

Religious Reform and *Ummah* Unity under Nur al-Din Mahmud Zangi: A Historical Analysis of Sunni Institutional Strategy

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Abstract

The unification of the *umma* through Sunni Islam constituted a central tenet in the governance framework of Nur al-Din Mahmud Zangi (d. 1174), implemented within the context of the 12th-century Islamic world. The medieval Islamic landscape was marked by sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shi'a communities, intra-Sunni doctrinal rivalries, the Crusader presence which had seized control of Bayt al-Maqdis (Jerusalem), Antioch and Tripoli, political instability stemming from conflicts among Islamic polities, and the rising influence of minority sects like the Batiniyyah that threatened Sunni orthodoxy. Confronting these challenges, this study examines how Nur al-Din strategically employed religious scholars (*ulama*) and educational institutions as primary instruments to strengthen *umma* unity under a Sunni framework. Through historical analysis drawing upon primary and secondary sources, this research demonstrates that Nur al-Din established an extensive *madrassa* network and mobilized Sunni scholars to: 1) promote Sunni orthodoxy as state ideology, 2) diminish the influence of divisive heterodox movements, and 3) cultivate a religious identity supporting his political unification agenda. This approach not only succeeded in creating a more homogeneous ideological foundation but also reinforced the political legitimacy of his rule against internal and external threats. The findings offer critical insights into the historical collaboration between political authority and religious scholarship in building *umma* unity, with enduring relevance for understanding Islamic political history.

Keywords: Nur al-Din Mahmud Zangi, *umma* unification, Sunni, *ulama*, *madrassa*, Crusades

Introduction

Nur al-Din Mahmud ibn Zangi ibn Aq Sunqur was one of the most prominent medieval Islamic leaders who played a pivotal role in the military campaigns against the Crusader (Frankish) occupation in Bilad al-Sham (the Levant).¹ In addition to his regnal title *al-Malik* (the King), he was also honored with epithets such as *al-Malik al-Adil* (the Just King), *al-Malik al-Shahid* (the Martyred King), and *al-Malik al-Sa'id* (the Fortunate King), as recorded in numerous Islamic historical sources, reflecting his noble character.² According to Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī, the name “Nur al-Din” (Light of the Faith) was itself an honorific bestowed upon him.³ Contrary to common

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¹ Burhan Che Daud, “Al-Malik Al-Ādil Nūr al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. Zankī: An Introduction”, *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 1.3 (2010), 294.

² Shihab al-Din Abd al-Rahman bin Ismail bin Ibrahim. *Kitab al-Rawdatayn fī Akhbar al-Dawlatayn al-Nuriyyah wa al-Salihiyyah*. (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Ilmiyyah, 2003), 1: 96.

³ Shams al-Din Abi al-Mazaffar Yusuf bin Qazawaghli al-Turki al-Shahir Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mirat al-Zaman fī Tarikh al-Ayan*. (Hyderabad: s.l., 1951), 18: 209.

assumption, this title did not signify exceptional achievement; it was a conventional name given to children at the time, consistent with naming traditions of the era.

As documented by Ibn ‘Asakir, Nur al-Din was born on Sunday, 17 Shawwal 511 AH/5 February 1118 CE.⁴ His family background profoundly influenced the political and military landscape of the Islamic world, particularly in confronting the Crusaders in Bilad al-Sham. His grandfather, Aq Sunqur (d. 1094), was a Seljuk Turkish commander of *mamluk* (military enslaved person) origin, raised within the Seljuk army system. Appointed governor of Aleppo by the Seljuk Sultan Malik-Shah I, he became a key figure in the Seljuk administration.⁵ Nur al-Din’s father, Imad al-Din Zangi, founder of the Zangid dynasty, held significant authority as the *atabeg* (regent)⁶ for the Seljuk Sultan in Mosul and Aleppo. Imad al-Din inherited Aq Sunqur’s strategic acumen, combining tactical brilliance with diplomatic finesse.⁷ In 1144 CE, he achieved a landmark victory by recapturing the County of Edessa, one of the four Crusader states in the Levant (alongside Jerusalem, Antioch, and Tripoli).⁸ Thomas Asbridge argues that this victory marked a turning point in revitalizing Islamic *jihad* consciousness after the Frankish invasions of the late 11th century.⁹ Nur al-Din, shaped by his father’s leadership, participated in military campaigns against both Crusaders and rival Muslim factions. Following Imad al-Din’s death in 1146 CE,¹⁰ Nur al-Din assumed power in Aleppo, while his brother Sayf al-Din Ghazi ruled Mosul, temporarily dividing the Zangid realm into two polities.¹¹

Nur al-Din Mahmud Zangi’s reign (d. 1174 CE) witnessed a transformative phase in Islamic history, particularly in unifying Muslims under Sunni orthodoxy. The 12th-century Islamic world faced critical challenges: (1) chronic sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shi’a communities and inter-dynastic power struggles, (2) the existential threat of the Crusaders, who had seized Jerusalem and other strategic territories,¹² and (3) the rise of heterodox movements like the

⁴ Ali bin al-Hasan bin Hibah Allah bin Abd Allah bin al-Husayn ibn Asakir, *Tarikh Madinat Dimashq* (Dar al-Fikr, 1995), 57:118.

⁵ Kamal al-Din Abi Qasim Umar bin Ahmad bin Abd Allah Ibn al-Adim, *Zubdah al-Halab min Tarikh Halab* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutubb al-Ilmiyyah, 1996), 222.

⁶ The title *Atabeg* (pl. *Atabegs*) was conferred upon military tutors appointed for the princes of the Seljuk Empire. When Seljuk princes reached the age to commence their formal education, they were customarily removed from the capital and dispatched to provincial territories as *Amirs* (governors). In practice, the military commander who administered the province on the prince’s behalf was designated as the *Atabeg*. The *Atabeg’s* responsibilities extended beyond military training and princely education to include the selection of instructors and oversight of all matters pertaining to the prince’s upbringing. Notably, even after the prince attained maturity, the *Atabeg* retained paternal authority and was honored as a surrogate father. *Atabegs* were typically chosen from the military elite, reflecting the paramount importance of martial education for Seljuk princes. This position frequently became hereditary, passing from father to son - a pattern consistent with numerous other offices that were maintained within familial or kinship networks during this period. Through this system, several influential *Atabeg* families accumulated substantial power, ultimately establishing autonomous dynasties that ruled in nominal allegiance to the Seljuk Empire. Sümer Faruk. *Oğuzlar (Türkmenler) Tarihleri-Boy Teşkilâtı-Destanları* (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Basımevi, 1972), 134.

⁷ Shakir Ahmad Abubar, *al-Hurub al-Salibiyyah al-Ushrah al-Zankiyyah* (Lubnan: al-Jami’ah al-Lubnaniyyah, s.a.), 58.

⁸ Hussain Othman, *Salib dan Penjajahan Dunia Islam* (Batu Pahat: Penerbit UTHM, 2018), 63.

⁹ Thomas Asbridge, *The Crusades, the War for the Holy Land* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 193.

¹⁰ Ali bin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Abd al-Karim bin Abd al-Shaibani Ibn al-Athir, *Kitab al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Ilmiyyah, 2003), 9:339.

¹¹ Ali bin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Abd al-Karim bin Abd al-Shaibani Ibn al-Athir, *Kitab al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Ilmiyyah, 2003), 9: 328.

¹² Bakri, Mohamad Fikri Mohd, Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, and Shu’aibu Umar Gokaru. “Sisi Gelap Dunia Islam Abad Pertengahan Menjelang Perang Salib Pertama (489-492 H/1096-1099 M): The Dark Side of the Medieval Islamic World on the Eve of the First Crusade (489-492 Ah/1096-1099 Ce).” *Al-Basirah Journal* 15, no. 2 (2025): 34.

Batiniyyah, which undermined communal cohesion.¹³ In this context, Nur al-Din systematically pursued ummah unification by leveraging two key institutions, religious scholarship (*ulama*) and education, as pillars of his governance. Recognizing that political unity required ideological foundations, he established Sunni *madrasahs* and empowered orthodox scholars to: (1) consolidate his political legitimacy, (2) standardize Sunni doctrine, (3) forge a cohesive religious identity, and (4) counter internal and external threats. This study critically examines how this unification strategy was implemented and impacted religious and political structures under Nur al-Din. Its findings offer significant insights into the interplay of religion and politics in Islamic history, particularly in addressing sectarian pluralism and external invasions.

Historical Ground of the Political and Social Landscape in the Medieval Period

The Islamic world in the early 12th century was in a state of turmoil that demanded strong leadership and a clear vision. Despite numerous formidable challenges, Nur al-Din Mahmud Zangi emerged as a ruler who successfully unified Islamic territories in Syria and Egypt. Carole Hillenbrand argues that the medieval Islamic world was characterized by severe internal divisions among Muslims, particularly between Sunni and Shi'a sects, as well as power struggles among competing petty dynasties. This fragmentation weakened the Muslim *ummah* as a whole and hindered efforts to counter external threats, especially from the Crusaders, who had captured Bayt al-Maqdis in 1099.¹⁴ Following the fall of Jerusalem, the Crusaders seized several key regions in Bilad al-Sham and established small Christian states in the heart of the Islamic world. This development not only challenged Muslim political sovereignty but also threatened their religious identity and security. Scholars such as Alwi al-Atas and Mohamad Firdaus argue that the lack of Muslim unity in confronting the first wave of Crusader invasions and the decline in jihadist fervour were among the key factors that contributed to the Frankish conquest of Islamic lands.¹⁵

Additionally, the rise of dissident movements such as the Batiniyyah, considered heterodox by mainstream Islam, further exacerbated societal confusion and undermined communal cohesion. Although they were originally an offshoot of Shi'a Ismailism, internal schisms within the Fatimid caliphate gave rise to a new faction known as the Nizari Ismailis, which evolved into an extremist sect in the medieval period.¹⁶ The Batiniyyah, particularly their elite assassins (*fida'i*), conducted covert operations by infiltrating enemy institutions, especially the Seljuk leadership, Sunni scholars and ideological opponents. One of their most notable assassinations was that of Nizam al-Mulk, the Seljuk vizier, in 1092 CE.¹⁷ In 1149 CE, an alliance was even formed between Raymond of Antioch and the Batini leader Ali ibn Wafa to resist Nur al-Din's advance toward Antioch jointly.

Nevertheless, the battle successfully turned in favour of Nur al-Din. Meanwhile, Sunni Muslims also faced internal sectarian conflicts that further fractured Islamic unity. Historical sources

¹³ Bakri, Mohamad Fikri Mohd. "Nur Al-Din Mahmud Zanki's (1146-1174 CE) Perspective On Bayt Al-Maqdis: A Historical Overview." *Al-Muqaddimah: Online Journal of Islamic History and Civilization* 12, no. 2 (2024), 87.

¹⁴ Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades Islamic Perspectives*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 33.

¹⁵ Alwi Alatas and Mohamad Firdaus Mansor Majdin, "Muslim Disunity and Lost in First Crusade," *UMRAN-Internasional Journal of Islamic and Civilizational Studies*, 9.2 (2022), 23.

¹⁶ Tim Riset Majelis Tinggi Urusan Islam Mesir, *Ensiklopedi Aliran dan Madzhab di Dunia Islam*, trans. Masturi Intan, Muhammad Abidun Zuhdi and Khalifurrahman Fath, (Jakarta: Pustaka al-Kautsar, t.t), 47-54.

¹⁷ Ali bin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Abd al-Karim bin Abd al-Shaibani Ibn al-Athir, *Kitab al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Ilmiyyah, 2003), 9: 38.

document tensions between Hanbali and Ash'ari-Shafi'i adherents.¹⁸ In 469 AH/1076 CE, Abu Nasr al-Qushayri sparked controversy at the Nizamiyya *Madrasah* by accusing Hanbalis of *tajsim* (anthropomorphism), leading to violent clashes. Authorities suspended academic activities (until 473 AH/1080 CE) to restore order. However, sectarian strife resurfaced more severely when Nizamiyya students engaged in bloody riots, resulting in nearly 20 deaths and numerous injuries.¹⁹ This episode illustrates the intense sectarian fanaticism of the time and its polarizing effect on society.

In addition to external threats, Nur al-Din also faced formidable internal challenges. At that time, the Islamic world was fragmented into several small dynasties frequently engaged in internecine warfare, such as the Seljuks, the Fatimids in Egypt, and various local emirs in Syria.²⁰ This fragmentation not only weakened the Muslim *ummah* but also complicated efforts to assemble a unified force to resist the Crusader armies. Moreover, the rivalry between the Abbasid and Fatimid caliphates at the time extended beyond territorial expansion to include the propagation of ideology through organized missionary activities (*da'wah*). Al-Basasiri, who served as vizier to the Abbasid Caliph al-Qa'im, came under the influence of the Fatimid Shi'i *da'wah* and attempted to overthrow the Abbasid caliphate. However, this attempt ultimately failed following the intervention of Tughrul Beg, the leading figure of the Seljuks, who succeeded in expelling al-Basasiri from Baghdad.²¹ The Abbasid caliphate's declining power, increasingly constrained by external influences, further enabled the rise of various autonomous rulers in the Bilad al-Sham region during the medieval period, including the 'Uqaylid, Mirdasid, Buwayhid, Hamdanid, and Marwanid dynasties.²²

Following the assassination of Imad al-Din in 1146 CE (541 AH) at Ja'bar Fortress, Nur al-Din confronted simultaneous internal and external threats. On one front, Imad al-Din's death emboldened his enemies, who seized the opportunity to launch attacks on his territories. These included: 1) Raymond, the ruler of Antioch, who attacked the areas of Hamah and the vicinity of Aleppo, 2) Mu'in al-Din Unur, the Atabeg of Damascus, who seized Ba'albek and asserted control over Hamah and Homs,²³ 3) the Artuqid emirs, Husam al-Din Timurtash and Fakhr al-Din Qaraarslan, who recaptured territories such as Ras al-'Ayn and Dara that had previously been under Imad al-Din's authority; and (4) Joscelin II, who attempted to reclaim Edessa with the support of local Armenian allies.²⁴ Additionally, Nur al-Din's early relationship with his brother, Sayf al-Din Ghazi, was initially strained due to their power rivalry. Nevertheless, this tension was eventually resolved after a dramatic reconciliation meeting, as recorded by Ibn al-Athir.²⁵

¹⁸ Ali bin al-Hasan bin Hibah Allah bin Abd Allah bin al-Husayn ibn Asakir, *Tabyin Kadhib al-Muftari fima Nusiba ila al-Imam Abi al-Hasan al-Ash'ari* (Dimashq: Matba'ah al-Tawfiq, 1929), 163-164.

¹⁹ Ali bin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Abd al-Karim bin Abd al-Shaibani Ibn al-Athir, *Kitab al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Ilmiyyah, 2003), 8: 413.

²⁰ Muhammad Esa Prasastia dan Abdul Rofiq, "Analysis of The Causes of The Disintegration of The Government of The 'Abbāsiyyah Dynasty (1000 M-1250 M)", *Devotion: Journal of Research and Community Service* 3. 3 (2022), 198.

²¹ Ali bin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Abd al-Karim bin Abd al-Shaibani Ibn al-Athir, *Kitab al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Ilmiyyah, 2003), 8: 347.

²² Latief Oesman, *Ringkasan Sejarah Islam* (Jakarta: Widjaya, 1979), 76.

²³ Abi Ya'la Hamzah Ibn Al-Qalanisi, *Dhail Tarikh Dimasyq*. (Beirut: Matba'at al-Aba al-Yasu'iyin, 1908), 287.

²⁴ Abi Ya'la Hamzah Ibn Al-Qalanisi, *Dhail Tarikh Dimasyq*. (Beirut: Matba'at al-Aba al-Yasu'iyin, 1908), 288.

²⁵ Ali bin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Abd al-Karim bin Abd al-Shaibani Ibn al-Athir, *Al-Tarikh al-Bahir fi al-Daulah al-Atabakiyyah bi al-Mausul*, (Kaherah: Dar al-Kitab al-Hadithah, 1963), 88.

In confronting these challenges, Nur al-Din employed a range of strategies to consolidate his territories following the death of Imad al-Din. These strategies included political marriages, notably with the daughter of the ruler of Damascus, peace treaties, and, when necessary, military campaigns. Nur al-Din recognized that the Muslim ummah needed to unite under strong leadership to confront these existential threats. He began his unification efforts by solidifying his power base in Aleppo before extending his influence to other regions.²⁶ His endeavours were motivated not only by political considerations but also by a deep commitment to defending Islam as both a religion and a civilization.

However, more importantly, Nur al-Din's efforts were directed toward creating a unified religious identity by strengthening the influence of Sunni orthodoxy as the ideological foundation of the state. According to Burhan Che Daud, sectarian divisions within the Muslim community, particularly in terms of adherence to different schools of thought (*madhhab*), constituted one of the principal challenges that Nur al-Din sought to resolve as a prerequisite for building political and military strength toward a greater objective.²⁷ To achieve this aim, Burhan observes that Nur al-Din introduced reforms in his governance by relying on two key institutions: the *ulama* and education.²⁸ On one hand, al-Salabi argues that Nur al-Din recognized that political unity would not be sustainable without a solid ideological foundation. Therefore, he began involving prominent Sunni scholars in his administration and established a network of *madrasahs* throughout the territories under his control. These *madrasahs* were not merely centers of education but also served as instruments for disseminating a standardized Sunni doctrine and reinforcing loyalty to the ruler.²⁹ According to Yaacov Lev, Nur al-Din fundamentally leaned towards the Shafi'i school when he first proposed adopting Sunni doctrine as the basis for uniting the *ummah* and pursuing the cause of *jihad*.

Nevertheless, he continued to accommodate other Sunni schools of thought in his reform initiatives.³⁰ In fact, although Nur al-Din himself adhered to the Hanafi school, he was not dogmatic in his affiliation. Through this approach, he succeeded in creating a system that integrated religion and politics, strengthening his rule's legitimacy.

Religious Reform and *Ummah* Unity under Nur al-Din: A Historical Analysis

In response to the intensifying sectarian and ideological conflicts among Muslims in the medieval period, which contributed significantly to the disunity of the *ummah* during the confrontation with the First Crusade, Nur al-Din adopted a strategic approach by strengthening Sunni orthodoxy as the primary foundation for fostering Islamic unity. According to al-Salabi, Nur al-Din was regarded as an individual of firm creed, resolute in developing and fortifying his governance based

²⁶ Burhan Che Daud, Abdal-fattah El-Awaisi and Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor. "Historical and geopolitical analysis of Nūr Al-Dīn Mahmūd Zankī's Plan for liberating Bayt Al-Maqdis", *Journal of Islamicjerusalem Studies* 18. 3 (2018), 6.

²⁷ Burhan Che Daud, "Nur Al-Din and Tajdid: The Role of Scholars and Religious Institutions Towards Islamic Renewal in Twelfth Century Syria" In E-Proceeding of the 2 nd International Conference on Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization, (article, International Seminar on Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization, Kuala Lumpur, 9-10 Mac 2015), 415.

²⁸ Burhan Che Daud, "Nur Al-Din and Tajdid: The Role of Scholars and Religious Institutions Towards Islamic Renewal in Twelfth Century Syria" In E-Proceeding of the 2 nd International Conference on Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization, (article, International Seminar on Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization, Kuala Lumpur, 9-10 Mac 2015), 415.

²⁹ 'Ali Muhammad al-Salabi, *al-Dawlah al-Zankiyyah* (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'Asriyyah, 2010), 211.

³⁰ Yaacov Lev, "The jihād of Sultan Nūr al-Dīn of Syria (1146–1174): history and discourse," *Jerusalem studies in Arabic and Islam* 35 (2008), 276.

on the principles of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).³¹ He sought to counter the growing influence and missionary activities of the Shi'i Imamiyyah and Isma'iliyyah sects, which were expanding in regions surrounding Aleppo, Damascus, and Egypt, by mobilizing all available resources and capacities to establish Sunni Islam as the dominant religious orientation within the Muslim society.

Within this context, Nur al-Din viewed the Ahl al-Sunnah school, or Sunni Islam, as the principal element in constructing the framework of an ideal state. As Abdulkadir Turan has pointed out, Nur al-Din regarded Sunni *madrasahs* as vital institutions that produced knowledgeable and devout individuals capable of safeguarding the state against the ideological threats posed by the Baṭiniyyah and Shi'i movements.³² Under his rule, Islamic education flourished across various disciplines, including *tasawwuf* (Sufism), which received his full support, demonstrating Nur al-Din's commitment to cultivating a learned society imbued with the spirit of *jihad*.³³

Several key factors can be identified as the primary motivations behind Nur al-Din's support for Sunni orthodoxy. These include his Turkish ethnic background, which had embraced Sunni Islam since the tenth century; the political stability he achieved by endorsing Sunni Islam as the majority denomination within the territories he governed; and the unity of the *ummah* realized through the reinforcement of a shared religious ideology. Nur al-Din also recognized that Sunni Islam, with its moderate approach, was better positioned to unify the Muslim community compared to the Shi'i sects and the Baṭiniyyah movement, which were seen as threats to political stability and the security of Sunni Islamic regions. Furthermore, the influence of prominent Sunni scholars, particularly those affiliated with the Nizamiyyah *madrasahs* such as Imam al-Ghazali, played a significant role in consolidating Sunni orthodoxy under Nur al-Din's leadership.³⁴

Nur al-Din is seen as promoting education, personal development, and military *jihad* as integral elements within his reform initiatives, designed to address two primary challenges: the threat posed by the Franks and the Shi'i Isma'ili Fatimid faction. All these efforts were directed towards fostering a Sunni revival in Bilad al-Sham during the medieval period.³⁵ This observation is supported by Mohd Zakhiri Md Nor and Ani Munirah Mohamad, who note the rapid expansion of educational institutions under the rule of Nur al-Din Zangi, which was aimed at reviving the Sunnah and eliminating the influence of the Fatimid regime.³⁶ The measures undertaken by Nur al-Din to institutionalize the field of education represented a deliberate strategy to cultivate a generation steadfast in creed and spiritually resilient. This awareness is clearly reflected in a record by Abu Shamah, which recounts that when Majid al-Din Ibn al-Dayah addressed the jurists of Aleppo on behalf of Nur al-Din, he stated: "We have established these educational institutions

³¹ 'Ali Muhammad al-Salabi, *al-Dawlah al-Zankiyyah* (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'Asriyyah, 2010), 211.

³² Abdulkadir Turan. "Nüreddin Mahmud Zengî Devri'nde (541-569/1146-1174) İlmiye Sinifi," *Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies* 18. 3 (2018), 37.

³³ Yaacov Lev, "The jihād of Sultan Nūr al-Dīn of Syria (1146–1174): history and discourse," *Jerusalem studies in Arabic and Islam* 35 (2008), 275.

³⁴ Majid Irsan Kailani, *Kebangkitan Generasi Salahuddin dan Kembalinya Jerusalem ke Pangkuan Islam*, terj. Abdullah Abbas. (Selangor: Thinker's Library SDN. BHD., 2000), 179.

³⁵ Burhan Che Daud, "Nur Al-Din and Tajdid: The Role of Scholars and Religious Institutions Towards Islamic Renewal in Twelfth Century Syria" In E-Proceeding of the 2nd International Conference on Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization, (article, International Seminar on Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization, Kuala Lumpur, 9-10 March 2015), 414.

³⁶ Mohd Zakhiri Md Nor and Ani Munirah Mohamad. "Waqf in Medieval Islam: An Overview." *Russian Law Journal* 11. 4 (2023), 42.

solely to disseminate knowledge, eradicate innovations (*bid'ah*) from this land, and exalt His religion.”³⁷

Nur al-Din recognized that knowledge played a role as vital as military strength in confronting both the Shi'i factions, viewed as internal adversaries, and the Crusader forces as external threats. Consequently, he pursued the strengthening of Sunni orthodoxy through educational reform and promoted the integration of the Muslim *ummah* to counter the spread of Shi'i teachings.³⁸ Waqar Un and Muhammad Naeem affirm that the Islamic rule of the medieval period witnessed a golden age of education, marked by the active involvement of scholars in research and innovation.³⁹ Furthermore, Imad al-Din Khalil argues that the educational reforms implemented by Nur al-Din were not merely intellectual developments but were a strategic effort to instill authentic conviction through broad cultural and educational activities. These initiatives aimed to bridge thought and practice while fostering a devout society aligned with Islamic principles.⁴⁰ Christopher L. Izant contends that Nur al-Din's religious zeal employed rhetorical strategy as an ideological foundation in his campaign to unite Muslims and resist the Crusaders.⁴¹ According to Izuddin Syidada, during Nur al-Din's rule, Aleppo hosted 54 *madrasahs* representing the four Sunni schools of law (*madhhabs*) and 31 Sufi *khanqahs*, illustrating the significance and prominence of education and scholarship in Nur al-Din's governance, which sought to build a strong and unified Muslim society.⁴²

Establishing Connection with *Ulama*: A Framework for the Unification of the *Ummah*

One of the earliest initiatives undertaken by Nur al-Din to secure support for his rule and reform agenda was to establish close relations with the *ulama*. Within the governance structure of a state or kingdom, the *ulama* played a critical role as a source of religious and intellectual legitimacy in Islamic society.⁴³ Their esteemed position among all segments of the community as inheritors of knowledge and successors to the mission of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) made it incumbent upon rulers to maintain and honour their status.⁴⁴ Accordingly, fostering a close relationship with the *ulama* enabled Nur al-Din not only to strengthen his political standing but also to build trust and garner support from the populace, as the *ulama* were regarded as respected moral and spiritual leaders.

Moreover, early awareness of the threat posed by the Franks had already been raised by several scholars, including Abu Sa'd al-Harawi and al-Sulami. The publication of *Kitab al-Jihad* by al-Sulami exemplified the popularization of *jihad* advocacy in Damascus and the greater al-Sham region. This was a reaction by religious scholars to the widespread apathy and lack of motivation

³⁷ Shihab al-Din 'Abd al-Rahman bin Isma'il bin Ibrahim. *Kitab al-Rawdatayn fi Akhbar al-Dawlatayn al-Nuriyyah wa al-Salihyyah* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Ilmiyyah, 2003), 1:117.

³⁸ Abd al-Majid Abu al-Fatah, *al-Tarikh al-Siyasi wa al-Fikri li al-Madhhab al-Sunni* (Dar al-Wafa Lil Taba'ah wa al-Nashru wa al-Tauzi', 1988), 213

³⁹ Waqar Un Niza Faizi and Muhammad Naeem Butt, "The Origins of Islamic Educational Reforms: A Qualitative Study about Network of Pakistani Ulema in Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries", *Al-Idah* 38.2 (2020), 85.

⁴⁰ Imad al-Din Khalil, *Nur al-Din Mahmud al-Rajul wa al-Tajribah* (Beirut: al-Dar al-Qalam, 1980), 130.

⁴¹ Christopher L. Izant, "The Crusades and Jihad: Theological Justifications for Warfare in the Western and Islamic Just War Traditions." (Doctoral Thesis, Boston College. College of Arts and Sciences, 2010), 45.

⁴² Abd al-Majid Abu al-Fatah, *al-Tarikh al-Siyasi wa al-Fikri li al-Madhhab al-Sunni* (Dar al-Wafa Lil Taba'ah wa al-Nashru wa al-Tauzi', 1988), 214.

⁴³ Joan E. Gilbert, "Institutionalization of Muslim scholarship and professionalization of the ulama in Medieval Damascus." *Studia Islamica* 52 (1980), 109.

⁴⁴ Abdul Muid, "The Ulama role in the institution of Islamic religious education perspective." *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)* 6. 11 (2017), 1648.

among both rulers and the general public to rise and resist the invading Crusader forces.⁴⁵ Al-Sulami himself criticized the weakness of Muslim unity at the time, identifying it as a key factor that enabled the Franks to dominate Bilad al-Sham.⁴⁶ Similarly, Ibn 'Asakir described several *ulama* who, in the early stages of their involvement in the *jihad* movement, were “deeply committed to promoting and defending Sunni orthodoxy” (*muta'aṣṣib fi al-sunna*), which he regarded as high praise rather than derogation.⁴⁷ These scholars were ardent advocates of *jihad* among the populace, aiming to ensure the triumph of Sunni Islam against its numerous adversaries particularly external enemies (the Crusader forces) and internal opponents (the Shi'i) during that period.⁴⁸

Nur al-Din Mahmud Zangi's Support for the Sunni Ulama

Nur al-Din's early initiative to secure support for his rule involved fostering close relations with the *ulama*. The *ulama* played a vital role in providing both religious and intellectual legitimacy, while also serving as respected moral leaders within the Islamic community. This relationship not only strengthened Nur al-Din's political position but also secured the trust and support of the populace. According to Hillenbrand, a significant aspect of Nur al-Din's governance was his support for religious scholars (*ulama*) in al-Sham, some of whom even participated directly in his military operations.⁴⁹ The importance of the *ulama*'s role was further reflected in Nur al-Din's practice of frequently inviting them for discussions, offering them great respect, and treating them with profound humility.

Al-Salabi notes that the institution of the *ulama* not only functioned as educators and disseminators of knowledge but also advised, supervised, and helped align governmental policies with *shari'ah* principles. Their support for Nur al-Din's policies, such as the establishment of *madrasahs* and religious institutions, propelled educational development and cultivated a generation that was both knowledgeable and inspired by the spirit of *jihad*. This not only revived the intellectual tradition but also instilled a sense of struggle grounded in faith within the society.⁵⁰ This new generation served not only as defenders of Sunni doctrine but also as a formidable force against external threats, including the Crusader armies. The reform efforts, strengthened by the support of the *ulama*, created an era of Sunni revival and consolidation, overcoming internal divisions and reinforcing both the spirit of *jihad* and the unity of the Muslim *ummah* in the face of external and internal threats.⁵¹

Nur al-Din's personal adherence to the Hanafi school, marked by deep commitment yet free of fanaticism, exemplified an inclusive model of leadership. He also capitalized on the success of the Nizamiyyah *madrasah* network spread across Bilad al-Sham as a means of educational reform under his rule. The founding motives of the Nizamiyyah *madrasahs* to defend Sunni orthodoxy, supply the state with competent civil servants, and promote the welfare and unity of the Muslim

⁴⁵ Suleiman A. Mourad dan James E. Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in The Crusader Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 45.

⁴⁶ Suleiman A. Mourad dan James E. Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in The Crusader Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 45.

⁴⁷ Suleiman A. Mourad dan James E. Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in The Crusader Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 45.

⁴⁸ Suleiman A. Mourad dan James E. Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in The Crusader Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 45.

⁴⁹ Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades Islamic Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 119-122.

⁵⁰ Ali Muhammad al-Salabi, *al-Dawlah al-Zankiyyah* (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'Asriyyah, 2010), 238.

⁵¹ Imad al-Din Khalil, *Nur al-Din Mahmud al-Rajul wa al-Tajribah* (Beirut: al-Dar al-Qalam, 1980), 139.

ummah aligned with the challenges Nur al-Din faced during his reign.⁵² Consequently, Nur al-Din integrated a significant number of *ulama* educated in the Nizamiyyah *madrasahs* as government officials and educators under his administration. Notable figures included al-Qadi Kamal al-Din al-Shahrazuri, who served as a minister, al-Qadi Sharaf al-Din Abu' Asrun and 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani, who both taught in various educational institutions in Damascus and served as chroniclers for Nur al-Din.⁵³ According to Abdulkadir Turan, Nur al-Din sought to fully leverage the institution of the *ulama* by fostering close relations with them as part of his broader reform strategy.⁵⁴

Nur al-Din's approach also encouraged the migration of several scholars to his territories, particularly Aleppo and Damascus. Ibn al-Athir notes that the flourishing intellectual activities under Nur al-Din's reign attracted scholars who wished to reside under his leadership.⁵⁵ Abd al-Majid observes that many *ulama* migrated specifically to participate in Nur al-Din's efforts to fortify Sunni orthodoxy and combat the threats posed by the Franks.⁵⁶ Abu Shamah records that prior to Nur al-Din's rule, the regions of al-Sham were largely devoid of scholarly activity and intellectual life; however, under his leadership, jurists and Sufi scholars gathered in numerous scholarly assemblies, with many choosing to reside permanently within his domains.⁵⁷ Consequently, intellectual pursuits flourished under Nur al-Din's governance, supported by significant allocations of funding and the development of infrastructure, much of which was facilitated through the *waqf* (endowment) system he established.

Several scholars and Sufi leaders maintained close relationships with Nur al-Din, including Abu al-Najib al-Suhrawardi (d. 563 AH),⁵⁸ Shaykh Arsalan al-Dimashqi (m. 541 H),⁵⁹ Shaykh 'Umar

⁵² Asyraf Isyraqi Jamil, "Pemikiran Pentadbiran Pendidikan Nizam al-Mulk: Kajian Terhadap Madrasah Nizāmiyyah" (Doctoral Thesis, Universiti Malaya, 2014), 189-198.

⁵³ Abd al-Majid Abu al-Fatah, *al-Tarikh al-Siyasi wa al-Fikri li al-Madhab al-Sunni*, (Dar al-Wafa Lil Taba'ah wa al-Nashru wa al-Tauzi', 1988), 222.

⁵⁴ Abdulkadir Turan. "Nûreddin Mahmud Zengî Devri'nde (541-569/1146-1174) İlmiye Sinifi." *Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies* 18. 3 (2018), 36.

⁵⁵ Ali bin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Abd al-Karim bin 'Abd al-Shaibani Ibn al-Athir, *Al-Tarikh al-Bahir fi al-Daulah al-Atabakiyyah bi al-Mausul*, 171-172.

⁵⁶ Abd al-Majid Abu al-Fatah, *al-Tarikh al-Siyasi wa al-Fikri li al-Madhab al-Sunni*, (Dar al-Wafa Lil Taba'ah wa al-Nashru wa al-Tauzi', 1988), 223.

⁵⁷ Shihab al-Din Abd al-Rahman bin Ismail bin Ibrahim. *Kitab al-Rawdatayn fi Akhbar al-Dawlatayn al-Nuriyyah wa al-Salihiyyah*. (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Ilmiyyah, 2003), 1: 107-108.

⁵⁸ Abu al-Najib al-Suhrawardi was a scholar and Sufi from Baghdad, born in Suhraward around 490 AH. He studied at the Nizamiyyah Madrasah in Baghdad under the guidance of teachers such as Shaykh As'ad al-Miyahni and adhered to the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence. Abu al-Najib passed away in 563 AH. In 558 AH/1163 CE, he visited Damascus on his way to Jerusalem but was prevented from continuing due to conflicts with the Crusader forces. In Damascus, he was warmly received by Nur al-Din and granted permission to teach and engage in religious outreach (*da'wah*). Although it is not known whether Nur al-Din personally attended his gatherings, the welcome and support extended to him reflected Nur al-Din's respect for Sufi scholars, including those from outside the region of al-Sham. Nur al-Din himself is said to have had a strong inclination towards *tasawwuf* and to have lived a life resembling that of a Sufi. Burhan Che Daud, "Nur Al-Din and Tajdid: The Role of Scholars and Religious Institutions Towards Islamic Renewal in Twelfth Century Syria", In E-Proceeding of the 2 nd International Conference on Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization, (article, International Conference on Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization, Kuala Lumpur, 9-10 Mac 2015, 419.

⁵⁹ Shaykh Arsalan ibn Ya'qub al-Ja'bari al-Dimashqi (also known as Shaykh Ruslan) was a prominent Sufi scholar in Damascus who played a significant role in the spiritual development of Nur al-Din Zanki. He was regarded as a *wali* (saint) and advanced a mystical approach to Sufism in Damascus. Nur al-Din established a *khanaqah* (spiritual center) for him outside the walls of Damascus. Shaykh Arsalan was also known as a leader of the popular resistance movement against the Crusader forces. Although he did not participate directly in military activities, he established a guard post at his *zawiyah* in the eastern part of Damascus, which became a center for *dhikr* (remembrance of God)

al-Malla' (m. 570 H),⁶⁰ Shaykh Burhan al-Din Abu al-Hasan Ali bin Muhammad al-Balkhi (m. 548 H),⁶¹ Shaykh Sharaf al-Din bin Abi Asrun (m. 585 H),⁶² Shaykh Qutb al-Din Mas'ud al-Naysaburi (m. 578 H),⁶³ Shaykh Imad al-Din al-Asfahani (m. 597 M)⁶⁴ and several other prominent Sunni scholars.

The presence of scholars in Nur al-Din Zangi's administration was not merely to secure political legitimacy but also to harness their expertise in managing the educational institutions he had established. The *madrasahs* founded under his rule functioned not only as centers of knowledge but also as platforms for disseminating authentic Islamic teachings and reinforcing religious understanding among the general populace and government officials. Some scholars, such as Imad al-Din al-Asfahani, also played active roles in the judicial and administrative systems, contributing to the reinforcement of justice, oversight of transparency, and the prevention of corruption among state officials.⁶⁵

and *jihad* activities. Eric Geoffroy, *Le soufisme dans la culture islamique : aperçu historique*, (FUOC Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, t.t.), 33-34.

⁶⁰ Abu Hafs Mu'in al-Din Umar ibn Mahmud ibn Khidr al-Irbili, better known as Umar al-Malla', was a distinguished Sufi scholar and jurist from Mosul. He authored a book entitled *al-Kitab al-Jami' li Sirah Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz* (*The Comprehensive Book on the Life of Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz*), which he dedicated to Nur al-Din. In the introduction to the book, he praised Nur al-Din for his piety and love of knowledge. Nur al-Din maintained a special relationship with Umar al-Malla'. After constructing the *Jami' al-Nuri Mosque* in Mosul with an endowment of 60,000 dinars, Nur al-Din entrusted the management of the mosque to Umar al-Malla'. He also decreed that all administrative decisions within his office in Mosul should first be referred to Umar al-Malla', reflecting Nur al-Din's great trust in him. Imad al-Din Abi al-Fida Ismail Ibn Umar bin Kathir, *al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah*, ed. Abdullah bin Abd al-Muhin al-Turki (Giza: Dar Hija, 1998), 16: 489.

⁶¹ Shaykh Burhan al-Din Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Muhammad al-Balkhi was a Hanafi scholar who taught at the *Madrasah al-Sadriyyah* in Damascus. Nur al-Din later invited him to Aleppo to lead the *Madrasah al-Hallawiyah* after its construction was completed. Al-Balkhi played a significant role in abolishing the Shi'i version of the *adhan* in Aleppo. He firmly instructed a jurist to call the *adhan* in accordance with *shari'ah* and even threatened to punish anyone who refused to comply. Beginning in 543 AH/1148 CE, Nur al-Din had already ordered the Shi'i community in Aleppo to cease the practice of including "Hayya 'ala Khair al-'Amal" in the *adhan* and prohibited the disparagement of the Prophet's Companions. These measures placed considerable pressure on adherents of the Isma'ili Shi'i sect. 'Ali Muhammad al-Salabi, *al-Dawlah al-Zankiyyah*. (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'Asriyyah, 2010), 243.

⁶² In 550 AH, Nur al-Din appointed Shaykh Imam Sharaf al-Din ibn Abi Asrun to oversee the *Madrasah al-Asruniyyah* in Aleppo. He was a leading jurist of his time. Nur al-Din also established several additional *madrasahs* for him in Manbij, Hama, Homs, Baalbek, and Damascus, granting him full authority to appoint instructors. Shams al-Din Muhammad bin Ahmad bin 'Uthman Al-Dhahabi, *Siyar 'Alam al-Nubala'*. (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risalah, 1985), 21: 126-127.

⁶³ In 544 AH, Nur al-Din Zangi established the *Madrasah al-Nafariyyah* in Aleppo for the instruction of the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence. He invited Shaykh Qutb al-Din Mas'ud al-Naysaburi to serve as the principal instructor. Shaykh Qutb al-Din (born 505 AH) had previously taught at the *Nizamiyyah Madrasah* in Nishapur and was renowned as a distinguished debater. His educational journey began in Baghdad (538 AH), after which he taught in Damascus before moving to Aleppo at the invitation of Nur al-Din. He also taught in Hamadan before returning to Damascus, where he held a teaching position at the *Madrasah al-Ghazaliyyah*. Shams al-Din Muhammad bin Ahmad bin 'Uthman Al-Dhahabi, *Siyar 'Alam al-Nubala'*. (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risalah, 1985), 21: 107-109.

⁶⁴ In 562 AH, Imad al-Din al-Asfahani moved to Damascus to serve in the government at the invitation of Kamal al-Din al-Shahrazuri, the judge (*qadi*) under Nur al-Din. He served as a scribe for Nur al-Din before being dispatched as an envoy to Caliph al-Mustanjid and was later appointed to teach at the *Madrasah al-Amadiyyah* in 567 AH. Nur al-Din subsequently granted him a position within the government administration. However, following Nur al-Din's death, his official standing declined. He later travelled to Mosul, fell ill, and returned to Aleppo, where he arrived during Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi's siege of the city in 570 AH. Shams al-Din Muhammad bin Ahmad bin 'Uthman Al-Dhahabi, *Siyar 'Alam al-Nubala'*. (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risalah, 1985), 21: 345-348.

⁶⁵ Abdulkadir Turan. "Nureddin Mahmud Zengi Devri'nde (541-569/1146-1174) İlmiye Sinifi." *Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies* 18. 3 (2018), 37.

Nur al-Din also relied on scholars as moral guides and as unifiers of the medieval Islamic society. He leveraged their influence to resolve internal conflicts and strengthen communal unity. According to the account of Ibn al-Athir, the assemblies convened by Nur al-Din were likened to the gatherings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). He would invite distinguished scholars and accord them great respect, including standing to greet them, gazing upon them with reverence, and inviting them to sit beside him.⁶⁶ Nur al-Din's humility and deference clearly reflected his profound appreciation for knowledge and the *ulama*. In facing political challenges, including external threats and internal divisions within the Muslim community, the *ulama* served as authoritative peacemakers. They were respected by all factions and acted as impartial mediators in resolving disputes.

This approach reflected Nur al-Din's ascetic and humble character; a quality rarely found among Muslim rulers of his era. His commitment to religious development was evident in the construction of mosques, *khanqahs*, and *ribats*, underscoring his earnest involvement of scholars and Sufi leaders in his *jihad* efforts against the Crusader threat. Nur al-Din's inclusive vision for uniting the Muslims of Syria was further strengthened by placing scholars and Sufi figures at the forefront of his reform (*tajdid*) and *jihad* initiatives.⁶⁷ From one perspective, Nur al-Din's close relationship with the *ulama* was not merely a political strategy but also reflected his deep religious character and his genuine concern for building a cohesive and unified Islamic society.

Sunni Institutional Strategy: An Analysis for Its Implementation during Nur al-Din

Under Nur al-Din's rule, Sunni-based *madrasahs* experienced rapid development. Nur al-Din invited scholars from various parts of the Islamic world to serve as instructors in the *madrasahs* established across his territories, including Aleppo, Damascus, Manbij, Hama, Homs, and Ba'albek. Furthermore, the educational institutions in each city possessed distinctive characteristics tailored to the local backgrounds and prevailing circumstances. His extensive efforts to expand these institutions reflected his deep commitment to education and its role in strengthening the intellectual and spiritual foundations of the Muslim community during his era.

Aleppo, which had served as Nur al-Din's initial seat of power, had long been a battleground for ideological competition since the tenth century, with strong Shi'i influence taking root during the reign of Sayf al-Dawlah al-Hamdani (944–967 CE). During that period, the identity of the Imamiyyah Shi'ah was reinforced through modifications to the *adhan* and prominent religious symbols. This phenomenon persisted under the Mirdasid and Uqaylid dynasties in the eleventh century, which allowed for the expansion of Shi'i influence.⁶⁸ The height of this influence occurred during the reign of Ridwan ibn Tutush, who supported Isma'ili Shi'i beliefs to maintain his political position against rival factions. During the rule of Imad al-Din, there was no particular focus on, or threat posed to the Shi'i community in Aleppo. According to Abdulkadir Turan, by the time Nur al-Din assumed power, he had inherited a city long shaped by Shi'i thought and required a comprehensive strategy to strengthen Sunni orthodoxy.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ali bin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Abd al-Karim bin Abd al-Shaibani Ibn al-Athir, *Al-Tarikh al-Bahir fi al-Dawlah al-Atabakiyyah bi al-Mausul* (Kaherah: Dar al-Kitab al-Hadithah, 1963), 171-173.

⁶⁷ Ali bin al-Hasan bin Hibah Allah bin Abd Allah bin al-Husayn ibn 'Asakir, *Tarikh Madinat Dimashq* (Dar al-Fikr, 1995), 57: 118-124.

⁶⁸ Abd al-Majid Abu al-Fatah, *al-Tarikh al-Siyasi wa al-Fikri li al-Madhab al-Sunni*, (Dar al-Wafā Lil Tabā'ah wa al-Nashru wa al-Tauzi', 1988), 207.

⁶⁹ Abdulkadir Turan. "Nüreddin Mahmud Zengî Devri'nde (541-569/1146-1174) İlmiye Sinifi." *Journal of Islamicjerusalem Studies* 18. 3 (2018), 38.

In response to Shi'i dominance, Nur al-Din implemented a multifaceted approach encompassing educational, religious, social, and symbolic dimensions. One of his key initiatives was the establishment of educational institutions as the backbone for disseminating Sunni ideology. He repurposed several existing buildings, including churches, into Sunni *madrasahs* and founded four principal *madrasahs* during the first decade of his rule: *Madrasah al-Hallawiyah* (Hanafi, 1148 CE), *Madrasah al-Nafariyyah* (Shafi'i, 1149 CE), *Madrasah al-Asruniyyah* (Shafi'i), and *Madrasah al-Shu'aybiyyah* (Shafi'i).⁷⁰ By 1169 CE, the number of *madrasahs* in Aleppo had increased to eight, mainly due to contributions from his officials. Although Nur al-Din adhered to the Hanafi school, he prioritized the Shafi'i school, which was more dominant in the Sham region. To reinforce this initiative, he recruited scholars who had graduated from the renowned Nizamiyyah *madrasahs*, known for their experience in confronting Shi'i influence. He established a network of scholars capable of countering Shi'i doctrines through scholarly engagement.⁷¹ Among these scholars was Shaykh Qutb al-Din, who taught at the *Madrasah al-Nafariyyah al-Nuriyyah* upon Nur al-Din's invitation.⁷² Shaykh Sharaf al-Din ibn Asrun led the *Madrasah al-Asruniyyah* in Aleppo⁷³ and was entrusted by Nur al-Din to oversee the network of *Madrasahs al-Asruniyyah* in other cities, including Damascus, Hama, Manbij, and Ba'albek.⁷⁴

In addition, Nur al-Din emphasized the unification of the Sunni *madhhabs* by establishing spaces known as *zawiyahs* for the Maliki and Hanbali schools within the Great Mosque (*Jami'*) of Aleppo, ensuring that all Sunni denominations were granted space without conflict. Beyond education, he also advanced Sufi and medical institutions by establishing three *khanqaqs* (two for men and one for women), which served as centers for Sunni Sufi activities.⁷⁵ These initiatives not only strengthened Sunni spirituality and intellectualism but also expanded social services grounded in Islamic values. On another front, Nur al-Din employed symbolic architecture as a political and religious tool. The construction of a *qastal* (water reservoir) near the Mosque of Umar in 1150 CE symbolized victory over the Crusader forces and conveyed a rejection of Shi'i influence at this historically significant site.⁷⁶ According to Julian Raby, the *qastal* also communicated the message of unity between *jihad* and the Sunni identity that his administration sought to uphold.⁷⁷

Nevertheless, Nur al-Din's reform agenda in Aleppo also elicited direct responses from the Shi'i community, which demanded the restoration of the religious freedoms they had previously enjoyed. In 554 AH/1159 CE, when Nur al-Din became seriously ill, the Shi'i adherents seized the opportunity to strengthen their position. Nasrah al-Din Amir Amiran, Nur al-Din's brother,

⁷⁰ Muhammad bin Ali bin Ibrahim bin Shaddad, *al-A'alaq al-Khatirah fi Zikr Umara' al-Sham wa al-Jazirah*, ed. Yahya Zakariya Abbarah (Damsyik: Manshurat wazarat al-Thaqafah, 1991), 1: 257.

⁷¹ Abd al-Majid Abu al-Fatah, *al-Tarikh al-Siyasi wa al-Fikri li al-Madhhab al-Sunni*, (Dar al-Wafā Lil Taba'ah wa al-Nashru wa al-Tauzi', 1988), 211.

⁷² Abd al-Majid Abu al-Fatah, *al-Tarikh al-Siyasi wa al-Fikri li al-Madhhab al-Sunni*, (Dar al-Wafā Lil Taba'ah wa al-Nashru wa al-Tauzi', 1988), 209.

⁷³ Abu Zar Sibṭ Ibn al-Ajami, Ahmad bin Ibrahim bin Muhammad bin Khalil, *Kunuz al-Zahab fi Tarikh Halab* (Halab: Dar al-Qalam, 1996), 1: 278.

⁷⁴ Abu Zar Sibṭ Ibn al-Ajami, Ahmad bin Ibrahim bin Muhammad bin Khalil, *Kunuz al-Zahab fi Tarikh Halab* (Halab: Dar al-Qalam, 1996), 1: 278.

⁷⁵ Hisam Muhammad, "Masjid Bani Umayyah al-Kabir fi Halab Shahid 'ala al-'usur wa hamalat tadmīr lam tanqat' i min al-Maghul hatta al-'Asad", laman sesawang *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, diakses pada 29 November 2024, <https://www.alquds.co.uk/%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AC%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9/>.

⁷⁶ Yasser Tabbā, "The Architectural Patronage of Nūr al-Dīn," (Doctoral Thesis, New York University, 1982), 265.

⁷⁷ Julian Raby. "Nur Al-Din, the Qastal al-Shu'aybiyya, and the "Classical Revival"." *Muqarnas Online* 21. 1 (2004), 295-296.

attempted to seize power but was opposed by Nur al-Din's loyal officials. The Shi'a then pledged their support to Nasrah al-Din on the condition that he restore their religious freedoms. In protest, they also damaged several Sunni *madrasahs*. However, once Nur al-Din recovered and reasserted his policies through his judge (*qadi*), Abu al-Fadl Muhammad ibn Hibat Allah, the Shi'i rebellion was successfully suppressed.⁷⁸

Nur al-Din's approach to consolidating Sunni orthodoxy in Aleppo proved effective. Through a network of *madrasahs* promoting Sunni teachings, the unification of various Sunni schools, the strategic use of symbolic architecture for political and religious purposes, and the integration of education, spirituality, and social services, he successfully transformed Aleppo's religious landscape. This holistic strategy not only diminished Shi'i influence but also established a solid foundation for the unification of Muslims under the Sunni banner, providing the ideological and social strength necessary for the impending Crusader conflicts.

After successfully unifying Damascus in 1154 CE, Nur al-Din continued his vision of reinforcing Sunni orthodoxy, as he had implemented in Aleppo.⁷⁹ Damascus's strategic position, adjacent to the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, made it not only a military hub but also a key site for the development of Islamic education. Nur al-Din recognized that ideological strength was as critical as military power; thus, he placed significant emphasis on educational institutions while securing the support of local *ulama* as agents for disseminating authentic Sunni doctrines.⁸⁰ Prior to Nur al-Din's rule, Damascus had 11 *madrasahs*, comprising five Hanafi, four Shafi'i, and two Hanbali schools, most of which had been established during the Burid dynasty (1120–1145 CE).⁸¹ However, the educational system at that time had not yet adopted the systematic model exemplified by the Nizamiyyah *madrasah* in Baghdad. Most instruction occurred in mosques and *zawiyahs* without a structured formal curriculum. This deficiency provided Nur al-Din with the opportunity to reform and enhance the educational system in Damascus.

In his efforts to strengthen Sunni education, Nur al-Din established six principal *madrasahs*. Among them was *Madrasah al-Kallasah* (1160 CE), built near the Umayyad Mosque and functioning as a center for both learning and worship.⁸² *Madrasah al-Imadiyyah* was explicitly founded for Imad al-Din al-Isfahani and was equipped with a library and student dormitories.⁸³ Meanwhile, *Madrasah al-Nuriyyah al-Kubra* (1171–1172 CE), affiliated with the Hanafi school, became one of the most magnificent educational buildings, located near the al-Khayyat market.⁸⁴ In addition, he established three smaller *madrasahs*: *Madrasah al-Asruniyyah*, *Madrasah al-Nuriyyah al-Salahiyyah*, and *Madrasah al-Nuriyyah al-Sughra*. According to research conducted by Yasser Tabba, none of these *madrasahs* have survived intact, and their exact dates of

⁷⁸ Kamal al-Din Abi Qasim Umar bin Ahmad bin Abd Allah Ibn al-Adim, *Zubdah al-Halab min Tarikh Halab* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutubb al-Ilmiyyah, 1996), 340-341.

⁷⁹ Ali Muhammad Ash-Shallabi, *Bangkit dan Runtuhnya Daulah Zankiyah*, terj. Masturi Irfham dan Muhammad Aniq Imam. Jakarta Timur: Pustaka Al-Kautsar, 2020. 336.

⁸⁰ Abd al-Majid Abu al-Fatah, *al-Tarikh al-Siyasi wa al-Fikri li al-Madhab al-Sunni*, (Dar al-Wafa Lil Taba'ah wa al-Nashru wa al-Tauzi', 1988), 213.

⁸¹ Yasser Tabbaa, "The Architectural Patronage of Nūr al-Dīn," (Doctoral Thesis, New York University, 1982), 184-185.

⁸² Abd al-Qadir al-Nu'aymi al-Damshqi, *al-Daris fi Tarikh al-Madaris*, ed. Amar Muhammad al-Nahar (Damsyik: Wuzarat al-Thaqafah, 2013), 91.

⁸³ Ibn Shaddad Muhammad bin Ali bin Ibrahim, *al-A'laq al-Khatirah fi Dhikr Umara' al-Sham wa al-Jazirah: Tarikh Madinat Dimashq*. (Damsyik: al-M'ahad al-Firni li al-Dirasat al-'Arbiyyah, 1956), 237-238.

⁸⁴ Ibn Shaddad Muhammad bin Ali bin Ibrahim, *al-A'laq al-Khatirah fi Dhikr Umara' al-Sham wa al-Jazirah: Tarikh Madinat Dimashq*. (Damsyik: al-M'ahad al-Firni li al-Dirasat al-'Arbiyyah, 1956), 203.

construction remain uncertain, though estimates place their founding between 1154 and 1174 CE.⁸⁵ Nur al-Din's final educational project was *Madrasah al-Adiliyyah al-Kubra*, initiated in 1172 CE and completed in 1223 CE, designed with reference to the architecture of al-Nuriyyah.⁸⁶

The contributions of Nur al-Din's senior officials further enriched the educational landscape of Damascus. Among these were *Madrasah Altish al-Duqaqi*, built in 1150 CE, and two *madrasahs* founded by the renowned commander Asad al-Din Shirkuh: *al-Asadiyyah al-Juwaniyyah* and *al-Baraniyyah*.⁸⁷ Additionally, *Madrasah al-Rayhaniyyah*, established by Khwaja Rayhan in 1170 CE, further expanded the rapidly growing network of educational institutions.⁸⁸ As a result, by 1183 CE, the number of *madrasahs* in Damascus had increased to twenty. The city emerged as a prominent intellectual center, attracting scholars from across the Islamic world. The design of these educational institutions also became more systematic and of higher quality, providing employment opportunities for scholars and teachers and producing a generation of skilled intellectuals. This educational expansion successfully transformed Damascus into not only a vital center of Sunni learning but also a gathering place for renowned scholars and international intellectuals. Ibn Jubayr, in his *Rihlah Ibn Jubayr*, recorded that the institutions or *madrasahs* established by Nur al-Din were among the finest in terms of infrastructure. The design of these institutions resembled unique and elegant palaces, particularly *Madrasah al-Nuriyyah al-Kubra*, which he described during his visit in 580 AH/1199 CE.⁸⁹

In addition to concentrating the development of *madrasahs* in major cities such as Aleppo and Damascus, Nur al-Din also extended the educational network to smaller towns within his realm. This approach reflected his vision of disseminating Sunni influence broadly, not limited to administrative centers. He established Shafi'i *madrasahs* for Qadi Ibn Asrun in towns such as Baalbek, Hama, Homs, and Manbij, as previously noted. Historical sources also mention the possible existence of *madrasahs* in al-Rahbah and Harran, two areas known as centers for the development of the Hanbali school, further demonstrating efforts to expand education across various Sunni *madhhabs*.⁹⁰

Nevertheless, the construction of *madrasahs* in specific locations has generated controversy and debate among historians. In Raqqa and Edessa, Elisseeff claimed that Nur al-Din had established *madrasahs*.⁹¹ However, the records of Ibn Shaddad, a primary historical source on the era of Nur al-Din, do not corroborate this assertion.⁹² In Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, the inscription on the *madrasah* building dates to 1199 CE, 25 years after Nur al-Din's death, thereby ruling out the possibility that

⁸⁵ Yasser Tabbaa, "The Architectural Patronage of Nūr al-Dīn," (Doctoral Thesis, New York University, 1982), 188-189.

⁸⁶ Abd al-Qadir al-Nu'aymi al-Damshqi, *al-Daris fi Tarikh al-Madaris*, ed. Amar Muhammad al-Nahar (Damsyik: Wuzarat al-Thaqafah, 2013), 79-80.

⁸⁷ Ibn Shaddad Muhammad bin Ali bin Ibrahim, *al-A'laq al-Khatirah fi Dhikr Umara' al-Sham wa al-Jazirah: Tarikh Madinat Dimashq*. (Damsyik: al-M'ahad al-Firni li al-Dirasat al-'Arbiyyah, 1956), 262-263.

⁸⁸ Ibn Shaddad Muhammad bin Ali bin Ibrahim, *al-A'laq al-Khatirah fi Dhikr Umara' al-Sham wa al-Jazirah: Tarikh Madinat Dimashq*. (Damsyik: al-M'ahad al-Firni li al-Dirasat al-'Arbiyyah, 1956), 209.

⁸⁹ Abu al-Husayn Muhammad bin Ahmad bin Jubayr, *Rihlah Ibn Jubayr*, (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1984), 231-232.

⁹⁰ Abu al-Falah Abd al-Hay bin Ahmad bin Muhammad al-Akari al-Hanbali, *Shadharat al-Dhahab fi Akhbar man Dhahab*, ed. Mahmud al-Arnaut, (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir, 1986), 6:392.

⁹¹ Nikita Elisséeff, "Les monuments de Nur ad-Din: Inventaire, notes archéologiques et bibliographiques," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 13 (1949-51), 38.

⁹² Muhammad bin Ali bin Ibrahim bin Shaddad, *al-A'laq al-Khatirah fi Zikr Umara' al-Sham wa al-Jazirah*, ed. Yahya Zakariya Abbarah. Damsyik: Manshurat wazarat al-Thaqafah, 1991), 3:71.

he was responsible for its construction. Meanwhile, there is also a possibility of *madrasah* development in Sinjar and Mosul.⁹³

In the context of Mosul, during his visit in 1171 CE, Nur al-Din ordered the construction of the Great Mosque (*Masjid Jami'*), which took three years to complete. Although there is academic debate regarding the existence of a separate *madrasah* within the mosque complex, most historians agree that educational activities were more likely conducted within the mosque's spaces, such as in the *zawiyah*. The absence of physical evidence or clear documentation prevents confirmation of a dedicated *madrasah* in Mosul during Nur al-Din's era.⁹⁴ Most of the *madrasahs* established under his administration adopted a curriculum similar to that introduced in the Nizamiyyah *madrasahs*, which centered on religious sciences such as Quranic studies (recitation, memorization, and writing), *kalam* (theology), *fiqh* (jurisprudence including *mu'amalat* and legal rulings), Arabic literature, the Prophet's *sirah* (biography), and mathematics (*hisab*). Mahmud Yunus also acknowledged this, noting that the subjects taught at the Nizamiyyah *madrasah* focused primarily on religious studies, particularly *shari'ah*, since most of the appointed instructors were Sunni jurists.⁹⁵

Additionally, Nur al-Din established a dedicated institution for the study of Hadith known as *Dar al-Hadith al-Nuriyyah*. This was, in fact, the first such institution in Islamic history and expanded significantly after Nur al-Din's era. According to Hasan al-Sayed, the purpose of *Dar al-Hadith* was not only to support and disseminate the Sunnah but also to actively promote enjoining good and forbidding evil, provide guidance and counsel to the Muslim community, counter their enemies, and foster noble morals within society.⁹⁶ The institution was overseen by Ibn 'Asakir, one of the leading Hadith scholars of the medieval period.⁹⁷ Ibn 'Asakir was a central figure among the scholars who supported Nur al-Din's efforts to promote awareness of Muslim unity and *jihad* against adversaries. Several of his works were written at Nur al-Din's request to inspire the spirit of *jihad* among Muslims at the time, including *Fadl 'Asqalan* (The Virtues of the City of Asqalan) and *al-Arba'un ḥadithan fī al-ḥathth 'ala al-jihad* (Forty Hadiths Encouraging Jihad).⁹⁸

Conclusion

From one perspective, this study demonstrates that Nur al-Din Mahmud Zangi (d. 1174) successfully achieved the grand vision of unifying the *ummah* by making the consolidation of Sunni orthodoxy the cornerstone of his governance. He confronted the significant challenges of

⁹³ Nikita Elisséeff, *Nur ad-Din, un grand prince musulman de Syrie au temps des Croisades (511- 569/1118-1174)*, (Damascus, T.p., 1967), 3: 934.

⁹⁴ Keppel Archibald Cameron Creswell, *The Origin of The Cruciform Plan of Cairene Madrasahs*. (Le Caire Imprimerie De L'Institut Francais D'archeologie Orientale, 1922), 3.

⁹⁵ The emphasis on the teaching of *shari'ah* originated from Nizam al-Mulk's efforts to strengthen Sunni orthodoxy within society in response to the growing threat posed by the spread of Shi'ism. Mahmud Yunus, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam* (Jakarta: Hidakarya Agung, 1990), 61.

⁹⁶ Hasan al-Sayed Muhammad Yasin, *Al-madaris al-Hadithiyyah wa-Dawruha fi Khidmati al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah al-Mutahharah – al-madrasah al-nuriyyah namudhajan*, (Misr: Majallah Kuliyyah al-Dirasat al-Islamiyyah, 2021), 587. Bakri, Mohamad Fikri Mohd, Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, and Shu'aibu Umar Gokaru. "The Ulama and Jihad: Examining Ibn 'Asakir's Role in the Narrative of Bayt al-Maqdis' Liberation During Nur al-Din Mahmud Zanki's Era." *Online Journal of Research in Islamic Studies* 12, no. 2 (2025), 41.

⁹⁷ Ali bin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Abd al-Karim bin Abd al-Shaibani Ibn al-Athir, *Al-Tarikh al-Bahir fi al-Daulah al-Atabakiyyah bi al-Mausul*, (Kaherah: Dar al-Kitab al-Hadithah, 1963), 172.

⁹⁸ James Earl Lindsay, "Professors, prophets and politicians: 'Ali Ibn 'Asakir's "Ta'rikh Madinat Dimashq." (Doctoral Thesis, The University of Wisconsin, 1994). 17.

the twelfth century, including internal divisions between Sunnis and Shi'is, military threats from the Crusaders, regional political instability, and the strong influence of minority movements such as the Batiniyyah. To address these challenges, Nur al-Din used the institutions of the *ulama* and education as the principal instruments to achieve three strategic objectives. First, he sought to strengthen Sunni orthodoxy by developing a network of *madrasahs* in Aleppo, Damascus, and smaller towns throughout his territories. These *madrasahs* played a crucial role in promoting Sunni teachings as the ideological foundation of the state. Although personally adhering to the Hanafi school, Nur al-Din prioritized the Shafi'i school, which held greater influence in al-Sham, while continuing to accommodate other Sunni schools such as the Maliki and Hanbali. This approach reflected his inclusive nature within the broader Sunni framework.

Second, Nur al-Din acted to diminish the influence of separatist sects through systematic educational reforms. He not only curtailed the influence of Shi'i and Batiniyyah doctrines by promoting a more dominant Sunni narrative, but he also took decisive action to eliminate Shi'i practices, such as the Shi'i version of the *adhan* in Aleppo. The establishment of *madrasahs* in strategic locations, including sites formerly occupied by churches, also served as symbols of Sunni triumph and represented the spread of a more moderate and widely accepted religious ideology. Third, he shaped a religious identity that supported his political agenda by mobilizing *ulama* who were graduates of the Nizamiyyah *madrasahs*. These scholars served as religious advisers, preachers, and administrators. The close collaboration between the government and the *ulama* not only strengthened Nur al-Din's political legitimacy but also established an ideological unity that underpinned the *jihad* agenda against external threats, particularly the Crusaders.

Again, this study revealed that Nur al-Din's strategy for unification was holistic, encompassing the development of educational infrastructure such as *madrasahs*, mosques, *zawiyahs*, and *ribats*; the unification of various Sunni schools without suppressing internal diversity; and the employment of *ulama* as agents of change in governance and society. This model of governance integrated a complementary political and religious vision, resulting in a cohesive and resilient society capable of confronting both external and internal challenges. The implications of this study are significant, as it offers an essential perspective on the value of close cooperation between rulers and the *ulama* in building unity within the *ummah*. Nur al-Din's approach remains relevant not only for understanding the historical and political context of twelfth-century Islam but also for contemporary discussions on managing sectarian divisions and modern geopolitical challenges. His success was not solely dependent on military strength but also on his wisdom in constructing a robust intellectual and spiritual foundation through an advanced and structured educational system. Thus, Nur al-Din Zangi's administration serves as an exemplary model of how the fusion of political and religious vision can create a united society under the banner of Sunni Islam. His efforts laid the firm groundwork for Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi's eventual success in the liberation of Bayt al-Maqdis. This study concluded that the unification of the *ummah* requires an integrated approach involving education, *ulama* leadership, and astute political wisdom.

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