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The Paradigmatic Model of Thought-Oriented Leadership in Teaching Islamic Studies Courses in Iraqi Universities

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to develop a paradigmatic model of thinking-oriented leadership in the teaching of Islamic Studies courses within Iraqi universities by examining the structural, institutional, and individual factors that shape its implementation.

Methods: Using a qualitative and applied research design, the study targeted all Islamic Studies instructors across Iraqi universities, a population comprising 1,500 faculty members. Through purposive sampling, 15 instructors were initially selected for interviews, with theoretical saturation reached after interviewing two additional participants. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection tool, and the data were analyzed through coding-based thematic analysis.

Results: Findings revealed 13 key components that collectively influence thinking-oriented leadership in Islamic Studies education. These components include structural factors such as course content and teaching methods, as well as paradigmatic epistemological conflicts that challenge traditional instructional approaches. The study also identified significant shifts in the attitudes and expectations of newer generations of students, along with broader organizational, institutional, and socio-cultural factors that shape teaching environments. Furthermore, limited professional development aligned with thinking-oriented pedagogy, institutional and political pressures, and technological and resource constraints emerged as considerable barriers. Individual and professional limitations among instructors further complicated implementation efforts. Additionally, effective thinking-oriented leadership was found to depend on participatory and interactive teaching strategies, which contribute to both individual and social educational outcomes. Based on the extracted components, a comprehensive 177-item researcher-developed questionnaire was produced.

Conclusions: Overall, the study concludes that adopting a thinking-oriented leadership model requires addressing multifaceted challenges and strengthening instructor development to achieve meaningful and sustainable improvements in teaching Islamic Studies.

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Introduction

Effective classroom management can be approached through various methods depending on contextual conditions. Teacher characteristics, the cultural and social environment of the school, and learners' educational needs are among the factors that shape instructional practices. Consequently, over the years, numerous approaches to classroom leadership and management have emerged, each emphasizing particular dimensions in order to create constructive and engaging learning environments (Abedinia et al., 2024).

Among university courses, Islamic Studies holds a distinctive position, as it aims to strengthen students' religious insight, ethical grounding, and cultural awareness. These courses require a calm, respectful, and interactive learning atmosphere more than others. The manner in which these classes are led plays a crucial role in their success, as thoughtful and well-grounded classroom management strategies can deepen religious understanding and promote meaningful engagement with Islamic teachings (Afshari Qozlu et al., 2021).

In recent years, educational systems worldwide have increasingly recognized the need to transform teaching–learning processes. Education is now understood not merely as content transmission but as a multidimensional endeavor aimed at fostering deep understanding, independent thinking, critical analysis, and active participation. Contemporary instruction must enable students not only to retain information but also to interpret it, construct meaning, and apply knowledge in personal, professional, and social contexts (Khodouei Ashkezari, 2024).

Studies consistently demonstrate that traditional instructional methods—characterized by one-way transmission of knowledge—no longer meet the complex needs of modern learners. In such approaches, students remain passive recipients with limited opportunities for active engagement, resulting in superficial learning, reduced motivation, and disengagement (Omidi et al., 2024). In contrast, Warner (2025), a leading scholar in modern pedagogy, asserts that "the classroom must be a place where thinking flows, not merely a venue for content delivery." He argues that the successful teacher is one who creates conditions that naturally sustain questioning, dialogue, and reflection, shifting the teacher's role from a transmitter of knowledge to an intellectual leader and facilitator of students' cognitive and moral growth.

The purpose of Islamic Studies courses extends far beyond memorization or ritual instruction. Their core mission is to cultivate religious rationality, deepen faith, and encourage reflective

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engagement with Islamic teachings and their application in daily life. Achieving these goals requires pedagogical approaches aligned with the complex and multidimensional nature of the subject. Thinking-oriented leadership offers a powerful framework in this regard, enabling instructors to guide students toward reflective inquiry into concepts such as faith, ethics, justice, monotheism, the meaning of life, and moral responsibility (MirAhmadi, 2023).

However, the current state of Islamic Studies education in Iraqi universities reveals that these aims are not fully realized. Instruction is predominantly traditional, teacher-centered, and lecture-based. Opportunities for dialogue are limited, and learner participation is minimal, reducing classrooms to arenas of rote instruction rather than spaces for intellectual and spiritual development. Empirical studies corroborate these concerns: Al-Shammari (2021) reports that many students view Islamic Studies as among the least important courses due to traditional methods and the absence of open dialogue. Similarly, Al-Tamimi (2023) finds that many instructors adopt authoritarian teaching styles and lack the skills necessary to foster reflective and interactive learning.

These conditions lead students to adopt passive learning roles, impeding the achievement of educational objectives and, in some cases, provoking disengagement or resistance toward religious content. In a society such as Iraq—facing extensive social, cultural, and religious challenges—this issue becomes particularly pressing.

Furthermore, rapid social change, globalization, and students' broad access to diverse intellectual and religious resources intensify the need to modernize teaching and leadership strategies. Within this context, thinking-oriented leadership can revitalize Islamic Studies classrooms by transforming them into vibrant, meaningful spaces in which faith and understanding are shaped through rational inquiry, lived experience, and critical thinking.

Recent research supports this direction. Safary (2025) and Habibi (2024) show that critical thinking is essential for advancing Islamic societies and integrating religious principles into social life. Similarly, Ghavi and Moharrami (2023) emphasize the importance of curricular adaptation, improved infrastructure, professional development for instructors, and granting greater autonomy in teaching and research. Dehghani, Nasr Esfahani, and Meshkat (2023) highlight the need to clarify the academic rationale and societal value of Islamic Studies courses, noting consensus among instructors and students on the importance of strengthening religious knowledge, promoting higher-quality living, and fostering relationships with religious scholars.

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International research echoes these findings. Halstead (2025) demonstrates that integrating critical thinking into Islamic education is both feasible and essential for addressing contemporary intellectual challenges, helping learners engage independently and critically with religious and social issues. Similarly, Alam (2024) and Karim (2024) argue that applying critical thinking in Islamic theology enhances conceptual understanding, analytical skills, and the development of new forms of religious knowledge.

Given the documented positive effects of thinking-oriented leadership on learning processes, religious understanding, and students' analytical capabilities, a fundamental question emerges: How can thinking-oriented leadership be effectively integrated into classroom management in Islamic Studies courses in Iraqi universities to enhance their educational and formative objectives?

Material and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design using the grounded theory approach. The participants consisted of instructors teaching Islamic Studies courses in Iraqi universities. Using purposive criterion-based sampling (i.e., selecting instructors specifically responsible for teaching Islamic Studies), a total of 15 participants were recruited. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

To establish the validity of the findings, the collected data were compared and cross-checked with results from previous studies conducted in the same field. This comparison ensured that the emerging findings were consistent with the broader body of research and that the interpretations aligned with existing knowledge. Data saturation was achieved after conducting 15 interviews, as no new information or concepts emerged, indicating that the dataset was sufficiently comprehensive and reliable for analysis.

The data analysis process was carried out using a systematic coding procedure, which involved identifying key concepts, categories, and relationships that formed the basis of the emerging theoretical model.

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Results

The initial codes related to developing a thought-centered leadership model for teaching Islamic Studies courses in Iraqi universities were categorized in two stages. The results are presented in the tables below.

Table 1. Classification of Open Codes for the Causal Conditions Category

Row	Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Codes	
1	In Islamic Studies classes, the emphasis is more on memorization than on analysis.	Dominance of Memory-Based Tradition in Teaching	Structural Factors (Content and Teaching)	Causal Conditions
2	Instructors focus more on delivering religious content than on developing students' thinking skills.			
3	A memory-based approach is used when engaging with sacred texts, without conceptual analysis.			
4	Students are engaged more in content reception than in intellectual engagement.			
5	Weak implementation of critical-thinking development in training Islamic Studies instructors.	Lack of a Thinking-Oriented Approach in		
6	Instructors lack access to adequate resources for applying a thinking-oriented approach.			
7	Most instructors rely on traditional methods and avoid educational innovation.			
8	Islamic Studies curricula have not been revised for many years.	Tendency to Preserve Traditional Stability in		
9	Course content is not designed to meet new intellectual needs			
10	Course content is not designed to meet new social needs			
11	Teaching resources do not align with the evolving characteristics of the younger generation			
12	Rare occurrence of substantive content changes in Islamic Studies courses.			
13	Absence of an Islamic and locally rooted model for thought-centered teaching.	Lack of an Indigenous Conceptual Framework	Epistemological Paradigm Conflict	
14	Instructors are unaware of appropriate frameworks for thought-centered instruction.			
15	Lack of an integrated Islamic approach to thinking in instructor training.			
16	Absence of a unified conceptual framework for designing Islamic Studies courses.			
17	Presence of translated Western texts in analytical course resources.	Dominance of Western Discourse		
18	Conflict between Western humanistic views and Islamic perspectives.			
19	Critical thinking is defined in current sources based on secular foundations.			
20	Students cannot distinguish between Islamic thinking and Western philosophical thinking.			
21	Conflict between instructors' roles as preachers and as academic teachers.	Role and Mission Conflicts		
22	Lack of clear differentiation between the traditional and academic roles of instructors.			
23	Ambiguity regarding whether instructors should act as analysts or promoters of religion.			
24	Blurred boundaries between academic teaching and religious preaching in class.			
25	The new generation does not accept content without reasoning and analysis.	Structural Transformation in the Perceptions and Expectations of the New Generation	Structural Transformation in the Perceptions and Expectations of the New Generation	
26	Students do not accept a purely nurturing role in education (beyond receiving information).			
27	Students' analytical abilities have increased due to access to diverse, comparable sources.			
28	Universities are shifting toward training analysts rather than mere receivers of information.			

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29	Students' perspectives have become more diverse due to fast and broad access to multiple sources.	Increased Access to Information and Influence of Diverse Views		
30	Many students simultaneously receive intellectual input from various media alongside coursework.			
31	Students' thinking has been shaped by exposure to diverse intellectual schools in society.			
32	Students raise new questions after engagement with external sources.			
33	A gap between official discourse and the mindset of the new generation distances students from the core message of the course.			
34	Instructors need to design content based on an understanding of students' intellectual backgrounds.			
35	competition exists between course materials and students' imported mindsets.			

The results of Table 1 show that three selective codes were identified at this stage, with each selective code containing two to three axial codes. In total, the causal conditions category consisted of 8 axial codes and 35 open codes.

Table 2. Classification of Open Codes for the Contextual Conditions Category

Row	Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Codes	
36	Education professors do not have regular contact with other educational groups.	The island structure of faculties	Organizational and institutional structure	Contextual Conditions
37	There is no scientific exchange between other humanities groups and the Education group.			
38	An interdisciplinary dialogue space has not been formed in the university.			
39	Education teaching is carried out in structural isolation from other disciplines.			
40	The content of education courses is not related to other sciences.	Weakness of integrated curriculum planning		
41	In curriculum planning, the integration of religion and religious education with social issues has been ignored.			
42	Students' lack of understanding of the conceptual connection between education courses and other courses			
43	Lack of a specific model for linking religious issues with societal issues			
44	Assessment of education courses based on memorization of content	Lack of a modern evaluation structure		
45	Lack of implementation of analytical assessment methods in education courses			
46	Lack of place for innovative evaluation methods in the education curriculum			
47	Lack of use of analytical tools in evaluation by professors			
48	Lack of support from professors for entering integrated projects	Lack of support for interdisciplinary activities		
49	Lack of acceptance of interdisciplinary proposals in the education curriculum			
50	Lack of sufficient resources for producing joint interdisciplinary content			
51	Lack of official encouragement of interdisciplinary cooperation in the academic system			
52	Cautious attitude of students from war-torn regions towards religious education	Post-crisis (war) era	Social-cultural space	
53	Lack of focus on analyzing religious issues due to mental insecurity			
54	Prevention of the formation of free thinking due to existing social trauma			
55	The impact of the post-crisis atmosphere on weakening the culture of dialogue and exchange of ideas in the classroom			
56	Weakness of scientific criticism and debate skills in education classes	Lack of culture of dialogue and		
57	Lack of space for free dialogue among students			
58	Predominant fear of expressing different views in class discussions			
59	Weakness of the culture of intellectual interaction in education classrooms			
60	Lack of concern and common language between students and professors	The gap between the generation		
61	Lack of addressing current issues during education lessons			
62	Inconsistency between professors' way of expressing themselves and the language of the new generation			

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63	The impact of the generation gap on reducing intellectual interaction between professors and students			
64	Weakness of research experience and scientific production among many education professors	Lack of research experience of professors	Weakness of professional development with a thinking-centered approach	
65	Neglect of research-based education in education teacher training			
66	Improvement of data collection and analysis methods among professors			
67	Limitation of education teaching to direct description and transmission instead of research activity			
68	Lack of a system of continuous scientific evaluation and promotion for professors	Neglecting continuous professional growth		
69	Lack of continuous learning opportunities during teaching service			
70	Professors' feeling of structural needlessness in updating specialized knowledge			
71	No institutional requirement for developing educational and research skills			
72	Education professors' need for professional training courses in teaching thinking			
73	Weakness Systematic training of reasoning skills in the formal education process			
74	Limited number of workshops related to updating teaching methods			
75	Weakness in the higher education system's support for educational innovations in education	Lack of institutional support for educational innovation		
76	Laws and regulations restricting education courses from implementing new teaching methods			
77	Lack of resources and support for creative educational programs			
78	Lack of institutional encouragement for initiative and innovation in the university environment			

According to Table 2, three selective codes were identified in this stage as well, with each containing three to four axial codes. Overall, the contextual conditions category included 10 axial codes and 43 open codes.

Table 3. Classification of Open Codes for the Intervening Conditions Category

Row	Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Codes	
79	Exclusion of course topics due to the possibility of individual ideological perceptions	The dominance of ideological control over content	Institutional and political pressures	Intervening Conditions
80	Variable content restrictions based on local policies			
81	Caution in content development to avoid misunderstanding			
82	The impact of governance on educational independence and freedom			
83	Vague expression of some topics due to fear of political interpretation			
84	Surveillance of external institutions on the content of education classes	A security perspective on education classes		
85	The non-discussible of some topics from the perspective of security institutions			
86	Reduced participation of professors and students as a result of the controlled environment			
87	The formality of the classroom environment limited to communication frameworks			
88	The impact of political affiliation on the process of hiring and promoting professors	Politicization of the academic environment		
89	The difficulty of independent thinking in a politicized environment			
90	The influence of partisan views on educational content			
91	The dominance of factional competitions on scientific interaction in education courses			
92	Insufficient awareness of professors about digital educational tools	Teachers' unfamiliarity with new tools	Technological challenges and resources	
93	Lack of formal training to utilize technology in teaching in new ways			
94	Weak performance of professors in how to use educational software			
95	Resistance of some professors against learning new technology			
96	Non-updating of textbooks Education curriculum	Lack of up		

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97	Incompatibility of resources with the intellectual needs of the present era			
98	Predominance of traditionalism over curriculum content			
99	Limited access to new scientific articles in the field of religious education			
100	Understanding new methods as a factor weakening classroom control	Distrust of new methods	Personal and professional limitations of professors	
101	Doubts about the effectiveness of the thinking-oriented approach in teaching			
102	Predominance of preference for traditional education over educational modernization			
103	Perception of changing teaching styles as a professional threat			
104	Task-oriented view of teaching education among some professors	Weak professional motivation		
105	Weak motivation for academic advancement among education professors			
106	Lack of a reward and evaluation system that encourages creativity in teaching and learning			
107	Lack of clear career prospects for the professional growth of professors			
108	Limited participation in global programs for teaching and learning religious education	Lack of international learning experience		
109	Lack of comparative experience with successful educational systems in teaching religious education			
110	Lack of opportunities for cross-border scientific exchange in education courses			
111	Ignorance of comparative educational experiences and models in teaching education			

The results in Table 3 indicate that three selective codes were identified at this stage, each linked to two to three axial codes. Altogether, the intervening conditions category contained 8 axial codes and 33 open codes.

Table 4. Classification of Open Codes for the Strategies Category

Row	Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Codes	
112	Using real case studies in the classroom to explain religious knowledge	Using social issues in explaining religious teachings	Educational Leadership in the Thinking-Based Education Classroom	Strategy
113	Analyzing social issues such as poverty or justice within the framework of knowledge			
114	Encouraging students to participate in solving real-life problems with a religious approach			
115	Engaging students' minds with concepts based on case studies			
116	Applying religious concepts to social relationships			
117	Applying religious concepts to personal relationships			
118	Dedicating part of the class to practicing critical thinking			
119	Analyzing the concepts of prejudice, weak reasoning, and fallacy			
120	Analyzing examples of logical criticism in the classroom			
121	Using guided discussion and debate techniques			
122	Providing students with some of the material as pre-study	Blended and flipped learning		
123	Dedicating class time to analysis instead of just presenting the material			
124	Preparing questions before class by students			
125	Active thinking and participation using the reverse method			
126	Producing localized resources in simple language for students to produce	Development of new educational resources		
127	Using the combination of religious and social content in content design			
128	Making the course content up-to-date and understandable for the new generation			
129	Using real data from Iraqi society To enrich education:			
130	Defining class projects as a group	Proje ct-based grou	Parti cipat ory and intera	
131	Analyzing problems by students collectively			
132	Require students to actively participate in designing projects			

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133	Presenting and critiquing the results of student projects in the classroom			
134	Inviting professors from other disciplines to give lectures	Interdisciplinary exchange in content		
135	Integrating class content with other humanities subjects (sociology and psychology, etc.)			
136	Encouraging students to relate religious concepts to their field of study			
137	Considering specialized concepts from other disciplines in education			
138	Asking students for their opinions about the class after each session	Use surveys and continuo		
139	Using student feedback to modify teaching methods			
140	Continuous evaluation of the class process to improve methods			
141	The role of the student in designing the learning process			
142	Creating a safe space in the classroom for expressing opposing opinions	Creating a learning environment based on		
143	Welcoming open and logical conversations			
144	Bringing the classroom space closer to two-way and active dialogue			
145	Raising differences of opinion as an educational opportunity			

Table 4 shows that two selective codes were identified at this stage, with each consisting of three to four axial codes. In sum, the strategies category included 7 axial codes and 34 open codes.

Table 5. Classification of Open Codes for the Outcomes Category

Row	Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Codes	
146	Increasing communication between students after attending education classes	Strengthening and improving communica	Social consequences	Outcomes
147	Establishing effective and respectful communication among students			
148	Increasing interaction between students with different interests			
149	The effect of education classes in promoting mutual respect			
150	Increasing participation in social activities by students	Social responsibility		
151	Increasing concern for social problems among students			
152	Increasing students' responsibility towards society			
153	Better understanding of social duties based on Islamic education			
154	Reducing the tendency to risky behaviors due to participation in thinking-oriented classes	Reducing social problems (crime,		
155	Strengthening students' religious views on crime and abnormality			
156	Controlling students' social behavior due to ethical discussions in education			
157	Strengthening students' belief in the ugliness of social crimes			
158	Finding a more meaningful personal connection with spiritual concepts by students	Strengthening individual spiritual life	Individual consequences	
159	Enhancing the role of prayer, supplication, and remembrance in students' lifestyles			
160	Strengthening thinking about life goals			
161	More desire to perform acts of worship in students			
162	Increasing students' mental peace after participating in education classes	Individual mental health		
163	Strengthening the control of negative emotions among students			
164	Reducing feelings of anger and frustration after completing education courses			
165	Feeling more psychologically balanced in the university environment			
166	Students' positive outlook on the future	Positive attitude towards life, life		
167	Students' feeling more satisfied with their personal lives			
168	Creating motivation and effort in life			
169	Increasing hope for achieving goals among students			
170	Strengthening students' ability to endure difficult situations	Resilience and patience in the face of		
171	Better management of psychological pressures by relying on religious education			
172	Seeing a more tolerant approach to failures			

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173	Students feel better and more capable of overcoming crises	Reducing anxiety		
174	Reducing students' worry and anxiety in university situations			
175	More calmness of students by relying on religious values			
176	Education classes act as an intellectual refuge to deal with stress			
177	Reducing mental and psychological concerns in the learning environment			

As shown in Table 5, two selective codes were identified for this category, with each containing three to five axial codes. In total, the outcomes category consisted of 8 axial codes and 32 open codes. In the final step of qualitative data analysis, selective coding was used to refine the categories and integrate them into coherent theoretical constructs. Selective coding represents the most critical phase of theorizing, during which the researcher links the core category to other categories, verifies these relationships, and revises or improves categories that require refinement (Nazari et al., 2017, p. 20). The resulting model derived from this study is presented in Figure 1.

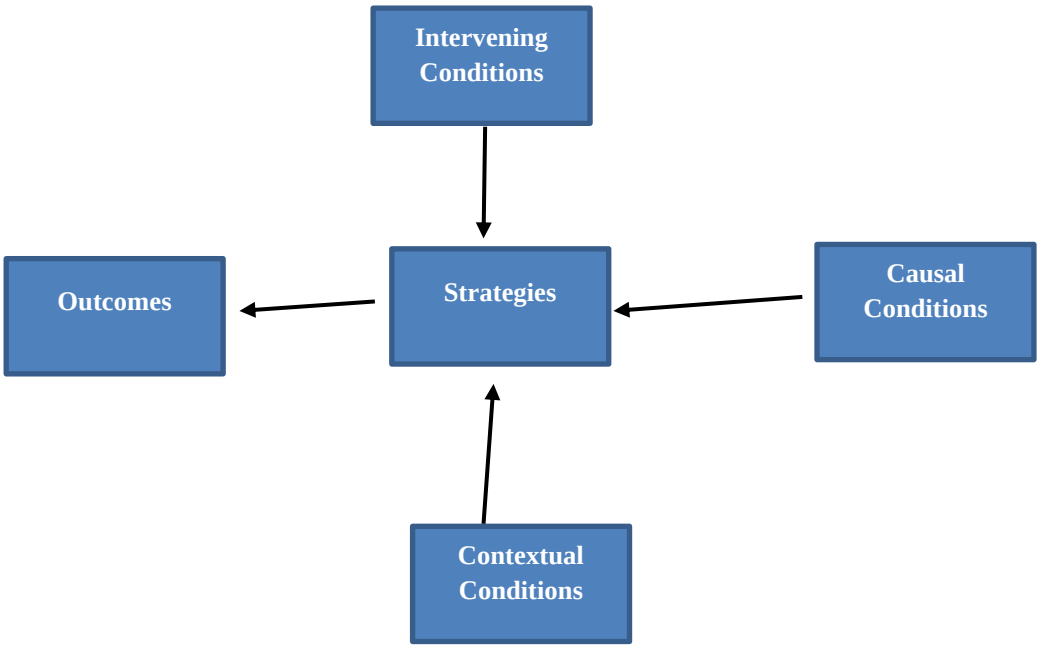


Figure 1. Thought-centered leadership model in teaching Islamic studies courses in Iraqi universities

Discussion

This study was conducted with the aim of developing a thought-centered leadership model for teaching Islamic Studies courses in Iraqi universities, using a qualitative approach grounded in data-based theory. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 Islamic Studies

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instructors and educational administrators, and analyzed using systematic coding. Ultimately, 177 concepts were organized into 13 main categories and 41 subcategories, with “thought-centered leadership in teaching” identified as the central phenomenon—a component around which the causal, contextual, intervening, strategic, and outcome dimensions were formed and dynamically interpreted.

In the causal conditions section, the findings revealed three fundamental roots: the dominance of memory-based traditions and static structures in education; an epistemological paradigm conflict between indigenous religious discourse and Western scientific discourse; and shifts in the perceptions of the new generation of students. These findings align with Habibi (2024) and Abulhul (2021), who identified the prevalence of transmission-based teaching and the lack of critical thinking in Islamic humanities as major barriers to meaningful learning. Similarly, consistent with Yusuf, Peres, and Hamzah (2018), this study found that the new generation of students is more receptive to active, problem-centered learning than traditional instruction—further clarifying the need to shift the instructor’s role from a transmitter of content to a thought leader.

In examining the contextual conditions, two main themes emerged: first, the fragmented organizational structure of universities, which inhibits the integration of religious and scientific knowledge; and second, the socio-cultural climate shaped by post-political crises, which has weakened the culture of dialogue and critique. These findings correspond with those of Azar et al. (2020) and Karim (2024), who emphasized the negative effects of inflexible administrative structures and closed academic cultures on educational innovation. In addition, Safiri (2025) and Afshari-Quzlu et al. (2021) found that the lack of modern evaluation systems and distrust toward dialogical teaching methods are among the major challenges of contemporary religious education—patterns strongly reflected in the present study.

Among the intervening conditions, institutional and political pressures, technological challenges, and the professional limitations of instructors played significant roles. The dominance of ideological oversight and security-driven monitoring has restricted academic freedom—an issue also highlighted by Nahar et al. (2021) in their examination of Middle Eastern universities. Likewise, limited technological and pedagogical competencies among instructors echo the findings of Baharoon & Ammeh (2015) and Mirahmadi (2023), who identified insufficient

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institutional investment in professional development as a core weakness of Islamic higher education in the region.

Two key axes of strategies were identified for implementing thought-centered leadership:

Instructional leadership grounded in critical and reflective thinking in Islamic Studies classrooms, using blended and flipped learning approaches and integrating contemporary social issues to connect religious teachings with real-life contexts.

Participatory and interactive strategies centered on group-based, project-oriented, interdisciplinary, and dialogical engagement between instructors and students. These findings align with Dehqani et al.'s (2023) model of transformative leadership in religious education and also parallel Ahanji's (2018) emphasis on shifting the teacher's role from authority figure to intellectual guide.

The outcomes of applying this model appeared at both individual and social levels. At the social level, results indicated that strengthening human relations and enhancing social responsibility were direct consequences of the thought-centered approach—consistent with Safiri (2025). At the individual level, gains in spirituality, mental well-being, positive attitudes, and student resilience mirrored the findings of Afshari-Quzlu and Habibi, confirming a comprehensive pattern of "internal growth and psychological balance" linked to thought-centered learning.

Analytically, the findings emphasize that thought-centered leadership is not merely a teaching style but a comprehensive educational paradigm. It redefines the relationship between knowledge, faith, and thought, and by integrating religious rationality with modern learning methods, it can respond to the needs of the new academic generation. By balancing educational, developmental, and value-oriented dimensions, this model transforms Islamic Studies courses from "theoretical units" into "transformative educational processes."

Based on the findings and comparison with previous research, the following recommendations are proposed:

Develop comprehensive professional development programs for Islamic Studies instructors focusing on leadership skills and critical thinking.

Revise the curriculum with an emphasis on interdisciplinarity and analytical approaches to Islamic Studies.

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Create safe academic environments by reforming university policies and reducing ideological constraints to promote dialogue and free inquiry.

Integrate modern educational technologies purposefully into the teaching of religious courses.

Expand cross-cultural faculty and student exchange programs to enhance locally grounded yet globally informed thought-centered Islamic education.

In conclusion, consistent with Mirahmadi (2023) and Dehqani et al. (2023), this study demonstrates that sustainable transformation in religious education is not possible without a shift in instructional leadership. Thought-centered leadership, as the central driver of this transformation, has the potential to shape a renewed intellectual and spiritual landscape in Islamic higher education in Iraq and the Arab world by shifting instructors' focus from "knowledge transmission" to "thought cultivation" and by linking Islamic epistemological foundations with contemporary human sciences.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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