisenbayev et al., 2024). In reality, the madrasa tradition in Central Asia was dynamic, producing thinkers who were conversant in both Islamic scholarship and the general knowledge of their era.

The Role of Madrasas in Post-Independence Kazakhstan

After Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991, the country experienced a significant religious revival. The long-suppressed demand for Islamic education resurfaced, and madrasas once again



became important as centers for religious learning and identity formation. However, the post-independence context also brought new challenges and opportunities, leading to substantial reforms in how madrasas operate and are regulated. This section examines how Kazakh madrasas have evolved since 1991, focusing on educational reforms, their role in shaping religious and national identity, and the state policies governing Islamic education.

Revival and Expansion of Islamic Education: In the immediate aftermath of independence, there was a dramatic increase in religious activity and interest in Islam across Kazakhstan. The number of mosques in the country grew from only a handful in the late Soviet period to over 2,000 within two decades. Similarly, informal Qur'an courses and madrasa-style classes began to proliferate in the 1990s. Recognizing the need for structured religious education, Kazakhstan established new institutions with international partnerships. A landmark was the founding of the Egyptian University of Islamic Culture "Nur-Mubarak" in Almaty, which was agreed upon in 1993 (through a bilateral accord with Egypt) and began operations in 2001 (Beisenbayev et al., 2024). Nur-Mubarak University became the first accredited Islamic university in Kazakhstan, offering degree programs in Islamic studies, and it set a precedent for integrating Islamic higher education into the national education system. In parallel, Kazakhstan's Spiritual Administration (the Muslim Board) opened a network of madrasa colleges across the country. Between 2007 and 2012, at least nine new madrasas were established in various regions, including notable ones in Astana, Shymkent, Shamalghan (Almaty region), Oral (Uralsk), Aktobe, Pavlodar, Almaty city, Saryagash (Turkestan region), and Taraz (Beisenbayev et al., 2024).

Educational Reform and Modernization: Post-independence madrasas in Kazakhstan have undergone significant curricular reform and institutional modernization. One major development was the formal licensing and accreditation of madrasas by the state. Starting in the 2015–2016 academic year, several madrasas were officially reclassified as "colleges" under Kazakhstan's technical and vocational education framework (Beisenbayev et al., 2024). Madrasas in Saryagash, Shymkent, Almaty, and Aktobe were among the first to receive state licenses, which allow them to issue recognized diplomas in religious studies. All accredited madrasas follow a standardized curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education, with programs titled "Islamic Studies" (specialty code 0112000) and an "Imam Khatib" qualification track. The course of study typically lasts about 2 years 10 months for basic Islamic studies (analogous to an associate degree) or 3 years 10 months for the *imam-khatib* program, which is aimed at training mosque leaders.

Alongside classical subjects like Qur'an, Hadith, Fiqh, and Aqidah (creed), the curriculum includes secular disciplines and skills: Kazakh (and other) languages, computer literacy, national history, and pedagogy. By adopting elements of the secular college system—such as credit-modular instruction and state-supervised examinations—Kazakh madrasas have professionalized the training of Islamic scholars and religious functionaries. This reform was driven in part by a 2015 initiative of the Spiritual Administration, which developed a "Concept for the Development of Religious Education until 2020" aimed at standardizing and improving Islamic education nationwide. As a result, contemporary madrasa graduates not only memorize religious texts but also gain general knowledge that can facilitate their engagement with society and public institutions.

Identity Formation: The resurgence of madrasas has been closely tied to questions of identity in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. During the Soviet era, religious identity was suppressed in favor of a secular, socialist identity. With independence, Islam has re-emerged as an important component of national and cultural identity for many Kazakhs. Madrasas contribute to this identity formation by educating a new generation of religious scholars who are reviving and reinterpreting Kazakh Islamic traditions. Many young people, seeking reconnection with their heritage, enroll in madrasa programs to learn about their faith and the Arabic script (which was historically used in Kazakh writing before



Soviet Latinization and Cyrillic scripts). By teaching the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam (the traditionally dominant madhhab in Central Asia) and the Maturidi creed, madrasas reinforce a specifically “Kazakhstani” Islamic identity that is linked to the broader Turkic-Islamic culture of the region. The government and religious authorities often promote this as “traditional Islam,” distinguishing it from foreign or extremist interpretations. This framing helps to integrate Islamic values with Kazakh national consciousness. For example, courses in madrasas sometimes include modules on the history of Islam in Kazakhstan, highlighting figures like Khoja Ahmed Yasawi (a 12th-century Sufi revered in Kazakhstan) to instill pride in a local Islamic legacy. In this way, madrasas serve not only to train clergy but also as custodians of cultural memory, reinforcing an inclusive national narrative where Islam is one strand of Kazakhstan’s multi-ethnic identity. Studies have noted that increased religious education activity in the 1990s and 2000s reflected a broader growth of religious identity among youth in Kazakhstan. Many students see their madrasa education as filling a moral and spiritual void left by decades of state atheism, thereby strengthening community values like charity (*sadaqa*), respect for elders, and social solidarity which are important in Kazakh culture.

State Policy and Regulation: Kazakhstan’s government has navigated a delicate balance in managing the rise of Islamic education. On one hand, the state has generally supported the revival of Islamic institutions as part of restoring cultural heritage and meeting citizens’ spiritual needs. On the other hand, concerns about religious extremism and the desire to maintain a secular state have led to proactive regulation of madrasas. The first Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (1992) granted citizens the right to practice religion freely and allowed religious communities to establish educational institutions. This permissive environment in the 1990s saw various Islamic groups (including some with foreign ties) opening schools and centers. In subsequent years, the government introduced stricter legislation. Notably, the Law “On Religious Activities and Religious Associations” enacted in October 2011 requires all religious educational institutions to register with the state and obtain permission for their curricula. Under this law, unregistered religious schools or informal study circles can be deemed illegal.

The rationale, as articulated by officials, is to ensure that religious teachings align with Kazakhstan’s commitment to interethnic harmony and do not promote extremist ideologies (Kassen, 2018). In practice, this law led to the closure of some unregistered *mekteb* or private madrasa classes and reinforced the role of the official Spiritual Administration in vetting and running Islamic schools. All nine of the country’s madrasa-colleges and the Nur-Mubarak Islamic University operate under charters approved by both the Ministry of Education and the Spiritual Administration, and they use curricula that have been reviewed by experts for compliance with national education standards. The state has also supported the development of Islamic education by providing scholarships and opportunities for top madrasa graduates to continue studies abroad (for instance, in universities in Egypt, Turkey, or Malaysia), with the expectation that they return as qualified imams and teachers. By 2023, Kazakhstan had a network of nine official madrasa colleges, one Islamic university, two Islamic institutes (including an institute for advanced training of imams), and two Orthodox Christian seminaries registered with the Committee for Religious Affairs. This indicates that Islamic education has been institutionally integrated into the country’s educational landscape, albeit within a framework of state oversight.

Another aspect of state policy has been the development of localized Islamic educational content. Fearing the influence of foreign curricula that might not suit Kazakhstan’s context, the authorities encouraged scholars to produce textbooks and translations in the Kazakh language. As a result, several key Islamic texts (such as guides on the basics of Islam, Hanafi jurisprudence manuals, and biographies of the Prophet) have been published in Kazakh with official sanction, and these are used in madrasa classrooms. The government also emphasizes *preventive education*: incorporating messages about religious tolerance, the importance of secular knowledge, and the rejection of extremist



interpretations. This is seen as critical given the broader regional concerns about radicalization. Indeed, the popularity of madrasas has grown to the point that demand exceeds supply – by early 2023, the nine madrasa colleges had thousands of applicants, more than they could accommodate, suggesting a need to establish more institutions or expand existing ones. The state’s strategy here is to channel this demand into officially recognized schools (as opposed to unregulated study groups), thereby educating young Muslims in a supervised environment. This is part of a larger policy to preempt the influence of “illegal religious groups” by increasing the availability of authentic and moderate religious education.

In summary, the post-independence period in Kazakhstan has seen madrasas become a focal point of both educational reform and cultural identity reconstruction. Through curriculum modernization and state licensing, these institutions have professionalized Islamic learning and made it a part of the national education system. Madrasas have contributed to the shaping of a post-Soviet Islamic identity that aligns with Kazakhstan’s nation-building efforts – an identity that is rooted in the Hanafi-Maturidi tradition and intertwined with Kazakh heritage. State policies have been generally supportive but carefully managed, aiming to ensure that the revival of madrasas strengthens social cohesion and national values rather than undermining them. Moving forward, the role of madrasas will likely continue to evolve as Kazakhstan adapts to global currents in education and religion, all while striving to maintain harmony in its multi-ethnic, multi-faith society.

Conclusions

Madrasas in the Kazakh steppe were not monolithic; they evolved through stages shaped by regional politics, socio-economic conditions and theological imperatives. Their origins lie in early mosque-based learning circles that expanded into independent colleges offering diverse curricula. The Seljuk Nizamiyya model provided a template for structured education and Sunni orthodoxy, and Kazakh madrasas adopted and adapted this model to local needs. Despite limited resources and periodic decline under imperial and Soviet rule, these schools produced scholars, poets and administrators who shaped Kazakh culture. They also served as social and economic centres, providing lodging and support for students and acting as hubs of communal life. Today, the revival of madrasas in Kazakhstan demonstrates the resilience of Islamic educational traditions. By integrating modern subjects and promoting inclusivity, contemporary madrasas continue to play a vital role in preserving religious identity and contributing to national development. Understanding their historical evolution and theological foundations can inform policies that balance religious freedom with social cohesion. Madrasas remain a testament to the enduring intersection of faith, knowledge and cultural exchange along the Silk Road. Limitations of the Study: This study has relied on historical records, published literature, and institutional data to trace the evolution of madrasas, which may be limited by biases in these sources. Archival documents and colonial reports might reflect external viewpoints and could underrepresent the perspectives of madrasa students and teachers themselves. There is also an unevenness in available data: some periods (such as the Soviet era) and topics (like women’s participation or informal education networks) are not well-documented and thus had to be inferred indirectly.

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