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EDUCATIONAL REFORM AS AN INSTRUMENT OF ISLAMIC MODERNIZATION: A HISTORICAL STUDY DURING THE ERA OF SULTAN MAHMUD II

Nurfitria Dewi

Universitas Mohammad Natsir Bukittinggi, Kota Bukittinggi, Sumatera Barat, Indonesia
(dewinurfitria99@gmail.com)

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ABSTRACTS

This study examines educational reform during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (1808–1839) as a principal instrument of Islamic modernization in the Ottoman Empire. The research is grounded in the context of political, military, and administrative decline in the early nineteenth century, alongside the growing challenges posed by Western modernity. Employing a qualitative approach based on historical research methods, this study analyzes the background of educational reform, the policies implemented, and their socio-religious implications for Ottoman society. Data were collected through extensive library research using primary and secondary sources and analyzed through heuristic, verification, interpretation, and historiographical stages. The findings reveal that educational reform under Sultan Mahmud II was not merely a technical response to Western advancement but functioned as an ideological and structural mechanism for producing a modern state apparatus and a new class of Muslim intellectuals. Despite resistance from conservative religious groups, these reforms played a crucial role in reshaping state–society relations and laid the groundwork for subsequent reforms during the Tanzimat era. This study highlights the strategic role of education in mediating between Islamic values and the demands of modern governance.

A. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire entered a period of profound decline that threatened its political authority, economic sustainability, and socio-religious cohesion. Once a dominant imperial power, the Empire increasingly lost its competitiveness due to internal administrative inefficiency and mounting external pressure from European states undergoing rapid industrial and political transformation. Recent historical studies emphasize that Ottoman decline was not the result of a single factor, but rather a complex interaction between structural weaknesses and global power shifts that challenged traditional imperial governance (Achdar & Nur, 2022; Panza, 2023).

Economically, the Ottoman crisis was intensified by modernization efforts that produced dependency rather than autonomy. Attempts to introduce industrial technologies—such as steam-powered machinery in the 1830s—were accompanied by excessive reliance on European imports, which hindered the development of domestic industries and weakened fiscal resilience. This dependency reduced economic competitiveness and aggravated existing financial instability, ultimately fueling widespread public dissatisfaction (Brameswari & Iskarna, 2022; Kurt & Şehitoğlu, 2022). As a result, modernization policies failed to deliver equitable socio-economic benefits, deepening the legitimacy crisis of the Ottoman state.

Politically and socially, the Empire faced increasing fragmentation driven by nationalist movements among ethnic groups such as Greeks and Serbs, whose demands for autonomy were reinforced by European geopolitical intervention. These internal pressures were compounded by ideological tensions arising from the introduction of Western political concepts, including secularism and liberal governance. Although secular reforms became more pronounced in the post-Ottoman period, their intellectual roots can be traced to earlier reform debates that generated resistance among conservative religious groups, producing enduring social polarization (Brameswari & Iskarna, 2022; Saylan & Çelikoglu, 2021).

Beyond the Ottoman context, the wider Islamic world encountered significant challenges posed by Western modernity, particularly the spread of secularism, liberalism, and materialism. Globalization intensified cultural penetration and reshaped social values, especially among younger generations, often generating tensions with established Islamic traditions (Nawaz & Hussain, 2025; Zubairi et al., 2024). At the same time, Muslim intellectuals increasingly sought to reinterpret modernity through Islamic ethical and spiritual frameworks, arguing for an alternative engagement that integrates modern knowledge without eroding religious identity (Maulud & Syaifuddin, 2025; Rahman, 2025).

Within this complex historical and ideological landscape, Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839) emerged as a reformist ruler who identified education as a strategic instrument for imperial renewal. Rather than limiting reform to military restructuring, Mahmud II positioned education at the core of his modernization agenda. The establishment of secular schools, curriculum reforms, and the dispatch of students to Europe aimed to cultivate a new generation capable of supporting administrative efficiency, military professionalism, and intellectual transformation (Baysan, 2024; Bilgin, 2023; Menekse, 2022). Education thus functioned as a means of shaping both state capacity and social consciousness.

From an Islamic perspective, these educational reforms align with the concepts of *tajdid* (renewal) and *islah* (reform), which historically legitimize adaptation in response to changing social realities. Recent studies highlight that Islamic education has long served as an agent of social transformation, mediating between religious values and contemporary demands (Fahrurrozi & Ichsan, 2024; Febriyani & Nursikin, 2024). Rather than negating Islamic principles, reform-oriented education seeks to integrate moral ethics, rational inquiry, and scientific knowledge, reflecting a dynamic understanding of Islam's engagement with modernity.

This study therefore examines educational reform during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II as an ideological, structural, and socio-religious instrument of Islamic modernization. By situating Ottoman educational policies within both imperial decline and broader Muslim encounters with Western modernity, this article addresses a gap in recent scholarship that often treats education as a secondary component of reform. Drawing on contemporary studies of Islamic education and modernization (Komariah & Nardaullah, 2025; Permana et al., 2024; Ubaidillah, 2024), this research argues that education constituted a central mechanism through which the Ottoman state sought to reconcile Islam and modernity, laying the foundation for subsequent reforms in the Tanzimat era.

B. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in the historical method to examine educational reform during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II as an instrument of Islamic modernization. The historical approach is selected to enable a contextual and critical understanding of the socio-political, religious, and intellectual conditions that shaped educational reform in the Ottoman Empire in the early nineteenth century. Rather than merely reconstructing events, this research adopts a descriptive-analytical perspective that explores the causal relationships between imperial decline, encounters with Western modernity, and the strategic positioning of education within the reform agenda of Sultan Mahmud II.

Data were collected through comprehensive library research utilizing both classical and contemporary sources, including historical documents, academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and prior studies on Ottoman reform and Islamic education. The data collection process involved systematic documentation techniques, encompassing the identification, selection, and organization of materials related to educational, administrative, and socio-religious reforms. Data analysis followed the standard stages of historical analysis: heuristics (source collection), source criticism to assess authenticity and credibility, interpretative analysis to contextualize educational reform within Islamic modernization, and historiography for coherent narrative construction. To ensure validity and objectivity, source triangulation was applied by cross-referencing multiple scholarly works and perspectives.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Historical Context and the Foundations of Reform under Sultan Mahmud II

The reform agenda initiated by Sultan Mahmud II must be understood within the broader context of the Ottoman Empire's structural decline in the early nineteenth century. At the time of his accession, the Empire faced mounting internal dysfunction marked by bureaucratic corruption, fiscal instability, and the erosion of military

effectiveness. Externally, sustained pressure from European powers such as Russia and Austria exposed the Empire's inability to compete within an evolving global order shaped by industrialization and centralized governance. These conditions necessitated a comprehensive reform strategy rather than piecemeal policy adjustments.

From a historical perspective, Sultan Mahmud II inherited not only a weakening state apparatus but also a fragmented social order. The Janissary corps, once the backbone of Ottoman military strength, had transformed into a politically entrenched institution resistant to innovation. Meanwhile, provincial elites exercised increasing autonomy, undermining central authority and tax collection. Recent scholarship emphasizes that these structural problems rendered traditional mechanisms of governance ineffective, thereby compelling reformist rulers to seek alternative models of state organization (Bilgin, 2023; Menekse, 2022).

The intellectual climate of the period further shaped the foundations of reform. Encounters with European military defeats forced Ottoman elites to acknowledge the technological and organizational superiority of Western states. This recognition did not immediately translate into cultural imitation, but rather into pragmatic reform thinking oriented toward state survival. In this sense, reform under Sultan Mahmud II was neither purely ideological nor reactionary; it was a strategic response to existential threats confronting the Empire.

Crucially, Sultan Mahmud II's reforms differed from earlier attempts in that they aimed to restructure the relationship between the state, society, and knowledge production. Education emerged as a central domain through which new administrative rationality, military professionalism, and social discipline could be cultivated. This shift marked the beginning of a reform paradigm in which education was no longer confined to religious institutions but was reimagined as a state-controlled instrument of modernization.

Military Reform and the Elimination of Structural Resistance

One of the most decisive moments in Sultan Mahmud II's reform agenda was the dissolution of the Janissary corps in 1826, an event historically referred to as *Vaka-i Hayriye* (the Auspicious Incident). Originally established as an elite military unit, the Janissaries had evolved into a conservative political force that actively resisted military modernization. Their opposition rendered incremental reform impossible and posed a direct threat to central authority. The decision to abolish the corps therefore reflected a calculated act of structural transformation rather than mere coercion.

The elimination of the Janissaries enabled the establishment of a new, centralized military institution modeled on European standards. This new army emphasized standardized training, hierarchical command structures, and the use of modern weaponry. European military instructors were recruited to introduce tactical discipline and technological expertise, signaling a shift from traditional warfare toward professionalized armed forces. Scholars note that this transformation marked a turning point in Ottoman military organization, aligning it more closely with contemporary state models (Permana et al., 2024; Tukenmez, 2023).

Importantly, military reform under Sultan Mahmud II was inseparable from educational reform. Military academies became sites of knowledge transmission where mathematics, engineering, and modern sciences were taught alongside tactical instruction. These institutions represented an early convergence of education and state-building, reinforcing the notion that knowledge production was essential to military

and administrative efficiency. Thus, military reform functioned as both a practical necessity and a catalyst for broader educational restructuring.

Despite its effectiveness, the abolition of the Janissaries also generated long-term social repercussions. The violent nature of the reform intensified distrust among conservative groups and reinforced perceptions of authoritarian governance. Nevertheless, from a historical-analytical standpoint, the reform succeeded in removing a structural barrier that had long impeded modernization, thereby enabling subsequent reforms in administration and education.

Administrative and Legal Reforms: Centralization and Rational Governance

Alongside military restructuring, Sultan Mahmud II pursued extensive administrative reforms aimed at strengthening central authority and bureaucratic efficiency. The traditional Ottoman administrative system, characterized by patrimonial relationships and fragmented authority, proved inadequate in managing the complexities of a modern state. To address this, Sultan Mahmud II introduced new ministries, including those responsible for internal affairs, foreign relations, and defense. These institutions facilitated clearer division of responsibilities and more systematic governance.

Administrative reform also entailed the reconfiguration of legal authority. While Islamic law (*sharia*) remained influential in matters of personal status, the Sultan introduced secular legal mechanisms to regulate administrative, commercial, and criminal affairs. This dual legal system reflected a pragmatic approach that sought to balance religious legitimacy with administrative efficiency. Recent studies highlight that this legal rationalization reduced arbitrary decision-making and enhanced state control over governance processes (Baysan, 2024; Boyraz, 2023).

The codification of laws represented another significant aspect of legal reform. By systematically documenting legal procedures, the state aimed to standardize judicial practices and limit interpretive disparities among judges. This development marked an early step toward legal modernization and reinforced the central role of the state in defining normative frameworks. Importantly, these reforms were not intended to abolish Islamic principles but to delineate their scope within a modern administrative structure.

From an analytical standpoint, administrative and legal reforms under Sultan Mahmud II reinforced the structural foundations necessary for educational reform. A rationalized bureaucracy required trained personnel capable of operating within new institutional frameworks. Consequently, administrative reform created demand for educated civil servants, thereby strengthening the strategic importance of state-controlled education.

Educational Reform as an Instrument of Islamic Modernization

Education occupied a pivotal position in Sultan Mahmud II's reform agenda, functioning as a bridge between Islamic tradition and modern state requirements. Recognizing the limitations of traditional madrasah education in addressing administrative and technological needs, the Sultan established secular schools oriented toward practical knowledge. These institutions introduced curricula encompassing mathematics, natural sciences, military engineering, and foreign languages, reflecting European educational models adapted to Ottoman contexts.

One of the earliest manifestations of this reform was the establishment of *Rushdiye* schools, which marked a transition toward compulsory and standardized education.

These schools aimed to cultivate discipline, literacy, and loyalty to the state, thereby reshaping social consciousness. Scholars argue that *Rushdiye* education played a crucial role in producing a new class of bureaucrats and officers aligned with reformist ideals (Bilgin, 2023; Menekse, 2022).

Educational reform also extended beyond domestic institutions through the dispatch of students to Europe. These students were expected to acquire technical expertise and return as agents of modernization. While this policy facilitated knowledge transfer, it also introduced ideological tensions, as exposure to Western thought challenged established religious and cultural norms. Nevertheless, this strategy reflected Sultan Mahmud II's belief that engagement with modern knowledge was indispensable for state survival.

From an Islamic perspective, educational reform under Sultan Mahmud II can be interpreted through the concepts of *tajdid* and *islah*. Rather than rejecting Islamic values, reformist education sought to reinterpret them in light of changing historical circumstances. Education thus functioned as an ideological instrument that mediated between tradition and modernity, reinforcing Islam's adaptability to socio-political transformation.

Social Transformation and the Emergence of a New Intellectual Class

The educational reforms initiated under Sultan Mahmud II contributed significantly to social transformation within the Ottoman Empire. The expansion of secular education facilitated the emergence of a new intellectual class characterized by bureaucratic competence and exposure to modern knowledge. This group increasingly occupied strategic positions within the military, administration, and legal institutions, thereby reshaping the social hierarchy.

This transformation altered traditional power relations, particularly between religious elites and state officials. While the *ulama* retained authority in religious matters, their influence over state governance diminished as secular institutions expanded. This shift generated tension but also reflected broader patterns of modernization observed in other Muslim societies. Recent analyses emphasize that such transformations were integral to the reconfiguration of state-society relations (Komariah & Nardaullah, 2025; Permana et al., 2024).

Education also facilitated increased social mobility by providing new pathways to state employment. Individuals from non-elite backgrounds could access administrative positions through formal education, thereby weakening hereditary privilege. This development contributed to the gradual formation of a middle class that supported reformist policies and identified with emerging notions of national identity.

However, social transformation was uneven and often contested. Access to education remained limited in peripheral regions, and resistance persisted among groups who perceived reform as a threat to established norms. Despite these challenges, educational reform under Sultan Mahmud II laid the groundwork for long-term social restructuring.

Resistance, Negotiation, and the Limits of Reform

Despite its transformative aspirations, Sultan Mahmud II's reform agenda encountered substantial resistance from conservative religious groups and provincial elites. These actors perceived reforms—particularly secular education and legal rationalization—as threats to Islamic values and local autonomy. Resistance manifested

in ideological opposition, social unrest, and, at times, open conflict with state authorities.

To address internal resistance, Sultan Mahmud II employed a combination of negotiation and coercion. He sought legitimacy by engaging progressive religious scholars who supported reformist interpretations of Islam, while simultaneously suppressing groups deemed obstructive to state consolidation. The dissolution of the Janissaries exemplifies the use of repressive measures to eliminate structural opposition, though such actions also intensified perceptions of authoritarian rule.

Internationally, Sultan Mahmud II navigated diplomatic challenges by strengthening alliances with European powers, particularly France and Britain. These relationships provided access to military expertise and technological resources essential for modernization. However, reliance on European support also exposed the Empire to external influence, raising concerns about sovereignty and dependency. Analytically, resistance to reform underscores the inherent tensions within modernization processes. Sultan Mahmud II's experience illustrates that reform is not merely a technical endeavor but a deeply political process shaped by competing interests and ideological contestation.

Long-Term Implications and the Foundations of the Tanzimat Era

The reforms initiated under Sultan Mahmud II had enduring implications for the Ottoman Empire and the broader Islamic world. Most notably, they laid the institutional foundations for the Tanzimat era, during which reform efforts expanded to include civil rights, legal equality, and economic modernization. Education continued to play a central role in these developments, reinforcing its significance as a long-term instrument of modernization.

Socially, the emergence of an educated middle class facilitated further reform initiatives by providing administrative capacity and ideological support. This class became a driving force behind intellectual debates on governance, law, and identity, contributing to the evolution of Ottoman political thought. Scholars emphasize that these transformations were cumulative rather than immediate, reflecting gradual shifts in institutional practices (Baysan, 2024).

Internationally, military and administrative modernization improved the Empire's diplomatic standing and negotiation capacity. Although the Ottoman Empire ultimately dissolved, reforms under Sultan Mahmud II extended its longevity and enhanced its adaptability to global pressures. From a comparative perspective, these reforms influenced modernization efforts in other Muslim societies, including Egypt under Muhammad Ali Pasha.

Contemporary Relevance and Lessons for Islamic Societies

The reform experience of Sultan Mahmud II offers valuable insights for contemporary Muslim societies grappling with modernization challenges. One key lesson is the centrality of education in mediating between tradition and innovation. Investment in education enables societies to adapt to global changes while preserving ethical and cultural foundations.

Additionally, Sultan Mahmud II's reforms highlight the importance of institutional coherence and political leadership in driving change. While authoritarian methods may yield short-term results, sustainable reform requires inclusive engagement and social legitimacy. Modern reform initiatives can learn from both the successes and limitations of Ottoman modernization. Finally, the Ottoman case

demonstrates that Islamic values and modern governance are not inherently incompatible. Through strategic reinterpretation and institutional reform, education can function as a transformative force that reconciles faith with contemporary realities.

D. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that educational reform under the reign of Sultan Mahmud II constituted a central instrument of Islamic modernization within the Ottoman Empire. Faced with profound military, administrative, and socio-political decline, Sultan Mahmud II repositioned education from a primarily religious domain into a strategic state apparatus aimed at producing disciplined bureaucrats, professional soldiers, and reform-oriented intellectuals. Through the establishment of secular schools, curriculum transformation, and overseas educational missions, education functioned not merely as a technical response to Western superiority but as an ideological and structural mechanism for redefining the relationship between Islam, the state, and modern governance. These reforms reflected a pragmatic application of *tajdid* and *islah*, illustrating Islam's capacity to engage constructively with modernity without relinquishing its ethical foundations.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that while Sultan Mahmud II's educational reforms generated significant resistance from conservative groups and faced limitations in implementation, their long-term impact was substantial and enduring. Educational modernization contributed to social transformation, the emergence of a new intellectual class, and the institutional groundwork of the Tanzimat era, shaping subsequent reform trajectories within the Ottoman Empire and influencing modernization efforts in the broader Islamic world. The Ottoman experience underscores the strategic importance of education in reform processes and offers valuable lessons for contemporary Muslim societies seeking to balance tradition and innovation. Ultimately, this study affirms that education, when integrated within a coherent reform vision, can serve as a powerful catalyst for socio-religious transformation and sustainable modernization.

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