

The Roots of Reform: Islamic Education and the Early Modernization Process in 18th Century Egypt

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the transformation of Islamic education in 18th-century Egypt, focusing on reform strategies, modernization aspects, key figures, and their impacts. Using a qualitative approach through documentation studies and in-depth interviews, data were collected from written sources, biographies, and intellectual works. Thematic analysis was applied to identify central ideas and their influence on educational development. Interviews with Islamic history experts, academics, or researchers who are competent in this field can provide further insights into the interpretation and a deeper understanding of the contributions of these figures to education. The findings reveal that Islamic education in Egypt experienced major reforms, especially through the integration of modern and secular sciences alongside traditional religious studies. Pioneering figures such as Muhammad Ali Pasha, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, and Muhammad Abduh were instrumental in reshaping educational institutions, curricula, and teaching methods. These reforms laid the foundation for modern education in Egypt and influenced broader Islamic educational practices. The study recommends the continued integration of religious and secular knowledge to build a holistic and contextually relevant education system.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi transformasi pendidikan Islam di Mesir abad ke-18, dengan fokus pada strategi reformasi, aspek modernisasi, tokoh-tokoh kunci, dan dampaknya. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui studi dokumentasi dan wawancara mendalam, data dikumpulkan dari sumber tertulis, biografi, dan karya-karya intelektual. Analisis tematik digunakan untuk mengidentifikasi gagasan-gagasan sentral serta pengaruhnya terhadap perkembangan pendidikan. Wawancara dengan pakar sejarah Islam, akademisi, atau peneliti yang kompeten di bidang ini dapat memberikan wawasan lebih lanjut dalam penafsiran dan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam mengenai kontribusi tokoh-tokoh tersebut terhadap dunia pendidikan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendidikan Islam di Mesir mengalami reformasi besar, terutama melalui integrasi ilmu-ilmu modern dan sekuler bersama studi keagamaan tradisional. Tokoh-tokoh pelopor seperti Muhammad Ali Pasha, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, dan Muhammad Abduh berperan penting dalam merombak lembaga pendidikan, kurikulum, dan metode pengajaran. Reformasi ini menjadi fondasi bagi sistem pendidikan modern di Mesir dan turut memengaruhi praktik pendidikan Islam secara lebih luas. Studi ini merekomendasikan perlunya integrasi berkelanjutan antara pengetahuan keagamaan dan pengetahuan umum untuk membangun sistem pendidikan yang holistik dan relevan secara kontekstual.

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A. INTRODUCTION

The modernization of Islamic education worldwide is the most important part of freeing itself from the doctrinal constraints of Islamic education, which is viewed as only learning religion and not studying general scientific subjects.¹ Reform or modernization is the process of adapting Islamic education to its time.² The renewal referred to is not meant to change what constitutes the provisions of Sharia as contained in the Qur'an and Hadith. However, the renewal intended, as stated by Abuddin Nata, is to change or adjust the understanding of both in accordance with the development of the times. The renewal referred to is not meant to change what constitutes the provisions of Sharia as contained in the Qur'an and Hadith. However, the renewal intended, as stated by Abuddin Nata, is to change or adjust the understanding of both in accordance with the development of the times.³

In Egypt, with the reformist figure well-known in the Islamic world, Muhammad Abduh, who, with his brilliant ideas, campaigned for the importance of integrating knowledge in the field of education. The idea that is often voiced in the form of opposing the dualism of education. Islamic education in Egypt that is very well-known is Al-Azhar, with an educational concept that not only organizes religious education but also general education such as medicine, pharmacy engineering, and also has a faculty called Daarul Ulum which conducts Islamic studies. This shows the disappearance of the dichotomy and the integration of Islamic education and Islamic educational institutions, especially at Al-Azhar in Egypt.⁴

The modernization of Islamic education in Egypt in the 19th century marked an important transition from the traditional education system to a more modern education system.⁵ Muhammad Ali Pasha, the ruler of Egypt since the early 19th century, was the chief architect of these reforms. He initiated a series of reforms aimed at improving the quality of education and creating a skilled workforce in fields such as the military, engineering, and medicine. These reforms are part of a larger strategy to strengthen Egypt amidst the growing European dominance.

The modernization of education in Egypt not only impacts the internal affairs of the country but also affects students from various Islamic countries studying there, including Indonesian students.⁶ This educational reform demonstrates a blend of traditional Islamic education elements with a modern scientific and technological approach. This study will outline the background of 18th-century Islamic education in Egypt, the strategies for

¹ Noqti Nuril Khovi, Muhamad Alfi Alfaridi, and Muh Hamzah, "Modernization Of Islamic Education Curriculum: Balancing Tradition And Innovation For Future Generations," in *Proceeding of International Conference on Education, Society and Humanity*, vol. 02, 2024, 1116–24, <https://ejournal.unuja.ac.id/index.php/icesh>.

² Syamsul Aripin Syamsul Aripin and Nana Meily Nurdiansyah, "Modernization of Education : A New Approach and Method in Learning Islamic Religious Education," *TADRIS: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 17, no. 1 (2022): 100–117, <https://doi.org/10.19105/tjpi.v17i1.5916>.

³ Aprizal Sulthon Rasyidi, "The Significants and Arguments for the Renewal of Maqāṣ Id Al- Sharī ' Ah," *Ulumuddin : Journal of Islamic Legal Studies* 13, no. 1 (2020): 45–67, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.22219/ulumuddin.v1i1.12723> Abstrak.

⁴ M. Fahim Tharaba and Mukhibat Mukhibat, "The Islamic Education Reform Early 20th Century," *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 20, no. 1 (2020): 121–41, <https://doi.org/10.21154/altahrir.v20i1.2008>.

⁵ Muslim, Abd Mukti, and Junaidi Arsyad, "Reformation Of Islamic Educational Institutions In Aceh (Study Of Madrasahs In 1915-1946)," *Edukasi Islami : Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 12, no. 04 (2023): 387–402.

⁶ Nazaruddin Lubis, "Educational Reform in Egypt (Analysis of Muhammad Abduh's Thoughts and Their Influence on Educational Reform in Indonesia)," *Jurnal Al-Fikrah* 12, no. 1 (2023): 133–47.

reforming Islamic education in Egypt, the aspects of modernization, the key figures involved, and the impacts resulting from these modernization efforts.

The modernization of Islamic education worldwide represents a pivotal effort to liberate it from doctrinal constraints that have long restricted its scope to religious instruction, often neglecting the integration of general scientific and technological knowledge. Reform in this context refers not to altering the core tenets of Sharia as laid out in the Qur'an and Hadith, but to adjusting their interpretation in accordance with the challenges and developments of modern life. As articulated by Abuddin Nata, this process of renewal does not undermine the integrity of religious principles, but rather seeks to make Islamic education relevant and responsive to the needs of contemporary society.

Egypt has been a prominent arena for such reform, particularly through the work of Muhammad Abduh, a seminal figure in modern Islamic thought. His progressive ideas were instrumental in advocating for the integration of secular and religious knowledge, directly challenging the educational dualism that had divided Islamic sciences from modern disciplines. This integration is most visibly realized in Al-Azhar University, one of the oldest and most respected Islamic institutions in the world. Al-Azhar's curriculum reflects a holistic educational model that combines Islamic studies with modern fields such as medicine, engineering, and pharmacy. The establishment of faculties such as Daarul Ulum further illustrates the move toward a cohesive educational structure that embodies both religious and secular knowledge under one institutional framework.

The modernization of Islamic education in Egypt gained significant momentum in the 19th century under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Pasha. As Egypt's ruler, he introduced comprehensive educational reforms aimed at strengthening the nation's capacity in military, engineering, and medical sciences. His vision was not limited to technical training; rather, it was part of a larger project to modernize Egyptian society and institutions in response to the growing dominance of European powers. These reforms represented a significant departure from the traditional Islamic education system, which had been largely centered around memorization and jurisprudence. Instead, a new educational model began to take shape — one that fused religious knowledge with practical, scientific learning.

These transformations had implications that extended far beyond Egypt's borders. Al-Azhar, in particular, became a hub for international students, including those from Southeast Asia. Indonesian students who studied in Egypt were exposed to this reformed model of Islamic education and carried its ideas back home, thereby influencing educational reform in their own countries. As such, Egypt's educational modernization served as both a national reform effort and a global reference point for Muslim societies seeking to reconcile tradition with modernity.

A number of scholars have explored the themes of Islamic education reform. For instance, Robert Hefner's *Making Modern Muslims* delves into how Islamic education in Southeast Asia evolves in response to modern state structures, echoing the integrative approach seen in Egypt but focusing on a different geographical context. Donald Boyd's historical account of *Educational Reform in Egypt: 1800–1870* provides a detailed overview of Muhammad Ali's reform era, though it pays less attention to the intellectual influence of reformist scholars like Muhammad Abduh. Malika Zeghal, in her study on the Al-Azhar ulema, emphasizes the institution's negotiation with modernity and political change in the mid-20th century, whereas this article goes further back to examine the foundational ideas and transformations

of the 19th century. M. Amin Abdullah offers a philosophical take on epistemological integration in Islamic education, while Dale Eickelman addresses the tension between tradition and modernity. What distinguishes this study from those works is its comprehensive synthesis of ideological, institutional, and political reform processes in Egypt, framed within a transnational perspective that highlights Egypt's influence on other Muslim-majority societies.

The novelty of this article lies in its integrative analysis that brings together the reformist ideologies of key figures like Muhammad Abduh, the state-driven reforms of Muhammad Ali Pasha, and the institutional transformations of Al-Azhar University. Rather than treating these elements in isolation, this study presents them as interconnected aspects of a broader educational modernization movement. Furthermore, it traces the transnational impact of Egypt's reforms, particularly on Indonesian students, providing a new dimension to the study of Islamic education by situating Egypt as both a reform center and a global influencer.

The main objective of this article is to analyze the historical and intellectual trajectory of Islamic educational reform in 19th-century Egypt. It aims to contextualize the emergence of modern Islamic education within Egypt's socio-political and intellectual environment, to examine the strategies and figures that drove this transformation, and to assess the wider implications of these reforms for Islamic education globally. By doing so, this article contributes to the ongoing discourse on how Islamic education can maintain its religious authenticity while adapting to the demands of a modern, interconnected world.

B. METHODS

For research on the modernization of Islamic education in Egypt involving figures such as Muhammad Ali Pasha, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Qasim Amin, and Hasan Al-Banna, the most suitable research method is the qualitative method.⁷ This approach is highly relevant because the focus of the research is to deeply understand the roles of these figures in bringing about changes in the Islamic education system in Egypt. This research aims to explore the views, thoughts, and contributions of each figure within the social and historical context, as well as how their ideas influenced the modernization of education. Researchers can use literature review techniques to analyze various written works, biographies, and historical documents related to these figures. This method allows researchers to explore in detail the context of thought, educational policies, and their impact on the development of Islamic education in Egypt in the 19th and 20th centuries.⁸

Data collection in this research can be conducted through documentation studies. Documentation studies involve the collection and analysis of various historical texts, books, articles, and intellectual works published by and about figures involved in the modernization of education in Egypt.⁹ Additionally, interviews with Islamic history experts, academics, or

⁷ Agus Rustamana et al., "Qualitative Research Methods," *Indonesian Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Science and Technology (Marcopolo)* 2, no. 6 (2024): 919–30, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.55927/marcopolo.v2i6.9907>.

⁸ Lesley Eleanor Tomaszewski, Jill Zarestky, and Elsa Gonzalez, "Planning Qualitative Research: Design and Decision Making for New Researchers," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (2020): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920967174>.

⁹ I Gusti Ayu Agung Omika DEWI, "Understanding Data Collection Methods in Qualitative Research: The Perspective Of Interpretive Accounting Research," *Journal of Tourism Economics and Policy* 1, no. 1 (2022): 23–34, <https://doi.org/10.38142/jtep.v1i1.105>.

researchers who are competent in this field can provide further insights into the interpretation and a deeper understanding of the contributions of these figures to education. The collected data will then be analyzed using thematic analysis, where the researcher identifies key themes in the educational thoughts and policies advocated by each figure. This analysis will also explore how their ideas are implemented in educational policies and their impact on social change and Islamic education in Egypt.¹⁰

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Background of Islamic Education in 18th Century Egypt

In the 18th century, Islamic education in Egypt played a crucial role in shaping the intellectual and spiritual identity of the local community and the broader Islamic world. As a center of Islamic scholarship for centuries, Egypt, with Al-Azhar University as one of its main institutions, became a primary destination for students from various corners of the Islamic world, such as North Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. However, the Islamic education system in Egypt at that time faced various significant challenges. This era was marked by intellectual stagnation in the Islamic world, where Egypt, as part of the Ottoman Empire, was also affected by changes in the political, social, and economic fields. Nevertheless, traditional Islamic educational institutions continued to endure and became the main pillars in the life of Egyptian society.

a. The Islamic Education System in 18th Century Egypt

In the 18th century, Islamic education in Egypt was centered at Al-Azhar University, which had been established since the 10th century as the highest educational institution in the Islamic world. Educational institutions such as madrasahs and mosques play an important role in teaching religious knowledge to the community. Al-Azhar has become a center for teaching religious sciences, such as Quranic exegesis, hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, and theology, with Arabic as the primary medium of instruction. Students, or talibul 'ilm, learn through the halaqah system where they can choose prominent scholars as teachers and engage in open discussions. In addition to religious studies, general sciences such as astronomy and mathematics were also taught, although in smaller proportions. A characteristic of education at that time was the use of classical Islamic texts such as the works of Imam Shafi'i and Al-Ghazali as the main references.¹¹

However, Islamic education at that time faced challenges in the form of a lack of innovation and intellectual development.¹² The focus of teaching tended to be on the repetition and explanation of old texts without the renewal of methods or the exploration of new knowledge. The conservative classical Islamic education tradition emphasized the preservation of tradition rather than the development of science. As stated by Mukti, the

¹⁰ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, ed. Helen Salmon et al., 5th ed. (California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2018).

¹¹ Ahmad Zamroni, Wakidi, and Husnul Haq, "Quality Development of Islamic Education in the Era of Society 5.0: Opportunities and Challenges," *International Journal of Post Axial: Futuristic Teaching and Learning* 5, no. 2 (2023): 98–103, <https://doi.org/10.59944/postaxial.v1i2.244>.

¹² Vera Diana Yulita, St Nurhayati Ali, and Nurully Kesuma Nimgrum, "Reconstruction of Islamic Educational Thought: Challenges and Opportunities in the Modern Era," *International Journal of Health, Economics, and Social Sciences (IJHESS)* 7, no. 2 (2025): 645–49, <https://doi.org/10.56338/ijhess.v7i2.7225>.

education system at that time was dominated by a traditional approach that prioritized preserving old habits rather than opening up space for innovation.

b. The Role of Scholars in Education

In the 18th century, scholars played an important role in Islamic education in Egypt, both as educators and as religious figures who had a significant influence on society. They function as guardians of religious traditions, providing authority in education, law, and spirituality. At Al-Azhar, scholars hold control over the curriculum and the books taught, making them the primary leaders in Islamic education.¹³ However, this role is often colored by a conservative attitude that focuses more on preserving tradition than on renewal. This attitude has drawn criticism from progressive groups who believe that the intellectual stagnation among scholars hinders innovation and the development of knowledge. Badran revealed that the scholars of that time preferred to maintain religious authority rather than accept changes in education. This conservatism strengthened the role of scholars as guardians of tradition, but at the same time reduced openness to reform. As a result, the Islamic education system in Egypt faces limitations in adapting to the changing times.

The ulama played a central role in Islamic education in Egypt during the 18th century, both as administrators of educational institutions and as guardians of scholarly traditions. They led Al-Azhar University as a center of Islamic education, serving as teachers, administrators, and scholarly guides, as well as managing madrasahs and halaqahs in mosques to teach religious knowledge and the Arabic language. As guardians of tradition, the ulama ensured the continuity of Islamic scholarship through the writing of books, the granting of ijazahs, and the preservation of scholarly chains of transmission by teaching disciplines such as *tafsir*, *fiqh*, *nahwu*, and *mantiq*. In the socio-political field, scholars act as mediators between the community and the rulers, conveying the people's aspirations, resolving conflicts, and advising the sultan or governor on sharia law. Although many scholars maintained traditional methods, some began to introduce modern science from Europe, especially in the fields of science and technology. They also recognize the importance of adapting the curriculum to face the changes of the times. This role makes scholars key figures in preserving tradition while also responding to educational challenges. Thus, the ulama hold significant control over the development of Islamic education in Egypt.

Al-Azhar University plays an important role as a center of education and scholarship in the Islamic world, attracting students from various regions such as Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Its curriculum initially focused on religious studies, but gradually began to integrate secular sciences into the learning process. Al-Azhar is also supported by a waqf system managed by scholars, which serves as the main source of educational funding in Egypt. Through waqf, students from underprivileged backgrounds can access education for free.¹⁴ In addition, waqf contributes to the dissemination of Islamic literature through the production and distribution of important books. The existence of Al-Azhar strengthens the tradition of Islamic scholarship and supports the dissemination of knowledge to various regions of the

¹³ Imron Muttaqin, "Challenges of Islamic Education Management in the Digital Era," *Ta'allum: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 10, no. 2 (2023): 343–64, <https://doi.org/10.21274/taalum.2022.10.2.343-364>.

¹⁴ A Ascarya, M N Hosen, and S Rahmawati, "Designing Simple Productive Waqf Models for Indonesia," *International Journal of Ethics and Systems* 38, no. 3 (2022): 380–401, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOES-07-2020-0101>.

Muslim world. Thus, Al-Azhar not only serves as a center of learning but also as a main pillar in the development of Islamic intellect and culture. Its contributions encompass interrelated roles in education, social, and economic spheres.

c. The Political Influence of the Ottoman Sultanate

In the 18th century, scholars in Egypt faced various challenges in their efforts to maintain the tradition of Islamic education amidst the tide of modernization. Conservatism became one of the main obstacles, where some scholars were reluctant to accept reforms or knowledge from the West because they were considered contrary to Islamic values, thus hindering educational reform. Additionally, political pressure from the Ottoman Empire and Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion also affected the independence of scholars in carrying out their roles in the field of education. Social inequality also posed a challenge, with the majority of the population living in poverty and only a handful able to access formal education. Nevertheless, scholars remain the main pillar in preserving the identity of Islamic scholarship through institutions like Al-Azhar. They continue to uphold the tradition of Islamic knowledge amidst the influences of colonialism and Europe. Scholars also served as important intermediaries in the early process of educational modernization in the late 18th century. Their role reflects a dedication to preserving Islamic values while also adapting to the changes of the times. In the 18th century, Egypt was under the influence of the Ottoman Empire, which granted local autonomy but still maintained control over important institutions, including Al-Azhar. The appointed Ottoman officials often came from the ranks of scholars who supported the imperial policies, indicating the political influence in the management of education.

However, despite Egypt having autonomy, the impact of Ottoman power on the education sector was quite significant, with economic and social decline also affecting the education system. Because most of Egypt's wealth was channeled to support the Ottoman Empire in Istanbul, the resources available for education became very limited. As a result, the education system experienced stagnation, with little innovation and facilities to support the learning process. Saqib notes that "the Ottoman power in Egypt was more focused on political and economic control, while the education sector, despite its importance, was often neglected or left stagnant". Egypt's dependence on this imperial center worsened the condition of education in the country. Moreover, the limited funding and facilities worsen the quality of education accessible to the public.

d. The Internal Dynamics of Islamic Education in Egypt

Islamic education in 18th century Egypt faced internal challenges, particularly related to the limitations of the curriculum which focused solely on classical religious sciences without introducing secular knowledge. This caused Al-Azhar graduates to struggle to compete internationally, while Europe had already entered the Enlightenment and scientific revolution era. The reluctance of scholars to accept new ideas from the West, which are considered contrary to Islamic values, exacerbates this stagnation. As a result, Islamic education in Egypt is trapped in old traditions that cannot respond to the changes of the times. Mona Abaza notes that "the conservatism of the scholars and the focus solely on religious studies have created intellectual backwardness in Egypt, which in turn weakens Egypt's position in the international world".

Although Al-Azhar remains an important center of Islamic scholarship, significant challenges arise due to the lack of innovation in the curriculum and educational approach. The role of scholars, although significant in preserving tradition, also plays a part in maintaining conservatism that hinders the development of new knowledge. Added to this was the political influence of the Ottoman Empire, which was more focused on economic and political control, leading to a decline in Islamic education in Egypt. Education in the 18th century played an important role in Egyptian society, but its failure to adapt to modernity made it less effective. The reforms initiated in the 19th century, such as those implemented by Muhammad Ali Pasha, subsequently addressed these weaknesses.

2. Strategies for Reforming Islamic Education

Islamic education in Egypt has undergone various stages of development, starting from the golden era of Al-Azhar as a center of Islamic scholarship to the reforms initiated by Muhammad Ali Pasha in the 19th century. The journey of Islamic education in Egypt cannot be separated from the political, social, and intellectual dynamics occurring in the region. As the intellectual center of the Islamic world, Egypt faces various challenges and demands to adapt to the changing times, including the implementation of relevant strategies in the Islamic education system. This study will delve deeply into the strategies of Islamic education in Egypt, analyze the developments, and assess their impact on society and the Islamic world.

a. Islamic Education Strategy in Egypt

The strategy of Islamic education in Egypt, particularly at Al-Azhar, aims to preserve the long-standing tradition of Islamic scholarship. Before modernization, Al-Azhar focused on teaching religious sciences such as Quranic exegesis, hadith, jurisprudence, and theology through the halaqah system, which allowed students to interact directly with scholars. Education at Al-Azhar prioritizes the yellow book or classical works of great scholars, which form a strong intellectual foundation. However, this system has also been criticized for being underdeveloped in modern sciences.

In the 19th century, under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Pasha, Egypt began to integrate religious education with secular knowledge. Muhammad Ali realized that Egypt needed to overhaul its education system to face the challenges of colonialism and backwardness. Therefore, he established technical, medical, and military schools that taught Western sciences such as physics, chemistry, and engineering. This approach created a dualism in the education system, with Al-Azhar and madrasahs remaining focused on religion, while modern schools taught science and technology. Muhammad Ali also sent students to study in Europe with the hope that they would return to advance Egypt.

As part of modernization, Egypt is also developing teacher capacity and reforming the curriculum. Education in the 19th century began to adopt a Western approach, which combined religious studies with secular sciences, as well as the teaching of foreign languages and technology. This includes the implementation of a systematic approach in the preparation of teaching materials and the use of textbooks that are more in line with the times. This strategy successfully improved the quality of education and produced skilled labor in the fields of engineering, medicine, and administration. In addition, Muhammad Ali established technical schools, such as the Qasr al-Aini School of Medicine and the Madrasat al-Handasah

School of Engineering, which focused on modern education and supported the advancement of Egypt's military and administration.

b. Dynamics and Challenges in the Implementation of Educational Strategies

The implementation of educational strategies in Egypt faces various challenges, especially from traditional scholars who view modernization as a threat to Islamic traditions. Scholars at Al-Azhar are concerned that the integration of Western knowledge could weaken Islamic religious values, leading to resistance against curriculum reforms and changes in teaching methods at religious educational institutions. Badran noted that "the conservatism of the ulama slows down educational reform because they prefer traditional teaching methods that focus on memorization and classical religious texts."

Although there have been efforts to integrate religious and secular education since the time of Muhammad Ali, the major challenge is to create a balance between the two systems. The dualism of education often results in a dissonance between graduates of madrasahs and modern schools. Graduates of madrasahs and Al-Azhar are often considered less prepared for the modern workforce, while graduates of secular schools are seen as lacking in understanding religious values. Educational reform in Egypt is also hindered by budgetary and infrastructural limitations. Despite significant efforts under Muhammad Ali, financial issues remained the main obstacle in building new schools, providing adequate facilities, and training competent teachers in modern sciences. Additionally, the influence of European colonialism in the late 19th century brought Western educational approaches that increased access to new technologies and methods, but also caused tensions regarding the preservation of religious identity in Islamic education.

3. Aspects of Modernization

Egypt is one of the countries with a very long history of Islamic education, especially through legendary institutions such as Al-Azhar University. However, with the advent of the modern era, the Islamic education system in Egypt faces significant challenges that drive the emergence of reforms and modernization in various aspects. This modernization includes changes in the curriculum, teaching methods, the role of teachers, and the structure of educational institutions. Additionally, the modernization of Islamic education in Egypt is influenced by global developments, both from the West and the Muslim world itself. This article will broadly review the aspects of the modernization of Islamic education in Egypt, focusing on curriculum analysis, institutional development, teaching methods, and the reformers who played a significant role in this transformation.

a. Aspects of Curriculum Modernization: Integration of Religious and Secular Sciences

Before modernization, the education system in Egypt, particularly at Al-Azhar, was dominated by traditional religious sciences such as tafsir, hadith, fiqh, and aqeedah, with a focus on teaching classical texts passed down through generations. Secular sciences hardly found a place in the curriculum, as they were considered irrelevant to religious teachings. However, in the early 19th century, Muhammad Ali Pasha recognized the importance of secular sciences for the progress of the country and introduced subjects such as mathematics, physics, medicine, and engineering into the curriculum to support the modernization of the

military and state administration. This step aimed to create the necessary experts for the country's modernization project.

Although it initially faced resistance from traditional scholars, Al-Azhar has gradually begun to integrate general knowledge such as science, foreign languages, and social sciences into its curriculum. Nevertheless, religious education remains the main foundation. This process reflects a significant shift in the education system, which previously focused solely on religious studies, towards a more inclusive education that embraces modern science and technology. This integration demonstrates an effort to balance Islamic traditions with the developments of the modern world, while still preserving the essence of religious education.

b. Aspects of Infrastructure Development and Modern Educational Institutions

In addition to changes in the curriculum, the establishment of modern educational institutions has also become an important aspect of the modernization of education in Egypt. Under the leadership of Muhammad Ali, Egypt established institutions such as the School of Medicine, the School of Engineering, and the Military Academy to support military and state administration reforms. These institutions adopted the Western education model, which focused on the disciplines necessary for the country's advancement. The shift from the traditional Islamic education model, which only focused on religious studies, towards a more comprehensive education by integrating secular sciences such as science, engineering, and administration, became clear through the establishment of these institutions. Furthermore, the Egyptian government began sending students to Europe, particularly to France, to study at universities, bringing back new insights into Western technology and education systems.

The development of this educational institution reflects a significant change in the Egyptian education system, which focuses on a more inclusive and comprehensive formal education. Additionally, the modernization of education also introduced gender equality by establishing schools specifically for girls, providing access to formal education that was previously limited for women. This signifies a broader social transformation in Egyptian society, where education was not only developed in terms of infrastructure but also in efforts to create a more equitable society. Thus, the modernization of education in Egypt under Muhammad Ali did not only focus on academic aspects but also on deeper social changes.

c. Renewal of Teaching Methods and the Role of Teachers

In the traditional Egyptian education system, the teaching method focuses on scholars and takes place in the form of halaqah in mosques, emphasizing the memorization of religious texts without using a structured pedagogical approach. However, with the advent of modernization, these teaching methods began to be replaced by more systematic and structured approaches. Modern schools began to adopt Western educational approaches, with an emphasis on conceptual understanding, the use of textbooks, and evaluation through exams. In engineering and medical schools, experimental methods and practicals were introduced to strengthen the teaching of natural sciences and engineering. This indicates a significant shift in teaching methods, moving towards a more scientific and results-based model.

Changes in teaching methods also bring changes to the role of teachers, who no longer function solely as conveyors of religious knowledge, but also as educators who teach general knowledge. Teachers in modern schools receive special training in subjects such as science,

mathematics, and foreign languages. This reform is also beginning to reach Islamic educational institutions such as Al-Azhar, although changes there are happening more slowly compared to secular schools. The modernization of Islamic education in Egypt, which includes curriculum reform, the establishment of modern educational institutions, and changes in teaching methods, has brought significant changes despite facing resistance from conservative groups. These changes have had a broad impact on the overall development of Islamic education.

4. Main Characters

a. Muhammad Ali Pasha (1769–1849)

Muhammad Ali Pasha, known as the "Father of Modernization in Egypt," played a key role in introducing various major reforms in Egypt in the early 19th century. As a governor appointed by the Ottoman Empire, he recognized the need to develop skilled personnel to strengthen the military and state administration, which prompted him to adopt a more scientific and secular Western education system. He established technical, medical, and military schools to produce skilled personnel capable of supporting the modernization of Egypt. In addition, Muhammad Ali also sent Egyptian students to Europe to study modern technology and science, which subsequently influenced educational reforms in Egypt, including affecting religious educational institutions like Al-Azhar to open up to the teaching of secular sciences.

Muhammad Ali Pasha starting his educational endeavors in 1805, were primarily driven by his ambition to build a strong military and a modern state. He established schools and brought in European teachers, focusing on fields like medicine, chemistry, physics, civil engineering, and military science. A key insight is that while his reforms brought rapid progress, they also had a negative impact on traditional Islamic education and institutions like Al-Azhar, as they marginalized religious education and even led to the draining of waqf assets. His reforms were also influenced by Western interests and were not always sustainable, sometimes being driven by personal and family ambitions.¹⁵

b. Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801–1873)

Rifa'a al-Tahtawi was a scholar sent by Muhammad Ali to study in France, and became one of the important figures who brought modern ideas to Egypt, especially in the field of education. After returning to Egypt, al-Tahtawi translated many Western scientific works into Arabic and integrated Western knowledge with Islamic traditions. He introduced the concept of secular education within Islamic education, believing that secular knowledge could support economic and social progress. Al-Tahtawi also developed a curriculum that integrated religious sciences with secular sciences such as history, geography, and social sciences, which helped to expand the scope of education in Egypt.¹⁶

Rifa'a al-Tahtawi as a significant educationalist and reformer who promoted a fusion of Eastern and Western cultures. He was a strong advocate for secular education and literacy,

¹⁵ Hasneli Hasneli, Meirison Meirison, and Qasem Muhammadi, "Educational Renewal During Muhammad Ali Period and Its Impact on The Al-Azhar Educational Institution," *Tafkir: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Education* 5, no. 1 (2024): 27–40, <https://doi.org/10.31538/tijie.v5i1.687>.

¹⁶ Kayan Manggala, Avita Aniqotul 'Athiyyah, and Ahmad Kholil, "Modernisasi Pendidikan Islam Di Mesir Dalam Pemikiran Rifa'ah Rafi' Al-Tahtawi," *ISEDU: Islamic Education Journal* 2, no. 1 (2024): 11–21, <https://doi.org/10.59966/isedu.v2i1.848>.

emphasizing its importance for social progress and the development of a modern democratic society. He actively participated in curriculum development, teacher selection, and even authored new grammar and reading books to address existing inadequacies.¹⁷

c. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897)

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, a reformist Muslim thinker, was highly influential in the pan-Islamism movement and the renewal of Islamic thought, including in education. He encouraged Muslims to adopt modern science and technology through *ijtihad*, critical thinking in Islam, and to critique religious teachings dogmatically. Al-Afghani argued that education is the key to liberating the Islamic world from Western colonial domination and restoring the glory of Islam. Although he was not directly involved in formal educational reforms, his thoughts greatly influenced Egyptian intellectuals.¹⁸

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani was a pan-Islamic thinker and political activist who sought to revive Islamic thought and liberate the Muslim world from Western influence. While not directly involved in formal educational reforms, his ideas, particularly his emphasis on modern education and political reform, significantly influenced young intellectuals in Cairo, including his student Muhammad Abduh. His work, such as '*al-Radd 'alā al-dahrīyīn*', aimed to counter the idea that science is more important than religion.

d. Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905)

Muhammad Abduh, a student of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, was one of the key figures in the reform of Islamic education in Egypt, particularly at Al-Azhar.¹⁹ As the rector of Al-Azhar, Abduh introduced significant changes by incorporating the teaching of modern sciences, philosophy, and foreign languages into the curriculum.²⁰ Although facing resistance from conservative groups, he succeeded in introducing rationalism and *ijtihad* in the understanding of Islamic teachings, with the aim of harmonizing Islam with modern science and technology. In addition, Abduh also advocated for reforms in Islamic law to align *fiqh* with the needs of modern society. He played a crucial role in reforming Cairo's Al-Azhar University, aiming to integrate modern sciences and philosophy into its curriculum.²¹

e. Qasim Amin (1863–1908)

Qasim Amin, the research indicates his historical perception as one of the Arab world's 'first feminists' due to his advocacy for women's education. He believed that improving women's status was crucial for national progress and criticized practices like veiling,

¹⁷ Naglaa Abou-Agag, "Representations of the West in Al-Tahtawi, Al-Hakim, and Awad," *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2020): 54–70.

¹⁸ Spahic Omer, "Jamāl Al-Dīn Al-Afghānī: The Founder of Muslim Modern," *IJUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies (IJRCS)* 8, no. 1 (2025): 30-39., <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.31436/ijrcs.v8i1.392>.

¹⁹ Ana Kurnia Sari and Khoirul Amin, "Muhammad Abduh as a Figure in the Al-Azhar Education Revolution in Shaping the Face of Islamic Education in Indonesia," *Proceeding of International Conference of Islamic Education* 2, no. 2 (2024): 187–98.

²⁰ M. Tajudin Zuhri et al., "Muhammad Abduh's Islamic Educational Thoughts And Its Relevance To Education In The Contemporary Era," *AL-WIJDĀN Journal of Islamic Education Studies* 8, no. 3 (2023): 474–89, <https://doi.org/10.58788/alwijdn.v8i3.2806>.

²¹ Abba Idris Adam, "Islamic Civilization in the Face of Modernity: The Case of Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 7, no. 6 (2017): 595, <http://worldconferences.net>.

seclusion, and lack of education for Muslim women. His influential book, *'Tahrir al-mar'a'* (The Liberation of Women), co-written with Muhammad Abduh, argued for women's education, though some scholarship suggests his views were influenced by colonial discourse and still maintained patriarchal elements and education for women is very important for the social and economic progress of society. Amin realized that the limited access of women to education hinders the overall development of Egypt. In his book, *Tahrir al-Mar'a* (The Liberation of Women), he outlines his views on the importance of providing equal access to education for women, which is part of a broader modernization effort in Egypt and paves the way for changes in women's roles in society ²².

f. Hasan Al-Banna (1906–1949)

Hasan Al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, emphasized a comprehensive education system that integrated religious and secular knowledge, played a significant role in the reform of Islamic education in Egypt. He believed in educating all layers of society, not just the elite, to enable Muslims to contribute to modern society while retaining their Islamic identity. His early life and education at Dar al-'Ulum, a modern institute of higher learning, shaped his views, though he was also deeply concerned by the Westernization and secularism he observed.²³

Although his movement was more focused on da'wah and politics, Al-Banna proposed a comprehensive education system where religious and secular education were not separated. He believed that Muslims should receive an education that combines religious and secular knowledge to contribute to modern society without losing their Islamic identity. Al-Banna also emphasized the importance of education for all layers of society, not just for the elite or scholars, and established schools and educational centers that emphasized religious education, ethics, and practical skills.²⁴

5. The Impact Generated

The efforts made to modernize education in Egypt have a wide impact, not only domestically but also throughout the Islamic world. First, the birth of the modern intellectual. One of the positive impacts of the education strategy in Egypt is the emergence of a modern intellectual class that possesses knowledge of science and technology, while also having a strong understanding of Islamic religious values. This generation played an important role in the development of the country and contributed to the economic, military, and administrative progress of Egypt in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Second, influence on the Islamic world. The education reforms carried out in Egypt also serve as an inspiration for other Muslim countries striving to improve their education systems. As the intellectual center of the Islamic world, Egypt sets an example in integrating religious

²² Khoirul Mudawinun Nisa', "Pengaruh Pemikiran Pendidikan Qasim Amin Pada Proponen Feminin," *Journal TA'LIMUNA* 3, no. 1 (2018): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.32478/ta.v3i1.100>.

²³ Lely Nur and Hidayah Syafitri, "Actualization of Hasan Al-Bana Holistic Integral Education in Integrated Islamic School," *Proceeding International Conference on Religion, Science and Education 1* (2022): 321–26, <https://sunankalijaga.org/prosiding/index.php/icrse/article/view/806>.

²⁴ Mahfud Alizar, Sekolah Tinggi, and Ilmu Tarbiyah Nurussalam, "Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam Di Timur Tengah: Kontribusi Hassan Al-Banna Dan Pengaruhnya Terhadap Kemerdekaan Negara-Negara," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 2, no. 1 (2024): 39–53.

and secular education, which has been adopted by many Muslim countries, such as Turkey and Pakistan.

Third, the weakening of traditional ulama authority. As modern education developed, the authority of traditional scholars who dominated Islamic education in Egypt began to weaken. With the advent of secular education and modern science, society began to see that traditional religious education alone was not sufficient to face the challenges of the times, leading to a diminishing role of religious scholars in education. The other hand, the modernization of education also brings new challenges, especially from conservative circles who are concerned about the loss of Islamic traditions in the modern education system. Nevertheless, this process of modernization continues, with Egypt serving as a model for many other Muslim countries in terms of modern Islamic education.

The efforts to modernize education in Egypt have had far-reaching consequences that extend well beyond its borders. One of the most significant impacts is the emergence of a new class of modern intellectuals who are capable of bridging the gap between religious values and scientific knowledge. This class of thinkers, administrators, scientists, and reformers played a key role in shaping Egypt's political, economic, and military institutions in the 19th and 20th centuries. Their educational background, grounded in both Islamic teachings and modern sciences, positioned them as key drivers of national development and modernization.

In a broader context, Egypt's educational reforms have served as a model and source of inspiration for other Muslim-majority nations seeking to reform their own systems. Countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, and Indonesia have drawn upon Egypt's approach to integrating religious and secular education, adapting it to their respective cultural and political contexts. Al-Azhar University, in particular, has become a reference point for religious scholarship that embraces engagement with contemporary knowledge and global challenges. For Indonesian students studying at Al-Azhar, the educational experience has often influenced how Islamic education is developed and implemented back home, especially in pesantren and Islamic universities that seek a balanced curriculum.

However, the modernization of education has also led to a shift in authority. Traditional religious scholars (ulama), who once dominated Islamic educational discourse, have seen their influence gradually diminish in the face of modern institutions that offer broader knowledge and skillsets. This shift has prompted resistance from conservative groups, who fear that modernization may dilute core Islamic traditions. Nonetheless, the trend continues, reflecting a growing consensus that Islamic education must evolve in response to social, scientific, and technological changes.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the discourse on the compatibility of Islam and modernity, challenging the notion that Islamic education must remain static. It reinforces the argument that Islamic principles are not inherently opposed to scientific advancement and can be reinterpreted in light of contemporary needs through *ijtihad* and critical engagement. The research also supports educational theories of integration and interdisciplinarity, which argue that compartmentalized learning is less effective in complex, modern societies.

Practically, the Egyptian case demonstrates that a well-planned reform of the education system—one that respects religious traditions while embracing modern sciences—can empower a society to develop holistically. For countries like Indonesia, where debates on curriculum integration between secular and religious studies continue, Egypt's experience offers valuable lessons. It underscores the importance of institutional reform, curriculum

development, and leadership by visionary scholars who understand both classical Islamic thought and modern knowledge systems. Egypt's model suggests that the future of Islamic education lies not in isolating tradition from modernity, but in building a synergistic relationship between the two to meet contemporary challenges.

D. CONCLUSION

The modernization of Islamic education in Egypt began in the early 19th century under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Pasha, who recognized the importance of secular knowledge to support the progress of the nation. Previously, education in Egypt, especially at Al-Azhar, focused on traditional religious sciences without integrating general knowledge. The educational reforms carried out by Muhammad Ali included establishing modern schools such as the School of Medicine and the Military Academy, as well as sending students to Europe to study technology and modern sciences. Important aspects of this modernization include the application of secular sciences, sending students abroad, and the establishment of more inclusive modern educational institutions, including for women. Figures such as Rifa'a al-Tahtawi and Muhammad Abduh played a crucial role in introducing Western science and educational reforms in Egypt. The impact of this modernization is very significant, including the transformation of the education system to be more open to the development of knowledge, the strengthening of the state through the creation of skilled professionals, and broader social inclusion. However, these reforms also created tensions in the effort to maintain Islamic identity amidst the influence of Western science. In the end, the modernization of Islamic education in Egypt successfully balanced Islamic traditions with the demands of the modern era.

This research, however, has several limitations. First, the study mainly relies on secondary data sources such as historical documents, biographies, and previous literature, which may limit the depth of empirical analysis. While interviews were suggested as a method, they were not fully conducted or incorporated into the current analysis, which could have enriched the understanding of key figures' contributions from a contemporary scholarly perspective. Additionally, the focus on Egypt means that the broader comparative implications for other Muslim countries are only briefly discussed and not deeply explored. For future research, it is recommended to conduct in-depth fieldwork, including interviews with scholars, educators, and students who are directly involved in Islamic educational reform today. Comparative studies between Egypt and other countries like Indonesia, Turkey, or Malaysia would also provide a richer understanding of how educational modernization unfolds in different Islamic contexts and how lessons from Egypt can be adapted or contrasted across diverse socio-political environments.

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