



The Primary Education System in the Ottoman Khilafah

Negative campaigns against Muslims and anti-Islamic sentiment have existed since the revelations of the first Ayat of Quran. One of the common assertions made by those wishing to attack the Islamic viewpoint in life is that the Islamic teachings promote ignorance, blind following, create personalities with little tolerance for others and zero respect for technological or social progress, particularly in regards to the issues relating to girls and their empowerment through knowledge.

However if one carefully reviews the historical evidence in an unbiased manner we will find that the Islamic Political System places Knowledge and learning as a matter of the highest priority for both males and females.

Islam promotes a clear understanding that seeking knowledge as an act of worship that will raise you in rank in this life and the next life.

﴿أَمَّنْ هُوَ قَانِتٌ آنَاءَ اللَّيْلِ سَاجِدًا وَقَائِمًا يَحْذَرُ الْآخِرَةَ وَيَرْجُو رَحْمَةَ رَبِّهِ قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ﴾

“Is one who is devoutly obedient during periods of the night, prostrating and standing [in prayer], fearing the Hereafter and hoping for the mercy of his Lord, [like one who does not]? Say, “Are those who know equal to those who do not know?” Only they will remember [who are] people of understanding.” [Quran surah 39 verse 9].

It is this very vision of success that spurred the Islamic rulers to encourage mass literacy in order to understand and practice Quran and Sunnah. The first Islamic State in Medina established the tradition of public learning from the inception of the Prophets Mosque, which was used as a place of educating the young and the old, as well as functioning as a social center for the Muslim community. The Islamic duty to educate led to the establishment of the first Islamic University in the world that of Al Qarawiyyin in the city of Fez, Morocco.

The trend for innovation in education made the Muslim lands a world leader in the field of knowledge and learning, so much so that many elite figures from outside the Muslim lands sought to educate their citizens in the Khilafah State at various periods in history. The most recent Khilafah that of the Ottomans in Turkey, had an outstanding educational model that rivals most institutions in existence today. According to Lord Paul Ricaut (British diplomat, historian, and authority on the Ottoman Empire), *“The education and discipline system of the Turks is one of the main strengths of the politics, and the most important elements that sustains the empire. In this system, neither wealth nor bribery nor being inherently in a superior class nor flattery is not valid; however, it applies virtue, prudence, diligence and discipline. The sultan himself rises a man by calling these characteristics”*.

Given that the 600 year span of the Ottoman Khilafah encompassed a 14 million square kilometers of land that included Cypriot Turks, Greeks, Bulgarians, Pomaks, Serbians, Croatians, Montenegrins, Bosnians, Albanians, Hungarians, Poles, Romanians, Armenians, Georgians, Syriacs, Chaldeans, Arabs, Romanians, Persians, Kurds, Coptics, Ethiopians and Berbers, Ricaut’s comments prove how education system of the Khilafah was a truly inclusive one where the opportunity to learn and improve oneself was denied to none, a problem that no current modern political model has achieved in such a comprehensive manner. With such a vast array of ethnic groups and cultures under one authority we can also see how the Islamic education system was a unifying force as nationalism has no value in the Islamic ideology, ayat from the Quran were taught such as:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتَقَاتُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ﴾

“O Men, We created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may KNOW one another (NOT THAT YOU MAY DESPISE EACH OTHER).”
[Quran 49. Verse 13]

﴿وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافُ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَأَلْوَانِكُمْ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ﴾

“And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and colours. Verily, in that are indeed signs for men of sound knowledge.” [Quran 30: verse 22]

With young minds introduced to such ideas, personalities were molded from an early age to be tolerant and humane to all persons as they were unified as citizens of the Khilafah so sectarian rivalry and hatred was minimalized which fostered a safe and secure society

An analysis of the Primary education system alone will prove how truly vanguard the Ottoman leadership was in securing a truly accessible, practical and praiseworthy educational experience for the youngest most sensitive minds in its care. In the Ottoman Khilafah schooling started at the age of 3 in what was known as the Sibyan (Primary Schools (Sibyan Mektepleri)

In his article published by the International Journal of Humanities and Social Science in 2013 Professor Dr. Selami Sonmez of Atatürk University in Turkey listed the aims of the Primary education system of the Ottoman Khilafah as follows:

1. Teaching Turkish and Muslim children to read Quran fluently and to write in Arabic properly
2. Teaching basics of Islam
3. Teaching the forms of worship in Islam
4. Teaching the principles of ethics in Islam and customs
5. Introducing and teaching true Islamic morals
6. Identifying the abilities of the children
7. Preparing the students for Madrasas.

Schools were either directly sponsored by the state itself or were built and funded by the wealthy individuals or community groups sharing the responsibility to educate the youth. It was not uncommon to have such schools attached to the mosque itself.

Ergin Osman in his 1977 book, *Turkish Education History*, wrote of the immense importance educating all levels of society was to the Ottoman Government that Fatih Sultan Mehmet pioneered that idea of specific funding for schools that only allowed children from poor families or orphans to attend so as to ensure that no needy individual slipped through the net of having the right to an education. He documented the specific protocols adopted for Primary education:

- a. Education in the Primary Schools was free of charge.
- b. A daily monetary allowance of 2 akche was given.
- c. Clothes, fez, shirt, pants, cummerbunds or belts, shoes and hats were distributed to all children.
- d. Food was given.
- e. A trip was organized once a year.

It was not uncommon that richer families would also sponsor poorer children hence promoting social cohesion in the Islamic State.

He also remarked that a child's first day of School was of such social significance culturally that parents, rich or poor, would hold special parties and street parades to commemorate the noble event. The official term for this was known as the “Amen Parade of

Children". Ahmet Rasim in his 1927 work, *Falaka. Istanbul* detailed the ceremony as one that involved feeding of relatives and friends where the child would be honored with gifts and dressed in new beautiful clothes and prayers would be said for their success.

The elaborate celebration of a child's first day at school had the following social function:

- a. To encourage the parents to send their children to the schools
- b. To encourage the fathers of other children next door to the schools to send their children to the school
- c. To encourage the child to start the school
- d. To encourage even growing sisters or brothers and the their neighbours' children to start school
- e. To provide dignity for the child's family

Osman Ergin is quoted in his 1977 research findings that such social importance to schooling cannot be found *"in any other nations' education history!"*

Dr Selami Sonmez (2013) documents that the teaching styles were flexible allowing children to learn at their own pace with more able students being allowed to progress faster and less able student were afforded more time to achieve. Larger classes were supported by the brightest students who were appointed as 'teaching assistants' to the other students, a phenomenon that is only now a recent development in the western schooling system.

In light of the immense historical and sociological evidence available we can conclude that the Ottoman Khilafah model of Primary education completely debunks the myth that the Islamic political system is devoid of respect for knowledge, progress and the education of it girls. On the contrary the limitations on access to education for citizens living in established democracies due to wealth, gender, ethnicity, and social class are well known and all western nations face an ongoing crisis in establishing true equality for its citizens.

In the same 2013 article previously mentioned, Dr. Selami Sonmez commented that the outstanding features of the Ottoman Khilafah's Education System were:

"....even (by) today's world, the features and functions of the Primary School.... are luxury, and there are many countries which has still not reached this concept. " (Primary Education System in Ottoman Empire Assist. Prof. Dr. Selami SONMEZ Atatürk University 2013).

Armed with this knowledge we can now review our fears of a return to the Islamic Political Ruling system and instead carry a positive, hopeful and inspirational vision to all people regarding the great possibilities of elevating humanity with the return of the Khilafah, Islamic State.

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