Interdisciplinary Journal of Social Science and Education (IJSSE) ISSN 3032-7563
Vol. 4, Issue 1, 2026 [pp.67-78]
DOI: https://doi.org/10.53639/ijsse.v4i1.112

Islamic Educational Leadership in the Maghreb Countries

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ARTICLEINFO

Article history

Received : March 29, 2026
Accepted : May 19, 2026
Published : June 06, 2026

Keywords

Islamic educational leadership;
Maghreb countries;
Traditional scholarship;
Educational reform;
Post-colonial state;

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Islamic educational leadership in the Maghreb countries of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania. Using a qualitative literature review and conceptual analysis, it synthesizes historical, sociological, and educational scholarship to explain how religious authority, state bureaucracy, and modernization shape leadership practices. The findings show that Islamic educational leadership is dominated by three interrelated models: the state-coopted scholar, the bureaucratic administrator, and the adaptive reformer. These models face persistent challenges, including curriculum reform, state surveillance, limited resources, pedagogical conservatism, and ideological contestation. At the same time, opportunities emerge through hybrid leadership, contextualized knowledge production, digital learning, and regional partnerships. The study concludes that effective Islamic educational leadership in the Maghreb requires a proactive hybrid model that combines scholarly legitimacy, pedagogical innovation, and strategic engagement with broader socio-political frameworks.

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1. Introduction

Islamic educational leadership in the Maghreb constitutes a critical phenomenon at the intersection of religion, education, and state power. Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania share a long history of Islamic scholarly formation, colonial disruption, post-independence state-building, and continuing negotiation over the place of religion in public education (Kaya & Drhimeur, 2023; Tamburini, 2026; Wüst & Nicolai, 2023). Centuries-old institutions, including Al Quaraouiyine in Morocco and Zaytuna in Tunisia, demonstrate that Islamic education in the region has never been a merely technical activity; it has served as a site for producing religious authority, moral identity, and social cohesion (Weideman, 2022). This social-cohesive function also resonates with studies of social capital in improving educational quality, where trust, networks, and communal participation become important resources for institutional resilience (Hanif, 2022).

The urgency of the topic lies in the changing function of Islamic educational leaders. In pre-modern settings, leadership was commonly rooted in scholarly recognition, ijazah-based transmission, piety, and community trust. In the contemporary period, however, states increasingly reorganize religious education

through ministries, national curricula, public universities, digital religious platforms, and official councils of ulama, thereby transforming many scholars and institutional heads into administrators within state-regulated religious fields (Schiavinato & Rhazzali, 2024; Tamburini, 2025; Tamburini, 2026).

Existing literature has examined Islamic education, religious authority, and state-religion relations, but Islamic educational leadership itself is often treated as a derivative variable rather than a central analytical object. Recent reviews show that Islamic school leadership, distributed leadership in Muslim contexts, and the leadership qualities of Islamic-school principals are emerging fields, yet they still require more context-sensitive analysis of authority, legitimacy, and institutional negotiation in Muslim societies (Ezzani et al., 2023; Hilal et al., 2025; Said et al., 2023).

This gap is important because leadership is not simply an institutional position. It is a practice of interpretation, mediation, and decision-making. A dean of an Islamic faculty, a head of a madrasa, an official mufti, or a shaykh of a zawiya does not merely implement policy; each must decide how to balance inherited knowledge, administrative compliance, pedagogical change, youth expectations, and public anxieties about extremism and social fragmentation (Lahmar, 2024; Poncini, 2023; Saada, 2023). The same challenge is intensified by Generation Z learning cultures and digital civic socialization, which require leaders to communicate religious knowledge through media-literate and citizenship-oriented pedagogies (Hanif, 2025; Hanif & Salsabillah, 2024).

This article therefore places Islamic educational leadership at the center of analysis. It pursues three objectives. First, it identifies and typologizes the dominant models of Islamic educational leadership in the contemporary Maghreb. Second, it analyzes the ecosystem of challenges facing these leaders, including political control, curriculum reform, resource constraints, and ideological contestation. Third, it maps opportunities for more adaptive and transformative leadership that can strengthen religious moderation, critical citizenship, and sustainable educational reform (Alabdulhadi & Alkandari, 2024; Mukhibat et al., 2024; Saada, 2023).

The core argument is that Islamic educational leadership in the Maghreb operates within a field of negotiation structured by the interaction of traditional religious capital, state bureaucratic capital, and global-modern educational capital. Contemporary educational leadership research emphasizes that effective leaders must manage complexity, distribute agency, and adapt institutional vision to changing social demands (Hilal et al., 2025; Niesche et al., 2023; Peng et al., 2024). In Islamic education, the most resilient leaders are hybrid actors who can perform double legitimacy: credibility within Islamic scholarly tradition and competence within modern educational and administrative systems. The negotiation of religious knowledge within modern institutions also requires hermeneutic sensitivity, because educational leaders must interpret inherited texts and social realities without reducing either to rigid formalism (Hanif, 2017).

2. Methods

This study uses a qualitative, conceptual, and theory-building design. It is a descriptive-analytical literature review that moves beyond summary toward

synthesis and model construction. The research is non-empirical in the sense that it does not collect new field data; however, it conducts a structured analysis of published scholarship, policy documents, historical works, and institutional reports related to Islamic education and religious authority in the Maghreb. The design follows current qualitative-research standards that emphasize interpretive transparency, conceptual coherence, and theoretically informed synthesis (Cyr & Goodman, 2024; Murris & Koro, 2025; Savin-Baden & Major, 2025).

The study site is the Maghreb region, covering Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania. These countries were selected because they share Arabic-Islamic heritage, experience with colonial governance, post-independence state-building projects, and continuing debates about the modernization of Islamic education. At the same time, the region contains important variations, such as Morocco's monarchy-centered religious diplomacy, Algeria's bureaucratized religious field, Tunisia's post-revolutionary renegotiation of religious institutions, Libya's institutional fragility, and Mauritania's strong tradition of text-based Islamic learning (Rhazzali, 2023; Tamburini, 2025; Tamburini, 2026; Weideman, 2022).

The unit of analysis is the model of Islamic educational leadership. This unit is operationalized through textual evidence concerning institutional leaders, state-appointed scholars, deans of Islamic faculties, heads of traditional learning centers, reformist intellectuals, and official religious administrators. The analysis focuses on how these actors acquire authority, make decisions, manage institutions, respond to reform pressures, and articulate visions of Islamic education, in line with recent leadership studies that treat leadership as relational, institutional, and normatively contested (Ezzani et al., 2023; Hilal et al., 2025; Said et al., 2023).

Data were collected through documentary analysis. The corpus included books and articles in Islamic studies, sociology of religion, political science, and comparative education; historical studies of Islamic learning; policy-oriented reports; and selected Arabic and French-language scholarship where relevant. Sources were selected purposively because of their relevance to Islamic education, religious authority, state management of Islam, or leadership theory in Muslim societies. This purposive strategy is consistent with qualitative cross-cultural inquiry, which privileges conceptual relevance, contextual sensitivity, and interpretive adequacy over mechanical representativeness (Cyr & Goodman, 2024; Liamputtong, 2022; Savin-Baden & Major, 2025).

The analysis combined thematic coding and conceptual framework analysis. Initial codes included traditional authority, bureaucratic authority, state co-optation, curriculum reform, pedagogical innovation, securitization, resource dependence, and adaptive leadership. These codes were compared across the five countries to identify recurring patterns and national variations. The resulting typology distinguishes state-coopted scholars, bureaucratic administrators, guardians of tradition, and adaptive reformers. The analytical procedure draws on contemporary guidance for thematic interpretation, reflexive synthesis, and qualitative attention to both enabling and constraining dimensions of leadership practice (Murris & Koro, 2025; Oplatka, 2023; Wolgemuth et al., 2024).

ISSN 3032-7563

3. Literature Review

Traditional Islamic scholarly authority, or marja'iyya diniyya, is foundational for understanding leadership legitimacy in Islamic education. It refers to authority grounded in mastery of the Qur'an, hadith, fiqh, theology, Arabic language, ethical formation, and recognized pedagogical transmission. In this model, leadership is personal and moral as much as institutional. The alim is expected to embody knowledge, piety, ethical conduct, and pedagogical responsibility. Contemporary scholarship on Islamic educational leadership similarly emphasizes moral formation, social justice, moderation, and the authority of exemplary practice (Alabdulhadi & Alkandari, 2024; Saada, 2023; Said et al., 2023).

In classical and neo-traditional Islamic education, leadership has been exercised through halaqah, madrasa, zawiya, mahadara, and shaykh-murid relationships. Teaching is not only the transfer of information but also the formation of character through adab, discipline, and imitation of scholarly exemplarity. In the Maghreb, Sufi orders, mosque-based instruction, student housing networks, and local scholarly circles have embedded religious education within community life, social trust, and moral authority (Rhazzali, 2023; Schiavinato & Rhazzali, 2024; Weideman, 2022). This communal dimension is consistent with the view that social capital can strengthen educational quality when trust and participation become institutional resources (Hanif, 2022).

A second conceptual pillar is bureaucratic-rational authority and state corporatism. In modern states, legitimacy is often derived from formal office, administrative hierarchy, written rules, budgets, and legal mandates. Post-colonial Maghreb states incorporated religious institutions into national projects, transforming many Islamic educational leaders into civil servants, inspectors, deans, directors, or members of official councils. Their authority increasingly comes from appointment and accountability to ministries rather than from community recognition alone, a pattern that parallels broader debates on school autonomy, accountability, and contemporary educational leadership theory (Niesche et al., 2023; Peng et al., 2024; Tamburini, 2025).

State corporatism helps explain how governments create, license, finance, and control legitimate religious institutions. Morocco's official religious field, Algeria's ministry-based religious bureaucracy, and Tunisia's shifting post-revolutionary landscape reveal different modes of state management. These arrangements can protect national cohesion, but they can also limit autonomy, standardize religious discourse, and reduce Islamic educational leadership to policy implementation (Kaya & Drhimeur, 2023; Tamburini, 2025; Tamburini, 2026; Wüst & Nicolai, 2023).

The third concept is adaptive and transformative leadership in hybrid spaces. Adaptive leadership refers to the capacity to diagnose complex pressures, mobilize stakeholders, and generate new responses to problems that cannot be solved by routine administration. Transformational leadership emphasizes vision, motivation, intellectual stimulation, and institutional change. In Islamic education, adaptive leaders are those who can preserve scholarly legitimacy while reforming pedagogy, curricula, institutional management, and public engagement (Ezzani et al., 2023;

Hilal et al., 2025; Peng et al., 2024). This emphasis parallels transformative education, which treats learning not merely as knowledge transfer but as a process of liberation, critical awareness, and social transformation (Hanif, 2014a).

Hybrid leadership is especially relevant in post-colonial Muslim societies because leaders operate between tradition and modernity, religious knowledge and secular administration, local communities and global educational standards. Recent scholarship on Muslim women's educational leadership, critical Islamic education, and global citizenship shows that Islamic education increasingly requires leaders who can connect spirituality, justice, citizenship, and institutional reform (Felsenthal & Agbaria, 2026; Lahmar, 2024; Saada, 2023). For Islamic educational leadership, hybridity is not a compromise of authenticity; it can be a strategy for renewing tradition through contextual intelligence. This position is close to de-westernization debates in Islamic education, which seek to engage global knowledge while preserving epistemic independence and Islamic intellectual foundations (Hanif & Fian, 2023).

Contemporary debates on tajdid, ijtihad, critical Islamic education, and the public role of religion further illuminate the leadership problem. Islamic education is increasingly expected to engage historical change, religious moderation, technological rationality, civic pluralism, and reform-oriented theology without surrendering normative depth (Felsenthal & Agbaria, 2026; Mukhibat et al., 2024; Şenel & Demmrich, 2024). In the Maghreb, this debate is intensified by colonial legacies, Arabization policies, Islamist movements, security concerns, and the desire to produce graduates who are both religiously literate and socially competent. The same tension appears in discussions on the Islamization of science in Society 5.0, where Islamic education is expected to mediate between technological rationality and religious epistemology (Hanif & Prasetianingtiyas, 2023).

4. Results and Discussion

The first major finding is the resilience of the state-coopted scholar model. In this model, the state draws upon the symbolic capital of recognized scholars to legitimate official religious policy. Morocco provides the clearest example because religious diplomacy, monarchy-centered authority, and official Islamic institutions are closely connected to national identity and soft power (Kaya & Drhimeur, 2023; Wüst & Nicolai, 2023). State-appointed scholars and councils of ulama therefore operate within a vertical religious establishment that links scholarship, monarchy, public preaching, and education, including official digital channels that define the boundaries of legitimate religious discourse (Tamburini, 2026).

In Algeria, the model developed differently but with a similar objective: the state sought to regulate the religious field after independence and, more forcefully, after the civil conflict of the 1990s. Religious education and official preaching became important instruments for producing a national Islam and countering both Islamist opposition and transnational radical discourses. Recent studies show that the Algerian state has intensified bureaucratic control over religion while also responding to security concerns produced by jihadi Salafism and digital religious contestation (Elischer, 2024; Tamburini, 2025; Tamburini, 2026).

ISSN 3032-7563

The mechanism of co-optation operates through appointment to official bodies, salaries, control of prestigious institutions, access to state media, standardized curricula, and inclusion in national reform campaigns. This arrangement gives Islamic educational leaders institutional resources and public visibility. However, it also establishes red lines around public discourse. Criticism of core state policies, religious legitimacy narratives, or regime-defined moderation is usually constrained. Leadership becomes influential but conditional, especially when moderation is promoted through state-defined structures rather than through dialogical educational practice (Alabdulhadi & Alkandari, 2024; Tamburini, 2025; Tamburini, 2026).

The second finding concerns the bureaucratic administrator model. Many Islamic educational leaders in public universities, institutes, and secondary schools are required to manage curricula, budgets, accreditation, student affairs, quality assurance, and compliance with ministry regulations. Their success is often judged through administrative indicators rather than scholarly creativity or pedagogical transformation. This model professionalizes institutional management but can weaken the moral and communal authority that historically defined Islamic learning (Niesche et al., 2023; Peng et al., 2024). Such administrative pressure also reflects broader market-oriented tendencies in higher education, where institutional performance is often reframed through efficiency, competition, and formal accountability (Hanif, 2010).

The third finding is the continuing authority of guardians of tradition. In zawiyas, madrasas, and mahadara settings, leaders still derive legitimacy from mastery of texts, memorization, isnad, piety, and personal relationships with students. Tunisia's Zaytuna networks and broader North African forms of religious intervention show that traditional Islamic institutions continue to operate as sites of identity formation, social discipline, and religious literacy (Rhazzali, 2023; Schiavinato & Rhazzali, 2024; Weideman, 2022). Yet this model faces pressure to demonstrate relevance to employment, civic participation, digital literacy, and modern social problems. Its resilience therefore depends not only on preserving texts but also on translating inherited knowledge into socially meaningful formation (Hanif, 2022).

A core challenge across these models is pedagogical reform. Leaders widely recognize the limitations of methods dominated by hifz and talqin when they are detached from analysis, contextual reasoning, and contemporary problem-solving. However, attempts to introduce critical thinking, interdisciplinary study, digital tools, or active learning can be interpreted by conservative teachers and students as the dilution of authentic Islamic learning. Pedagogical reform is therefore not a technical matter; it is a negotiation over epistemology, authority, quality standards, and identity (Mukhibat et al., 2024; Poncini, 2023; Rahmat & Yahya, 2022). Curriculum reform, in this sense, must be read philosophically rather than merely administratively, because every curriculum carries assumptions about knowledge, learners, and social purpose (Hanif, 2014b).

This challenge reveals four interconnected tensions. The first is

epistemological: how can Islamic education teach certainty in foundational texts while encouraging ijtihad, critique, and contextual judgment? The second is political: how can leaders innovate when centralized curricula prioritize uniform religious discourse? The third is economic: how can reform occur without resources for teacher training, curriculum development, digital infrastructure, and research? The fourth is generational: how can older scholars and younger students negotiate different expectations about learning, media, and public engagement? Empirical studies of digital Islamic education show that educational technology can support engagement, but only when it is integrated with sound pedagogy rather than used as decorative modernization (Hanif et al., 2022; Hanif et al., 2025; Saada, 2023).

The fourth finding is the emergence of adaptive reformers and hybrid institutional spaces. These leaders typically combine traditional Islamic training with modern university education in social sciences, education, philosophy, law, or public policy. They do not reject tradition; they reinterpret it as a dynamic resource for addressing contemporary questions. Their leadership is expressed through curriculum innovation, public scholarship, media engagement, interfaith dialogue, gender-aware leadership, and institutional entrepreneurship (Ezzani et al., 2023; Lahmar, 2024; Saada, 2023). Classical Islamic educational thought, including Avicenna's philosophical orientation, also supports this adaptive reading because it links knowledge, ethics, and human development rather than separating intellectual formation from moral formation (Hanif, 2023).

Morocco's Dar al-Hadith al-Hassaniyya illustrates the potential of hybrid institutional space. It remains connected to official religious authority, yet it also encourages advanced research in hadith studies through modern academic methods. Tunisia offers another form of hybridity in the post-2011 debate over the religious field, where Zaytuna-related circles, religious intervention in public institutions, and state websites continue to negotiate between Islamic heritage, democracy, rights discourse, secularist critique, and official religious management (Rhazzali, 2023; Tamburini, 2026; Weideman, 2022).

The rise of adaptive reformers suggests several strategic pathways. First, leadership development should combine advanced Islamic sciences with educational management, pedagogy, research methods, and public communication. Second, selected institutions should be granted protected innovation zones for curriculum experimentation, including courses on Islamic ethics, environmental responsibility, economics, human rights, and digital society. Third, regional networks should connect reform-minded Islamic educators across the Maghreb, West Africa, and Southeast Asia to exchange curricula and classroom practices. Recent reviews of Islamic-school leadership and distributed leadership in Muslim contexts support the importance of collaborative leadership, professional learning, and institutionalized curriculum development (Hilal et al., 2025; Said et al., 2023). Comparative work on international-standard madrasas and Islamic senior high schools indicates that curriculum development becomes more sustainable when adaptation is managed institutionally rather than left to individual enthusiasm alone (Hanif et al., 2024; Hanif et al., 2026).

ISSN 3032-7563

These pathways have broader implications. A confident and scholarly Islamic educational leadership can challenge extremism from within the tradition more effectively than state propaganda alone. It can also support human development by producing graduates who combine religious literacy, critical reasoning, communication skills, and civic responsibility. In this sense, Islamic educational leadership should not be framed only as a security problem or heritage issue; it should be seen as a strategic asset for social cohesion, cultural renewal, global citizenship, and sustainable development (Alabdulhadi & Alkandari, 2024; Elischer, 2024; Saada, 2023). Evidence from Indonesian Islamic boarding schools further shows that religious institutions can generate social entrepreneurship and community-oriented development when leadership links moral formation with institutional innovation (Hanif et al., 2023).

The analysis supports the central hypothesis that double legitimacy is decisive. Leaders who rely only on traditional authority may retain respect but remain marginalized from modern resources. Leaders who rely only on bureaucratic office may control institutions but lack trust and moral credibility. The most effective leaders are those who translate between scholarly capital, state resources, and modern educational practice. Their work is neither a smooth synthesis nor a simple compromise; it is a continuous process of boundary work, negotiation, distributed agency, and strategic adaptation (Hilal et al., 2025; Niesche et al., 2023; Peng et al., 2024).

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Islamic educational leadership in the Maghreb is a complex brokerage profession. Leaders are not passive channels of policy or tradition; they are strategic actors who interpret knowledge, manage institutions, negotiate legitimacy, and shape the formation of religious subjectivity. This insight moves the discussion beyond the question of what should be taught toward the more decisive question of who decides how Islamic education is taught and under what constraints.

The article identifies four leadership models: the state-coopted scholar, the bureaucratic administrator, the guardian of tradition, and the adaptive reformer. These models are not mutually exclusive; in practice, leaders often combine elements of several models. The most promising model is hybrid leadership, which integrates scholarly credibility, administrative competence, pedagogical innovation, and socio-political sensitivity.

The study also confirms that the central challenges of Islamic educational leadership are interconnected. Curriculum reform cannot be separated from state control, resource distribution, epistemological assumptions, and generational change. Likewise, the goal of religious moderation cannot be achieved by slogans alone; it requires leadership capable of producing intellectually rigorous, socially relevant, and pedagogically engaging Islamic education.

The main limitation of this study is its reliance on secondary literature and documentary analysis. It cannot fully capture the lived experience, informal decision-making, and daily negotiations of leaders, teachers, and students. Future

research should therefore conduct ethnographic case studies, oral history projects with Islamic educational leaders, surveys of teachers and students, and comparative studies between the Maghreb, West Africa, the Levant, and Southeast Asia.

Ultimately, the future of Islamic educational leadership in the Maghreb depends on the ability to renew tradition without bureaucratizing it into sterility, and to modernize education without severing it from its moral and scholarly foundations. The strongest leaders will be those who can keep one hand on the turath and the other on the needs of contemporary society - not juggling for show, but steering with intellectual responsibility.

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