

## Educational Reforms During the Reign of Mahmud II in Turkey

Recep Bilgin<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Language Teaching Department, Faculty of Education, Tishk International University, Erbil Iraq  
Correspondence: Recep Bilgin, Tishk International University, Erbil Iraq  
Email: recep.bilgin@tiu.edu.iq

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**Mahmud II came to the throne in 1808 after very difficult processes. Afterwards, he carried out many reforms within the State. Mahmud II implemented many reforms, especially in the western style, and followed the developments in the West closely. One of the most striking features of this period is the opening of western-style and secular education institutions in contrast to the traditional education that has existed in the state for hundreds of years. The aim of these educational institutions is both to save the State from collapse and to modernize the society. Especially in this period, it is possible to see that the Ottoman state elite followed and implemented all kinds of developments in the west. These developments emerged especially in the field of education.**

**Keywords: Mahmud II, Ottoman State, Education, Educational Reforms**

### 1. Introduction

Education is an indispensable activity for all societies. Education, which was under the rule of certain circles during the Middle Ages, began to spread to the whole society with the enlightenment period of the 17th century. Enlightenment and modernization movements that emerged in the western world were also influential in the field of education. In the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire, which was on the periphery of the West, followed all these developments closely and attempted to modernize. An important reason for these efforts is to strengthen the central government. Another important reason was to modernize the society. During the 19th century, we see that the efforts of modernization, secularization and adaptation to the West continued in the field of education as in many other fields in the Ottoman Empire. The starting point of all these efforts was the period of Mahmud II.

### 2. Overview of the Mahmud II Period

Mahmud II came to the throne at the age of 23 after his brother 4 Mustafa was killed in 1808. This is a period in which the Ottoman Empire suffered a lot to make reforms in the western style. The fact that Mahmud II became the sultan showed a great deviation from the old traditions of the Ottoman Empire. Until that day enrichment as a landowner was not allowed in the Ottoman Empire. However, by this period

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period, the feudal landowners, whose names were notables in the Ottoman Empire, gained an important power and played an important role in Mahmud II's becoming a sultan. During this period, the sultan's powers were restricted for the first time by signing a document called "sened-i ittifak" (Charter of Alliance) and the feudal lords obtained some guarantees (Kunt et al., 1997).

During this period, wars were fought with Russia, which became very powerful, and great financial losses were given in these wars. Afterwards, the Serbian revolt broke out with the Russians directing the Slavs in the Balkans to independence movements. Later, with the Greek nationalist uprisings, Greece gained its independence. The situation of the Ottoman State against these uprisings was so weak that even in the case of suppressing the uprising, it faced the intervention of the great states of that time. The Serbian revolts and the independence of Greece also had an impact on other nations in the Balkans, and rising nationalist movements started separatist movements in other nations. In addition, in this period, the Ottoman Empire could not intervene in response to the occupation of Algeria by the French (Aksin, 2007).

The ideas of nationalism spread as a result of the French Revolution in 1789 deeply affected the Balkan states located in the periphery of western Europe, and then nationalist movements emerged in these states. The ideas that emerged in this period, when the Ottoman Empire was very weak and tried to survive with its balance policies, left a lot of negative effects.

The problems of the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Mahmud II were not limited to foreign affairs. There have also been important developments in domestic politics. The Ottoman state elite was aware of a process leading to collapse. They resorted to various means to stop this process. The developments in domestic politics clearly showed how weakened the state was. For example, Kavalalı Mehmet Ali Pasha, who was the governor of Egypt at that time, challenged the Ottoman Empire with his army, and the Ottoman Empire had to ask for help from his old enemy Russia against the army of Mehmet Ali Pasha (Fahmy, 2012). In addition to these developments, the Janissary Corps, which was believed to be the reason for the continuous defeat of the Ottoman army, was closed. According to the opinion of the State elite at that time, the reluctance of the Janissaries in the wars and the burden on the Ottoman finances was an important reason for its closure.

All these developments were important indicators for the Ottoman state elite that the state was heading towards collapse. To stop this trend, the most important solution that came to the mind of the state elite was to strengthen the central authority. At the same time, the bureaucratic structures of the states underwent significant changes, especially with the effect of the enlightenment and modernization processes. The Ottoman Empire was also in the thought of strengthening its bureaucracy in order to keep up with the same transformations and to make the necessary reforms on time. The thought that the most important way to strengthen the central authority and to train new bureaucrats for the state is through education, prompted Mahmud II.

### **3. Reforms in Education**

The Ottoman state elite investigated the reasons for the decline in many ways and realized that one of the main problems was education. Although the primary aim is to strengthen the central authority, it is a very important development that the issue of education was addressed as an important agenda item (Deringil,

1993). The political, social, economic and scientific developments that emerged in the western countries (Mokyr, 2011) at that time mobilized other countries. The fact that the Ottoman Empire noticed these developments and tried to keep up with them shows that the Ottoman Empire elites had an advanced intellectual level. In this context, it is an important development to start educational activities by observing the developments in the West (Karpát, 1974).

The idea of disseminating education to the whole society in western states, especially after the enlightenment of the 18th century, is one of the clear indicators of this new era of humanity (La Vopa, 1992). In previous periods, science and education were in the hands of certain circles and did not spread to the society. However, enlightenment paved the way for very important developments by spreading education to the whole society. In the face of all these developments, the reaction of the Ottoman State elite in a short time and the efforts to spread education within the country were important developments (Fortna, 2001).

We can say that the most important aspect of the education reforms that emerged during the reign of Mahmud II was the westernization and secularization movements in education. However, in order to achieve this, some traditional structures had to either keep up with the process or their influence had to be diminished. Until that day, education in the Ottoman Empire was carried out by religious circles outside the control of the state. The madrasahs, which were inherited from the Seljuk State and had a religious structure, had been at the center of education for centuries. In addition to the religious education given in madrasahs, education on modern sciences was very limited. In addition, the people who grew up in these institutions had some religious fanaticism. The first move against these madrasahs, which was an important obstacle to secular education, was made by Mahmud II in 1826. During this period, madrasahs lost their financial freedom, and their income was confiscated by the Ministry of Endowment. Thus, traditional education was greatly restricted, and state control was ensured up to a point (Yıldız & Gündüz, 2019).

Mahmud II published the "Talim-i Sıbyan Fermanı" (The edict of education of children) in 1824 and made it compulsory for children to receive basic education. At that time, the education of children was not given importance by the families and children were generally seen as workers. This edict was issued in order to prevent this problem and to provide education to children from a young age, and it became an important indicator of how the state elite looked at education in the new period (Gurbetoğlu, 2020). However, the language used in this edict also shows how the Ottoman State elite was in a dilemma. In the edict, first of all, the importance of learning basic religious knowledge was expressed, and then it was stated that ignorance increased because the parents did not educate their children. In fact, by giving religious references in this edict, the reaction of the conservative society of that day was tried to be prevented. As a matter of fact, it is possible to see that religious references were also used in the edict of Tanzimat prepared by Mahmud II (Ölker & Aktaş, 2013). Although the State elite wanted to secularize, it is understood from the language they used in their edicts that they were afraid of the conservative society.

Although some restrictions were imposed on madrasahs in this period, these institutions continued their education. In addition to these, many schools providing modern education were opened and after this period, the education system, which was called the double-headed system in the Ottoman history, continued until the establishment of the republic (Hamit, 2003).

Focusing only on the reforms made by Mahmud II in the field of education will not fully reflect the general characteristics of that period. The aim of the reforms in education is to keep up with the developments in the western states, and the reforms made in many other fields were made for the same purpose. In fact, as understood from the sufferings of the Ottoman Empire at that time, the understanding of being a modern state like the western states and keeping up with the developments was dominant. In this context, many innovations were made in the state administration and in the relations between the state and the people. For example, the tradition of confiscating the property of dismissed and deceased statesmen in the Ottoman Empire was abolished (Taşar, 2017). Thus began the development of private property. Important innovations were introduced regarding civil servants. The political structure of the state underwent major changes. Simultaneously with all these, educational reforms were also carried out.

At that time, when the aim of spreading education to the whole society was pursued, the Ottoman Empire made primary education compulsory for children living in Istanbul (Celenk, 2009). In fact, we should point out that the fact that this practice was not widespread in all parts of the state is an important indicator of some issues. As it is understood from here, the central administration of the Ottoman Empire could not carry out these practices in the same way in all parts of the state. This shows that there is a weakness in the authority of the central government.

One of the most important indicators of western-style education and secularization efforts was the sending of students to Europe at that time. Thus, students will receive education in the western style and will be equipped with the education required by the state. Thus, it was calculated that these people would help strengthen the state.

The reforms of Mahmud II in the field of education continued with the establishment of secondary schools. Mahmud II, who made the education of primary school children compulsory, later opened the school as a continuation of these primary schools. Before that, he had asked a committee to do some research on this issue (Demirel, 2012).

The main purpose of the education reforms was to strengthen the central authority and to train civil servants for the state. “Mekteb-i maarif-i adliye” was opened for the realization of this purpose. In addition to this, it was aimed to train civil servants in “mekteb-i ulum-u edebiyeye” (Yıldız & Gündüz, 2019).

In this period, the reforms that were the clearest indicator of secularization in education in the Ottoman Empire were made in the education of the army. The curriculum of the Royal Military School (Mekteb-i Harbiye), which was especially designed to provide western-style education, was prepared in a secular style (Eser, 2012). In addition, the traditional military band (Mehter) was abolished, and the Imperial Band was founded (Signell, 1976). Additionally, royal medical school was also opened in this period, and this school became one of the symbols of secular education of that time (Yıldız, 2017).

Secular education movements, which started with Mahmud II, continued to accelerate in the following period. However, since he started the first secularization movements in education in Ottoman history, Mahmud II has an important position. However, all these movements were negatively received by the conservative society, and this caused the Sultan to be nicknamed as “the infidel sultan” (gavur padişah) (İnce, 2017).

#### **4. Discussion**

One of the developments that caused western states to establish hegemony over the whole world is the enlightenment movements that emerged from the 17th century. After this period, the superiority of the western world emerged in all areas of life. One of the important aspects of enlightenment was the idea of spreading education to the whole society and entering into a mass enlightenment. By the 19th century, the western world was also ahead of the rest of the world in the field of education. The Ottoman Empire, which always had very close relations with the West, made great efforts to keep up with the developments, especially in the 19th century. The Ottoman Empire, which closely followed all the modernization and enlightenment movements, gave great importance to social transformation, although it primarily aimed to strengthen the central government. In this context, besides the traditional educational institutions, institutions that will provide secular education in western style started to be established since the reign of Mahmud II. On the one hand, there were Educational Institutions that were created in line with the westernization efforts of the state, on the other hand, traditional Educational Institutions continued.

The secularization movements that emerged in the 19th century in the Ottoman Empire were first seen in the field of education. Institutions that provided education in western style were designed to train statesmen for the central government. In fact, the people who grew up in these institutions played important roles in the destiny of the state in later periods.

Mahmud II was the sultan who openly initiated the secularization movements in the Ottoman Empire. In this context, firstly, the western-style secularization of the education system was ensured. In fact, all this shows the pain of following the progress of the western world, while on the one hand there is a conservative society. At this point, it is possible to follow the traces of the secularization of the Ottoman Empire in the first half of the 19th century. The most effective tool of this secularization was seen as education. At the same time, these movements show the efforts and pains of keeping the distance that was continually opening with the western world at least constant.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In the modern age, education is in a position that directs the lives of societies. Since the elites of the Ottoman Empire had a developed intellectual capacity in the world of the 19th century, they immediately saw all the developments in the western world and gave the necessary reaction. In the face of the continuous progress of the western world, the Ottoman Empire tried to adapt to the transformations suitable for the western style. Secularization and westernization of education, which was one of the most valid methods for this, was an effort that started in the 19th century. In fact, all these show that the state elite, on the one hand, tries to save the state from collapse, and on the other hand, tries to modernize the society.

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