Historical Background of Islamic Education Modernization

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical background of Islamic education modernization from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century by using a historical approach grounded in library research. Drawing on documentary and bibliographic sources, the study analyzes four dimensions: the epistemological narrowing of Islamic education in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the intellectual and institutional advancement of the West, the disruptive effects of colonialism on Muslim societies, and the emergence of modernization consciousness among Muslims. The findings show that the crisis of Islamic education was not a total decline, but a narrowing of curriculum, pedagogy, and intellectual inquiry that weakened the balance between memorization, reasoning, and integrative learning. At the same time, Western scientific progress, political power, and colonial expansion exposed the limitations of inherited educational structures and accelerated reformist responses across the Muslim world. The study finds that modernization in Islamic education emerged not as imitation of the West, but as a selective process of renewal aimed at restoring intellectual vitality, institutional relevance, and civilizational agency while remaining grounded in Islamic values. These findings imply that Islamic education should approach modernization as critical reconstruction rather than unreflective Westernization, integrating religious foundations with broader intellectual and social demands in educational practice.

Keywords:
colonialism;
Islamic education;
modernization;
Muslim societies;
Western advancement

INTRODUCTION

Islamic education should be understood as a dynamic historical tradition rather than as a fixed and unchanging system. Across different periods, it has functioned not only to transmit religious knowledge, but also to shape moral formation, intellectual culture, and social order within Muslim societies. For that reason, the modernization of Islamic education cannot be reduced to the simple adoption of Western schooling. It is better seen as a long process of negotiation between inherited Islamic epistemologies, shifting political conditions, and new educational needs. Recent scholarship accordingly treats Islamic education as an evolving field whose development is closely tied to broader

questions of knowledge, authority, and civilizational change (Niyozov & Memon, 2011; Sahin, 2018).

Within this longer trajectory, many scholars identify the later premodern period as a time in which important sectors of Muslim education became increasingly constrained in their intellectual scope. Sabic-El-Rayess (2020), for instance, argues that Islamic educational thought experienced a major epistemological shift from an earlier, more inclusive and rational pursuit of knowledge toward a narrower emphasis on religious knowledge alone. Although the language of "decline" should be used carefully, this line of scholarship helps explain why later Muslim reformers viewed educational stagnation as a serious internal problem. What concerned them was not merely political weakness, but also the growing perception that educational institutions had become less open to intellectual renewal, broader inquiry, and integrative learning.

The urgency of reform became sharper when Muslim societies encountered the expanding power of Europe from the eighteenth century onward. Scholarship on modernity and the "Great Divergence" shows that Europe's scientific, economic, and geopolitical transformations created a widening asymmetry in global power, including in relation to Ottoman and other Muslim polities. Maziak (2017) argues that the scientific gap between much of the Muslim world and the modern West cannot be explained by Islam itself, but must instead be understood through broader historical and institutional developments. Likewise, Duzgun (2018) shows that the Ottoman experience needs to be read within changing geopolitical structures rather than through simplistic civilizational narratives. These perspectives clarify why modernization entered Muslim educational discourse as part of a wider struggle over knowledge, power, and survival in a rapidly changing world.

Colonial expansion further intensified this pressure by reshaping political authority and disturbing older educational arrangements in many Muslim societies. Research on colonial and postcolonial Muslim contexts shows that the encounter with Western rule often compelled Muslim educators to renegotiate the relationship between religious learning and state-oriented models of schooling. In Kelantan, Malek (2021) examines how British expansion affected Islamic culture and institutions in the emergence of the modern state, while Sikand (2009) shows that debates about Muslim "backwardness" in India frequently ignored creative attempts to combine deen and duniya, or religious and

modern education. This suggests that modernization was not simply imitation of the West, but also a defensive, adaptive, and reconstructive response to colonial domination and institutional disruption.

It was in this context that Muslim reformers increasingly placed education at the center of civilizational renewal. Hatina (2006) argues that education occupied a central place in modern Islamic thought because it was expected not only to purify faith, but also to cultivate activism and restore communal vitality. Building on that insight, this article examines the historical background of Islamic education modernization from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century through four interconnected dimensions: the perceived stagnation of Muslim education, the rise of Western power, the experience of colonialism, and the emergence of modernization consciousness among Muslims. From this perspective, the modernization of Islamic education should be understood as an effort to recover intellectual vitality while remaining grounded in Islamic values and responsive to new historical realities.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative historical-analytical design grounded in library research. Rather than generating field-based data, it examines documentary and bibliographic materials to reconstruct the historical background of Islamic education modernization. Such a design is appropriate because historical inquiry depends on the careful use of source materials, contextualization, periodization, and interpretive analysis, while document analysis offers a systematic way to review and interpret written records in order to generate historically informed understanding (Westberg, 2025; Bowen, 2009).

The data for this article consist of documentary and bibliographic sources relevant to the history of Islamic education, including classical works, modern scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and historical studies discussing educational stagnation, Western intellectual advancement, colonialism, and Muslim reform. In line with documentary historical analysis and bibliographic research, the study does not treat all texts as equal evidence; instead, the materials were selected on the basis of their relevance to the topic, their historical coverage, and their capacity to illuminate key shifts in educational thought and practice (Grazziotin et al., 2022; Morgan, 2022).

The analytical procedure was carried out in several stages. First, relevant sources were identified and collected through purposive library searching. Second, the selected documents were appraised in relation to authorship, historical relevance, credibility, and connection to the research problem. Third, the materials were organized according to three broad historical periods—classical, medieval, and modern—and then classified into four thematic axes: intellectual stagnation, Western advancement, colonial domination, and the emergence of modernization consciousness. Finally, the documents were interpreted comparatively in order to trace continuity, transformation, and causal relationships across historical periods, rather than merely presenting a chronological description of events (Bowen, 2009; Mogalakwe, 2006; Westberg, 2025).

To strengthen the rigor of the study, the analysis relied on cross-reading and comparison among multiple sources rather than on a single historical narrative. Recurring arguments, major turning points, and explanatory patterns were identified, coded, and synthesized so that the discussion remained both historically grounded and conceptually coherent. Consistent with recent scholarship on qualitative document analysis, credibility in this study was pursued through systematic source selection, transparent thematic categorization, and interpretive consistency across the documentary corpus (Morgan, 2022; Wood et al., 2020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Stagnation of Islamic education in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

The first major finding is that the condition described in the draft as the "stagnation" of Islamic education is more convincingly understood as an epistemological narrowing than as a complete cessation of intellectual life. The patterns highlighted in the draft, including conservatism, dependence on commentary traditions, contraction of the curriculum, and the excessive privileging of memorization, indicate that the educational system became increasingly oriented toward preservation rather than renewal. Sabic-El-Rayess (2020) argues that the history of Islamic education includes a shift from an earlier integration of rational and religious forms of knowledge toward a narrower emphasis on religious knowledge alone. In a related vein, Niyozov and Memon (2011) show that Islamic education has continually evolved through debates over authority, knowledge, and identity, which suggests that later premodern educational change should be read not

simply as "decline," but as a historically specific reordering of what counted as legitimate knowledge.

From this perspective, the most significant educational problem was not memorization itself, because memorization has always had an honored place in Islamic pedagogy, but the weakening of the balance between memorization, understanding, reasoning, and intellectual inquiry. The draft's observations about limited creativity and reduced curricular breadth therefore point to a deeper pedagogical issue: educational transmission became less dialogic and less open to integrative learning. Sahin (2018) argues that Islamic education must be understood through its rich intellectual, theological, and historical traditions rather than through rigid binaries that oppose tradition to critical reflection. Read historically, then, the narrowing of curriculum and pedagogy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries helps explain why later reformers perceived the need to reconnect religious learning with broader intellectual and social capacities.

B. Western intellectual advancement and its impact on Muslim societies

The second finding is that Western advancement operated not only as a technological or military development, but also as an epistemic challenge to Muslim societies. The draft correctly associates Western power with major transformations such as the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, and the reorganization of political authority. However, recent scholarship cautions against reducing this process to a simple civilizational triumph. Duzgun (2018) criticizes Eurocentric accounts of the "Great Divergence" and argues that the Ottoman case must be interpreted through broader questions of property, geopolitics, and world-historical development. Similarly, Maziak (2017) contends that the scientific lag in many Muslim-majority contexts cannot be explained by Islam itself, but by social, institutional, and political conditions. Accordingly, Western superiority became historically decisive because scientific progress was coupled with state capacity, military organization, and economic expansion.

For Islamic education, the importance of this development lay in the shock of comparison. Once Muslim societies were confronted with the administrative efficiency, scientific productivity, and military effectiveness of European powers, inherited educational structures increasingly appeared inadequate to new historical conditions. This does not mean that the Islamic intellectual tradition lacked internal resources for

renewal. Rather, as the draft implies, educational institutions were no longer producing sufficient engagement with the forms of knowledge needed to respond to rapidly changing political and material realities. In this sense, Western advancement became one of the main external pressures that exposed the limits of a narrowed educational model and intensified calls for reform.

C. Colonialism and the need for Islamic education modernization

The third finding is that colonialism intensified pre-existing educational tensions by transforming not only territory and economy, but also institutions, knowledge hierarchies, and cultural authority. The draft emphasizes warfare, inequality, social stratification, cultural erosion, and religious intervention, and these themes remain analytically important. Yet the discussion becomes stronger when colonialism is framed as an institutional process rather than merely an external act of domination. Malek (2021), in his study of British expansion in Kelantan, shows how colonialism affected Islamic culture and institutions within the wider emergence of the modern state. Likewise, Sikand (2009) demonstrates that in colonial India, efforts to modernize Islamic education often aimed to bridge deen and duniya, or religious and worldly education, rather than to replace one with the other. Colonial pressure therefore reshaped the educational field itself, compelling Muslims to rethink the structure, function, and public role of education.

This helps explain why modernization in Islamic education emerged as both resistance and adaptation. Reformers were responding not only to military defeat, but also to the colonial reclassification of knowledge and the growing separation between "religious" and "modern" schooling. What later became educational dualism should therefore be understood as a historical product of colonial and postcolonial restructuring, not as an original feature of Islamic intellectual life. Educational modernization was thus directed toward restoring institutional relevance while preserving Islamic moral and theological commitments. In that respect, the draft's argument that colonialism stimulated introspection is persuasive, but it becomes more academically precise when linked to the reorganization of educational authority under colonial rule.

D. The growth of modernization consciousness among Muslims

The fourth finding is that modernization consciousness among Muslims grew out of the convergence of internal critique and external pressure. The draft presents this consciousness as a response to backwardness, colonization, and the widening gap between Islamic normative ideals and historical reality. This interpretation is consistent with Hatina's (2006) argument that education occupied a central place in modern Islamic thought because it was expected not only to purify faith, but also to cultivate activism and restore communal vitality. Modernization consciousness, then, did not begin as a rejection of Islam. Rather, it emerged as an attempt to reactivate Islamic teachings as a civilizational resource capable of responding to modern crises.

For that reason, modernization in Islamic education should not be interpreted as mere imitation of the West. Niyozov and Memon (2011) show that Islamic educational thought has long been shaped by negotiation between continuity and change, while Sahin (2018) argues for a critical educational engagement that resists both unreflective secular borrowing and anti-modern closure. Read in this way, the rise of reformist consciousness in the nineteenth century represented a project of selective reconstruction: an effort to reconnect revelation, reason, ethics, and institutional reform so that Islamic education could respond to contemporary realities without surrendering its normative core. This interpretation also makes the draft's conclusion stronger, because it frames modernization as a historically grounded effort to renew Islamic education from within rather than as a passive response to Western dominance alone.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the modernization of Islamic education emerged from the interaction between internal epistemological narrowing and external historical pressure. The findings indicate that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were marked less by a total absence of intellectual activity than by a narrowing of educational priorities, seen in conservative scholarly habits, limited curricular scope, and the dominance of memorization over critical and integrative learning. At the same time, Western scientific, political, and organizational advancement exposed the growing inadequacy of inherited educational structures, while colonialism further disrupted Muslim institutions, knowledge hierarchies, and cultural authority. In response to these combined pressures, modernization consciousness developed among Muslims as an effort to restore

intellectual vitality, institutional relevance, and civilizational agency without abandoning the normative foundations of Islam. The main implication of this study is that Islamic education modernization should be understood not as simple Westernization, but as a selective and historically grounded process of renewal that seeks to reconnect religious knowledge with broader intellectual, social, and institutional needs.

This study is limited by its reliance on library research and historical interpretation, which means that its conclusions depend on the scope, quality, and representativeness of the selected sources rather than on archival, ethnographic, or field-based evidence. In addition, because the discussion is organized around broad historical themes, it does not examine in detail the regional diversity of Muslim experiences or the specific contributions of individual reformers, institutions, and local educational movements. Future research should therefore investigate the modernization of Islamic education through comparative case studies across Muslim societies, closer engagement with archival and primary historical materials, and more focused analyses of how reformist ideas were translated into institutional practice. Further studies may also explore how the historical logic of modernization continues to shape contemporary Islamic education in responding to globalization, state policy, and changing knowledge demands.

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