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The Evolution of Imam Hatip Schools in Turkiye: From Kemalist Secularism to the Educational Politics of the AKP Era

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji evolusi Sekolah Imam Hatip di Turki sebagai bagian dari dinamika panjang relasi antara negara, agama, dan pendidikan. Dengan pendekatan historis-interpretatif, artikel ini menelusuri bagaimana Imam Hatip schools lahir sebagai instrumen teknokratis dalam proyek sekularisme Kemalis, berkembang melampaui mandat vokasional awalnya akibat tekanan sosial, dan kemudian direposisi secara politis pada era Partai Keadilan dan Pembangunan (AKP) sebagai simbol kebebasan beragama dan keadilan sosial. Temuan utama menunjukkan bahwa Imam Hatip schools tidak pernah sepenuhnya berada di luar kendali negara, bahkan ketika mengalami ekspansi dan legitimasi politik yang signifikan. Sepanjang berbagai rezim, sekolah ini berfungsi sebagai ruang negosiasi antara pemberdayaan komunitas religius dan instrumentalisasi ideologis oleh negara. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa ambiguitas tersebut bukanlah kegagalan kebijakan, melainkan kondisi struktural yang mencerminkan ketegangan yang belum selesai antara sekularisme, Islam, dan proyek modernitas di Turki.

Kata kunci: Imam Hatip schools, pendidikan Islam, sekularisme Kemalis, AKP, politik pendidikan, Turki

Abstract

This article examines the evolution of Imam Hatip schools in Turkey as part of a broader and ongoing negotiation between state power, religion, and education. Using a historical–interpretive approach, the study traces how Imam Hatip schools emerged as technocratic instruments within Kemalist secularism, gradually expanded beyond their original vocational mandate due to social demand, and were later reframed in the AKP era as symbols of religious freedom and social justice. The findings suggest that, despite significant policy shifts, Imam Hatip schools have never operated outside state supervision. Across different political periods, they have functioned as contested spaces where religious empowerment and political instrumentalization coexist. Rather than viewing this ambivalence as a

policy anomaly, the article argues that it reflects a structural condition rooted in the unresolved relationship between secular governance, Islamic education, and modern citizenship in Turkey.

Keywords: Imam Hatip schools, Islamic education, Kemalist secularism, AKP, education politics, Turkey

Introduction

Few educational institutions in modern Muslim societies carry as much symbolic weight as the Imam Hatip schools in Türkiye (Öztürk, 2025). They are schools, of course, classrooms, curricula, examinations, but they are also something more elusive. They function as political signs, cultural memories, and moral battlegrounds. To talk about Imam Hatip schools is never merely to talk about pedagogy (Çakmak, 2009). One is almost inevitably drawn into larger debates about secularism, religion, national identity, and the proper relationship between the state and Islam (Aşlamacı & Kaymakcan, 2017).

At first glance, the story appears straightforward. In the early decades of the Turkish Republic, founded under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, religious education was sharply curtailed in the name of a radical, state-driven secularism (Buyruk, 2021). Later, especially during the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Imam Hatip schools expanded dramatically and gained unprecedented political legitimacy (Ozgur, 2011). This trajectory is often narrated as a simple pendulum swing, from repression to revival, from exclusion to dominance. Yet such a neat storyline feels unsatisfying (Akboga, 2016). It flattens tensions that were never fully resolved and ignores the ambivalences that shaped each phase of reform.

Historically, Imam Hatip schools were established not to empower religious authority, but to domesticate it (Pak, 2004). Emerging in the early Republican period as vocational institutions for training prayer leaders (imams) and preachers (hatips), they were part of a broader Kemalist strategy: Islam was not to disappear, but to be reorganized, rationalized, and placed firmly under state control (Sayari & Hasanov, 2008). In this sense, Imam Hatip schools were never "outside" secularism. They were, paradoxically, one of its instruments. This point is often overlooked, perhaps because later political developments retroactively cast these schools as symbols of resistance rather than regulation (Dede et al., 2023).

Over time, however, social realities complicated the original design. Rural-to-urban migration, the rise of conservative middle classes, and persistent popular demand for religious literacy gradually transformed Imam Hatip schools into something closer to general secondary education with a strong Islamic component (Aktaş et al., 2023). By the late twentieth

century, these institutions had become pathways not only to mosque service but also to universities, bureaucracy, and politics (Sarfati, 2015). We think this is where the story becomes genuinely interesting. The schools did not simply survive secularism; they adapted to it, stretched it, and occasionally exposed its internal contradictions.

The post-2002 era, under AKP governance, intensified these dynamics. Policy changes expanded Imam Hatip enrollment, lifted restrictions on graduates' access to higher education, and integrated religious courses more deeply into the national education system (Karlidag-Dennis et al., 2019). Supporters framed these reforms as democratization, finally aligning education with the values of a religiously conservative majority (Bayhan & Gök, 2017). Critics, meanwhile, warned of ideological capture and the erosion of secular public space. Both positions contain elements of truth, yet neither fully captures the complexity of what unfolded on the ground (Yaşar, 2020). The growth of Imam Hatip schools was not only the result of top-down political will; it also reflected long-standing societal negotiations over faith, mobility, and respectability.

This article approaches Imam Hatip schools not simply as religious institutions, nor merely as political tools, but as evolving educational spaces shaped by shifting power relations (Bayhan, 2017). Rather than asking whether they represent "Islamization" or "democratization," it asks how different regimes, Kemalist and post-Kemalist alike, have used education to manage religion, and how social actors have responded in ways that were sometimes compliant, sometimes creative, and sometimes quietly resistant (Sen, 2022). The evolution of Imam Hatip schools, we argue, tells us less about the triumph or failure of secularism, and more about its ongoing transformation in a society where religion has never been fully private, nor entirely public (Öncü & Balkan, 2016).

Method

This study adopts a qualitative historical–interpretive approach, positioned somewhere between educational history and critical policy analysis. The aim is not to measure outcomes in a statistical sense, nor to produce a linear institutional chronology, but to trace how meanings, functions, and political interpretations of Imam Hatip schools have shifted over time. In other words, the method is concerned less with *how many* schools existed at a given moment, and more with *what those schools were understood to be*, by the state, by political elites, and by society at large.

The primary data sources consist of historical documents and policy texts, including education laws, curriculum regulations, parliamentary debates, and official reports issued from the early Republican period to the contemporary era. These materials are read contextually, not at face value. Policy texts, after all, tend to present themselves as neutral and technical,

while quietly embedding ideological assumptions about religion, citizenship, and modernity. Reading them requires a certain skepticism, perhaps even patience, because what is omitted often matters as much as what is declared.

To complement official sources, the study also draws on secondary literature in Turkish and English: scholarly works on secularism, religion–state relations, and the sociology of education in Turkey. Memoirs, journalistic accounts, and critical essays are selectively used, not as definitive evidence, but as windows into lived experience and public perception. We are aware that such sources can be uneven, sometimes polemical, occasionally nostalgic. Still, they help illuminate how Imam Hatip schools were felt and talked about, not merely how they were regulated.

Analytically, the study employs periodization as a heuristic device rather than a rigid framework. The Kemalist era, the period of multiparty politics, the post-1980 restructuring, and the AKP era are treated as overlapping phases rather than sealed compartments. This allows for attention to continuities that cut across political ruptures, such as the persistent role of the state in defining "acceptable" religious knowledge, even when ideological rhetoric appears to shift dramatically.

Interpretation is guided by a critical discourse perspective, focusing on how concepts like secularism, freedom, morality, and national identity are mobilized in educational debates. At times, the analysis leans into ambiguity. Policies that appear restrictive in one context may look permissive in another; reforms framed as democratizing may simultaneously produce new exclusions. Rather than resolving these tensions prematurely, the method intentionally leaves some questions open, reflecting the contested and unfinished nature of educational reform itself.

Finally, reflexivity plays a modest but deliberate role. As a researcher engaging with a topic so deeply entangled with contemporary politics, complete neutrality is neither possible nor particularly honest. The method therefore acknowledges interpretive positioning while remaining committed to historical rigor. The goal is not advocacy, but understanding, an understanding that accepts complexity, resists simple binaries, and allows the evolution of Imam Hatip schools to emerge as a layered and often contradictory process.

Results and Discussion

Kemalist Secularism and the Managed Return of Religious Education

In the early years of the Turkish Republic, secularism (*laiklik*) was not introduced as a cautious constitutional principle but as a civilizational

project. Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the state pursued a rapid and uncompromising transformation aimed at redefining the moral and intellectual foundations of society (Bilgin, 1993). Religious institutions, long embedded in Ottoman governance and everyday life, were suddenly recast as obstacles to progress. Madrasas were closed, Sufi orders banned, and religious education removed from the formal school system. On paper, the separation between religion and state appeared decisive, even radical.

Yet this is where the Kemalist story becomes less coherent than its rhetoric suggests. Religion, despite official narratives of exclusion, was never fully expelled from the public sphere. Instead, it was reorganized. The abolition of independent religious authority created a vacuum that the state itself hurried to fill. The establishment of the Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı in 1924 signaled a crucial shift: Islam would no longer operate autonomously, but neither would it disappear. It would be administered, standardized, and rendered compatible with the new national order (Mercan Küçükakın & Engin-Demir, 2022). Secularism, in practice, meant not the absence of religion, but its bureaucratic domestication.

Education became one of the most sensitive arenas for this managed approach. While religious instruction was largely removed from mainstream curricula, the state soon recognized the practical need for trained religious personnel, imams, preachers, and Quran reciters, who could operate within the boundaries of official ideology (Kaya, 2015). Completely eliminating religious education proved unrealistic, perhaps even risky, in a society where Islam remained a key source of moral meaning. Thus began what might be called a cautious retreat from absolutist secularism: limited, tightly controlled forms of religious training were gradually reintroduced, justified not in theological terms but in administrative necessity.

It is within this context that the early precursors to Imam Hatip education emerged. These initiatives were not conceived as expressions of religious freedom, nor as concessions to popular piety. Rather, they functioned as regulatory mechanisms. By training religious officials within state-approved institutions, the Republic sought to prevent alternative, potentially oppositional forms of Islamic knowledge from taking root (Elveren, 2018). The logic was defensive, even preventative. A state-trained imam was preferable to an independent religious figure shaped by informal networks beyond bureaucratic oversight.

There is a certain irony here that Kemalist discourse rarely acknowledged. The same state that proclaimed a strict separation between religion and politics invested significant resources in defining what “proper” Islam should look like. Curricula, language use, and even moral tone were subject to regulation (Alothman, 2025). Religious education was not eliminated; it was reframed as a technical function of governance. One

might argue, perhaps somewhat provocatively, that Kemalist secularism did not secularize society so much as it nationalized religion.

This contradiction had lasting consequences. By insisting that religion be both controlled and functional, the early Republic inadvertently preserved its relevance. Islam was stripped of institutional independence, but not of social significance (Yılmaz, 2019). Over time, the limited spaces allowed for religious education began to attract not only future clergy but also families seeking moral grounding in an unfamiliar modern order. What began as a narrow administrative solution quietly laid the groundwork for broader educational demands that the Kemalist framework was ill-prepared to accommodate.

In retrospect, the early Republican approach to religious education appears less like a clean break with the past and more like an uneasy compromise. Secularism was asserted with confidence, yet practiced with hesitation (Türegün, 2025). The state claimed neutrality, yet acted as an arbiter of belief. This managed return of religious education was not a failure of Kemalism, strictly speaking, but a reflection of its internal tensions. Those tensions would resurface repeatedly in later decades, shaping debates over Imam Hatip schools long after the revolutionary fervor of the 1920s had faded.

Imam Hatip as a Controlled Space: Vocational Logic and State Supervision

When Imam Hatip schools began to take a more recognizable institutional form, they were framed less as sites of religious revival than as instruments of administrative order. Their very name, combining *imam* and *hatip*, reveals the intention clearly enough. These were not schools for producing theologians, philosophers, or independent religious thinkers (Küçükakın & Engin-Demir, 2022). They were designed to train functionaries: individuals capable of performing ritual duties, delivering sermons aligned with state-sanctioned interpretations, and maintaining religious services without disrupting the broader secular architecture of the Republic.

From the outset, the logic was vocational and technocratic. Imam Hatip schools were positioned within the education system as specialized tracks, distinct from general academic high schools. Their curricula reflected this status. Alongside basic religious subjects, Qur'anic recitation, fiqh, and sermon techniques, students followed a standardized set of secular courses determined by the Ministry of National Education (Sarfati, 2017). The balance was deliberate. Religious knowledge was included, but carefully delimited; it was meant to be sufficient for professional practice, not expansive enough to encourage theological autonomy.

This design served multiple state interests at once. First, it ensured a steady supply of religious personnel for mosques and public religious

services administered by the Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı. Second, it created a clear hierarchy of religious knowledge. What was taught in Imam Hatip schools was "official" Islam, codified, standardized, and stripped of interpretive plurality. Informal or alternative forms of learning, whether Sufi, local, or politically charged, were implicitly delegitimized by contrast.

Supervision extended beyond curriculum into institutional status and career pathways. For many years, graduates of Imam Hatip schools faced restricted access to higher education, particularly in non-theological fields (Akşit & Akşit, 2010). This was not merely an administrative oversight; it was a structural mechanism of control. By narrowing post-graduation options, the state effectively reinforced the vocational identity of these schools. Students were encouraged, subtly but persistently, to remain within predefined roles as religious service providers rather than aspiring to broader professional or intellectual trajectories.

At the same time, this controlled space offered a form of protection. Within a political climate often hostile to overt religiosity, Imam Hatip schools functioned as legitimate enclaves where Islamic expression could exist without being immediately framed as subversive. Wearing religious attire, studying religious texts, and articulating moral concerns rooted in Islam were permitted, precisely because they occurred within an institution recognized and monitored by the state (Budak, 2025). In this sense, restriction and recognition operated together. What was constrained was also, paradoxically, safeguarded.

There is a temptation to read this arrangement purely as repression, but that would miss part of the picture. For many families, especially in conservative or rural communities, Imam Hatip schools represented one of the few acceptable compromises between faith and modern schooling. They allowed participation in the national education system without a complete rupture from religious identity (Karataş, 2025). We suspect this is why, despite their limited scope and ambiguous prestige, these schools endured. They answered a social need that the Kemalist model of education never fully resolved.

Still, the cost of this arrangement was significant. By defining legitimate religious education as vocational and functional, the state reduced Islam to a set of services rather than a living intellectual tradition. Critical inquiry, ethical debate, and interpretive diversity were largely sidelined. Graduates were trained to perform, not to question. Over time, this produced a peculiar tension: Imam Hatip schools preserved Islam in public life, yet in a form that was intentionally muted and politically contained.

This tension, between empowerment and constraint, visibility and limitation, would shape the future trajectory of Imam Hatip education. What began as a controlled space for managing religion gradually became

a platform from which new demands would emerge. The vocational logic that once defined these schools would eventually be challenged, not because it failed administratively, but because it underestimated the social aspirations of those who passed through its classrooms.

Social Demand, Mobility, and the Quiet Expansion Beyond Original Mandates

By the mid-twentieth century, the neat vocational logic that had once defined Imam Hatip schools began to loosen. Not through open confrontation, at least not at first, but through something more gradual and harder to regulate: social demand. As Turkey underwent rapid urbanization and demographic change, education increasingly became a vehicle for social mobility (Usman et al., 2025). Families who had migrated from rural Anatolia to expanding cities carried with them not only religious sensibilities, but also a strong desire for upward movement within the national system. Imam Hatip schools, initially designed for a narrow professional purpose, unexpectedly found themselves at the center of these aspirations.

Urbanization altered the social ecology of education in subtle ways. In newly urbanized neighborhoods, access to elite secular schools was often limited, whether by entrance exams, cultural capital, or geographic proximity. Imam Hatip schools, by contrast, were more accessible and, perhaps more importantly, socially welcoming. They offered an environment where religious identity did not need to be muted or negotiated daily. For many families, this mattered (Öztığ & Adısönmez, 2024). Education was not only about credentials; it was also about dignity, belonging, and the hope that moral formation and academic progress need not be mutually exclusive.

Over time, students enrolling in Imam Hatip schools were no longer exclusively future imams or preachers. A growing proportion had no intention of entering religious service at all. They aspired to become teachers, civil servants, engineers, or, quietly at first, political actors. This shift placed pressure on the original mandate of the schools (Sidik et al., 2024). Curricula designed for vocational training now had to support broader academic competencies. While official policy was slow to acknowledge this transformation, classroom realities often moved ahead of regulation.

The expansion was “quiet” in the sense that it unfolded through incremental adjustments rather than formal declarations. Secular subjects gained greater weight in practice, even when official descriptions remained unchanged. Teachers adapted lessons to prepare students for national exams. Students, in turn, used Imam Hatip education strategically, treating it as a stepping stone rather than a terminal track (Arican & Mutlu, 2023). In retrospect, it seems clear that the state underestimated the adaptive

capacity of these institutions. What was meant to channel religious education into a narrow corridor gradually widened into a multipurpose pathway.

This transformation also coincided with the emergence of a more confident religious middle class. Economic liberalization and political pluralism in the later decades of the twentieth century enabled conservative families to imagine futures beyond mere survival or clerical service. Education became central to this imagination (ZengİN & Hendek, 2023). Imam Hatip schools, once marginal, began to acquire symbolic value as institutions that could reconcile faith with modern ambition. They were no longer only about preserving religion under surveillance; they became about navigating modernity on one's own terms.

Yet this expansion was not without tension. The growing gap between the schools' formal vocational status and their de facto general education function created persistent ambiguity. Authorities responded inconsistently, sometimes tolerating the shift, sometimes pushing back through regulatory constraints. This oscillation reflected a deeper uncertainty: could religiously marked institutions be allowed to produce broadly educated citizens without threatening the secular order? The question was never fully resolved.

What is striking, perhaps, is how little of this transformation was centrally planned. It emerged from the cumulative choices of families and students who found in Imam Hatip schools a workable compromise between identity and opportunity. In that sense, the evolution of these schools was not merely a top-down political story, but a social one. Long before they became headline symbols in national debates, Imam Hatip schools had already begun to outgrow the narrow boundaries originally imposed upon them, quietly, persistently, and with consequences that would only become fully visible in later decades.

Crisis, Restriction, and the Politics of Access (1980s–1990s)

The relative accommodation that had allowed Imam Hatip schools to expand quietly did not go unchallenged. By the 1980s and especially the 1990s, the Turkish state entered a period of heightened anxiety about religion, identity, and political loyalty. Military interventions, most notably the 1980 coup and the so-called "post-modern coup" of 1997, reasserted the guardianship role of secular institutions, casting religious visibility as a potential threat to the Republic's foundational ideals. Education, once again, became a frontline.

What makes this period distinctive is not only the severity of restrictions, but the logic that underpinned them. Policies targeting Imam Hatip schools were framed less as punitive measures against religion per se and more as corrective actions aimed at preserving a particular vision of modernity (Gümüş & İpek, 2022). In official discourse, the concern was not

Islam as belief, but Islam as a pathway to power. Imam Hatip graduates, increasingly present in universities, bureaucracy, and political movements, disrupted long-standing assumptions about who constituted the national elite and how that elite should be formed.

The most consequential policy was the restriction of access to higher education through differentiated university entrance coefficients. Graduates of vocational schools, Imam Hatip included, were effectively penalized if they sought admission to programs outside their designated fields (Ariman, 2022). This mechanism was bureaucratic, technical, and seemingly neutral. Yet its effects were anything but. It reasserted a hierarchy of knowledge in which religiously marked education was deemed incompatible with full participation in secular professions. Access, rather than belief, became the site of control.

It is tempting to interpret these measures simply as repression, and there is truth in that reading. Opportunities were curtailed, aspirations blocked, and entire cohorts of students redirected against their will (Ay & Pingov, 2022). But stopping there risks overlooking the deeper rationale at work. The state was engaged in a boundary-maintenance project: defining who could legitimately represent modern Turkey. Imam Hatip graduates, with their visible religiosity and alternative cultural capital, unsettled the image of a secular, Western-oriented elite cultivated since the early Republic.

There is a certain paradox in how modernity was defended during this period. Rather than expanding pluralism, the state narrowed acceptable pathways to advancement. Modernity was treated as a fragile inheritance, one that required protection through exclusion. In this sense, restrictions on Imam Hatip graduates were not anomalies but expressions of a long-standing Kemalist impulse: progress had to be guided, curated, and, when necessary, enforced.

Socially, the impact was profound. For many families, the promise that Imam Hatip education could facilitate upward mobility was suddenly withdrawn. Feelings of injustice accumulated quietly, turning educational policy into a source of moral grievance. The schools themselves did not disappear, but their graduates encountered an invisible ceiling, one that shaped political consciousness as much as career trajectories (Şarapli, 2021). We would argue that this experience of blocked mobility played a significant role in later political realignments, even if it was rarely acknowledged openly at the time.

In retrospect, the politics of access in the 1980s and 1990s reveal a state struggling to reconcile its secular ideals with an increasingly diverse social reality. By policing entry into higher education, the state sought to preserve an elite that mirrored its own self-image. Yet in doing so, it also deepened the very divides it aimed to contain. The crisis was not only about

religion; it was about who had the right to belong fully to the nation's future, and under what conditions.

The AKP Era and the Reframing of Religious Education as Democratic Right

The policy landscape surrounding Imam Hatip schools shifted decisively after 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power. What had long been treated as a problem to be managed, or contained, was now recast as a right to be restored. Religious education, in the AKP's framing, was no longer a tolerated exception within a secular system; it became an expression of democratic pluralism and social justice (Demircioğlu, 2020). This reframing did not emerge in a vacuum. It drew energy from accumulated grievances of the previous decades, especially the sense that religiously conservative citizens had been systematically excluded from full participation in public life.

Policy changes followed quickly and with visible confidence. Restrictions on Imam Hatip graduates' access to higher education were lifted, most notably through the abolition of differentiated university entrance coefficients. Enrollment surged. New Imam Hatip schools were opened, existing ones expanded, and middle-school tracks were reintroduced. These were not marginal adjustments but structural shifts that altered the educational map (Mohd Nor & Ibrahim, 2020). For supporters, this expansion corrected a historical wrong; for critics, it signaled an ideological turn that threatened the neutrality of public education. Both readings circulated simultaneously, often speaking past each other.

The political narrative accompanying these reforms mattered as much as the reforms themselves. AKP leaders presented Imam Hatip schools as vehicles of equality, institutions that allowed children from religious families to pursue education without renouncing their identity. The language of rights, democracy, and popular will became central (Suna et al., 2020). In this telling, earlier secular restrictions appeared not merely outdated but unjust, even authoritarian. We think this rhetorical move was particularly effective because it aligned educational policy with broader global discourses on minority rights and freedom of conscience, even as the Turkish context remained distinct.

Institutionally, the expansion also changed the character of Imam Hatip education. The schools increasingly resembled general secondary institutions with a religious emphasis rather than vocational training centers for mosque service. Curricula diversified, academic performance improved in some cases, and graduates entered a wide range of professions. This transformation fulfilled long-standing social aspirations, yet it also blurred boundaries that had once reassured secular elites. When Imam Hatip alumni began to occupy influential positions in bureaucracy, media,

and politics, the schools' symbolic meaning shifted again, from marginalized pathway to mainstream conduit of power.

At the same time, the AKP's approach was not free of contradictions. While promoting religious education as a democratic right, the state also intensified its role in defining acceptable religious knowledge. Expansion went hand in hand with centralization. Curricula, appointments, and institutional priorities remained tightly regulated (Baltacı et al., 2019). Critics argued that one form of control had replaced another: where Kemalist secularism once limited religion through exclusion, the new order risked instrumentalizing religion through inclusion. The question of autonomy, educational and theological, remained unresolved.

Perhaps the most enduring effect of the AKP era lies in how it normalized the presence of religiously marked education within the public system. Imam Hatip schools were no longer peripheral or defensive institutions; they became ordinary, even expected, features of the educational landscape. This normalization altered the terms of debate. The issue was no longer whether religious education belonged in public schools, but how much, in what form, and under whose authority.

In this sense, the AKP era did not simply reverse earlier policies; it redefined the grammar of educational politics. Religious education was articulated as a matter of rights and recognition, not concession. Yet the ambivalences persisted. Empowerment and instrumentalization advanced together, reflecting a deeper continuity in the Turkish state's relationship with Islam. The tools had changed, the rhetoric had softened, or sharpened, depending on perspective, but the central question remained strikingly familiar: how to integrate religion into public education without relinquishing political control over its meaning.

Between Empowerment and Instrumentalization: Persistent Ambivalences

At this point, it becomes difficult, perhaps impossible, to offer a clean verdict on Imam Hatip schools. Are they empowering institutions that have finally granted religious communities visibility, dignity, and opportunity within the public education system? Or are they instruments of a new political orthodoxy, reshaped to serve shifting state interests under a different ideological banner? The honest answer, we think, is that they are both. And that unresolved duality is precisely what makes them analytically significant.

On one level, the empowerment narrative is hard to dismiss. For many students and families, Imam Hatip schools have undeniably expanded educational access and social mobility. They have allowed religiously observant citizens to participate in public life without constant negotiation or self-censorship (Şahİn & Kesik, 2019). In contrast to earlier decades, when religiosity could function as a liability, religious identity now

operates, at least in some contexts, as a legitimate and socially recognized resource. This is not trivial. It reshapes everyday experiences of belonging, aspiration, and self-worth.

Yet empowerment does not automatically translate into autonomy. As Imam Hatip schools have moved closer to the center of state educational policy, they have also become more tightly embedded in political structures. Curricula remain centrally defined, administrative appointments politically sensitive, and institutional priorities aligned with broader governmental narratives (Genç, 2018). In this configuration, religious education risks becoming less a space for ethical reflection and more a vehicle for cultivating loyal citizens who internalize a preferred moral-political synthesis. Islam, once restricted by exclusion, may now be constrained by incorporation.

This tension plays out most clearly at the pedagogical level. Teachers operate within overlapping expectations: to deliver academic competence, to transmit religious values, and to avoid crossing political red lines that are rarely spelled out but widely understood. Critical inquiry, especially when it touches on authority, pluralism, or dissent, can feel awkwardly placed (Sarfati, 2016). Students are encouraged to be confident, moral, and socially engaged, yet often within a framework that subtly privileges conformity over contestation. The result is an educational environment that is productive, but carefully bounded.

What complicates matters further is that many of these constraints are not experienced as coercive. They are normalized. For students who have known no alternative, the alignment between religion, nation, and state appears natural rather than imposed. This is where instrumentalization becomes most effective: not when it silences, but when it feels intuitive. The state no longer needs to police religious expression aggressively; it shapes the conditions under which certain forms of expression appear reasonable, respectable, and safe.

At the same time, cracks remain visible. Graduates of Imam Hatip schools do not form a monolith. Some embrace the roles implicitly offered to them; others reinterpret their education in unexpected ways, using religious literacy to critique power rather than reinforce it. This diversity suggests that instrumentalization is never total. Educational spaces, however regulated, retain a degree of unpredictability. Perhaps this is the lingering legacy of earlier ambivalences: once religion was allowed to survive in controlled form, it could never be entirely scripted.

Seen in this light, Imam Hatip schools are best understood not as solutions but as sites of ongoing negotiation. They sit at the intersection of pedagogy, ideology, and state loyalty, embodying tensions that no policy has fully resolved (Çinar, 2013). Their evolution reflects a broader pattern in modern Turkey: shifts in who controls religious education, changes in

justification and rhetoric, but a persistent reluctance to relinquish oversight altogether. The form of control changes; the impulse remains.

Rather than viewing this ambivalence as a failure, it may be more accurate to see it as a structural condition, one that mirrors the unfinished relationship between religion and the modern state in Turkey. Imam Hatip schools continue to empower and constrain, open doors and set boundaries, often at the same time. And it is precisely within this uneasy coexistence that their political and educational significance endures.

Conclusion

The evolution of Imam Hatip schools in Turkey resists any simple narrative of rupture or triumph. From their origins as tightly regulated vocational institutions under Kemalist secularism to their expansion and normalization during the AKP era, these schools have consistently occupied an in-between position, never fully marginal, never entirely autonomous. What emerges from this historical trajectory is not a linear story of repression followed by liberation, but a more complicated pattern of adaptation, negotiation, and redefinition.

Across different political regimes, the state has remained deeply invested in shaping religious education. What changed were the justifications and techniques. Early Republican secularism sought to manage religion through restriction and bureaucratic containment; later governments, particularly after 2002, reframed religious education as a democratic right while maintaining strong institutional oversight. In both cases, Imam Hatip schools functioned as instruments through which the state attempted to reconcile Islam with its preferred vision of modern citizenship.

At the same time, social actors repeatedly stretched the boundaries imposed upon them. Families and students transformed Imam Hatip schools from narrow training centers into vehicles of social mobility and moral affirmation. These bottom-up pressures altered the schools' function long before policy fully caught up. This dynamic complicates claims that Imam Hatip education is merely a top-down ideological project. It has also been a response to unmet social demands, especially among religiously conservative communities seeking recognition within the public sphere.

The persistent ambivalence surrounding Imam Hatip schools, between empowerment and instrumentalization, should not be read as an anomaly or policy failure. Rather, it reflects a structural tension embedded in the relationship between religion, education, and the modern state in Turkey. As long as religion is neither fully privatized nor allowed complete autonomy, educational institutions that mediate faith and citizenship will remain contested spaces.

Ultimately, Imam Hatip schools tell us less about the success or decline of secularism than about its transformation. They reveal how secular governance adapts when faced with enduring religious sociality, and how religious education evolves when it becomes entangled with political power. Their story is unfinished, not because policy debates remain unresolved, but because the negotiation between belief, authority, and education continues to shift with Turkey's changing social and political landscape.

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study. We also confirm that this manuscript is original and has not been submitted to, nor is it under consideration by, any other publisher.

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