

The Role of Schools in Islamic Society: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

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Education in Arabia before Islam

There are at least three opinions concerning the status of education on the Arabian peninsula prior to the advent of Islam. The first opinion assumes that the Arabs were an illiterate people, void of any knowledge of science or any other indicator of educational progress. It maintains argue that the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace), to whom the Qur'an was revealed, was himself illiterate, thus reflecting his society's educational state; and that those living in the pre-Islamic Arabian peninsula were steeped in ignorance and controlled by myths, superstitions, and the worship of idols.¹

The second opinion concerning the days of ignorance (the pre-Islamic period [*jahiliyyah*]) concentrates on the extent to which the Arabs acquired knowledge of those sciences that were necessary for their daily lives. For example, Mustafa Mutawali discusses the study of astronomy as an aid to traveling, the study of weather conditions (meteorology), and the study of traditional healing in medicine.² The pre-Islamic Arabs also studied the science of tracking, genealogy, and poetry. While this line of historical research does not necessarily contradict the first, the issue is one of emphasis, with Mutawali and others demonstrating that the pre-Islamic Arabs were not totally void of knowledge.

The third opinion focuses on the knowledge acquired by the upper strata of pre-Islamic Arab society. A very small minority of upper class individuals were well versed in the skills of reading, writing, mathematics, and business administration. Some scholars have asserted that only 17

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people in Makkah could read and write when the Prophet Muhammad's mission began.³

An examination of these three historical perspectives of education in pre-Islamic Arabia provides a good background from which to start a discussion of education in the Islamic society founded by the Prophet Muhammad. The people of Makkah had extensive trade relations with the societies of Rome, Abyssinia, Persia, and Byzantium, who were materially and educationally more advanced. The apparent sophisticated relations that Makkah had with these societies could not have been carried out by a people who were totally ignorant of the prevailing knowledge of their day. However, historians agree that the masses of people were overwhelmingly illiterate. At the Battle of Badr, the Prophet ordered that the nonbelievers, who were captured and could not pay for their release, should be freed if they taught ten Muslims to read and write. What this suggests is that there were among the Quraysh those who could read and write but who were not wealthy. This also indicates the status that education would have in the emerging Islamic society.

Islam and Education

From its inception, the religion of Islam honored education and strongly encouraged Muslims to study and learn. There are many *ayat* (verses) from the Qur'an and Hadith (the Traditions) from the Prophet that stress the importance of education. Allah says in the Qur'an:

Allah will raise up to (suitable) ranks (and degrees) those of you who believe and have been granted knowledge. (58:11)

Say: Are those equal those who know and those who do not know? (39:9)

If you realize this not, ask of those who possess the message. (16:43)

"O my Lord! Increase me in knowledge." (20:144)

The first educator in Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, said, "Scholars carry the heritage of the prophets."⁴ The Prophet continually encouraged his companions to seek knowledge. His home was the first Islamic school, a place where they learned about their *din* and their roles as Muslims. As the number of Muslims grew, the Prophet Muhammad moved his school to Dar al-Arqam Ibn Abi al-Arqam in Makkah. There, the Prophet taught his companions how to recite the Qur'an and interpret its meaning, and there he transmitted the Sunnah. Thus, Dar al-Arqam is considered by many Muslims to be the first Islamic school, a place where the first group of Muslim leaders and scholars were trained.⁵

The Prophet's *hijrah* from Makkah to Madinah signaled a corresponding shift in the focus of Islamic education. Before the arrival of the Prophet and the *muhajirin*, Madinah had no history of widespread literacy amongst its inhabitants. It was an agriculturally based society, isolated from the popular trade routes that characterized Makkah. In terms of institutions of learning, there was only a local Jewish home that served as a religious studies center.⁶

Despite the lack of a literary tradition in both Makkah and Madinah, those who were educated were respected for their knowledge and accorded a high social status. Even the *kahanah* (those who specialized in sorcery) were respected because of their knowledge of certain scientific phenomena. Therefore, one of the first goals of the Prophet Muhammad was to spread knowledge among the Muslims. For this reason, Muhammad sent Mus'ab ibn 'Umayr to teach the people of Madinah the Qur'an, the Shari'ah, and other aspects of Islamic knowledge.

The early Muslims considered the acquisition of knowledge to be a religious obligation based on the Prophet's saying that "the seeking of knowledge is an obligation of every Muslim male and female."⁷ Regardless of race, sex, age, or social status, Muslims found that Islam gave them ample opportunity to seek knowledge.⁸ Islam also considers teaching to be a noble profession in that the Prophet himself said: "Verily, as for the scholar, Allah, His angels, the dwellers in the Heavens and on the Earth, even an ant in its hole and the fish (in the depth of the sea), invoke blessings on he who teaches people goodness."⁹ His teaching guided the early Muslims on the Arabian peninsula to unprecedented standards of civilization, morality, and justice.

In the early years of the Islamic society, the focus of education was on enhancing literacy within the context of recitation and interpretation of the Qur'an. The *khulafa' rashidun* continued the tradition established by the Prophet. The Caliph 'Umar sent Muslim scholars and those who could read with the army that they might remain to teach in those areas that were brought under the rule of the Islamic state. Educational movements and schools were established in virtually every place these scholars settled.¹⁰ Thus in the early years of the Islamic state (the era of the Prophet and the *khulafa' rashidun*), the scholars and the literate among the Muslims served as ambassadors to newly incorporated lands. As the Muslim nation grew, the focus of education continued to be the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the Islamic sciences. However, with the advent of the Umawi Caliphate, greater attention was given to the teaching of the Arabic language. The mastery of Arabic was not only a tool for enhanced knowledge of Islam, but it also was essential for those who wished to work in the various administrative units (*dawawin*) of the Islamic state. For example, as Islam spread into the Persian empire, Arabic eventually supplanted Persian as the official language of government administra-

tion. This Arabization process existed throughout the Islamic state, with Arabic becoming the official language of government administration throughout the Muslim nation.

The First School in Islam

The Prophet's mosque in Madinah was not only the first school in the Islamic state, it was the first public school on the Arabian peninsula. Here education was available free of charge with no discrimination or differentiation among the Muslims on the basis of race, age, color, or gender. The mosque offered lodging to students who were poor and to those who had traveled from distant lands to acquire Islamic knowledge. Those who wished to live and work in Madinah were able to reside at the mosque until they found employment.¹¹ As Badawi has noted: "The task of the masjid is an educational one which freed human beings from the stigma of ignorance, and provided them with knowledge and virtue."¹² Na'im has commented that "the Prophet's masjid in Madinah was the first school in Islam where education with its principles, values, behaviors and relations was found. (Then) the history of education in Islam was based on the masjid as a focus of relationships, an institute for teaching (education), a court of justice, a gathering point for the Army, a place for receiving ambassadors, and so on."¹³ In the beginning, the curriculum of the Prophet's mosque consisted of the religious subjects such as Qur'an, Sunnah, Hadith, and Shari'ah. Later, subjects such as language and literature were added to these transmitted sciences (*al-'ulum al-naqliyah*). As the Islamic state expanded its boundaries and the Muslims increased their interactions with other cultures and civilizations, the curriculum was expanded to include what were known as the rational sciences (*al-'ulum al-aqliyah*), such as medicine and astronomy.

The role of the Prophet's mosque as the first school in the Islamic state laid a strong foundation for the development of Muslim schools and universities in succeeding generations. It was a comprehensive institution that served as the center of Muslim social, political, economic, judicial, and educational life.

During the caliphate of 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab, a number of schools (*katafif*) were established.¹⁴ In addition, over time the mosque lost its unique function as the only educational institution in the Islamic nation. The efforts of the caliphate to integrate diverse peoples into the ummah, along with advancements in the acquisition of scientific knowledge required the establishment of independent institutes, organized schools, literary councils, bookstores, and libraries.¹⁵

The initial period of the Islamic state saw education taking place independent of any central governing authority. The rapid growth of the Islamic nation, however, along with eventual ideological conflicts (e.g.,

Sunni vs. Shi'ah), created a situation that mandated government intervention. By the fourth century after the hijrah, during the Abbasid era, the central government was playing a major role in the establishment of new schools, the hiring of teachers, curriculum development, and policy formulation.¹⁶

Al-Katatīb

The actual date of the establishment of this type of school is a matter of some dispute among scholars. Some authors have argued that *katatīb* existed in Arabia before the advent of Islam.¹⁷ Others have suggested that *katatīb* were not known until the early years of Islam. Those who support the latter view argue that only Islam could have inspired the kind of dedication to learning on the Arabian peninsula that resulted in the massive effort to memorize the Qur'an and render it into book form.¹⁸ The majority of scholars of this period, however, contend that the Caliph 'Umar was the first to order the establishment of these schools with the purpose of teaching children the Qur'an, reading, and writing. Prior to that time, the education of young children was confined primarily to attending *halqahs* in the mosque with their parents.¹⁹ Hasan 'Abdu al-'Al mentioned that *katatīb* were established "after the masjid, in those areas in which Islam spread east and west during the time of Caliph 'Umar, a time when Muslims felt the need to expand the teaching of Islam and insure the memorization of the Qur'an by Muslim children."²⁰

There were two types of *katatīb*, one for the teaching of reading, writing, and basic math (here it was permissible for Muslim children to be taught by Christians and Jews), and one for teaching religious subjects and the Qur'an.²¹ Males were admitted to *katatīb* from age 6 until the memorization of the Qur'an was completed or until approximately age 14. Females were accepted from age 6 and generally stayed until age 9.

The school day started after *fajr* prayer and continued until 'asr prayer, with a lunch break around *dhuhr* prayer. The school week ran from Saturday through Thursday.

The administration of *katatīb* was generally free from any intervention by the Islamic government, unless there were reports of innovations or distortions of Islam. Teachers generally owned the schools and established their own curricula. This type of institution spread throughout the Muslim world, becoming very numerous by the end of the second century after the hijrah. *Katatīb* contributed greatly in introducing basic reading and writing during the Umawi period. This was a period of extensive cultural interaction between Arabs and other peoples coming into the fold of Islam. The rapidly expanding Islamic state required an approach to education that taught not only the Qur'an and the religious subjects, but also met the needs of Muslims for basic literacy skills.

Katatīb continued to play a major educational role in the Abbasid era, during which other institutions—such as literary councils, bookstores, and libraries—began to play major roles in education. Also, increased political stability, growth in financial resources, a paper industry, and other elements of advanced civilization helped increase the accessibility of education to the masses of people.²² By the second half of the fifth century after the hijrah, the introduction of government-funded, public schools led to a decline in both the importance and necessity of *katatīb*.²³

There were a variety of educational institutions that reflected the development of education in Islamic civilization between the time of the Prophet and the establishment of what are known today as public schools, colleges, and universities. These include the palaces of various Caliphs, princes, and wealthy individuals; the houses of literary councils and scholars; and bookstores and libraries.

Palaces

The palaces of the caliphs, the amirs, and the wealthy were regularly used as the location of scientific and literary lectures, symposia, and debates. Tutors were brought into the palace to provide instruction to the children residing in the palace. Tutors were generally seen as both respectable and influential people because of their access to the caliph, the amir, or the wealthy.²⁴

Literary Councils

Gatherings at the home or palace of the caliph were a regular feature of Islamic society from the time of the *khulafa' rashidin*. It was during these times that many of the affairs and problems of the ummah were discussed, often accompanied by lively debate. During the era of the *khulafa' rashidin* such gatherings were simple ones in which any Muslim could come and go at any time and participate in the discussion. Through the Umawi era, these kinds of meetings continued to take place at the palace of the caliph with few modifications but with some restrictions on who could attend. It was still, however, generally structured in a simple way. During the Abbasid era, the nature of the meetings became more organized, formal, restricted in terms of attendance, and scientific in subject matter. Primarily, they became settings for the elite elements of the society and those close to the caliph. Famous scholars in the various branches of knowledge were often invited. Meetings began at a certain time and were dismissed by a sign from the caliph himself.

These gatherings made a great contribution to the cultural and scientific progress made by the ummah. The sophisticated nature of the subject matter and the status of the participants promoted an atmosphere of scholarly exchange that had few parallels throughout the world. By the Abbasid era, the caliph himself was known as a knowledgeable and high-

ly educated man. The Caliph Al-Ma'mun, for example, established a research center called Bayt al-Hikmah (House of Wisdom) that housed an astronomical observatory, a bureau for translation, and a large library.²⁵ The gatherings of the learned served greatly to enhance the status of education within the Muslim nation and to expand the frontiers of knowledge and science.²⁶

Scholars' Homes

The homes of scholars were used as places of study from the advent of Islam; e.g., Dar al-Arqam bin Abi al-Arqam and the Prophet's house in Makkah. Scholars' houses were particularly important as early Islamic educational institutions prior to the widespread establishment of schools in the Muslim world.²⁷ Al-Saqar has noted that "organized subjects were taught in their houses that were structurally designed for (educational) purposes."²⁸

Bookstores

There is general agreement among historians that bookstores were established from the beginning of the Abbasid Caliphate. Bookstores eventually assumed the role of gathering place for the educated, the knowledgeable, and students from diverse places. Debates and discussions were held on a daily basis, thus creating a setting that contributed greatly to scientific progress and the expansion of knowledge in the Muslim world.²⁹

Libraries

Libraries were the educational institutions that immediately preceded the widespread establishment of public schools. They were basically scientific and cultural centers that concentrated on empirical research and study. A library was called Dar al-Hikmah.³⁰ Mustafa Mutawali has suggested that "Bayt al-Hikmah is considered an example of the progress in the Abbasid era."³¹

Schools

The fourth century after the hijrah in the Muslim world (during the Abbasid Caliphate) was a time of cultural and scientific renaissance. Educational development during this period is traceable to a variety of factors, including the following:

- interaction of diverse cultures;
- freedom of thought;
- proliferation of Arabic among the educated throughout the ummah;
- technological development and the need for specialization in areas of knowledge, such as medicine and mathematics;
- increased travels of Muslim scholars between the East and the West;
- widespread availability of education;

- tolerance within ideological debates among Muslim scholars and also between Muslims and non-Muslims;
- diversity found within newly translated materials acquired from non-Muslim countries;
- competition that came about when the ummah split into various states during the second half of the Abbasid era;
- differences and competition based on *madhhab*; and
- the accumulation of surplus wealth that could be invested in education.

Ultimately, economic and social change within the ummah resulted in a movement toward government-supported educational and vocational specialization. The Muslim society's need for literate specialists coincided with a situation in which students were no longer able to master all branches of knowledge.³²

'Abdu al-'Al suggests additional influences that lead to the ultimate establishment of public, government supported schools in the ummah. They include the following: the large increase in the number of potential students; advances in the accumulation of scientific knowledge; growing ideological conflicts between Sunni and Shi'ah Muslims;³³ and creation of a new strata of Sunni scholars, judges, and administrators who would fill religious, scientific, and government jobs.³⁴

Generally, educational historians agree that schools, as government organized and funded educational institutions, were not known in the Muslim world before the end of the fourth century after the hijrah. Much of the literature suggests that Naisabour in Iran was the location of the first public school in the Islamic state. The school was called Al-Bihaiyah, and it was started by Abu Ishaq al-Asfrayni who died in 418 A.H. However, it is the establishment of the Nizamiyah School in Baghdad in 459 A.H. (1066 C.E.) by the Seljuk minister, Nizam al-Mulk, that truly signaled a shift from the other institutions (mosques, palaces, bookstores, and scholars' houses) to organized, government-supported schools. From that time onward, public schools spread throughout the Muslim world in an organized manner, with government authorities, merchants, and upper class individuals competing to establish schools. Thus, a new and prosperous era in the development of Islamic schools had been ushered in.³⁵

Al-Saqar has suggested that the school was "a result of more than four centuries of the development of the Islamic educational system."³⁶ From the establishment of the Nizamiyah schools, the government began to influence the direction of educational policy through its role in the appointment of teachers. Abadhah has noted that "the state had active participation in the establishment of schools from the fifth century hijrah. Therefore, the school became one of the states organized institutions."³⁷ The government's role in establishing, funding, and administering

schools gave it the right to control areas such as curriculum development. For example, when schools were established by the Fatimi Caliphate in Egypt, the government required that the curriculum be based on the Shi'ah ideological orientation.³⁸

Although there is general agreement that the Nizam al-Mulk schools were the starting point for more organized, public schools, these schools have been criticized because they were established for primarily political reasons, i.e., to check Shi'ah ideology that was spreading throughout the Muslim world, particularly in Egypt, Iran, and Iraq.³⁹ The Nizamiyah schools promoted the Shafi'i madhhab, exclusively, and even adherents of other Sunni madhhabs were not allowed to study in them. It was not until the Abbasid Caliph, al-Muntaser, established the al-Mustansiriyah School in Baghdad in 631 A.H. (1234 C.E.) that a government supported school accepted adherents of all four Sunni madhhabs—Hanafi, Shafi, Hanbali, and Maliki.⁴¹ This was truly a major development in the history of education in the Muslim world.

- *The Teachers:* In the early years of Islam, teachers performed their roles voluntarily, only for the sake of Allah. Those who were qualified to teach came to the mosque to teach students virtually any subject at any time. They were appreciated and given great respect by the people because their motives for teaching were noble and pure. Since there was no financial compensation for teaching, the overwhelming majority of teachers had other occupations. However, as Islam spread and Muslims came into increasing contact with foreign cultures, teaching as a solely voluntary vocation became impossible. Teaching eventually took its place among the professions, and teachers received salaries for performing their roles.⁴¹ Mutawali suggested that with the political, social, geographic, and economic changes in the Islamic state, teaching took its place among the other professions and that some Muslim thinkers began to consider teaching as a truly noble profession.⁴²

In the early years there were no formal institutes for the training of teachers. Self-education was the major form of teacher training, i.e., having the self-motivation to learn to read, write, and recite the Qur'an. Teachers had the freedom to teach what they saw as necessary, with no external restraints.

- *Curriculum and Methods:* From the beginning, Islamic education used the Qur'an and Sunnah as its foundation and source of direction. Idris has noted that "the Qur'an is the basis of teaching because it contains the Islamic instructions which organize Muslim life in the religious and secular affairs."⁴³ Thus, in the early period of Islam, the focus of attention was on the religious subjects such as Qur'an, *tafsir* (interpretation), and hadith. However, as the Islamic state expanded and Muslims interacted with other cultures, especially in the Abbasid era, disciplines such as medicine, mathematics, and philosophy were introduced. These

were known as the *'ulum 'aqliyyah* (sciences of reason), as opposed to the *'ulum al-din* (sciences of religion).⁴⁴

Teaching methods in the Islamic educational system depended upon the age of the students. For younger students, more attention was given to student attitudes and individual differences. While rote memorization was used, approaches such as reading aloud, reading stories about historical figures and events, and learning through play were all used by Muslim teachers. Teachers also gave advice and direction, served as role models, and attempted to balance motivation and punishment as ways of dealing with students. Approaches to teaching older students included discussion, dialogue, lectures, and debates.⁴⁵

Muslim teachers generally dealt with their students in a kind manner, and encouraged interaction between students. Noted Muslim educators such as Ibn Khaldun encouraged teachers to be kind, encouraging, and cooperative with their students. In general, teachers were encouraged to use a step-by-step approach to dealing with discipline: first, ignore the misbehavior; second, warn the student privately; and third, use light physical punishment.⁴⁶

The history of Islamic education reflects a transition from the simple *halqah*, which focused on religious knowledge and housed in the mosque, to complex institutions such as universities and public schools, which taught both the religious and the so-called secular subjects. Education was available to all Muslims irrespective of race, ethnicity, or national origin, and it served as a major force in civilizing the various Muslim peoples across the earth.

Modernization, Colonialism and the Dual Educational System

Early efforts to modernize the Islamic educational system in the beginning of the 19th century C.E. were military in their objectives and not educational. The end of the brief French occupation of Egypt was followed by the emergence of Muhammad Ali Pasha as Egypt's semiautonomous governor. Although still nominally under the control of the Ottoman sultan in Istanbul, Muhammad Ali initiated many policies independent of Turkish control. One of these policies was the modernization of the army.⁴⁷ A school was established in 1816 by Muhammad Ali that taught military tactics, horse riding, and the use of arms, in addition to Qur'an, Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Italian. In 1826, he sent a large contingent of students to France for training, while during this same general period he established a military school under the supervision of a French army officer and French instructors.⁴⁸ Tibawi has noted the following:

The success of the new institutions in producing the officers who trained an efficient army was proved in Arabia and Greece, where at the command of the sultan it was sent to quell revolts. So successful was his army that Muhammad Ali decided to introduce further improvements in the institutions.⁴⁹

Over time, Muhammad Ali developed an entire educational system designed to meet the increasing requirements of his military establishment. Elementary schools were established that fed into preparatory schools, each of them producing students that would ultimately serve the army of Muhammad Ali. These schools ran parallel to the traditional schools that had existed for centuries under the authority of the *'ulama*.

When Muhammad Ali's reign ended in the middle of the 19th century C.E., a number of the educational practices he initiated remained. Large numbers of Egyptian students were sent to Europe to be educated. Schools established by foreigners in Egypt, particularly Catholic missionary schools, began to flourish and ultimately attracted increasing numbers of Muslim children.⁵⁰ This period in the history of Islamic education was one during which the political leaders of the Islamic state (the Ottoman sultans) were mesmerized by the military prowess of the European powers and attributed their military strength to superior education.

The second half of the 19th century C.E., therefore, saw many reforms introduced into the traditional Islamic system that brought it more in line with the European approach. As the stage was set for the eventual colonial domination of the Muslim world by the European powers, a form of educational colonialism had already been firmly planted in the Islamic state. The dual educational system, one religious and one secular, that came to characterize the Muslim world was not, therefore, the sole invention of the colonizers. They only refined and elaborated upon a system that had its roots in the Muslims' loss of self-confidence and their inability to reconcile modern education and Islamic education.

As the western colonial powers eventually imposed themselves on one Muslim people after another, it became clear that one of their primary strategies of continued domination and subjugation would be education. The process of colonization itself only served to increase the sense of self-doubt that had crept into the Muslim world. Many Muslims began to identify with the culture and values of the colonialists and to prefer their form of education to the traditional Islamic system. The colonialists exploited this crisis in Muslim identity through the establishment of a secular system of education designed to prepare an elite group of indigenous Muslims to assume low-level government positions in colonized lands under what, for example, the British called "native administration."

In order to fulfill the role of training a core group of colonized Muslims as government functionaries, new kinds of schools had to be established.

The development of schools in Sudan during the late 1800s and early 1900s represents an example of the systematic design of educational institutions to serve the needs of the colonial administration.

This relationship between education and employment on one hand and education and political change on the other was a fundamental part of [Governor General] Cromer's idea on the role of education. Such education was needed as would help the administration to function and distract the educated from revolt by giving them employment. His emphasis on technical and vocational education was not only because of the need for skilled workers—but also for its political role . . . by limiting general education to a small class, he aimed at weakening the nationalist movement. As the natural consequence of education in his view was the production of a class wanting to get rid of foreign rule, he advised that it should be confined to those who were needed for employment.⁵¹

In 1901 the “educational needs” of Sudan were officially defined as follows: the creation of a native artisan class; the diffusion of education among the masses of people sufficient to enable them to understand the the most basic elements of the machinery of government; and the creation of a small native administrative class who would ultimately fill many minor posts.⁵²

In the case of Egypt, it was the reign of Muhammad Ali that laid the foundation for the dominance of secular education over Islamic education.

The ulama, their economic independence ended, declined in prestige The new schools and training institutions which he founded ended their monopoly of the means of education. Furthermore, the content of the traditional Islamic curriculum was an inappropriate preparation in a country undergoing modernization. The development of westernized education lapsed for a time after Muhammad Ali's death, and its social consequences did not become fully apparent until the second half of the century.⁵³

The declining influence of traditional Islamic schools continued in Egypt throughout the latter half of the 19th century C.E..

The recruitment of teachers for schools of the new type remained a problem. In 1871 Ali Mubarak, one of the leading Egyptian reformers, opened a college known as Dar al-'Ulum to provide higher education in both Islamic and western subjects. In the following year, fifty students from al-Azhar, who had received a traditional Islamic education, were selected for training in Dar al-'Ulum. By 1879,

there were about thirty modern state primary schools in Egypt (the great majority of them in Cairo), while the number of foreign and community schools rose from 59 to about 150.⁵⁴

Thus, even prior to the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, efforts at “modernization” were well underway. After the complete dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, modernization and secularization became synonymous. There was no longer even the semblance of an Islamic state, and the colonial rulers ran the educational affairs of the Muslims in a manner that focused solely on the requirements of colonization. One of these requirements was replacing a Muslim’s loyalty to the ummah with his loyalty to the nation-state. The nation-states that comprised the bulk of the Muslim world were creations of the colonial powers designed with the concept of “divide and rule.” National entities were created that allowed the colonialists to exploit ethnic and tribal differences. Some tribes or ethnic groups, particularly if they were non-Muslim, were given economic and educational advantages, thus sowing the seeds for many of the internal, national rivalries that have continued to the present day.

Tibawi has made the following observation on the nationalistic ideology that took root in the process of educating Muslims:

Viewed from the vantage point of the present, Islamic education is a mere shadow of its past. Its modernization has in the end led to its complete transformation. The modern systems have not simply supplemented it as was intended by the early modernists; they have in fact supplanted it, even though not always by the conscious efforts of the modernists. Indeed, some of these still pay more than lip service to Islamic educational tradition as may be observed in certain state constitution[s], in national laws and also in the curricula. But there is no making the radical shift in educational and practice from religious to national orientation.⁵⁵

The contemporary revival of Islam has raised a number of important questions concerning the purposes and content of education for Muslims. Efforts are underway, first, to analyze the nature of educational problems and, second, to propose solutions that are based in the Qur’an and the Sunnah.

Contemporary Efforts to Islamize Education

Throughout the Muslim world, efforts are underway to provide an Islamic framework for the education of Muslim children and youth. In those countries that have governments openly supportive of an Islamized educational system, increased attention is being paid to reducing the dichotomy between religious and secular education. There is a recogni-

tion that Islam must be infused into the entire curriculum and that the Islamic and secular frames of reference cannot peacefully co-exist.

In 1977, the first World Conference on Muslim Education was held in Makkah. Scholars from throughout the Muslim world deliberated on the status of Muslim education and issued a number of resolutions aimed at Islamizing the educational process. These resolutions included the following:

- The training imparted to a Muslim should be such that faith is infused into the whole of his personality and creates in him an emotional attachment to Islam, thus, enabling him to follow the Qur'an and the Sunnah and willfully and joyfully submitting to the Islamic system of values so that he may proceed to the realization of his status as khalifat, to whom Allah has promised the authority over the universe.
- Education should promote in man the creative impulse to rule himself and the universe as a true servant of Allah, not by opposing and coming into conflict with Nature, but by understanding its laws and harnessing its forces for the growth of a personality that is in harmony with it.
- There must be a core knowledge, obligatory for all Muslims at all levels of the educational system (from the highest to the lowest), graduated to conform to the standards of each level.
- Contemporary knowledge in the field of scientific and social development and information must be given to pupils at all levels.⁵⁷

Apparently from current efforts, a new attempt is being made within the ummah to reconcile modern, secular education with the traditional, Islamic approach. This reconciliation is often discussed within the distinction between *fard 'ayn* knowledge (the revealed sciences) and *fard kifayah* knowledge (the acquired sciences). Imam al-Ghazzali made this distinction when he discussed the religious sciences (*al-'ulum al-khabariyyah*) and the rational sciences (*al-'ulum al-'aqliyah*). The revealed (religious) sciences include the Qur'an, the Sunnah, the Shari'ah, theology (*tawhid*), Islamic metaphysics (*al-tasawwuf*), and linguistic sciences (Arabic).⁵⁷ The acquisition of knowledge in these sciences is incumbent upon every Muslim male and female.

The acquired (rational) sciences include the social, natural, and technological sciences. Acquisition of this knowledge is incumbent upon some members of the Islamic society, but not all. The ummah is in need of doctors, teachers, engineers, and other professionals. When some Muslims acquire this knowledge, the rest of society is no longer responsible. However, if no one acquires this knowledge, all members of the society are held accountable. Clearly, education for Muslims must reflect a synthesis of the revealed and acquired sciences. This, in essence, means that Islamic education will reflect a unification of secular and religious

knowledge, thus eliminating the dual educational system that has afflicted the Muslim world under colonialism.

Unifying the two systems should create the opportunity to eliminate their major shortcomings, namely, the inadequacy of archaic textbooks, the inexperience of many teachers in the traditional system, and the mimicry of the secular West in methods and ideals in the public system. . . .

The union of the two education systems is expected to do more than bring means to the Islamic system and autonomy to the secular. It is expected to bring Islamic knowledge to the secular system and modern knowledge to the Islamic system. It is criminally negligent to entrust Muslim youths at the elementary and secondary education levels to missionaries or non-Muslim educators; this must be stopped.⁵⁸

This vision of Islamization is currently providing the major stimulus for the reform of Muslim education. Throughout the Muslim world, educators are discussing and debating ways of replacing the dominant secular approach with a balanced Islamic approach thoroughly grounded in the revealed sciences. It is essential that these dialogues include the need to transform the Muslim school from simply a caricature of the Western model into an institution dedicated and prepared to serve the needs of the ummah.

A transformation of the role of the school in the Islamic society must be accompanied by a willingness on the part of Muslims throughout the ummah to alter their conceptions of, for example, the traditional time frames for school and the structure of the academic year. There is nothing sacred, for example, in twelve years of primary, intermediate, and secondary education. Children starting school at age 4 with two years heavily devoted to Qur'anic memorization would provide a strong foundation in both Qur'anic knowledge and memory training. The relevant aspects of modern early childhood education could be applied as needed. This would include, for example, sufficient time devoted to play activities and the development of pre-reading and pre-math skills.

In addition, the nine-month school year, which has become the norm in so many places, is an outgrowth of the needs of an agriculture-based, pre-industrial American society where children were needed in the summer to work their families' farms. Currently in the United States, a number of school systems are experimenting with full-year academic programs. The adoption of full-year programs in Islamic schools would provide greater time to give students both revealed and acquired knowledge.

Muslim educators must be willing to use creative and innovative approaches to curriculum development and program implementation in their efforts to meet the educational needs of Muslim children and soci-

ety. Schools can serve as focal points for Muslim community education in much the same way as the mosque did in the early years of Islam. Adult literacy courses, arts and crafts classes, and Islamic studies circles can also be operated within the context of an Islamic school designed to meet a variety of needs.

The Islamization of education must become a priority not only among Muslim educators but among the business, scientific, and professional sectors of the ummah as well. The ummah cannot expect to produce doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and scientists totally committed to Islam until the educational system, from primary school through secondary school and the university, is reflective of the Islamic world view. As schools are Islamized, an increased commitment to Islam on the part of the educated should naturally follow. No longer will the ummah be afflicted by those Muslims whose education has alienated them from their identity as Muslims.

Conclusion

The history of schools in the Islamic society is one of development and transformation. From the mosque-based *halqah* in the early years of Islam to the current state-run public school systems, sincere Muslims have struggled to make the Qur'an and the Sunnah the guiding lights of Islamic education. Through ideological struggles, modernization, colonization, and now westernization, those committed to the concept of the Islamic school have held fast to the rope of Allah and steadfastly persevered in their endeavors. Allah says in the Qur'an:

Verily Allah is with the patient. (2:153)

Those who are responsible for the establishment of Islamic schools must show patience in a variety of ways. Their steadfastness will, *in sha' Allah*, ease the path for millions of Muslim children and adults to pursue an Islamic education that will benefit them both in this life and in the Hereafter.

Notes

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4. Nasir al-Din al-Albani, *Sahih Sunan al-Tirmizi*, vol. 2, first edition, hadith no. 2159 (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States, 1988), p. 342.
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6. Salah al-Ali, *The State in the Time of the Prophet* (Al-Mujama'a al-Ilmy al-Iraqi Press, 1988).

7. Husayn Amin, *The Mustansiriyah School* (Baghdad, Iraq: Shafeeq Press, 1960); Nasir al-Din al-Albani *The Small Collection of Alahadith and Its Additions*, 2nd edition, hadith no. 3913 (Beirut, Lebanon: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1986), p. 727. This hadith was narrated by Altabarani, Anas, Albihagi, Ibn Abbas and others.
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9. Muhammad al-Tabrizi, *The Light of Lamps 1*, 3rd edition (Beirut, Lebanon: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1985), hadith no. 213, p. 74.
10. Muhammad Na'im, "The Real Teacher and the First Prophetic Schools," *Al-Azhar Magazine* (1960) no. 8.
11. Nabil al-Samaluti, *School Organization and Educational Modernization* (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: Dar Ashorooq Printing and Distribution, 1980); Mutawali, *History of Islamic Education*.
12. Mohamed Badawi, "Improving the role of the masjid to serve the religious cause," *Al-Manhal* (1989) vol. 50, no. 467, p. 91.
13. Na'im, "The Real Teacher and the First Prophetic Schools," p. 447.
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15. Mutawali, *History of Islamic Education*; Hasan 'Abdu al-'Al, *Islamic Education in the Fourth Hijra Century* (Cairo, Egypt: Dar al-Fikr al-Arabi, 1978); Amin, *The Mustansiriyah School*.
16. 'Abdu al-'Al, *Islamic Education in the Fourth Hijra Century*.
17. Ahmed, *The Development of Arab Thought*; Mutawali, *History of Islamic Education*.
18. Ahmed al-Ahwani, *Education in Islam* (Cairo, Egypt: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1957).
19. Ahmed Shalabi, *History of Islamic Education*, 2nd edition (Cairo, Egypt: Egyptian Anglo Library, 1960); Atif Abadhah, "Islamic Schools," *Al-Manhal* (1989) vol. 50, no. 467; Naji al-Ansari, "Al-Madina: Education from 622-1992," *Al-Manhal* (1992) vol. 54, no. 499; Mutawali, *History of Islamic Education*.
20. 'Abdu al-'Al, *Islamic Education in the Fourth Hijra Century*, p. 182.
21. Ahmed, *The Development of Arab Thought*; Mutawali, *History of Islamic Education*.
22. Hasan Mahmoud and Ahmed al-Sharif, *The Islamic World in the Abbasid's Era*, 4th edition (Cairo, Egypt: Dar al-Fakr al-Arabi, 1980); Mutawali, *History of Islamic Education*.
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30. Amin, *The Mustansiriyah School*; 'Abdu al-'Al, *Islamic Education in the Fourth Hijra Century*; Mutawali, *History of Islamic Education*.
31. Mutawali, *History of Islamic Education*, p. 203.
32. Mahmoud and Al-Sharif, *The Islamic World in the Abbasid's Era*; 'Abdu al-'Al, *Islamic Education in the Fourth Hijra Century*.
33. 'Abdu al-'Al, *Islamic Education in the Fourth Hijra Century*.
34. Mutawali, *History of Islamic Education*.
35. Amin, *The Mustansiriyah School*; 'Abdu al-'Al, *Islamic Education in the Fourth Hijra Century*.
36. Al-Saqar, *History of Muslim Education*, p. 811.
37. Abadhah, "Islamic Schools," p. 90. See also Mutawali, *History of Islamic Education*, p. 191.
38. 'Abdu al-'Al, *Islamic Education in the Fourth Hijra Century*.
39. Amin, *The Mustansiriyah School*.

40. Shalabi, *History of Islamic Education*; Amin, *The Mustansiriyah School*.
41. Ahmed, *The Development of Arab Thought*; 'Abdu al-'Al, *Islamic Education in the Fourth Hijra Century*; Al-Ahwani, *Education in Islam*.
42. Mutawali, *History of Islamic Education*.
43. Idris, *The Madinah Society During the Prophet's Time*, p. 231.
44. 'Abdu al-'Al, *Islamic Education in the Fourth Hijra Century*; Ahmed, *The Development of Arab Thought*.
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50. Ibid.
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57. Ibid.
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