



IMAM HATIP SCHOOLS AND THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN TURKEY: AN EXAMINATION OF THE AKP'S ROLE

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the intricate relationship between Imam Hatip Schools and the strategies employed by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to promote religious education in Turkey. Imam Hatip schools hold a unique position in the contemporary Muslim world, marked by their historical evolution and distinctive characteristics. The AKP, led by Erdogan, came to power in 2002, vowing to foster a "Pious Generation" through these schools, which had deviated from the secular principles established by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1923. This article examines the multifaceted interplay of social, political, and educational developments that have shaped the current landscape of religious education in Turkey. Over the years, these religious vocational schools have undergone significant transformations, mirroring broader societal and political shifts in Turkey. By tracing the historical trajectory of Imam Hatip schools, analyzing their role within the Turkish education system, and exploring the AKP's strategies to enhance their influence, this article seeks to provide insights into the intricate dynamics at the confluence of religion and politics in contemporary Turkey.

KEYWORDS: Imam Hatip Schools, Evolution, Justice and Development Party (AKP), Religious Education in Turkey

1. INTRODUCTION

Imam Hatip schools have been a component of Turkey's state-funded education system since the country's founding. These schools were supposed to produce Imam and Khatibs as religious leaders. The role of these schools has changed dramatically in recent years. Its development strongly reflected Turkey's political situation, particularly the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) since the early 2000s. This article attempts to uncover the complex connection between Imam Hatip School and the AKP's activities to promote religious education in Turkish society.

1.1. ISLAM AND EDUCATION IN TURKEY

Erdogan's Islamist-inspired Justice and Development Party won Turkey's election in 2002. Since then, detractors have accused Erdogan of reverting to the secular state established by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1923. He was well-known for sustaining Islamic activities in a variety of contexts, including the National Education System's plan for Islamic schools. Yet, he remained cautious in putting such a strategy in place to manage the government effectively. Tayyip Erdogan has dominated Turkish politics since 2003 and is often regarded as the most visible and influential Turkish politician since Ataturk. After the AKP's electoral success in 2002, debates concerning Islam and the roles of Imam Hatip schools erupted. Following the 1970s, these institutions became a source of grassroots activism among Islamist groups.

President Erdogan's educational reforms from 2002 onwards focused a "raising pious generations" by leaving behind traditional and secular ideas for a more religious stance.⁴ Since the AKP's rise, Turkish schools have extended their gradations of religious education. The Imam-Hatip secondary schools are state-backed schools that give a combination of innovative education and provide a foundation for religious education. According to government sources, most Turks send their kids to go to such schools to get an advanced education in different fields of life along with religious teaching.⁵

The President of Turkey, Erdogan, graduated from Imam Hatip School. No one knew about his services as Turkey's president in the future and also Prime Minister for the third term since 2003. Imam Hatip school was nominated first of its kind with the motive to transform young men to be preachers and remain the center of concern for Erdogan. It has been universally agreed upon that the common purpose of this educational system is to raise good individuals who love their history, culture, and heritage.

This entire interaction characterizes how social, political, and instructive improvement; framed the current arrangement of religious training in Turkey. The aftereffect of this investigation is considered huge because the change of Imam Hatip school occurred not in religion, but in the public expression that arose in 1924 by Kamal Ataturk the originator of conventional Turkey. Fazlur Rahman⁶ clarified that a huge development in religious schooling in the current Islamic world has occurred in Turkey.

1.2. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN TURKEY: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW FROM OTTOMAN EMPIRE TO MODERNIZATION

The early history of Turkey began from the Ottoman Empire in 1299, yet if the Turkish Seljuk of Rum was additionally thought to be the early Ottoman Empire, the domain was inherent in 1077.⁷ In a historical context, Imam Hatip schools belong to Nizamiya Madrassas which follow traditional Islamic education supported by the Seljuk Empire.⁸ At that time the Madrassas

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⁴ Cornell, Svante E. "The Islamization of Turkey: Erdoğan's education reforms." *Turkey Analyst* 8, No. 16 (2015).18-28.

⁵ Gür, Bekir S. "What Erdoğan really wants for education in Turkey: Islamization or Pluralisation." Retrieved from Al Jazeera Centre for Studies (2016).30-35.

⁶ Rahman, Fazlur. *Islam and modernity: Transformation of an intellectual tradition*. Vol. 15. University of Chicago Press, 1984.302-303.

⁷ Amiruddin, M. Hasbi. "The Development of Islamic Education In Turkey." *Sarwah: Journal of Islamic Civilization and Thought* 16, No. 2 (2017).25.

⁸ Adivar, Abdulhak Adnan. "Islamic and Western Thought in Turkey." *The Middle East Journal* (1947).270-280.

were considered as the higher religious educational institute. The era of Tanzimat (1839-1876) is considered the beginning of the idea of 'traditional' and 'modern' in religious education.⁹ Most importantly the process of modernization along with religious education ran parallel in the country even after the era of Tanzimat. It can be said that the process successfully worked together with the help of Tanzimat's intellectuals, the traditional sources of Islamic civilization along Western sources.¹⁰ The establishment of the Turkish Republic, in 1923 measured great change in the perspective of Turkey's religious education. Separation of state and religion, as well as separation of religion from education, culture, and the legal framework, has now been proposed. This was an era when all the ideas of secularism prevailed, including religious education. Now Turkey as a secular state was ready to adopt Western laws in all its institutions.¹¹ The rebirth of imam hatip schools reflects the traditional Islamic nature of the majority of Turkish society. Here we can say, a Turkish society experienced a shift of change when this secular approach marginalized political and social affairs from religion.¹² It's a deliberate attempt to portray the 'Kemalist vision' to wipe out the role of Islam from Turkish society.¹³ From then onwards Turkey became a state that strictly followed the secular Ideology of their father, Kamal Ataturk.

1.3. A Shift to Secularism

The role of Islam in Turkish politics was a grim issue even throughout the Selçuk and Ottoman periods. In this sense, the increasingly visible confrontation between Islam and secularism in the Republic of Turkey has clear origins. With the decline of the ruler's power in the late seventeenth century, the religious initiative grew increasingly compelling, and high-ranking muftis became prominent figures in Ottoman legislative and diplomatic affairs. In the later lengthy stretches of the Ottoman Realm, distressed Arab populations beyond Anatolia came to see the caliphate as an aspect of a Turkish colonial realm, and as the Ottoman system and liberal reforms pressed the country towards modernization, Western practices, and true secularisation. According to the Kemalists, the Turkish education system ought to guarantee 'no room for religion within the instructive process. Agreeing with them, students as rising citizens should get instruction as free-thinking people.'¹⁴

1.4. ESTABLISHMENT OF IMAM HATIP SCHOOL SYSTEM TURKEY

Imam Hatip schools have been a component of Turkey's state-funded education system since the country's founding. These schools were supposed to produce Imam and Khatips as religious leaders. The actual point was they were to be paid by Govt and thus, were bound to follow the religious teachings layout designed by the Govt. The authorized examination of the restored Imam Hatip schools may be separated into four stages:

- From 1951 to 1973, A time of emergence and expansion,
- An era of transformation and progress from 1973 to 1997,
- A period of weakening and decline from 1997 to 2002, and
- A period of resurgence and rejuvenation from 2002 to the present.¹⁵

1.5. 2002-2022 (PERIOD OF REBIRTH AND REDEVELOPMENT)

2002-2022 is considered an era of rebirth and redevelopment. The AKP party brought important developments in the Turkish education system like adopting the law on 4+4+4. Through this law, AKP introduced a 12-year obligatory multi-stage education system. A time of resurgence and recharging of Imam Hatip schools. In this period Imam Hatip schools have been recovering the status, enlistment levels, and general capacities of the earlier decade. The enlistment figures rose from 71,100 to 235,000 in 2011.¹⁶

Imam Hatip schools gave channels to social portability and served to coordinate the networks around them in the social, financial, and political existence of society. By 2010, the AKP government, which had a greater number of supporters among the Diyanet workforce than any past government, oversaw the organization and slowly transformed it into an instrument of AKP strategies. The government left upon the development of various new mosques and Imam Hatip schools, raising Diyanet's financial plan to extraordinary levels in the accompanying years.¹⁷

The AKP government has been looking for ways to provide graduates of Imam Hatip schools better consideration when applying to non-theology universities, like allowing them to move to regular state institutions before graduation.¹⁸ According to a 2006 TESEV poll, 82 percent of respondents feel that Imam-Hatip graduates should be treated equally when applying to universities.¹⁹

1.6. MODERNIZING EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF SECULARIZATION IN THE TURKISH STATE

On 3rd March 1924, 479 madrasahs were shut down, besides, all the Islamic syllabi were removed from the educational projects of the state-subsidized institutes. Educational besides training preparation substances in cemeteries didn't observe huge variations for a significantly long time except for some minor modifications. So, consequently, madrasahs, by and large, remain conventional establishments, which end up losing their relationship with the high-level time frame and its genuine components, and the necessities of the overall population when entering the nineteenth century.²⁰

No course was available for the instructing of religion accessible in the state-funded educational system for a very long time from 1935 till 1948. Religious schooling was shifted

⁹ Aşlamacı, İbrahim, and Recep Kaymakcan. "A model for Islamic education from Turkey: the Imam-Hatip schools." *British Journal of religious education* 39, No.3 (2017).279-292.

¹⁰ Davutoğlu, Ahmet. "Modernleşme Sürecinde Entelektüel Dönüşüm ve Zihniyet Parametreleri." *Modernleşme, İslam Dünyası ve Türkiye* (2001).361-392.

¹¹ Hefner, R. W., & Zaman, M. Q. (Eds.). (2010). *Schooling Islam*. Princeton University Press.150.

¹² Çelebi, Bahadır. "The Failure of Assertive Secularization Project in Turkey." *Turkish Journal of Politics* 2, No. 1 (2011).25.

¹³ İbrahim, Muhammad Khalis, and Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor. "Cabaran pendidikan Islam di Turki: usaha AKP terhadap pemeraksanaan sekolah Imam-Hatip." *International Journal of West Asian Studies* 10, No. 1 (2018).1-12.

¹⁴ Çakmak, Diren. "Pro-Islamic Public Education in Turkey: The Imam-Hatip Schools." *Middle Eastern Studies* 45, No. 5 (2009).825-846.

¹⁵ Alasania, Giuli, and Nani Gelovani. "Islam and Religious Education in Turkey." *IBSU Scientific Journal* 5,

¹⁶ Ozgur, İren. *Islamic schools in modern Turkey: Faith, politics, and education*. No. 39. Cambridge University Press, 2012.155.

¹⁷ Öztürk, Ahmet Erdi. "Turkey's Diyanet under AKP rule: from protector to imposer of state ideology?." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, No. 4 (2016).619-635.

¹⁸ Çağaptay, Soner. "How will the Turkish military react?." *Elcano Newsletter* 36 (2007).7.

¹⁹ Çarkoğlu, Ali, and Melvin J. Hinich. "A spatial analysis of Turkish party preferences." *Electoral Studies* 25, No.2 (2006).369-392.

²⁰ Kenan, S. *Phases of Religious Education in Modern Turkey*. *Islamische Erziehung in Europa*,(2009).521.

to the private domain for some time, and the youthful age accepted their religious schooling in a casual set-up, generally from their folks at the domestic level, once in a while from imams, old madrasas graduates, or then again researchers in mosques. There was likewise plenty of religious content composed by the noticeable specialists of the religion of that age to instruct Islam to the youth as a component of the exercises of casual strict training during the mentioned period.²¹

In 1949, in a moderately frail reaction to grassroots requests, the public authority declared the start of Imam Hatip courses in ten urban areas. The program comprising months included subjects like the Qur'an, Hadiths, and Islamic History. The duration of the exercises was 50 minutes, and what's more, ran from 9:00 AM to 12:50 PM. Their enlistment was restricted, they graduated just fifty students at the end of their very first year. It is unlikely that the developments are considered sincere exertion to fulfill the requirement for additional strict functionaries.²² On October 13, 1951, the governmental authority decided to launch new religious schools. In 1951-52, the main Imam Hatip schools began operations in Ankara, Istanbul, Konya, and Kayseri. The total number of students enrolled in these institutions was 876. Following that, the number of students at these schools increased in tandem with the number of schools.²³

The number of students attending Imam Hatip secondary schools increased to 48,895 during the 1974-75 academic year. This figure eventually grew to 200,300 by 1980-81. Also, girls were granted admission to Imam Hatip secondary schools in 1976. The influence of the National Salvation Party's participation in various partnerships with Nationalist Front governments is frequently referred to as the proliferation of Imam Hatip high schools. Islamists were allowed to build the Public Salvation Party (1972-1981) in October 1972. The party's goals included obligatory secondary education, including religion into the curriculum, and recreating the caliphate. The party was anti-market and advocated closer ties with Muslim countries. They accepted that the Ottoman Realm was being overrun by Westernization methods, as well as a growing detachment from Islam. Notwithstanding their opposition, Islamic gatherings were frequently in collaboration with secularists during the 1970s. As a result, Islamists were promoted to positions of power, and the number of mosques or Imam Hatip schools, Quran courses, or related employees increased.²⁴

Prime Minister Turgut Zal's reforms in the mid-1980s resulted in a currency booster, much of it from the Arab world. As a result, Islamists were able to organize politically. Under Zal's more liberal approach to religion, Muslim organizations and brotherhoods were given wider freedoms and allowed to support the building of private schools and universities. As a result of the reforms, new political groups, particularly Islamists, obtained more political space. Islamic organizations gained access to major news establishments and newspaper chains, allowing them to reach a much bigger political audience.²⁵

The coup of September 12, 1980, was a crisis point in Turkish history, as well as in the history of Imam-Hatip high schools. Under military administration, graduates of Imam-Hatip high schools were permitted entrance to all university fields. In 1985, two new Imam-Hatip high schools were constructed, one in Tunceli, despite the region's so-called ethnic structure, and the other in Beykoz as an Anatolian Imam-Hatip High School, to help youngsters whose parents work overseas. Although the number of Imam-Hatip high schools has remained steady, the number of children attending these institutions has increased by 45 percent. This is partly due to an improvement in the quality of Imam Hatip high schools and the education they offer.²⁶

In 1989, as indicated by the University Exam Center insights, 22% of Imam Hatip Schools candidates were conceded to colleges. During the 1980s and 1990s, Anatolian Imam Hatip schools set a large number of their alumni into lofty expert resources in driving Turkish colleges. During this decade, around 80% of the graduations from Kertal and Kadikoy Anatolian Imam Hatip schools in Istanbul and Tevfik Ileri Anatolian Imam Hatip school in Ankara got high scores in the college selection tests and taken on wide-reach resources. Besides, the accomplishment of these Imam Hatip school graduates is responsible for the upgrade in the allure furthermore, remaining of Imam Hatip schools according to numerous strictly moderate Turks. All through the 1980s and 1990s, the schools had a flood of new understudies. In the 1982-1983 scholastic year, 374 Imam Hatip schools were enlisting 219, 931 students. In the 1996-1997 scholastic year 601 Imam Hatip schools were enlisting 511,502 understudies.²⁷

1997 to 2002 was debilitating and decreased in Imam Hatip schools on account of the heightening strains between the Islamist Refah Partisi (RP). Likewise, it was because the secularist powers in the public eye prompted the 1997 political emergency. Since their ascent

to control individuals from Rİefah Partisi had supported a few Islamic practices that had particularly incited the military, for example, premium free banking, veiling in state establishments, and public supplications. As a direct consequence of the emergency, the quantity of Imam Hatip school understudies diminished from 511,502 to 77,392 somewhere in the range between 1997 and 2002.²⁸

By the mid-1990s, mam-Hatip schools had attracted around 11% of students in the relevant age group and had developed into a separate educational system. Only approximately 2% of eligible pupils attended clerical schools when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. The March 2012 education reform increased mandatory schooling from eight to twelve years, divided into four years of elementary school, four years of middle school, and four years of high school.²⁹

However, since the introduction of obligatory schooling for eight years in 1997, the popularity of mam-Hatip schools has plummeted. The categorization of mam-Hatip schools as "vocational schools" in 1999 meant that, while graduates now had more possibilities, getting into top university courses became more difficult. Middle schools were abolished by demanding that all eight required years of education be spent in the same primary school. Children could not enroll in vocational schools until ninth grade.³⁰

²¹ Ibid.521.

²² Ozgur, Iren. *Islamic schools in modern Turkey: Faith, politics, and education*. No. 39. Cambridge University Press, 2012.26.

²³ Alasania, Giuli, and Nani Gelovani. "Islam and Religious Education in Turkey." *IBSU Scientific Journal* 5, No.2(2011).35-50.

²⁴ Ibid.35-50.

²⁵ Mardin, Ş.Turkish Islamic exceptionalism yesterday and today: Continuity, rupture and reconstruction in operational codes. *Turkish Studies*, 6(2) (2005).157.

²⁶ Raharjo, "The Role of Government in Revitalization of Islamic School in Turkey." *Walisono: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan* 22, No. 1 (2014).181-210.

²⁷ Ozgur, Iren. *Islamic schools in modern Turkey: Faith, politics, and education*. No. 39. Cambridge University Press, 2012.50.

²⁸ Ozgur, Iren. *Islamic schools in modern Turkey: Faith, politics, and education*. No. 39. Cambridge University Press, 2012.52.

²⁹ Raharjo, "The Role of Government in Revitalization of Islamic School in Turkey." *Walisono: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan* 22, No. 1 (2014).181-210.

³⁰ Ibid.181-210.

2002 to the present, a time of resurgence and recharging of Imam Hatip schools. In this period Imam Hatip schools have been recovering the status, enlistment levels, and general capacities of the earlier decade. The enlistment figures rose from 71,100 to 235,000 in 2011.³¹

Imam Hatip schools have been created and expanded fivefold over 11 years, with the decision party of Turkey, the AKP, showing that they need to dispose of the mainstream framework. The quantity of Imam Hatip schools situated across Turkey has ascended from 450 to 708 in the 11 years a long time that the AKP has been in power. It was being arranged that in the training year of 2013-2014, by making 100 new Imam Hatip schools, this figure will reach 808. By the mid-1990s, Imam-Hatip schools had attracted around 11% of students in the relevant age group and had developed into a separate educational system. Only approximately 2% of eligible pupils attended clerical schools when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. The March 2012 education reform increased mandatory schooling from eight to twelve years, divided into four years of elementary school, four years of middle school, and four years of high school.³²

1.7. THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF EDUCATION IN TURKEY: FROM SECULARIZATION TO ISLAMIZATION

Ataturk saw the pervasive originations of Islam that contradicted the requests for modernization as the greatest hindrance in making Turkey a modern, reformist country. For modernization endeavors to succeed, the principal task was to change these originations, which could be successful just if individuals came to have confidence in the new originations all alone through instruction. To be powerful, be that as it may, it needed to be looked for and accomplished by dispersing the right picture of Islam through education.

Under the Republic, many changes were introduced affecting the education system. On March 3, 1924, new laws came into force to standardize the educational system. The law closed all madrasas and placed all Turkish educational institutions and the entire education budget under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of National Education. The law also included the Quran and religious teachings in all public school curricula beginning in the second grade. A Faculty of Theology was established to train religious scholars for such courses. Religious schools (Imam Hatip Schools) were also opened to meet the demands of the people. The Republic's early religious education was aimed at supporting the nation's modernization efforts and correcting common "misconceptions" in the field of religion. Unfortunately, the first form of application was unsustainable and later led to a troubled period in religious education (1924-1948).

The first negative developments in religious education began in 1926. At that time, religious instruction for 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade subjects was one hour. On November 30, 1929, the Commission on Education and Discipline of the Ministry of National Education decided to limit religious education to elective subjects in municipal elementary schools without examinations. A year later, a resolution further shortened religious education to only 30 minutes of electives per week and targeted only fifth grade.

Religious education was abolished from rural schools in 1927 and from all schools in 1936. However, it continued as an extracurricular activity in local primary schools until 1938. In 1939, new ordinances removed religious instruction from the curriculum altogether. In program development activities beginning after 1927, religious education was gradually removed from grammar schools and teacher training schools from 1929 to 1931.

As a result of this process of excluding religious education from the educational system, the Imam Hatip School closed in 1929 and the present-day Faculty of Theology at Istanbul University closed in 1933. No institute provided religious education in those years.

In 1948, religious education was reintroduced into primary school, albeit in the form of extracurricular education. Her one-hour "elective" religious education class was introduced in fourth grade and her fifth grade. Families who wanted their children to attend these classes had to submit a special petition to the school authorities. Furthermore, in 1949 the Ankara University Theological Faculty was opened, followed by the reopening of Imam Hatip's school in 1951.

In 1950, a new government was elected in nationwide multiparty elections. This new government was more sympathetic to the religious sentiments of society and introduced religious courses in high schools. This time the student was automatically enrolled in the course. If parents wanted their children exempt from the course, they had to submit a written application to the school. Religious education thus returned to the state curriculum.

In 1967, religious education was introduced in the first and second grades of the gymnasium. However, admission to the course was possible only with a written application from a parent. In 1975, the course was extended through the senior year and senior year of high school. This voluntary religious instruction in schools continued until 1982. During this period (1948-1982), religious education was voluntary until the 1980s, and ethics and character-building courses were compulsory in schools. Before 1980, religious education and ethics were two separate majors for him. Religious education was based on the sectarian model of religious education, whereas ethical education was completely secularized and had nothing to do with religion.

Religious courses were elective until the military coup of September 12, 1980. The period immediately preceding the coup was one of intense public debate, social and ideological confrontation, and violent clashes between left-wing and right-wing groups. After the coup, the junta attempted to restore order by arresting hundreds of thousands and executing dozens more. She also enacted, among other things, a new constitution making religious education compulsory in Turkish schools. State saw the move as a necessary step to ameliorate the social unrest of the past decade by reintegrating the country's values.

The Turkish Ministry of National Education summarizes its approach to education by accepting. The purpose of this program is to educate students about religion and ethics and improve their competencies in this regard, thereby contributing to the achievement of the general goals of national education in Turkey.³³

Today, religious education begins in the 4th grade of elementary school and continues through middle school and high school. From grade 4 to grade 8, classes are two hours a week. At the secondary level, a week he has two additional lessons. We can say that this class is not considered an Islamic teaching class. An informative class that explores religious culture and general moral principles through a curriculum that includes information on various religions. However, the focus of the curriculum is Islam, as

³¹ Ozgur, Iren. *Islamic schools in modern Turkey: Faith, politics, and education*. No. 39. Cambridge University Press, 2012.63.

³² Altinyelken, Hülya Kosar, Kenan Çayır, and Orhan Agirdag. "Turkey at a crossroads: critical debates and issues in education." *Comparative Education* 51, No. 4 (2015).473-483.

³³ T.C. Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı (MEB). *Din eğitimi Genel Müdürlüğü, Ortaöğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı* (9, 10,11 ve 12. Sınıflar); Devlet Kitapları Müdürlüğü: İstanbul, Turkey, 2005.75.

the majority of students are Muslim.³⁴ The curriculum addresses both multiculturalism and national issues. Existing curricula reflect the state's secular nature and the tendencies of curriculum makers.

A high school graduate received eight years of continuous religious education. Textbooks for each level are created and approved by the Ministry of Education. In Turkey, the state controls and monitors religious education curricula and textbooks. One of the main departments of the Ministry of Education is called the Directorate General of Religious Education. This Directorate prepares religious education for primary, middle, and high schools in Turkey.³⁵ All textbooks include five Major subjects 1. Major Religions of the World; 2. History of Islam and Life of the Prophet Muhammad. 3. How to perform Islamic rituals. 4. The role of religion in Turkish history. 5. Islamic Ethics and Manners.³⁶

1.8. IMAM HATIP SCHOOLS AND THE AKP'S MEASURES TO PROMOTE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN TURKEY

In 1995, Necmettin Erbakan became Turkey's first Islamist prime minister. However, he was removed from that position in his February 28, 1997, so-called "postmodern coup". After the coup, the state declared a struggle against fundamentalism, declaring secularism to be the foundation of the state and the surest defense of peace and order. As a result, the public education system was once again restructured. The elementary and middle school were merged into his eight-year primary school, hitting Imam Hatip Middle School. With the introduction of new education reform laws, Imam Hatip's graduates lost their right to work in several government agencies, including the police and the military. Furthermore, as graduates of nominal "vocational schools", they were effectively prohibited from studying at

the university level except in the field in which they were trained. theology. As a result of these changes, the number of students at Imam Hatip School dropped dramatically from 600,000 to 50,000.³⁷

Things started to change with the 2002 elections. A new political party, the AKP, won the elections based on greater cooperation with the West, membership in the European Union, and the coexistence of Islam and democracy. The Communist Party began rolling back from the rigid secularism introduced after the 1997 coup, instead focusing on curbing inflation, deregulating the economy, and shrinking the state sector. With its openness to foreign investors and its support for liberalism and democracy, AKP entered a period of rapid economic growth.³⁸ The party felt that past decisions had harmed Turkey's religious education.

Some of the major changes adopted during this period are: The AKP has won every election and referendum held in the last 17 years, setting up a new record in Turkey's electoral history from 2002 to 2019. Includes the 2014 and 2018 presidential elections and the 2017 referendum, as well as the March 2014 and March 2019 local elections. The Communist Party began rolling back from the rigid secularism introduced after the 1997 coup, instead focusing on curbing inflation, deregulating the economy, and shrinking the state sector. With its openness to foreign investors and its support for liberalism and democracy, AKP entered a period of rapid economic growth.³⁹ The party felt that past decisions had harmed Turkey's religious education.

Between 2002 and 2011, the AKP government pursued notable reforms in line with its ambitions of joining the European Union. In this process, the AKP government has made great strides in the field of human rights. It has allowed broad freedoms for all sections of society and for both religious and non-religious groups which face serious criticism. There are growing concerns that the party is now pursuing a politically exclusive system rooted in the religious and national identity of Sunni Muslims.⁴⁰ However, as of 2012, there have been no major changes in religious education.

Under this new system, which came into effect in the 2012-2013 academic year, courses on the Quran and the life of the Prophet Muhammad will be offered as electives for middle and high school students. The Ministry of Education can also prepare electives on Christianity and Judaism.⁴¹ The religious, cultural, and ethics courses remain compulsory and are taught two hours per week, from grade 4 through high school.

Since Imam Hatip Middle School opened in 2012, the total number of students aged 10 to 14 enrolled in these schools has increased to 700,000 (the total number of middle school students is 5.5 million). Imam Hatip High School has 650,000 students (out of a total of 5.7 million high school students). The government has also stepped up religious education in regular public schools, some of which have been converted into Imam Hatip schools. Students at Imam Hatip's school makeup only 11% of the total high school population but receive 23% of funding (about \$1.5 billion). Despite this support, the Imam Hatip School has a lower success rate than other regular public schools.⁴²

In March 2012, a new law restructured the Turkish education system. The new system, commonly known as "4 + 4 + 4", again divided compulsory education into three periods, dividing it into four years of primary, middle and high school.⁴³ The reason was to give students and their families the option of studying at a regular secondary school or some kind of technical or vocational school, including the religious "vocational" Imam Hatip Secondary School. Thus, this new system ushered in a kind of golden age of religious education. After being closed under strict regulations after the 1997 coup, Imam Hatip Middle School reopened.⁴⁴

This process also led to important developments in higher religious education. The number of theological departments increased from 25 to 80 and the number of students from 300 to 50,000. The teacher training course in religious education, formerly part of the Faculty of Education, was transferred to the Faculty of Theology, making it the only faculty offering a teacher training course

³⁴ Kaymakcan, Recep. "Christianity in Turkish religious education." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10, No.3(1999).279-293.

³⁵ Genç, M. Fatih, Ina Ter Avest, and Siebren Miedema. "Religious education in two secular multicultural societies: The Turkish and Dutch case compared." *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 15 (2011).801-805.

³⁶ Alasania, Giuli, and Nani Gelovani. "Islam and Religious Education in Turkey." *IBSU Scientific Journal* 5, No.2(2011).35-50.

³⁷ Genç, M. Fatih. "ve 2071 Türkiye'sinde Imam Hatip Liseleri." *Eğitime Bakış* 11, No. 35 (2023). 19-24.

³⁸ Alasania, Giuli, and Nani Gelovani. "Islam and Religious Education in Turkey." *IBSU Scientific Journal* 5, No. 2 (2011).35-50.

³⁹ Alasania, Giuli, and Nani Gelovani. "Islam and Religious Education in Turkey." *IBSU Scientific Journal* 5, No.2 (2011).35-50.

⁴⁰ Meral, Ziya. "Compulsory religious education in Turkey: A survey and assessment of textbooks." *US Commission on International Religious Freedom* (2015).150.

⁴¹ Genç, M.F. History and Current Situation of Religious Education in Turkey. C.Ü. İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi (2012).539-585.

⁴² Butler, D. Special Report: With More Islamic Schooling, Erdogan Aims to Reshape Turkey. 2008. Available online: www.reuters.com (accessed on 15 September 2018).

⁴³ Gün, Feyza, and Gülsün Atanur Baskan. "New education system in Turkey (4+ 4+ 4): A critical outlook." *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 131 (2014). 229-235.

⁴⁴ Genç, M.F. History and Current Situation of Religious Education in Turkey. C.Ü. İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi 2012.539-585.

in Religious Education.⁴⁵

The move to 8-year obligatory primary education has been one of the most significant improvements in the Turkish education system. This law, which was debated for the first time in the 3rd National Education Council meeting on 2-10 December 1946 but enacted with National Education Basic Law number 1739 dated 14 June 1973, was one of the most significant developments in our educational system. The introduction of 8-year obligatory primary education, on the other hand, was limited to experimental primary schools. In the years afterward, the Ministry of National Education has received proposals and pressure from both intellectual and business circles across the country. The Grand National Assembly of Turkey then provided political support for increasing the compulsory school duration and the primary education period.⁴⁶

2. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the transformation of Imam Hatip schools in the Turkish education system and the role of the AKP in shaping its development. By examining historical context, political motivations, and social influences, we contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex power relations at the intersection of religion, education, and politics in contemporary Turkey.

⁴⁵ Genç, M.F. What Should Be the Position of The State in Religious Education, An example from Turkey; Oğuz Kutlu Educational Sciences, Ed.; Akademisyen Yayınevi: Ankara, Turkey, (2018).107–113.

⁴⁶ Erçelebi, Hasan. "Türkiye'de Zorunlu Eğitimin Sekiz Yıla Çıkarılma Çalışmalarında Karşılaşılan Sorunlar ve Çözüm Önerileri." *Öğretmen Dünyası*, Ankara (1997).45-80.