

## **MUHAMMAD ABDUH ON THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE**

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### **Abstract**

This article analyzes the views of Muhammad Abduh, a prominent Islamic thinker who lived and worked at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, regarding the educational system of the Ottoman Empire. It examines the activities of traditional religious educational institutions—madrasas and schools—operating during the Ottoman period, their role in socio-political life, and the content of education. The study highlights Abduh's reformist approach to education and his efforts to harmonize religious and secular sciences.

**Keywords:** Muhammad Abduh, Ottoman Empire, education system, madrasa, Islamic reformism, religious and secular education, ijihad, enlightenment, modernization, science.

### **Introduction**

The socio-political and cultural transformations that occurred in the Islamic world at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries necessitated fundamental reforms in the educational system. Particularly within the territory of the Ottoman Empire, education emerged as a key factor in social development and faced the challenge of balancing religious traditions with the demands of modern science. In this context, the ideas of Muhammad Abduh—one of the leading representatives of Islamic enlightenment and reformism—are of particular significance.

Muhammad Abduh interpreted education as the primary force capable of renewing society and leading it toward progress. He critically analyzed the internal problems of the madrasa and school systems operating during the Ottoman period and emphasized the need to modernize educational content in accordance with contemporary demands, to integrate religious and secular sciences, and to implement teaching methods based on reason and rational thinking. In Abduh's view, stagnation in the educational system was one of the main obstacles to the scientific and moral development of society.

According to Abduh, although the number of schools and madrasas in the Ottoman state was not small in proportion to the population, they were insufficient in meeting the actual needs of society. The majority of rural populations and Arabs living in remote regions did not consider

education for their children necessary and therefore failed to provide adequate upbringing. Consequently, reforms in curricula would not benefit them, as they remained outside these reforms. The same situation applied to those who had passed school age [1, p. 72]. However, both groups constituted an integral part of the state and possessed rights and obligations. Their ignorance harmed both themselves and the state, indicating the need for their moral and spiritual reform.

This reform could only be achieved by encouraging them to educate their children. If the state were to assume full responsibility for building schools for their children, it would face a heavy financial burden. Therefore, one of the duties of preachers and spiritual guides was to encourage wealthy individuals to contribute financially to the construction of schools according to their means. For this purpose, societies and commissions should be established in each region.

Spiritual guides were to be selected from among individuals who were well-versed in religious and literary sciences, knowledgeable in ethical matters, practiced what they preached, and were capable of guiding people in all respects. Each preacher had to speak fluently and clearly in the language of their people.

In addition, Friday sermons needed urgent reform and should be entrusted to qualified individuals. Preachers were required to warn the public about the moral and social problems they directly observed, explain their harmful consequences, and guide people toward the right path, as this constituted the primary purpose of Friday sermons.

Abduh then presented a general conclusion and anticipated the following questions:

- Where are the books recommended for the first and second social groups?
- Where are the specialists who will educate the third group?
- Where is the guidance community fully trusted by the state?
- How will the expenses be covered?
- Will educating the third group not take a long time? [2, p. 57]

Abduh answered these questions by stating that preparing the necessary books for the first and second groups was relatively easy and could be accomplished promptly under the supervision of the Shaykh al-Islam. As for educators for the three groups, including the guidance community, although it might be difficult to find them in every city, a sufficient number could be identified across the Muslim world to initiate the project, provided the intention was sincere and aimed solely at pleasing God. Such individuals would be pious, morally upright, uninterested in worldly positions, and devoted to religious service.

Regarding the long duration required to educate the third group, Abduh noted that Christian clergy underwent specialized training for at least 15–20 years. Given that their teachings were based on falsehood, it was not surprising that those seeking truth would require extensive study to fully comprehend all aspects of the matter.

In terms of financial support, Abduh emphasized that although few in number, educated and loyal wealthy individuals undoubtedly existed. The state should encourage citizens in this regard, and utilizing the financial capabilities of wealthy Muslims in the Ottoman lands would not be particularly difficult if the task were entrusted to competent hands. These conclusions were based on Abduh's long-term experience with Muslims and his deep understanding of their moral character. Those who sincerely serve religion never fall into despair, for only unbelievers despair of God's mercy [2, p. 89].

Muhammad Abduh, a great thinker, sociologist, and reformer, was one of the most influential figures in the modern Islamic world. Alongside his valuable works, he left behind a large generation of students. His ideas spread across a wide geographical area, giving his writings significant impact.

According to Abduh, profound transformations were necessary for the Islamic world to overcome its stagnation. Among the most important reforms were educational reform, restructuring of al-Azhar, and the inclusion of modern sciences in curricula.

Abduh initially expressed his educational views through the press, emphasizing that indifference to modern scientific achievements was unacceptable and that reform in education and culture was essential. Nations progress only through the advancement of knowledge; therefore, educating citizens and widely disseminating knowledge was imperative [3, p. 187]. Abduh also demonstrated great interest in modern Western philosophy, particularly works on ethics, education, and social philosophy. He recognized that the primary factor behind Western superiority was its high level of education and scientific development. Consequently, he considered the reform of educational institutions a top priority. During his tenure as a government representative on al-Azhar's administrative council, he successfully introduced subjects such as mathematics, literature, and geography into the curriculum and established the al-Azhar library.

Abduh developed a distinctive methodology for youth education. He believed that Islam constituted the foundation of education and provided a system that nurtured individual personality rather than suppressing it. Educational systems, in his view, were the driving force behind societal moral and cultural change. Education first creates the conditions for change and then implements it. The laws that shape society are, fundamentally, its educational laws [4, p. 27].

In projects prepared under the initiative of Sultan Abdulhamid II to reform religious education, Abduh emphasized that Muslims' greatest weakness was insufficient knowledge of religious fundamentals. He argued that doctrinal corruption led to moral and practical decline and that reforming religious education and enhancing public cultural awareness were essential remedies. Accordingly, he proposed well-structured educational programs in his reform projects.

## Conclusion

Muhammad Abduh's views on the educational system of the Ottoman Empire clearly demonstrate the decisive role of education in the modernization of Muslim society. He critically assessed the gap between traditional religious knowledge and modern sciences and justified the necessity of educational reform. Abduh advocated intellectual freedom, reliance on reason and *ijtihad*, and the development of critical thinking within the educational process. The dominance of madrasa education, coupled with its insufficient adaptation to contemporary needs, was identified as a key characteristic of the Ottoman educational system. Without rejecting religious education, Abduh supported its integration with natural and social sciences. He believed that only such an approach could ensure the scientific, cultural, and social development of Muslim society.

In conclusion, Muhammad Abduh's reformist perspectives on Ottoman education remain relevant today, providing an important theoretical foundation for harmonizing tradition and modernity in education, enhancing intellectual capacity, and guiding society toward progress.

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