

Article

The Future of Imam Hatip Schools as a Model for Islamic Education in Türkiye

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Abstract: After the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923, the madrasah system was abolished, and new schools, called Imam Hatip Schools (IHSs), were established to train “officials responsible for the performance of religious services” in 1924. These schools have slowly transformed from vocational schools into mainstream schools, partly because of the public’s demand for religious and academic education at state schools. In this qualitative research, through official documents and existing studies, we explore the IHSs’ historical foundations and their features. Then, we examine the recent initiatives, namely the “project school” and “program diversity”, launched by the conservative government to improve the quality of the IHSs and to make them competitive in today’s exam-oriented education system. The history of the IHSs shows that these schools have always been at the centre of politics of religion and have experienced periods of prosperity and decline depending on the ruling elites and governments. The IHSs have some crucial features which make them a unique model for Islamic education in the Turkish education system. The new initiatives seem to positively impact the IHSs, as they can now enrol students through central exams and aptitude tests. Yet, they also have ramifications, the most important being that these schools will move further away from their initial purpose, which was to train religious officials.

Keywords: religious education; Islamic religious education; Imam Hatip Schools; Türkiye



Citation: Zengin, Mahmut, and Abdurrahman Hendek. 2023. The Future of Imam Hatip Schools as a Model for Islamic Education in Türkiye. *Religions* 14: 375. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030375>

Academic Editors: Fella Lahmar and Khalid Arar

Received: 11 January 2023

Revised: 6 March 2023

Accepted: 9 March 2023

Published: 13 March 2023



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1. Introduction

Madrasah was one of the most prominent educational institutions in the history of Islamic education. The Seljuks and Ottomans contributed significantly to the institution-alisation and development of madrasahs, which educated and trained religious scholars, judges, teachers and officers needed by the state and society for centuries. However, in the nineteenth century, new schools (called *maktab*) were established during the Western-inspired modernisation process in the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, there were also few attempts to reform madrasahs as traditional educational institutions. After the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923, the madrasah was abolished in 1924, ending the so-called madrasah–maktab quarrel in favour of the latter. Madrasah was abolished due to the national, secular and positivist education policies in order to create a new nation state and new society (Okçabol 2005). However, in place of the madrasah, new schools called Imam Hatip Schools (IHSs, *İmam-Hatip Mektepleri*, and later *İmam Hatip Liseleri* in Turkish, which can be translated as Imam and Preacher Schools) were established to train “religious officers” in 1924 (Tevhidi Tedrisat Kanunu 1924).

In this qualitative research, we explore the historical foundations of IHSs, their distinctive features and the “program diversity” and the “project school” initiatives introduced in 2014 and 2016, respectively, to improve the schools’ quality and to make them more competitive in today’s exam-oriented education system, through official documents and existing studies. We discuss the positive impact of these initiatives and their ramifications. Therefore, the research question of the article is what are the features of Imam Hatip Schools

as a model for Islamic education and what are the potential effects of the recent initiatives on these schools?

The literature on IHSs in Turkish abounds (Aşlamacı 2014; Bozan 2007; Çakır et al. 2004; Karaman 2021; Ünsür 2005), partly because the IHSs have always been at the centre of politics of religion in Türkiye. There are also few studies on IHSs in English, exploring their new opening in 1951 (Reed 1955), their socio-political history (Tarhan 1996), their link with Islamism and secularism (Pak 2004), the political quarrel over them (Öcal 2007), their connection with the Islamic movement, particularly the current conservative government (Ozgur 2012), and whether these schools can be a model for Islamic education (Aşlamacı and Kaymakcan 2017). However, since 2012, the number of IHSs has increased (see below). There have also been new initiatives to improve the quality of education in these schools and make them more competitive by attracting more successful students in today's exam-oriented education system. It is therefore important to analyse the potential effects of these initiations on these schools.

2. A Brief History of the Imam Hatip Schools

The Ottoman Empire (1299–1922) inherited the madrasah system from the Seljuks. Though there were few reconstruction efforts, especially at the time of Mehmed the Conqueror (1432–1481) and Suleiman the Magnificent (1494–1566), the madrasah system remained mostly intact in terms of management, finance and education until the late 19th century. During the Western-inspired modernisation process in the 19th century, new schools (called *maktab*) were opened in the Empire, which led to the infamous quarrel between *madrasah* and *maktab*, as a proxy war between traditionalists and modernists. However, there were also attempts to improve madrasahs. For example, madrasahs in Istanbul were renamed *Dârü'l-Hilâfeti'l-Aliyye* in 1914 and courses such as Math, Geography and Astronomy were added to their curriculum for the first time in the context of madrasah reform initiatives (Öcal 2017). Moreover, new madrasahs were also opened to train specifically religious officers: *Medresetü'l-Vaizin* (1912) and *Medresetü'l Eimme ve'l-Huteba* (1913), which were later combined (1919) and renamed *Medresetü'l-İrşad* (Öcal 2017). However, upon the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923, all these madrasahs were abolished in 1924 after the Unification of Education Act (*Tevhidi Tedrisat Kanunu*). The same act also sanctioned the establishment of the IHSs. The IHSs can be seen partly as a continuation of the reformed madrasa system: they were named after *Medresetü'l Eimme ve'l-Huteba* (Madrasa for Imams and Preachers, established in 1913), and their curriculum was similar to that of *Dârü'l-Hilâfeti'l-Aliyye* (Dinçer 1974; Öcal 2017; Zengin 2017).

A total of 29 IHSs were opened in 1924 to raise “officials responsible for the performance of religious services” (*Tevhidi Tedrisat Kanunu* 1924); however, soon after, they were all closed, and in 1930 there were no IHS at all. The lack of student interest was often mentioned in official statements as a reason for their closures. However, studies show that official policies such as not opening the upper secondary division of the IHSs, which prevented their graduates from entering universities, cutting financial aid to these schools, and the fact that their graduates could not become civil servants all affected students' preferences (Öcal 2017; Ünsür 2005; Zengin 2002). Therefore, Öcal (2017) notes that it was official policies, not the lack of student interest, which led to the closure of the IHSs, but Miser (2005) argues that it was the conservative circles that caused the lack of student interest in these schools, as they never trusted these schools.

Apart from the student interest, the closure of the IHSs can be explained in two ways. First, the founding cadre of the Republic never did believe that the IHSs would have a vital role in the modernisation process of the Republic; therefore, they just temporarily established the IHSs to prevent reactions and objections from the public and then closed them slowly (Kara 2017; Subaşı 2005). Second, in contrast, the founding cadre believed that these schools could help the modernisation process by raising “enlightened/modern religious clergy”, but the social conditions and these schools' “insufficient” performance in

the reform process led to their closures (Subaşı 2005). In either case, these schools' closure was closely related to the politics of religion in the early years of the Republic.

Due to strict secularism policies in the 1930s and 1940s, religious courses in ordinary schools were also abolished along with the IHSs; therefore, there was no religious education at any level in the public education system (Ayhan 2004; Öcal 2017). With the transition to the multi-party election system in 1946, however, some positive steps in the field of religious education were taken. In 1948, 10-month Imam Hatip courses were opened as a political and temporary solution. The transformation of these courses into the lower secondary IHSs took place in 1951 when 7 IHSs were opened. Moreover, soon, the upper secondary division of these schools (1953–1954) was opened (Öcal 2017; Zengin 2017).

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the number of IHSs slowly increased, reaching 19 in 1960 and 72 in 1970. However, there have also been debates, especially during and after the military coup or memorandum periods, over their closures, reducing their numbers, closing their lower secondary division, and reducing their graduates' employment areas. For example, after the 1971 Memorandum, the lower secondary division of the IHSs was closed in 1972 but reopened in 1974. Moreover, female students were barred from enrolling in the IHSs in 1972; however, this was overturned by the Council of State in 1976 on equality of educational rights grounds. Apart from these back-and-forth developments, there were also positive ones. In 1973, with the "Basic Law of National Education", the IHSs were officially classified as "upper secondary schools" (*lise*) (Millî Eğitim Temel Kanunu 1973), which meant that their graduates could pursue higher studies in non-religious fields for the first time; however, this was only limited to social science/literature faculties and departments at the time. Despite the aforementioned developments, the number of the IHSs had increased to 374 by 1980 (Öcal 2017).

After the 1980 military coup, there were both negative and positive developments. During the 1980s, the military cadre did not allow the opening of new IHSs; therefore, only 8 new IHSs were opened, which means that the number of the IHSs increased slightly to 382 in 1990. However, with a change in 1983, their graduates could enrol at any university faculty/department, being only dependent on national university entrance exam scores for the first time, and some IHS graduates topped these exams. Moreover, a new type of IHS was opened, called the Anatolian IHS, which initially opened to serve the children of Turkish expats living in Germany (1985), but later took students living in Türkiye through national exams (Öcal 2017). All these developments increased these schools' and their graduates' visibility and social impact in the 1990s. The secular section of society and ruling elites, therefore, criticised these schools for going beyond the original purpose of their establishment. They argued that the number of the IHSs far exceeded the need for religious officers for political and religious reasons and that many female students who could not assume the position of imam or khatib enrolled at these schools. Moreover, they claimed that these schools were transformed from vocational schools into alternative educational institutions to, what they call, scientific and secular education. Furthermore, these schools' curricula, educational style, teachers, students, parents and supporting foundations were also criticised on the grounds that they could pose a threat to the secular education system and secular state (see Baloğlu 1990; Çakır et al. 2004; Kara 2017; Miser 2005; Subaşı 2005).

All these criticisms led to negative developments for the IHSs. By 1997, the number of the IHSs reached 612. During the so-called 28th February Post-Modern Coup period (1997), the lower secondary division of the IHSs was closed, and their graduates' entrance to non-religious university fields was made difficult by the reduction in national university entrance exam scores (Öcal 2017). During this time, the number of the IHSs decreased from 612 to 452 in 2003. However, after the rise of the Justice and Development Party (*AK Parti*) in 2002, there have been attempts to solve these problems, though the Party faced obstacles from the judiciary, presidency and military. Finally, by 2012, the lower secondary division of the IHSs was reopened, and the score reduction policy at the university entrance exams for the IHS students was ended. Since these developments, there has been a significant

increase in the number of IHSs (see below), and there have been initiatives to raise the quality of the IHSs (Kara 2017; Zengin 2017).

Currently, the IHSs serve as 4-year lower secondary (ages 10–14) and 4-year upper secondary (ages 14–18) schools. According to the latest available statistics, there are more than 5000 IHSs out of more than 25,000 lower secondary and upper secondary state schools. This means that their numbers increased from about 1800 in 2012 to more than 5000 in 2022 (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı 2022).

This short history shows that even though the IHSs were a Republican project, since their establishment, they have been politicised and become a matter of political debate (Öcal 2007). Part of this debate has been about what kind of generations will be raised in the modern, secular Republic, the position of these schools against the secular character of the Republic and whether these schools form a basis for political Islam (Baloğlu 1990; Çakır et al. 2004; Miser 2005; Ozgur 2012; Subaşı 2005; Zengin 2017). The fundamental criticism of the secular circles has been that these schools have gone beyond their original purpose, which was to raise religious officers, and has become an alternative educational institution to, what they call, scientific and secular education (Miser 2005).

However, there have also been concerns and fears of the conservative circles about IHSs as some have seen these schools as an apparatus of the secular state to raise “modern/republican” (as opposed to traditional/religious) clergy. Some have questioned whether it is ever possible to teach religion properly in a secular education system governed by a secular Ministry of National Education, and some have regarded these schools as a state project to modernise Islam and weaken the Muslim community (Kara 2017).

3. Features of the Imam Hatip Schools

The IHSs have always been state schools, and similarly to other state schools in Türkiye, they are supervised by the state. Their curriculum is prepared by the departments of the Ministry of National Education, and their expenditures, including teachers’ salaries, are paid by the state. In other words, these schools, which provide Islamic education, are part of the state education system. Even though Türkiye adopted French-inspired secularism to minimise the role of religion in the public sphere, this has never meant a complete separation of state and religion. Rather, the state has regulated and controlled Islam through state departments such as the Presidency of Religious Affairs and schools, such as the IHSs.

State control and supervision, though, are not novel ideas for Islamic educational institutions. The institutionalisation of madrasahs and state support for these schools started with the Seljuks and continued with the Ottomans. The IHSs, in this respect, can be considered a continuation of this tradition (Aşlamacı 2014; Aşlamacı and Kaymakcan 2017). In terms of curriculum, though, these schools’ intellectual foundation goes back to the efforts to find a balance between traditional and modern education in the late Ottoman period (Aşlamacı 2014). These schools can also be seen as a Republican project, as religious education and religious services are considered a public service in Türkiye and the establishment of private religious education schools is prohibited by the law (Özel Öğretim Kurumları Kanunu 2007). This has ensured that national and secular educational policies are carried out systematically across all schools, including the IHSs (Ozgur 2012).

As the Sunni–Hanafi understanding of Islam has had an important place in the Turkish–Islamic tradition and the vast majority of the population follows it, the teaching of Sunni–Hanafi understanding has prevailed in the IHSs, partly to ensure national unity (Aşlamacı and Kaymakcan 2017). Moreover, the religious teachings which are seen as incompatible with the republican ideas and values, such as secularism, nationalism, and positivism, have been omitted from the curricula of IHSs. With this approach, a state-controlled and supported understanding of Islam has been taught in the IHSs (Aşlamacı 2014). Somehow, this has helped form a general understanding of religion in society in line with the republican ideas and somehow prevented religious-related problems such as radicalisation. This has

been one of the reasons why these schools attracted the attention of Muslim societies in different parts of the world as a model for Islamic education (Akam 2010).

Even though they are state schools, the IHSs are different from other state schools in Türkiye in that around 40% of their curriculum is devoted to Islamic courses, such as Arabic, Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic jurisprudence. The rest is devoted to academic courses, such as Math, Science, Turkish, History and Geography, as these schools provide Islamic education in addition to the standard secondary school education. In that respect, these schools can be considered as synthesising "traditional" (i.e., religious) and "modern" education (Aşlamacı 2014), but it should be noted that teaching in these schools is considered to be based on modern education pedagogy even for Islamic courses, as these have been overseen by the Ministry of National Education. In this sense, they are different from traditional madrasas of the Ottoman Empire. The downside of a curriculum which consists of extensive religious courses and the regular secondary school education is that it is an overburdened curriculum for students (Reed 1955).

Yet, such a curriculum structure of the IHSs is an essential factor in the preference of parents who demand religious education along with academic education for their children. Moreover, the religious atmosphere, values and culture provided by the IHSs have been seen as another vital reason for parental demand for these schools (Ayhan 2004; Bolay and Türköne 1995; Öcal 2017). Another distinguishing feature of the IHSs is that they have a very strong relationship with the segments of society they serve. So much so that a significant part of their buildings and dormitories have been funded by public donations and non-governmental organisations' contributions, which have shouldered the financial burden of schooling (Aşlamacı 2014; Ayhan 2004; Reed 1955; Ünsür 2005).

One of the essential functions of IHSs is that they contribute to a diverse school system with more opportunities for parental choice. These schools have especially contributed to the schooling of children of lower- and middle-class families living in rural areas, who have seen these schools as compatible with their cultural and religious values. Moreover, with free dormitory facilities, these schools have been preferred by parents and students with limited financial means. In this sense, these schools have provided an upward mobility opportunity for disadvantaged segments of society (Ayhan 2004), as their children could receive education and then work in various professions, from teaching to religious services.

The IHSs have also contributed to girls' access to education. In some rural areas, families tended not to send their daughters to school after primary education; however, as these schools have provided Islamic education and a religious environment and culture, parents have increasingly sent their daughters to the IHSs. So much so that in some schools, the number of female students has exceeded male students. This has evoked criticisms that these schools should not enrol female students as they cannot become imam or khatib due to religious reasons. In the 1970s, there was a short period when female students were prohibited from enrolling in IHSs (see above) (Öcal 2017).

As stated above, the IHSs have always been state schools, and similarly to other state schools in Türkiye, their curriculum is prepared by the departments of the Ministry of National Education. In this respect, the IHSs are different from madrasahs in other Muslim societies, especially where madrasahs are civil education institutions outside the state education system.

The IHSs are also different from faith-based schools in European countries, as they do not have any link with religious organisations and communities. For example, in England, faith-based schools may have formal links with religious organisations, which, in turn, may impact their religious education curriculum and staffing policy (Long and Danechi 2019). However, the IHSs may not have any links with a religious organisation, including the state religious department, the Presidency of Religious Affairs. They are solely under the control of the Ministry of National Education.

The IHSs have never had primary/elementary sections, which distinguishes them from faith-based schools in other countries; for example, in England, most faith schools are primary schools (Long and Danechi 2019). As stated above, these schools have been

transformed from vocational schools whose aim was to raise religious officers to mainstream educational institutions with an extensive Islamic education. This has been the major criticism levelled at these schools (see above). Yet, the supporters of the IHSs have argued that these schools should be a part of mainstream education for those who demand an academic as well as an Islamic education for their children. The new initiatives have been further steps in this direction.

4. Program Diversity and Project School Initiatives

As stated above, there have already been initiatives, such as the establishment of the Anatolian IHSs in the 1980s, which helped IHSs attract more successful students in the early 1990s. However, these developments were hampered by the so-called 28th February Post-Modern Coup period, which can be seen as an intervention of the secular establishment into the IHSs. This period continued to have an impact until the early 2010s. After the reopening of the lower secondary division of IHSs and the removal of the obstacles IHSs graduates faced at the national university entrance exams in the early 2010s, new initiatives were launched by the conservative government. In 2014, the “project school” initiative was introduced ([Resmi Gazete 2014](#)), whose details were announced in 2016 ([Resmi Gazete 2016](#)). The “project school” is a school that meets certain criteria set by the Ministry of National Education, and it refers to academically successful schools that accept students through central placement exams and can apply different programs such as science and social science. The IHSs can be also granted the project school status, if they meet certain criteria.

One of the criteria is, for example, that the school must have the physical infrastructure, equipment and human resources suitable for the nature of the project and stand out in terms of academic, professional and social activities from other schools. When the school is granted the “project school” status, its status is evaluated every four years. If the school no longer meets the necessary criteria, its status is removed. Class sizes in the project schools are capped at a maximum of thirty students. ([Resmi Gazete 2016](#)).

The “program diversity” is another initiative which was introduced in 2014. It refers to the fact that the schools offer different programs that allow students to receive intensive education and develop themselves in their areas of interest such as science, social sciences, foreign languages, Quran memorisation (*hifz*), arts or sports.

As a result, new IHSs which implement science and social science, language, *hifz*, traditional/contemporary arts, music and sports, technology and international programs have been opened. The program diversity is not implemented in all IHSs. Only a certain number of IHSs started to apply it ([MEB DÖGM 2018b](#)). Moreover, it has been applied mainly at the upper secondary division, while some lower secondary IHSs have implemented the *hifz* program.

4.1. Features of the Project IHSs

The newly created project schools also apply the program diversity. Currently, all project IHSs apply a “science and social science program”. In some project IHSs, additional programs are also offered, such as *hifz* and foreign languages. The project IHSs have some features which differ from those of other IHSs. Students are admitted to project schools through central placement and aptitude tests, which is not the case in non-project IHSs ([Karaman 2021](#)), and the maximum class size is 30 students. Moreover, these schools must establish “advisory boards” to ensure cooperation with universities, public and private organisations and other stakeholders, and “project execution commissions” to carry out social, cultural and scientific activities. Furthermore, these schools can establish protocols with various stakeholders, from universities to non-governmental organisations ([MEB DÖGM 2018a](#), [2018b](#); [Resmi Gazete 2016](#)). Moreover, there are different rules for the appointment of administrators and teachers to the project schools. These all indicate a certain degree of autonomy in the management and functioning of the project schools, which is not the case in non-project schools ([Karaman 2021](#)).

In terms of the curriculum structure, the project IHSs still have similarities with normal IHSs. In both normal IHSs and project IHSs, the weekly course load consists of 40 h. Moreover, neither program diversity nor project school initiatives have changed the existing basic curriculum structure of the IHSs, as they all still provide an extensive Islamic education (MEB DÖGM 2018b).

In terms of curriculum, however, there are two essential differences between the ordinary IHSs and the project IHSs. Firstly, in the project IHSs, elective courses are determined in advance according to the nature of the program (e.g., science or social science) implemented. The ordinary IHSs, in contrast, have more flexibility in deciding the elective course list, which can be planned according to the availability of teachers and the interests of students. In this way, the project IHSs use the same program as the Science Upper Secondary Schools (*Fen Liseleri*) or the Social Science Upper Secondary Schools (*Sosyal Bilimler Liseleri*), with the exception of some minor courses, and with additional religious education courses (MEB DÖGM 2018a).

Secondly, even though there is no difference between the project IHSs and the ordinary IHSs in terms of compulsory courses, there are differences in the weekly hours of religious courses, as the project IHSs offer fewer hours for the Qur'an and Arabic Language, and these hours are instead attributed to elective courses (Zengin and Karaman 2020).

As the project IHSs accept students through central placement and aptitude tests and have better facilities, and different rules for class size and teacher/administrator appointments, their students' success at the university entrance exams has gradually increased. This has had a positive impact on the success rate of all IHSs. For example, there were 17 IHS students among the first hundred students (in three score types: Science, Social Science and Equal Weight, which means there were 17 IHS students among roughly 300 students) in the 2020 university entrance exam, and this number rose to 57 in 2022. The number of IHS students in the first 1000 places also increased (Anadolu Ajansı 2022). The academic success of IHSs can also be seen in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). According to the PISA 2018 Preliminary Report, which includes the scores of seven different school types in Türkiye, IHSs enjoyed the highest score increase after the prestigious Science Upper Secondary Schools (*Fen Liseleri*). This might be the result of improvements in the quality of education and specialisation in different areas (Karaman 2021). With these initiatives, IHSs have had the chance to compete with academically successful schools.

Moreover, these initiatives might also help to increase students' and parents' interest in these schools. There can be different reasons for the students' preference for these schools. According to one piece of research (Zengin and Karaman 2020), family guidance/orientation, a desire to study at a project school, students' central placement test scores, a desire to be part of the IHS and obtaining quality religious education are the major reasons for the students' preference for these schools (see also Tarhan and Karateke 2021).

4.2. Challenges of the Project IHSs

Despite these important developments, there are also challenges associated with the project schools. For example, teachers and administrators can work in these schools for no longer than eight years, with an additional two years; however, according to Karaman (2021), there is still no formal regulation on the criteria for the selection of administrators and teachers and on the extension of their terms, which might result in arbitrary and unfair practices. Furthermore, teachers in the project schools are expected to show higher performance; however, in terms of personal rights and salaries, there is no difference between teachers in the project schools and ordinary schools, which makes it difficult to attract qualified teachers for the project schools.

In recent years, there have been developments in religious education (RE) pre-service teachers' education. Previously, RE teacher candidates were placed into the schools for teaching practice for one term; in 2021, however, this was increased to two terms in line with other teacher education programs. This means that RE teacher candidates should spend

144 h in total at schools to complete pre-service teacher education in addition to theory courses which consist of 308 h. Moreover, the Directorate General for Religious Teaching of the Ministry of National Education organises various in-service and teacher development programs, such as teacher mobility, school-based professional courses and thematic reading groups, for both ordinary and the project IHSs' teachers and administrators (see <https://dogm.meb.gov.tr/www/haberler/kategori/1> (accessed on 6 March 2023)). These can all contribute to better teaching at the project IHS; currently, however, there is no study which documents how the new pre-service teacher education and various in-service and teacher development programs contribute to teaching at the ordinary and the project IHSs.

In Türkiye, the prestigious Science Upper Secondary Schools use special textbooks, which are different from those used in ordinary schools, as these schools attract high-performing students. However, the project IHSs, which also aim to attract high-performing students, use the same RE textbooks as the ordinary IHSs. The project IHSs have been allowed to use the special textbooks for Math, Physics, Chemistry and Biology prepared for the Science Upper Secondary Schools; however, there has been no attempt to date by the Ministry of National Education to prepare special RE textbooks for the project IHSs. As there are studies which indicate that students at the IHSs, especially those who plan to study subjects other than Theology, find the religious courses theoretical and heavy, and think that the content does not appeal to them, there might be a need for better curricula and textbooks for these courses (Kaya 2018; Sari 2021).

Another challenge is that even though there are high expectations for these schools, there is no state financial support specifically provided for the project schools, which leads the school administrators to seek additional financial support from the public. This can place a heavy burden on administrators who already have the mountainous task of smoothly running a project school.

Furthermore, as the project IHSs are preferred by academically successful students, these students show more interest in academic subjects such as Math and Biology rather than religious courses (Aşlamacı 2017; Karaman 2021). Indeed, studies show that some students tend to favour the reduction in religious courses and the increase in academic courses (Çınar 2018; Sari 2021).

Moreover, the students at the project IHSs want to study and work mostly in fields other than religion. According to Zengin and Karaman (2020), students at the project IHSs wish to study and work in medicine, pharmacy, dentistry and healthcare (30.5%), engineering and architecture (22.8%), law (11.9%), police, military and security (7.1%). Only 4.6% of the project IHS students prefer to study theology, which is a number that is relatively low. In another research which surveyed students' career tendencies in ordinary IHSs, theology was slightly higher than other fields (23%) but still low given the fact that this shows that almost 77% of the students preferred other fields (Aşlamacı 2017). These raise important questions about the curriculum structure and the original purpose of these schools, which will be discussed below.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The IHSs offer both Islamic and academic courses. In other words, these schools are a Turkish model for Islamic education. Even though these schools were established by the founders of the Republic, their intellectual foundations go back to the efforts to find a balance between traditional and modern education in the late Ottoman period. The history of IHSs shows that these schools have been greatly affected by politics of religion and political wranglings between conservative and secular circles and parties. The background to this wrangling has been partly forming a political base on the one hand, and preventing conservatives from clinging to the public sphere on the other (Ozgur 2012). Therefore, the development of the IHSs has been patchy and intermittent; currently, however, they enjoy a period of prosperity, thanks to successive conservative governments. However, the development of the IHSs can also be seen as a success of the secular establishment, as the IHSs have always been part of the unified, centralised and secular education system,

strictly controlled by the Ministry of National Education without any interference from any religious organisation, including the Presidency of Religious Affairs.

These schools contribute to a diverse school system with more opportunities for parental choice. Therefore, they are essential for diversity in education, which is also an important argument for faith-based schools in the West (Jackson 2003; Parker-Jenkins et al. 2005). The existence of religious schools is also important in terms of religious freedom and right to education, espoused in the international human rights conventions, such as the European Convention on Human Rights, as freedom of thought, conscience and religion includes, among others, “teaching” (Article 9) and Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 urges states to “respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions” (Council of Europe 1950).

In Türkiye, the state does not allow the establishment of private religious schools, despite the presence of private schools. Moreover, religious minorities have a right to establish their own schools under the Lausanne Peace Treaty (Article 40) (Lausanne Peace Treaty 1923). Therefore, the IHSs seem to be the only option for Muslim families who wish to have religious as well as regular academic secondary school education for their children.

These schools have been transformed from vocational schools tasked with raising religious officers to mainstream schools, which include both the standard secondary school curriculum and extensive religious courses. Moreover, in order to compete in an exam-oriented education system, new initiatives have been launched, namely the program diversity and the project school. It seems that this has had a positive impact on the success of IHS students in university exams and on attracting more successful students. However, these initiatives have also had some ramifications.

The studies which show that students in these schools show more interest in academic courses rather than religious courses might be worrying, as this might hinder these schools from providing a quality religious education and, in turn, weaken their power to build a religious identity, which has been one of the vital reasons for the preference of these schools by parents. The career orientation of students towards non-religious fields might also question the curriculum structure of these schools, which devote roughly 40% of their curriculum to Islamic courses. Indeed, studies show that students at these schools tend to favour the reduction in religious courses and the increase in academic courses (see above). In the future, there might be more calls for the reduction in religious courses, but this will further weaken the power and role of these schools to develop a religious identity and, therefore, probably face reactions from conservative circles and organisations.

Another important issue is whether IHSs have moved away from their initial objective, which was to raise religious officers, such as imams and khatibs. As seen above, the law in 1973 (Milli Eğitim Temel Kanunu 1973) classified these schools as upper secondary schools (*lise*), which meant that their graduates could pursue higher studies in non-religious as well as religious fields. This was an important step in the transformation of the IHSs from a vocational school to a mainstream secondary school. Moreover, studies show that students and families tend to perceive these schools as general schools with extensive religious courses rather than vocational schools (Aşlamacı 2017; Özensel and Aydemir 2014). Furthermore, even though the IHSs have been tasked with raising religious officers, over the years, due to the rise in the number of graduates, and a need for a graduate degree, a theology degree has gradually become an advantage and, in some cases, a requirement to occupy official religious officer posts in the Presidency of Religious Affairs. This means that an IHS diploma no longer guarantees a post in religious services. In fact, due to the large number of theology faculties, even a theology faculty diploma does not guarantee this (Hendek et al. 2022).

These all show that in terms of law, student and parental expectations, and employability, these schools have gradually moved away from their initial objective. The findings on students’ career orientation and their view on religious courses show that the new initiatives, namely the “project” and “program diversity”, will probably further move these schools away from this objective. The content orientation of the IHSs might change in the

future to allow solid religious education without the objective of a specific occupational field, but this will probably require a reinterpretation of the Unification of Education Act, which tasks these schools with raising officials responsible for the performance of religious services (Tevhidi Tedrisat Kanunu 1924). One might wonder whether these schools should be still called Imam Hatip (imam/prayer leader and khatib/preacher) if their prime objective is no longer to raise religious officers. It seems that the name “Imam Hatip” carries symbolic significance, and any move to change it will probably face reactions from conservative circles (Zengin 2017).

Regardless of these challenges and problems, the IHSs, which successfully combine religious and academic courses to some extent, and the project IHSs, which attract successful students in national and international exams, can offer an alternative model for Islamic education. However, in order to realise this potential, it is important to depoliticise these schools and to structure religious and academic courses according to student and parental expectations as well as modern pedagogy and the aims of religious education in Türkiye.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization M.Z. and A.H.; methodology, M.Z. and A.H.; resources, M.Z. and A.H.; writing—original draft preparation, M.Z. and A.H. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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