# ISLAMIC EDUCATION AND MODERNITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: EGYPT CASE STUDY

**Eman Taha Mohamed**
*NUB University, Egypt*
*Email: emantaha@gmail.com*

**Abstract**

This article discusses Islamic education and modernity in the Middle East. Modern culture began to be known in Egypt since the emergence of Napoleon Bonaparte in the early 19th century in this country. However, at the time of Muhammad Ali, the transition from traditional education to modern education began. Furthermore, during the Ismail Pasya era, due to the reorganization of culture, traditional education began to compete with advanced secular education.

**Keywords: Islamic education, modernity, modern schools, the Middle East**

## INTRODUCTION

Talking about Islamic education in the Middle East, the region where Islam was first introduced will be more appreciative if we first discuss aspects of the historicity that drove the birth of Islamic education itself. Historically, Prophet Muhammad deserves to be called the founder of Islamic culture because he was the one who received the revelations that were loaded with doctrines about the urgency of education for humans.

Islamic education has a long history. In the broadest sense, Islamic culture develops along with the emergence of Islam itself. In the context of Middle Eastern society, where Islam was born and first developed, the arrival of Islam complete with educational efforts - not to mention the system - was a significant transformation, because pre-Islamic Arab society did not have a formal education system (Azra, 1999: vii).

At the beginning of the development of Islam, of course, formal Islamic education had not yet taken place. The ongoing Islamic education can generally be said to be informal, and even this has more to do with Islamic da'wah efforts — the spread and inculcation of the foundations of Islamic creed and worship. In this connection, it can be understood why the process of Islamic education takes place at a friend's house; the most famous is Dar al-Arqam. But when the Islamic community was formed, then Islamic culture was held in the mosque. The education process in

these two places is carried out in halaqah, a learning circle, which in the next period develops into a madrasa (Azra, 1999: vii).

The Middle East region which from the beginning was the basis of the birth of Islamic civilization, especially in the field of Islamic education is fascinating to study especially when the flow of modernization as a product of Western culture began to hit almost all regions of the world, including the Middle East region. It is rather difficult to deny that the current modernization, with its philosophical basis, has brought its changes so that the movie becomes a kind of part that is very important for one's life. Modernization that began to be rolled out in Western Europe more than 500 years ago soon became a global issue so that the entire region was eventually impacted by dynamic Western culture, even statically classified societies were affected by the current of modernization (Szyliowiez, 1973: 1).

Modernity that has engulfed the Middle East for the past 150 years has influenced traditional culture and society. Conflicts and reactions take place everywhere as a consequence of interactions between modernity and old traditions of the community (Szyhowiez, 1973: 1). Grunebaum (1965: 141-142) argues that individuals and society are divided, some accept, and some reject the aggression of the Western mentality into the region. Due to the impact of such an attack, certain groups and governments immediately increased power by adopting Western technology and sponsoring the need for modernization. As a result, dynamic change has become an essential part of Middle Eastern society's life, which includes Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Emirates and the sultanates in the Persian Gulf region (Mufrodi, 1997: 135).

Modern education enters the Middle East through a "back door" in the form of cultural influences or political dominance. He put aside Islamic traditions and replaced them with Western cultures at all levels, from the elementary level to the university (Bilgrami and Ashraf, 1989: 49). The government of every Islamic country assumes that by taking over the Western system, their country can achieve the progress of the modern world. Traditional Islamic educational institutions, madrassas, and dar al-ulum are necessarily more like a business entity placed in mosques and private homes or given modest assistance by the government so that traditional Islamic education institutions can remain standing (Bilgrami and Ashraf, 1989: 49). On the other hand, several new educational institutions and schools were built with their appearance and quality. The new education system opens more extensive job opportunities for students in higher education institutions and universities.

This paper intends to describe Islamic education and modernity in the Middle East. However, because of the limited space in this paper to discuss one by one in the Middle East region, the authors take Egypt as a study area because this region has

goals and structure of education and problems similar to those faced by other Arab countries (Szyliowiez 1973: 260).

According to Hamid Hasan Bilgrami and Sayyid Ali Asyraf (1989: 49) in their writings The Concept of Islamic University that modern education entered Egypt together with the arrival of Napoleon Bonaparte in the early 19th century, where in the book of Islamic Education in Indonesia and Egypt The emphasis on middle-high school, explained that the reign of Muhammad Ali had been the beginning of the transition from traditional education to modern education. Subsequently, during the reign of Ismail Pasha, efforts were made to reorganize education, and from here, traditional culture began to compete with advanced secular education (Hasan, 1983: 31).

Attacks on traditional education often appear from businesses that want Al-Azhar as an essential center of Islamic culture. Along with this, various laws have been issued to re-regulate training held at the university. Significant efforts include the government, since independence in 1922, in the 1930s and 1940s, several laws have been issued for the regulation of foreign and private schools. This law deals with the necessity of teaching Arabic, Islamic history, and religion in schools (Hasan, 1983: 31). The July 1952 Revolution was also a crucial period for Islamic education in Egypt, efforts to improve, especially Islamic culture, which are widely discussed at present are integral from improvements made at the beginning of the revolution. In connection with the preceding, this paper will discuss the general description of Islamic education and modernization of Islamic culture in Egypt.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Kuttab, mosques, and madrassas are the leading educational institutions in Egypt and the Middle East in general. In the next period, the institution developed into new schools, as we can see today. Kuttab means a child who studies the book but is understood to be popular with the meaning of maktab as a place to review books and the Qur'an. The word kuttab and maktab are both used to determine the first place of education (Hasan, 1983: 31). Goldziher translates the word kuttab with maktab with elementary school, which aims to provide first-level education to students (Ali, 1979: 78-79).

In the 18th century, kuttab in Egypt was generally under the supervision of the Waqaf Agency. Education was also carried out in mosques since 'Amr ibn Ash founded the first mosque in Fusthath. The mission of the mosque as a place for organizing Islamic education is still running until now. Even so, not all mosques develop into organized educational institutions, which could advance in this direction, namely the Al-Azhar mosque (Hasan, 1983: 33). According to Al-Maqrizi, in this mosque, eight study groups discuss various branches of religious and general

science ('Ali, 1979: 128). Then the madrasa is a continuation of education that was initially carried out in the mosque. In Egypt, the growth of the madrasa is closely related to the battle of ideas to erase the Shi'ite schools which began to develop since the Al-Azhar mosque was founded because the scholars saw it as unfit to hold a heated debate about something inside the mosque (Hasan, 1983: 33) so that the Al Madrasa was established. -Hafiziyah and Madrasa Ash-Shafi'iyah, both were the first madrasa in Egypt ('Ali, 1979: 130-133).

Seeing the reality of education in Egypt is still traditional. In 1833, Muhammad Ali ordered to build ten elementary schools in Egypt, as the first level for the preparation of prospective students for vocational schools so that at the time of Muhammad Ali, the two educational systems began, namely traditional education and modern secular education, which is held separately. As a result, the graduates of this school were divided into two; religious school alumni and current school alumni (Hasan, 1983: 41).

The education system can only be seen after its efforts by Khedive Ismail Pasya made Egypt part of Europe. He reactivated the Al-Madaris Council, increased the number of primary and secondary schools and planned new education policies and passed the National Education Law known as the 10 Rajab Law, 1284 Hijriyah, November 1869 (Szyliowiez, 1973:102).

With the establishment of primary and secondary schools, the need for qualified teachers began to be felt; then, by Ali Mubarak, a training center was opened to educate teachers named Dar-Al-Ulum (Dunne, 1968: 3). This institution is occupied with informing teachers in the fields of physics, geometry, earth science, history, and beautiful writing. Also, it is intended to educate teachers for the areas of study taught at Al-Azhar, such as the Qur'an, commentaries, hadith, fiqh, and Arabic. Thus, Dar Al-Ulum seeks to combine the field of religious studies with general (modern) fields of study. It is also a coincidence that during this period of development coincided with the arrival of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani to Egypt and the beginning of the renewal effort undertaken by Muhammad Abduh. Seeing that education at that time was divided into three; public education (represented by kuttab), education for the ruling family (represented by new schools built since the time of Muhammad Ali), and knowledge of scholars (represented by religious, academic learning such as Al-Azhar). At that time, Muhammad Abduh felt that people's culture was very neglected. Therefore, it developed the education of the people, and he founded al-Jami'ah al-Khairiyyah in 1892 (Mursi, 1982: 304-305).

This period of Abduh was crucial in Egyptian history. Western ideas began to enter beside traditional scholars. Some intellectuals want to be separated from the past. They develop nationalism. Their sense of patriotism has gained a prominent place since 1919, which was marked by the expansion of education among the people after 1923, which provided support for nationalism. In this period, there was an

educational dualism. One party wants a school, which aims to form an elite group in society which is then expected to lead the country, while the other view wants education as an effort to educate the nation.

In 1935, the government made an idea to implement as soon as possible and agreed on an expansion plan for education. Later in the same year, it was decided to change the learning system in the Kuttab into a full-day school system (full-day system) in all provincial cities (Hasan, 1983: 49). For this endeavor, in 1937, the government had handed over to all offices in the province to regulate the existing kuttab in each area. Then in 1983, the government removed the gap between kuttab and schools by moving foreign language lessons from level one to level two (Hasan, 1983: 50). In 1944 the Ministry of Education decided to write off school fees in elementary schools. This is intended to erode differences in social levels and promote education. In 1949, students were freed from the cost of buying books (Hasan, 1983: 50).

**Egypt Towards Modern Education Systems**

The outbreak of the revolution in 1952 in Egypt has given a new color throughout Egyptian history, where a new regime brought it towards the goal of modernization, which ruled over and adopted policies designed to transform traditional societies into modern societies. It was modern Egyptian society that became the vision of president Gamal Abdul Naser, a charismatic leader in the Middle East, who played a role in playing important rules both in the transformation of Egyptian society and in the international arena (Szyliowiez, 1973: 253).

The first thing Naser did was strengthen his position of power by removing the monarchy towards a political organization, also alienating all associations, both those engaged in the field of religion, and those involved in the common area so that his power became more centralized. To mobilize support, to legitimize the authority and goals of national development, Naser only formed one liberal party and was then reorganized into a National Union or Arab Socialist Union. The changes in the parties show the evolution of the orientation of the government and the efforts to institutionalize and legitimize the regulations into modernization.

To realize its modernization goals, Naser divided it into three stages. The first (1952-1956), held a revolutionary consolidation of forces, also formed a liberal party to support it. Also, he took the path of utilizing the clergy to gain legitimacy for the permanence of his position; second (1956-1961), undertook development efforts with an emphasis on economic aspects and social reorganization. To this end, a new

constitution was immediately adopted in 1956 by emphasizing the government's dedication to achieving social justice. In this period, foreign policy issues hit Egypt, followed by the Suez crisis in 1956. It was in this era that Naser emerged as an actor leading the Arab Nationalists, who then applied ideology as a factor of legitimacy; third (1961), using new thinking in the context of social transformation that emphasizes the fields of economics and industrialization (Szyliowiez, 1973: 253).

The political policies mentioned above, have implications for the implementation of Islamic education because the government is trying to rebuild the education system to adjust to the political and social constellation that is developing and the economic development goals to be achieved at that time. Various reforms have been carried out, including an emphasis on vocational schools, techniques, and scientific training, as well as efforts to improve education widely (Mahrouse, 1994: 1942).

As for the policies in the education sector in the early days, various laws were issued, namely Law No. 210 of 1953 which aimed at nationalizing all preparatory education took place at three levels. The first level is taken by students in the age of 6 to 12 years. These elementary level graduates can continue their studies to the senior high school level, three years. Furthermore, Law No. 213 of 1956 issued for the elimination of school fees in every state education (Hasan, 1983: 51). This law also prohibits level or class promotion examinations without a specified year limit. In 1958, Law No. 160, which banned all foreign schools, and handed them over to the private sector in the country, the curricula of schools at this time were then under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. Thus, the curriculum of all educational institutions in Egypt is under the direction of the government. In 1956, when there was a Suez Canal crisis, the government formed military training prepared for defense (Dodge, 1961: 157).

During the revolution in 1952, the government took a similar stance with the attitude taken by Muhammad Ali, regarding the role of religion in religious life in the country, where the Jamal Abdul Naser regime had played an ambivalent role in religion. The state always makes compromises with belief. Islam is declared state religion, but Islamic law is interpreted in a secular cloak. In short, this regime wants to formulate doctrine in the direction that is following its political goals (Abaza, 1994: 34-48).

The Waqf Board finally underwent a series of changes and was successfully put into full control of the government in 1952, including Al-Azhar. Although Al-Azhar University does not have much influence in the political life of the Egyptian government compared to other universities, such as Cairo University, Alexandria University, Ainun Syams University, and Assiut, Al-Azhar is an institution that is respected by the Egyptian community so that the rulers often hold interference to win the sympathy of the people in order to obtain people's legitimacy over their

power (Abaza, 1994: 34-48). Al-Azhar is a very strategic institution to be used to carry out renewal ideas because Al-Azhar is a famous center of Islamic studies (Bisri, 1985). Al-Azhar is a prominent center of religious education in the Islamic world. Also, Al-Azhar is one of the most important institutions that accept and educate international students from around the world, including students from Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, China, and others (Abaza, 1994: 38-39).

A group of scholars started modernization of Al-Azhar in the 19th century, the most prominent of whom was Muhammad Abduh. Still, the effect was only felt in the field of organization, the examination system, and the introduction of certain studies (Rahman, 1995: 118). Then the change also occurred in the 1960s, when the government saw that the state hoped that the younger generation would study not only religion, but also profane sciences so that they could be useful for their homeland. Also, students who were educated with secular education at the Egyptian University lacked the portion of religious training, so religious sciences were combined with profane sciences (Crecelius, 1966: 37).

To continue the modernization of education at Al-Azhar University, precisely on July 18, 1961, President Jamal Abdul Naser determined that the administration of Al-Azhar University was placed under his authority, which then brought changes to the systems, plans and study programs at Al-Azhar . In this case, Jamal Abdul Naser followed the Thaha Husein programs (Mardjoko, 1994: 80), namely by: first, adding secular faculties at Al-Azhar University, such as (1) Faculty of Education, (2) Faculty of Medicine, (3) Faculty of Commerce and Management, (4) Faculty of Science and Industry, (5) Faculty of Agriculture, (6) Faculty of Pharmacy and (7) Faculty of Natural Sciences (Al-Bahiy, 1982: 411; Jameela, tt: 201); second, to add curriculum content, that is to open modern schools, where modern science is taught, in addition to religious science. Al-Azhar University curriculum is equipped with modern science so that scholars understand the contemporary culture so that they can find solutions to problems that arise in recent times (Mardjoko, 1994: 80; Nasution, 1982: 31). Regarding curriculum content, it is more specifically aimed at teaching foreign languages (Western), which specifically Thaha Husein proposes that four languages: English, French, and Italian, be taught in schools in Egypt (Husein, 1973: 252).

The reasons are: (1) that in the development of science, a person is required to be able to master a number of foreign languages that can support the development of science, (2) that science and the superiority of science and technology and art should not be owned by one nation but must be owned by all nations ; third, increasing the number of knowledge ambassadors sent to Western countries. The study of Western countries, according to Thaha Husein, is a logical step, considering that Westerners used to study in the Middle East, especially in the Middle Ages, when Muslims had cosmopolitan civilizations. Everything has changed when Westerners are heading towards the new world order, and the Muslim community stagnates in thought. Now

that the Western world has reached progress in various fields, Muslims should learn from the progress that has been made by the West; and four, increasing educational facilities. Facilities that need to be reproduced are study rooms. Thaha Husein encouraged the government to immediately build a study room to create the ideal conditions between the number of classes, schools, and the number of students. This effort was successful, in which the government built 2600 study rooms and canceled school fees for the middle level (Mardjoko, 1994: 90).

This significant change is basically driven by the fact that the rapidly increasing number of Al-Azhar students cannot compete with the products of the general education system, so the new faculties are mainly aimed at adjusting. But another tangible benefit is seen from the fact that a weighted professional class will be created, which has a solid knowledge of Islam compared to products of the comprehensive education system, which only has a shallow religious understanding. This is undoubtedly a significant development and, from religion, will have far-reaching effects in the Egyptian network of social life (Rahman, 1995: 121). I have introduced female teachers in schools and the collapse of an entire dividing wall between men and women in social relations.

In 1962, a women's academy was also established in the Al-Azhar complex, which later became a university (in the Al-Azhar neighborhood) that had its medical faculty (Rahman, 1995: 121). Thus, sociologically, this is undoubtedly a surprising change. According to Harun Nasution (1982: 48), the idea of fighting for education for women in modern Islam in Egypt was first echoed by Rifa'ah al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) so that Egyptian women received the same training as men. The purpose of education is so that women can become good wives and can be friends of their husbands in the intellect and social life, more than that this woman's education is also in the context of forming a personality and instilling a sense of patriotism or Hubbu al-Watan. The idea was further emphasized by Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). According to Abduh, women in Islam have a high position. Still, customs are originating from outside of Islam change this so that eventually, Muslim women have a low place in society (Nasution, 1982: 79). This idea was then discussed at length by Qosim al-Amin (1865-1908) in his book Tahrir al-Mar' ah (women's freedom) published in 1900 and al-Mar'ah al-Jadidah (modern woman) published in 1901. According to Qosim Amen, the Muslims back off because women (half of Egypt's population) have never received a school education. Women's knowledge is necessary. This is not only so that women can manage the household, but also so that they can provide primary education for their children. This idea was then continued by Thoha Husein (1899-1973), and in his time (1954), women were allowed to study at Al-Azhar. Thus, the idea of fighting for women's education in the modern Islamic era shows that there was an organic continuity that was unbroken from previous thinkers until the establishment of a women's academy in the Al-Azhar complex.

## CONCLUSION

From the description above, it can be concluded that modern education entered the Middle East region through the back door in the form of the influences of Western political culture. The reform orientation of Islamic knowledge, which is patterned on Western education is basically because there is an assumption that the source of strength and welfare of life experienced by the West is as a result of the development of modern science and technology that they have achieved. The renewal of education in Egypt could take place because of the support of the political conditions of the government that were changing, especially the revolution in 1952.

The modernization of the Egyptian education system has begun since the 19th century among its figures is Muhammad Abduh but the results have not been felt much. Then the changes can be clearly recognized, namely since 1952 and 1962 where Gamal Abdul Naser tried to modernize Al-Azhar with the opening of new faculties such as the faculty of medicine, as well as the faculty for women while the development of education in Egypt in the following years has not been reviewed in this paper.

REFERENCES

1. Ali, Said Ismail. 1979. Ma'ahid al-Ta'lim al-Islam. Cairo: Dar al-Tsaqofah.
2. Azra, Azyumardi. 1999. Islamic Education: Tradition and Modernization Towards a New Millennium. Jakarta: Logos of Science Discourse.
3. AL-Bahiy, Muhammad. 1982. al-Fikr al-Islamiy wa al-Mujtama 'al-Mu'ashir. Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah.
4. Beltrami, Hamid Hasan, and Ali Said Ashraf. 1989. The Concept of University, trans. Machnun Husein. Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana.
5. Bisri, Mostopha. "Al-Azhar, Qibla of Islamic Studies" in Pesantren magazine, P3M, No. I / Vol. II / 1985.
6. Crecelius, Daniel. 1966. "Al-Azhar in Revolution" in the Journal of the Middle East Institute. Washington DC: William Sand.
7. Dodge, Bayard. 1961. AL-Azhar, a Millennium of Islam Learning. Washington DC. : The Middle East Institute.
8. Dunne, J. Heyworth. 1968. An Introduction to the History of Education in Modern Egypt. London: Frank Class & Co. Ltd.

9. Hassan, Affan, et.al., 1983. Islamic Education in Indonesia and Egypt: Focus on Middle-High School. Cairo: Indonesian Embassy in Education and Culture.
10. Husein, Doha, 1973. The Science of Tarbiyah Yahtawiy 'ala Mustaqbal al-Tsaqafah. Beirut: Dar al-Pole al-Labnaniy.
11. Jameelah, Maryam. t.th. Islam and Modernism, trans. A. Jainuri and Syafiq A. Mugni. Surabaya: National Business.
12. Mental institution. 1994. "Egypt, System of Education", in The International Encyclopedia of Education, Vol. 4 Tosten Husen (ed.). Oxford: El Sevier Science Ltd.
13. Marko 1994. Doha Husein: Islamic Education and Egyptian Intellectual Awakening, thesis, Yogyakarta: PPS IAIN Sunan Kalijaga.
14. Mafrodi, Ali. 1997. Islam Arabic Cultural Region. Cet I. cairo: Logos.
15. Mursi, Muhammad Rusnir. 1982. Al-Tarbiyyah al-Islamiyyah. Cairo: Alam al-Pole.
16. Rahman, Fazlur. 1995. Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual, trans. Ahsin Muhammad. Cet II. Dhaha: Reader.
17. Madison. 1994. "A new generation of the Indonesian Student Movement in al-Azhar" in Egypt
18. Szyhowiez, Joseph S., 1973. Education and Modernization in the Middle East, New York: Cornell University Press.
19. Von Gronebaum, Gustav E. 1965. "Acculturation and Self-Realization" in B. Rivlin and J. Azyliawiez (ed.), The Contemporary Middle East. New York: Random House.