

## FOREWORD

*'Name your teachers!'*

This was the solemn rallying call of early Islam as the community gathered to safeguard the Prophetic legacy from the very real and growing threat of distortion. It was a way to trace the genealogy of teachers back to the sources of knowledge, a process which came to be known as the isnād, or chain of narrations. Dr. Jonathan Brown observes, “[The isnād] became the veritable symbol of the ‘cult of authenticity’ that is Sunni Islam.”<sup>1</sup> Muḥammad b. Sīrīn (d. 110/729), an early authority, stated: “They were not accustomed to asking about isnād, but when the intrigues intensified, they began to demand: ‘Name for us your men (teachers)!’”<sup>2</sup> It is in this spirit that Dr. Moḥammad Akram Nadwī has compiled this book to answer this very question.

This is the second major work of my shaykh that I have had the honor to critically translate and present to the readers. It represents the esteemed scholar’s preferred genre choice for his personal writings and reflections. I have previously taken many of these essays and translated them under a series entitled *Imlā’ al-Khāṭir* (literally, “dictation of thoughts”) and published by Al-Salam Institute Press. In these, Dr. Akram follows in the tradition of the Ḥanbalī scholar Ibn al-Jawzī’s *Ṣayd al-khāṭir* and shares his reflections on a variety of topics ranging from theology to law, history to heart softeners, philosophy, education and more. Composed in a casual, conversational style consisting of questions followed by brief answers—each portion predicated by *qālū/qultu* (‘they said’/‘I responded’)—he utilizes therein a refined and elevated level of Arabic, reflecting his love of the language and his extensive expertise in Arabic grammar and rhetoric. These piercing reflections are part of the broader balāghah genre within Arabic literature.

So, what exactly is this book and why should anyone bother to read it? Beyond the obvious appeal to the growing number of students, colleagues and people genuinely interested in Dr. Akram, the book simultaneously

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<sup>1</sup> Pg. 80. Brown, Jonathan A.C. *Hadīth: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*. London, UK: Oneworld Publications. 2nd edition. 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Muqaddimah Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: Bāb al-isnād min al-dīn.

accomplishes two major tasks and should be understood as representing two books.

First, it emphasizes key lessons learned in the major Islamic disciplines, each in its own chapter. What is unique is that Dr. Akram highlights his own critical insights on each topic, of the sort that are usually not found in standard texts. Also, he includes not only the usual subjects taught in standard Islamic colleges and seminaries—from ḥadīth and fiqh to tafsīr and history—but goes beyond that to include lesser studied, but equally important topics such as literary criticism, poetry, polemics, and literature; and then even beyond that to include those topics that aren't academic at all but equally critical to a scholar of the faith—dhikr, fear of God, forbearance, generosity, critical thinking and more. In the end, the reader has in his hands a wonderful survey and comprehensive roadmap of the Islamic sciences.

The second aim of the book—and perhaps the primary one—is to present biographies of some of Dr. Akram's senior teachers at Nadwat al-'Ulamā'. As such, he chooses one key teacher from each discipline he has chosen to highlight, giving us glimpses into their lives, personalities, habits and more. Some of these teachers are alive, and some long gone but certainly not forgotten. All of this serves to provide a poignant snapshot of life and scholarship at Nadwah, and also opens up for the reader the Muslim literary and intellectual world of the Indian subcontinent, a topic of much interest in recent times.

In the end, the reader has in hand a critical survey of the Islamic sciences, a book of profound insights and reflections on various Islamic subjects, a biographical work of many renowned teachers at Nadwat al-'Ulamā', and a local history of Indian Muslim scholarship.

The book is set in one great institution of Muslim India, whose full name is Dār al-'Ulūm Nadwat al-'Ulamā', known in short as Nadwat al-'Ulamā' or as Nadwah. It will suffice here to quote from Dr. Akram's previous related work:

Nadwat al-'Ulamā' was established in 1893 (1311 AH) as a revivalist movement by some sincere, far-sighted scholars of Islam, who were firm in their belief in the doctrines of Islam and who enjoyed a revered social standing on account of their piety and learning. They came out of the school of Shaykh al-Islam Shāh Walīullah Dihlawī and his disciples. The guides and leaders of this earnest group of men were Mawlānā

Muḥammad ‘Alī Mungerī, Mawlānā Shiblī Nu‘mānī and Mawlānā ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Ḥasanī.

Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’ aimed: (a) to introduce appropriate changes into the syllabuses of Islamic training in order to bring them into line with the changed conditions of the modern age, and to integrate religious education, as far as possible, with the cultural progress of the community; (b) to examine the principles and conjunctions of the Sharī‘ah in order to sustain their conformity with the fundamental guidance of the Qur’ān and sunnah while addressing an ever-growing number of modern questions and problems; (c) to establish a library in northern India to serve as a centre for study and research in Islamic sciences; (d) to propagate the Islamic faith and ideals through suitable literature and to make arrangements for its publication; (e) to train and educate teachers who have a sufficiently deep knowledge of the Qur’ān and Sunnah to affect the moral environment and improve the prevailing social conditions.

Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’ held its annual sessions in different cities. But it was soon felt that unless some practical steps were taken to translate these ideas into action, the movement would not be understood and appreciated. Accordingly, the first step was taken in 1898 (1316 AH) with the establishment at Lucknow of a Dār al-‘Ulūm (literally, ‘the house of the sciences’). This institution quietly earned itself a proud reputation, in India and abroad, as a modern seat of learning the Arabic language and Islamic sciences.

Dār al-‘Ulūm concentrates particularly on the Qur’ān, traditions of the Prophet, Islamic law, and Arabic as a classical and living language. The importance and effectiveness of the endeavors of the Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’ have been acknowledged throughout India and in the entire world.

In brief, Dār al-‘Ulūm has tried to produce intellectually broad-minded scholars able to connect with the wider world, and therefore to represent and extend Islam. To expound the eternal nature of the Divine Message and the distinguishing features of the Sharī‘ah and its way in such language as might

appeal to the modern mind, and so help to bring about a confluence between the traditional and the modern.<sup>3</sup>

In the chronology of Dr. Akram's personal writings, *Lessons Learned* represents an important milestone, in that he first published *Madrasah Life: A Student's Day at Nadwat al-'Ulamā'* (Turath Publishing: 2007) some thirteen years ago to showcase a single day in the life of a religious school, or madrasah. As James Piscatori of the University of Oxford observed in the foreword to the book, it came at an opportune time when the madrasah was at the center of the media spotlight due to global geopolitics. This work served to correct many mis-notions people had concerning what really went on inside a typical madrasah. The book had a significant impact but was criticized as being too brief. Shaykh Bilal Ali Ansari, for instance, observed in a book review from 2008:

Due to the brevity of the story, the reader becomes less attached to the personalities mentioned in the book than he may like. I personally would have liked for the narrative to have been longer, but the brevity of the book has its own advantages.<sup>4</sup>

If *Madrasah Life* represented one day in the life of Nadwah, then *Lessons Learned* represents the entire course of study. It is a perfectly logical progression.

This project began when Dr. Akram first asked me to translate his Arabic language work *Man 'allamānī?* (*Who Taught Me?*) written much earlier but published for the first time in late 1440/2018 by Dār al-Rashīd in Lucknow, India under the supervision of Muḥammad Wathīq Nadwī. Embarking on the project I quickly realized that in order for this to be successful as an independent English-language work, it had to be much more than a literal translation. As such, I had to engage in a critical, non-literal translation that incorporated the intended meanings of the original while preserving structure and flow in English. For that, I had to eliminate much of what was eloquent in Arabic but redundant and repetitive in English. I also took the

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<sup>3</sup> Pg. 3-4. Nadwī, Moḥammad Akram. *Madrasah Life: A Student's Day at Nadwat al-'Ulamā'*. London, UK: Turath Publishing, 1428/2007.

<sup>4</sup> <https://attahawi.com/2008/12/22/foreward-madrasah-life-by-shaykh-m-akram-nadwi/>

liberty of rearranging some of the chapters from the original in order to make the text more readable. Footnotes have been kept to a minimum in order not to distract from the text. I have supplemented the book from some of Dr. Akram's other writings that are relevant to key portions. Ultimately, I am proud to introduce this as an independent work, with his endorsement.

Of note, some unfortunate circumstances transpired since the publication of the Arabic work—the demise of someone featured prominently in the book, a person about whom Dr. Akram writes:

You are asking me to give you a biography of a teacher beloved to me and influential upon me. I've had a long association with him and become very close. By reminding me of him, you have ignited great emotion within me, awakened dormant sadness, and rekindled his love and respect within my soul. I find my pen and mind competing to answer your request, and I do not know which of them will win.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth noting that these descriptions, full of emotion as they are, were penned prior to the Shaykh's demise. He was none other than Mawlānā Muḥammad Wāḍiḥ Rashīd Nadwī. This tragic event inspired additional stirring reflections from Shaykh Akram, which I have incorporated in this work.

All dates are provided simultaneously in both the Islamic-Ḥijrī and Christian-era formats, in this order. As opposed to the title 'Shaykh' used in other parts of the world, 'Mawlānā' is the title for religious scholars in the Indian subcontinent and precedes the names of Indian scholars.

I am certain that despite my best attempt, many errors and shortcomings must have inevitably found their way into this translated work. These should be wholly attributed to me and not to the esteemed author. Those who understand Arabic would be well-served to read Dr. Akram's pristine original work entitled *Man 'allamanī*.

I must thank the many individuals whose tireless support made this work possible. Many readers may be unaware of the incredible amount of time and effort that goes into the publication of a single book, even if it is only a translation. Credit goes first and foremost to my parents for their upbringing and care that brought me to this point. Any little success or achievement I

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<sup>5</sup> See chapter 12.

enjoy—occasions that are few if any at all—is due to their prayers and sacrifice. Above all, I am overcome with overwhelming sadness at moments like these. Ever since I lost my mother nearly a decade ago, I have no one to share these moments with. I wasn't able to tell her, for instance, when I finished memorizing the Qur'ān, or when my wife, son, and daughter did so. I can only hope that she is receiving her due share from these efforts, and perhaps even being informed of them, until the happy moment we meet again.

I am grateful to my wife and faithful companion Sumara Khan, from whom this project took away four to five months of valuable time. That is no small sacrifice. Also, as her Arabic is far better than mine (which is precisely why I married her in the first place), she does the proofreading for all my translations and points out all the errors, many of which would be a great source of embarrassment for me were they to find their way into these works. Sometimes I wonder if she is the real translator. I am grateful to her brother Usman Khan, who was my primary proof-reader, for his extremely thorough effort and his many valuable stylistic corrections. I also thank Moiz Mohammed for his general support throughout the work and Dr. Hatem Al-Hajj for his advice and availability for the more challenging translation-related issues. I must note that I relied on previous translations of sections of this work by my other colleagues, including Tariq Pandor and Fatima Chaudhury. Tariq is particularly talented, and I only wish his time would allow for more translation-work so that we could produce higher quality works than my own. I thank my friend Isa Kundra, one of the most serious students of knowledge I have ever known, for helping me get a current photograph of Nadwah for the front cover. I thank my friend Ahmed Agiz who volunteered for the cover design and put up with endless adjustments until coming up with the final product. I am greatly impressed by his work and I trust you will too.

Whenever I see a great building or successful institution, I am always astounded by the notion of success and how it occurs. Every achievement is the end result of a complex network of inter-linking pathways and the decisions of countless individuals, such that one is left overwhelmed and utterly incapable of identifying—let alone thanking—all the persons involved. Who deserves all the credit? Is it the ones who actually built the structure, the ones who contributed financially, or the ones who first conceived of the idea? What about the families of these individuals, and the

parents that raised them? And what about all the anonymous well-wishers and supporters, and the selfless worshippers who pray for your success in the middle of the night without you even knowing them? In the end, the only solace lies in recognizing that only God is the only ultimate *ḥasīb* (reckoner).

And sufficient is God in keeping the account.<sup>6</sup>

Abu Zayd,  
New Jersey

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<sup>6</sup> Qur'ān 33:39.





# LESSONS LEARNED

Treasures from Nadwah's Sages

Lucknow, India

Mohammad Akram Nadwi

*Translation and editing*  
Dr. Abu Zayd

## LESSONS LEARNED ■ Treasures from Nadwah's Sages

*"I joined Nadwat al-'Ulamā' and felt as if I had been raised from the dusty ground to the stars up above, from the level earth to the high heavens. I came across ancient books and studied with great teachers who were knowledgeable scholars, learned scribes and pious worshippers, all of noble origins and stock. . . . They were blessed with great manners, while the sciences lay at their feet. . . . They were warriors of the pen and masters of their craft. Nourished on the milk of eloquence, they might have drawn the trail of oblivion over the most powerful orator."*

This is how Moḥammad Akram Nadwī fondly recalls his alma mater in the heart of Lucknow. **LESSONS LEARNED** is a celebration of his journey of discovery, by sharing the biographies of some of his senior teachers along with lessons and insights learned along the way. The book is arranged topically as a critical survey of the Islamic sciences, and he selects one key teacher from each discipline he has chosen to highlight, giving us glimpses into their lives, personalities, habits and more. Some of these teachers are still alive, and many long gone but certainly not forgotten. All of this serves to provide a poignant snapshot of life and scholarship at Nadwah and opens up for the reader the Muslim literary and intellectual world of the Indian subcontinent, a topic of much interest in recent times.

Dr. Moḥammad Akram Nadwī has emerged as a leading Muslim scholar and author in the Western world. Born in rural India, he was educated in some of the best educational institutions of Muslim India—including Dār al-'Ulūm Nadwat al-'Ulamā' and the University of Lucknow—and under the tutelage of some of its most renowned scholars, including the late Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī, upon whose instruction he joined the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies as research fellow. He is the author of numerous works on a wide range of subjects in Arabic, Urdu and English. His magnum opus is a forty-plus-volume compilation of biographies of female scholars of Islam. He continues to teach in the UK through Al-Salam Institute, Cambridge Islamic College, and other forums.

Dr. Abu Zayd completed his 'ālimiyyah degree (Advanced License in Islamic Scholarship) under the tutelage of Dr. Moḥammad Akram Nadwī through Al-Salam Institute. In addition, he holds a Bachelor's Degree in Islamic Studies from the School of Islamic and Arabic Studies (American Open University), a Masters from the Islamic University of Minnesota under the guidance of Shaykh Waleed Edrees, and a Diploma in Classical Islamic Texts from Cambridge Islamic College.

