

ISLAMIC SCHOOLS FOR ELITE FORMATION: THE ENDERUN MODEL

 Nadhir Rouabhi^{1*},  Mustapha Halimi¹,  Mohammed Cheboub²

¹Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, University of Naama, Algeria

²Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef, Algeria

Abstract. This study examines specialized educational institutions in Islamic history and their contribution to the intellectual and cultural foundations of the Islamic renaissance. Focusing on a prominent example, it analyses the pedagogical framework, organizational structure and curricular orientation, while also highlighting the intellectual outputs of the institution in producing scholars, thinkers and state officials. The aim is to illuminate a historically successful educational experience that can inspire the development of educational theories adapted to the contemporary Islamic world. By analysing the mechanisms that sustained its effectiveness, the study proposes insights for building a flexible and coherent educational model that lessens the burden on students and reduces reliance on externally imposed systems disconnected from Islamic sociocultural values. The findings underscore the relevance of the subjects taught, their alignment with students' developmental stages particularly at the preparatory level and the institution's careful structuring of study. They also reveal the integration of physical and psychological training, alongside systematic guidance toward specialization and professional placement, features that secured the institution's lasting impact.

Keywords: *Specialized education, Islamic world, elites, Ottoman Empire, Enderun.*

Corresponding Author: Nadhir Rouabhi, Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, University of Naama, Algeria, Tel.: +213556950607, e-mail: rouabhi.nadir@cuniv-naama.dz

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1. Introduction

The contemporary Islamic world is witnessing a wide dynamism in the field of education, led by scholars and experts who strive to address existing challenges and develop educational policies that align with modern transformations and the needs of current generations. Yet these efforts, despite their importance, remain in need of educational references rooted in Islamic values and informed by the historical experiences of the Muslim world, in order to shape an authentic, independent and effective educational project.

Islamic history abounds with numerous models of civilizational renewal across its different stages, beginning with the era of the Prophet ﷺ and extending to the Ottoman Caliphate, which represented one of the peaks of Islamic expansion and power. This period was marked by significant achievements in administration, science and industry, largely attributable to the central role of education in nurturing generations within a solid cultural framework. Among the most prominent institutions reflecting this vision was the Enderun School, which functioned as a unique form of specialized education and a vital source for producing elites capable of managing the affairs of the empire.

Research Problem

From this perspective, the central research question can be formulated as follows: How did the Enderun School contribute to the development of the Ottoman Caliphate?, what programs did it adopt to achieve this and to what extent can its structure be adapted for a modern educational project?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research can be summarized in two main aspects:

1. **Scientific and Intellectual Significance:** Highlighting the role of historical Islamic educational institutions, particularly the Enderun School, in shaping elites and fostering civilizational progress. This contributes to enriching academic studies in the field of Islamic educational history.

2. **Practical and Contemporary Significance:** Drawing lessons from the Ottoman experience to rebuild modern curricula rooted in Islamic values, thereby enhancing the ability of contemporary Islamic education to address intellectual and cultural challenges amid Western dominance.

Objectives

1. To highlight the educational and social legacy of the Enderun School.
2. To explore the mechanisms of elite formation in the Ottoman state.
3. To assess the potential of utilizing the Enderun model in developing an independent contemporary educational project.
4. To identify weaknesses in current Arab educational systems by comparing them with the Enderun experience.

Hypotheses

- The Enderun curriculum represented an integrated model for the intellectual, psychological and physical formation of students.
- The duration and structure of training were crucial to the success of its graduates, offering lessons for addressing issues such as curriculum overload in modern systems.
- The school's system of graduate placement and employment serves as a successful model for managing educational and administrative human resources.

Methodology

This study employs the historical method, based on investigation and analysis, to highlight the role of education in the Ottoman state. It also applies the descriptive-analytical method through a case study approach, examining the Enderun School in detail to extract insights applicable to the development of contemporary Islamic educational frameworks.

Previous Studies

Several historians have addressed this experience within broader works, such as Inalcik (2002) and Lewis (1982). More specific studies include Dereli (2023), who devoted focused research to Enderun and Sabanci and colleagues (2017), who provided a socio-educational analysis considered among the most valuable modern contributions on the subject.

2. The state of education in the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth century

The sciences, arts and Islamic heritage constituted some of the most important intellectual and cultural centres of their time. From the middle Ages onward, they were preserved, disseminated and systematized by distinguished scholars of the Islamic community who recognized the necessity of reviving their civilizational role (Ottoman Knowledge Society, 1888). In this context, the Ottoman Caliphate placed knowledge at the heart of its development, undertaking multiple initiatives such as the establishment of specialized institutes for student training, general and private schools and other centres of learning. Mosques functioned as key institutions for religious scholarship, while translation centres were also founded, each governed by its own system. Islam itself served as the cornerstone of the educational framework and teachers or *shaykhs* held a position of great respect. Every student was expected to acquire a solid grounding in religious sciences before advancing to other fields. Those seeking specialization in a particular discipline were often required to travel to regions where authoritative scholars in that field resided (Inalcik, 2002).

The state also prioritized specialized training through the creation of several institutions, the most prominent of which was the *Palace School* (Kapıkulları), literally meaning “servants of the palace.” This institution produced professional administrators and soldiers and its system of recruitment formed the foundation of its structure.

Overall, education flourished during the sixteenth century, as evidenced by the proliferation of institutions across various disciplines and levels. By that century, the empire boasted approximately 15,000 schools, more than 4,000 of which were devoted to general education (Kamal, 2017). These included major madrasas, centers for authorship and translation, as well as technical schools and literary institutes. Among them was an institute dedicated to editing and correcting classical Arabic works, which brought together hundreds of manuscripts collected from European libraries, Egyptian archives and repositories in the Hijaz and the Levant (Ottoman Knowledge Society, 1888).

Social awareness also played a vital role in the prosperity of education, as ministers, notables and benefactors supported students by providing accommodation and sponsorship, particularly for the gifted (Doman, 2017). From this perspective, one can clearly discern the global strength of the Ottoman Empire and the centrality of education in shaping its citizens. More importantly, the Ottomans harnessed this system through an internally rooted strategy, avoiding reliance on foreign imports or external educational models.

3. Definition of the Enderun School

Linguistically, the term *Enderun* is of Persian origin, meaning “inside” or “within.” The Ottomans applied it to designate the imperial palace. Established during the reign of Mehmed II (the Conqueror), it became known in Ottoman Turkish as *Enderun Mektebi*, literally “the Palace School” (Misri, 2000).

Conceptually, the Enderun was a specialized educational institution designed to provide professional training for the administrative and military cadres of the Ottoman state (Dereli, 2023). It had a distinctive organizational structure that set it apart from other schools, granting it a unique position in world history. The school was situated inside the Topkapı Palace, beginning at the Third Gate (*Gate of Felicity*) and encompassed the

Audience Chamber, the Imperial Treasury, repositories of sacred trusts, the Ottoman kitchens and the entrance to the imperial harem.

4. Admission requirements

Admission to the Enderun School was open to both males and females, though under very specific conditions. Most candidates were non-Turkish and non-Muslim, with some exceptions and were primarily recruited through the *devshirme* system. Young boys, often from the Christian populations of the Balkans such as Bulgaria and Albania entered voluntarily, as the Enderun was considered a prestigious opportunity for advancement by many European and Anatolian families. Selected youths typically served first in auxiliary palaces, such as those in Edirne or İbrahim Pasha's palace, before being admitted to Enderun. They were referred to as *Acemi Oğlanlar* ("novice boys") or *Helbî* (Saban, 2000), chosen from among the brightest and most talented, often from noble families (Dereli, 2023).

5. The process of recruitment was governed by strict conditions, including

1. Recruits were required to be non-Arabs and non-Turks, with limited exceptions. This exclusion of the two largest Muslim ethnic groups in the empire aimed to prevent tribalism or religious partisanship, ensuring that future cadres were loyal only to the state and Islam rather than to ethnic or sectarian identities.

2. Jews, Russians, Persians and Romani populations were categorically excluded.

3. Recruitment cycles occurred every three to five years.

4. Preference was given to youths of "pure origin", particularly sons of Christian clergy.

5. Physical attributes - height, symmetry and overall appearance - were also considered essential criteria.

For females, recruitment followed a different system. Girls, often introduced as concubines, were likewise of non-Muslim origin, primarily from the Caucasus, especially Georgia. Admitted at age's seven to eight, they were raised within the imperial harem under the supervision of senior state officials. Special arrangements, such as the provision of wet nurses, were made when necessary. They received education and training separately from the male students, resided in distinct quarters and often married members of the Ottoman elite educated within the Enderun, thereby securing influential roles in imperial society.

6. The structures of the Enderun School

The Enderun School was characterized by a highly organized physical and institutional infrastructure that reflected its specialized educational mission. Its main facilities included:

1. **Student Residences:** Students were housed in designated chambers known as *oda*. The residential system was arranged hierarchically across four levels. The lowest rank was assigned to newcomers or first-stage recruits, while higher levels corresponded to more advanced stages of study. Each rank was accommodated on a separate floor within the residential complex (Lewis, 1992).

2. **Library:** The school possessed a dedicated library where rare and valuable manuscripts were collected, copied and preserved. This ensured that students had access to high-quality scholarly resources, thereby supporting the professional and intellectual environment of the institution (Lütfi Pasha, 2001).

3. **Lecture Halls:** Specialized classrooms were designated for formal instruction in various disciplines, reflecting the structured and systematic nature of the Enderun's curriculum.

4. **Sports Hall:** Physical training constituted an integral component of the program and students practiced athletic and martial exercises in a hall specifically designed for sports.

5. **Supply Room (Storeroom):** A storeroom was maintained to provide the logistical supplies necessary for daily life and instruction.

6. **Bathhouse:** A communal bathhouse ensured hygiene and discipline among students, reflecting the Ottoman emphasis on bodily cleanliness as part of education and moral training.

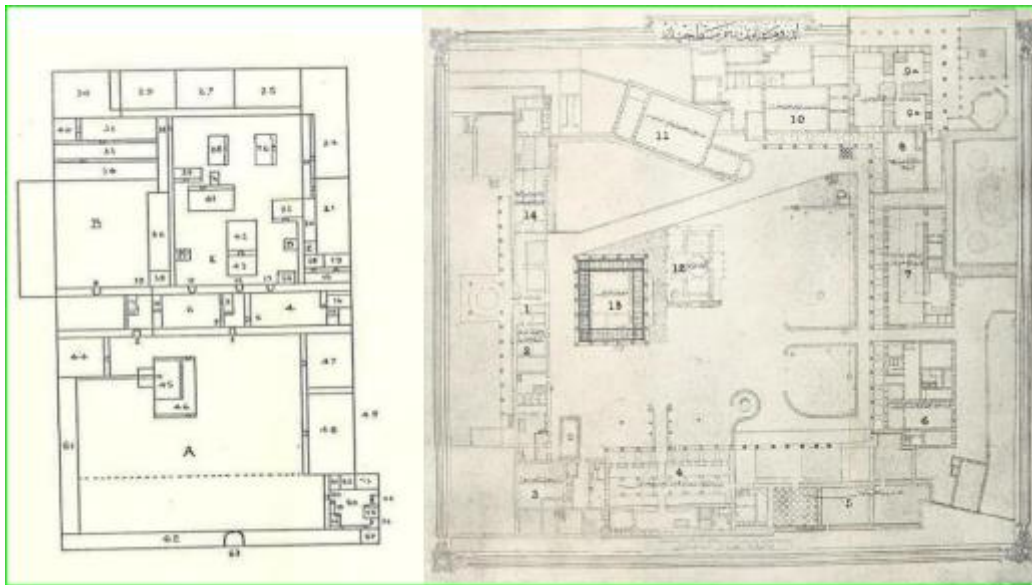


Figure 1. Layout of the Enderun School
Source: Sabanci et al. (2017)

7. Organization and pedagogical framework of the Enderun School

The Enderun School was governed by a distinctive organizational structure and internal code of conduct that reflected its mission as a center for elite formation. Its system combined rigorous discipline, moral oversight and intellectual guidance, while its pedagogical staff embodied the highest scholarly and administrative standards of the Ottoman court.

1. Internal Regulations

The school imposed strict rules on its members to ensure discipline and loyalty. Marriage was prohibited during the training period and students were only permitted to marry after graduation, often to palace concubines; otherwise, dismissal was enforced (Saban, 2000). Students were also forbidden from residing outside the palace and any departure required special authorization (Saban, 2000). Each student received a regular

stipend, distributed quarterly in line with other Ottoman officials (Sabanci *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, the palace provided all material needs, including clothing, footwear and undergarments, ensuring uniformity and stability (Sabanci *et al.*, 2017).

2. Pedagogical Staff

The school's academic and administrative hierarchy was led by the *Reis-i Tawashi* (Chief Instructor), who oversaw both staff and students and held the highest authority within the institution (Lewis, 1982). Teachers (*Tawashi*) were carefully selected scholars of high intellectual and moral standing, such as Mawlana Khayr al-Din (Zade Tasköprüzade, 1975). Each maintained an office and was assisted by aides in their instruction (Singer, 1998). The *Hujjāb* (doorkeepers) ensured discipline and monitored movement within the palace-school complex, while the *Defterdar* (registrar/accountant) managed the financial records, stipends and provisions of the institution.

8. Stages and curriculum of training

The Enderun School followed a highly structured program of study lasting approximately fourteen years, divided into successive stages, each with its own pedagogical objectives and requirements.

1. Theoretical Stage (Elementary Level)

This stage extended over four years and emphasized moral and religious foundations. Instruction included ethics - where silence, respect and Qur'ānic codes of conduct were central - together with Arabic reading, writing and conversation, ritual prayer and elementary mathematics (Mişrī, 2000; Lewis, 1982; Sabanci *et al.*, 2017). Discipline was enforced through strict rules and penalties for breaches of etiquette. Importantly, the program was deliberately non-intensive, reflecting principles later echoed in modern *Cognitive Load Theory*, which stresses the need to avoid cognitive overload in early learning (Martin *et al.*, 2023).

2. Intermediate Theoretical Stage

Spanning five to six years, this stage introduced advanced subjects and physical education. Students studied Arabic, Persian and Ottoman Turkish, Qur'ānic sciences, Hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, calligraphy, literature and poetry, alongside athletic and martial training, including archery, horsemanship and wrestling - activities also practiced by Ottoman sultans themselves (Lütfi Pasha, 2001; Kulen, 2013).

3. Practical Stage

Over three years, students applied their acquired knowledge and refined their skills. This stage functioned as a bridge to professional specialization and prepared students for placement in administrative or military posts (Lewis, 1982).

4. Final Examination

Graduation required passing a comprehensive examination supervised by senior instructors (*Tawashi*). The assessment focused on intellectual mastery, physical competence and psychological readiness for state service, with particular emphasis on religious commitment and ethical conduct (Lewis, 1982).

Core Disciplines: The curriculum of the Enderun School was broadly classified into five overarching domains, each encompassing a wide range of knowledge and skills:

1. Islamic Studies: Qur'ān, exegesis, Hadith, jurisprudence, Arabic grammar and prophetic history.

2. Humanities and Applied Sciences: Ottoman Turkish and Persian language and literature, history, arithmetic, geometry and algebra.

3. Fine Arts: Music (civil and military), ornamentation and calligraphy.

4. Physical and Military Training: Horsemanship, weaponry, archery, wrestling and strength exercises.

5. Vocational Training: Tailoring, leatherwork, construction, jewelry-making and preparation of medicines and ointments (Sabanci *et al.*, 2017).

The breadth of the Enderun curriculum reveals its alignment with both the intellectual needs of the sixteenth century and the broader requirements of statecraft. Notably, its integrative approach anticipates many of the “key competences for lifelong learning” later identified by the European Commission, such as literacy, multilingualism, mathematical and scientific skills, civic engagement, entrepreneurship and cultural awareness (OECD, 2020).

Progression and Advancement within the Enderun School: The advancement of students in the Enderun School followed a rigorous yet structured process. Those unable to fulfill their responsibilities in class or in the dormitory were reassigned, according to their abilities and achievements, to alternative duties within the palace. Successful completion of each stage, however, was regarded as a clear marker of progress and merit (Sabanci *et al.*, 2017).

9. Employment and administrative roles of graduates

The Enderun School served as the principal reservoir for the training of Ottoman leaders and administrators across multiple fields. In 1537, the school hosted nearly 700 students between the ages of 8 and 20 (Dereli, 2023). For centuries, it supplied the empire with skilled personnel who served in the palace, the army and the higher ranks of government (Kamal, 2017).

The Ottoman system of offices at that time was divided into two main categories: *Enderun* (inner services) and *Birun* (outer services). Graduates of the Enderun were typically appointed to the highest offices within the palace hierarchy and the state bureaucracy, whereas the *Birun* encompassed administrative staff in public services, teaching units and Janissary schools. While both groups were part of the state’s higher administration, the *Birun* staff usually received their training in other schools rather than at the Enderun.

Female graduates of the school also held specific positions within the palace. They were employed as companions to members of the imperial family, as tutors for royal children and as language instructors within the court (Kamal, 2017).

10. Notable Alumni of the Enderun

The school produced a remarkable number of prominent figures who left a lasting imprint on Ottoman history and intellectual life. Among them was *Hayali Pasha*, a poet and governor of Anatolia, who received his training within the Enderun (Sharqawi, 2019). Another was the celebrated geographer *Kâtip Çelebi*, renowned for his scholarly contributions (Albujung, 2015).

One particularly distinguished alumnus was *Fazıl Bey al-Enderuni*, of Palestinian origin, who became known for his literary and scientific works. Among his compositions were *Zenan-nâme* (“Book of Women”), *Huban-nâme* (“Book of Youths”) and *One Thousand and One Concubines* (Misri, 2000). His admission illustrates the school’s

inclusivity, since entry was occasionally extended to mamluks and freed slaves, whether acquired through purchase or tribute (Lewis, 1982).

11. The case of Lütfi Pasha

Perhaps the most outstanding graduate of the Enderun was *Lütfi Pasha* (d. 1564), a statesman, historian and reformer of Albanian origin. Having served as governor of Syria and Rumelia, he took part in major Ottoman campaigns in Belgrade, Russia and southern Italy, where he marched alongside Hayreddin Barbarossa. In 1539, he was appointed Grand Vizier, a position he held for two years (Lütfi Pasha, 2001).

Despite the grandeur of the empire, Lütfi Pasha was among the first to perceive signs of internal decline within the Ottoman administrative system. His most notable work, *Âsaf-nâme*, stands as a seminal treatise on governance, addressing four key domains:

1. The moral character and conduct required of officeholders in their dealings with the populace.
2. The organization of military affairs.
3. The management of the imperial treasury.
4. The administration of subjects and their welfare (Lütfi Pasha, 2001).

Through such writings, Lütfi Pasha not only contributed to the intellectual heritage of the empire but also embodied the school's mission of producing leaders capable of shaping state and society alike.

12. Conclusion

The Enderun School is one of the most important and successful Islamic models that requires historical and social study in order to highlight its positive role and to raise the possibility of reviving it through building future projects modelled after it, by extracting and developing its curricula in accordance with current educational requirements, which we summarize in the following points:

Islam is the first and fundamental pillar in our civilizational construction and is the essence of any future renaissance experience, far from imported experiments that are alien to our customs and Islamic values. The Enderun, as a specialized educational institution with a progressive religious character, is the most prominent evidence of the success of policies based on a religious foundation.

The Enderun School provides us with a model of tolerance and the absence of hatred or what is called racism, since it was open to everyone, even opening its doors to non-Muslims before Muslims themselves. This reflects the inclusive nature of the Ottoman state at that time, far removed from all forms of nationalism that we practiced in the twentieth century, which proved to be a failed experiment.

The Enderun School proved that tribal partisanship is not always beneficial and positive in the formation and construction of civilization. Through its graduates, we notice and confirm that the absence of such tribalism was a driving force for their emergence and success in their positions. This characteristic was derived from the teachings of the Prophet, peace be upon him, who rejected all kinds of fanaticism in his life.

Favouritism is one of the most divisive and destructive factors of civilizations, accompanied by the misjudgement of people's positions and the absence of justice through the seizure of positions by those who do not deserve them and are not qualified,

instead of those who are most deserving, especially those controlling the joints of administration. The Enderun is a model of an institution that respects the intellectual and practical rights of individuals, whereby every person has his proper place.

Justice, respect for the individual and providing him with resources help the individual succeed and give the best for his country with sincerity and this is evident in the graduates of the Enderun.

Civilizational awareness plays a major role in the success of the nation through encouraging investment in science and individuals to achieve development and progress.

Non-coeducational education proved its success and effectiveness through this exemplary educational institution.

The method of directing towards positions based only on competence made the output of this institution a pioneer in the development of the state.

The curriculum and the age stage of the students is a model that must be followed and applied within modern programs, as it was light in its early stages for the students, making the process of assimilation stronger.

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