

Extended Abstract

The Perception of Islam in International Imam Hatip High School Students Studying in Turkey*

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Abstract

This study has been conducted under the scope of a case study, a qualitative research method. It aims to examine the place and importance of the perception of Islam in why and how foreign exchange students chose to come and study in the International Imam Hatip High Schools, which have emerged as a new center of attention in high school education. In addition to these students not having any clear positive or negative judgments about Turkey because they've come here at a very young age, that all the students in the school are Muslim facilitates the research. The students themselves and nearly all their family are members of the Islamic religion. While most of the students were born into the religion of Islam, students are also found who later accepted Islam in school. A small number of the students were very well informed about Islam before they had come. Students especially prefer the International Imam Hatip High Schools for closing the gap in this area. The research was carried out in the 2016 spring semester at the Konya Mevlana International Imam Hatip High School in Anatolia. The school has 286 students. Sixty-five students from 50 countries participated in the research. Maximum variation sampling has been used by choosing group members from the students in the 9th, 10th, and 11th grades, whose average age is 17, in a way that would include at least one representative from the 50 countries found at the school. Interviews were held with 25 students in the study, and focus-group interviews were held with the other students. The students in the study are male. A semi-structured interview form consisting of seven questions has been used in the interviews. Every question cuts across a theme. Subject headings have been chosen according to these themes.

Keywords

Imam Hatip • Perception of Islam • Islam • Imam Hatip High Schools Model • Foreign exchange students

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The implementation of Imam Hatip High Schools (İmam Hatip Liseleri [IHL]) in Turkey, which gather modern science and religious education under the same roof, is a good reference for countries that are searching for a model in the Islamic world. Turkey in recent years has carried the power and reputation gained in recent years over to education by helping Islamic countries that it defines as the “heartland.”

The International Imam Hatip project, which was initiated in Turkey in Kayseri in 2006 and which has spread quickly in many countries of principally Islamic geographies, will play a role as an important institution in providing the consciousness of the Islamic community and in nurturing the formation of religious and cultural ties with students alongside the outward-oriented modern human.

Some problems exist on the topic of implementing the International IHL in other countries because it has emerged from Turkey’s own experiences with its tradition dating back a millennium. The problems encountered in this area include sectarian differences about perceptions of Islam from the students who come from different cultures. Therefore, the need exists to also assess students’ perception of Islam in order to prepare the model in a way that will address the students coming from different cultures and to provide support to its implementation in Turkey.

Students come to the International IHL as modern intellectual individuals who know their religion well, are strong in many areas, and well-trained for the world and the hereafter because they think they can gain the competence for the position of engaging in the presentation of Islam, seen as the task of the messenger, alongside being educated. The families of students who study at the International IHLs are seen to want their children to study at these schools in particular. Additionally, as a consequence of countries with Arabic language training centers through the Arab Spring having had many problems especially over security, through the Arabic taught in IHLs and Turkey’s appearance as a new destination, students prefer these schools for training. In addition to the schools being in Turkey, reasons are found alongside students’ learning the stance of presenting Islam in their preferences for the Imam Hatip models, such as how the schools provide a blend of both the positive and religious sciences, as well as the opportunity to memorize the Qur’an. While a section of students aim to continue on to theology training and higher education in Turkey after finishing high school, others want to return to their countries and serve in the field of religion. Also, students who want to receive training in fields apart from theology are seen to continue their connections directly or indirectly with religious education by getting their masters in theology.

The students’ perceptions of Islam necessitate an evaluation of their life perceptions related to Turkey. On this point, Turkey is categorized as a modern country with a high-quality standard of living and a good democracy. Turkey also appears to be quite

effective in other regions in terms of power. Students' thoughts before coming to Turkey have changed after arriving. These changes are mostly in a positive direction. No definite answer is given regarding whether Turkey represents an eastern or western culture regionally. Generally the answers indicate that it serves as a bridge between east and west.

According to the students of some countries, whether Turkey is defined as modern or as having a secular constitution, what comes to the fore is Turkey being the leader of the Islamic world. Although not in a full-fledged position of leadership, Turkey is a model possessing qualities in many areas that are felt necessary for other Islamic countries. According to the students, Turkey's religious education, IHLs, management style, and understanding of Islam are other factors that define this model. Students describe these qualities as the antidote to radical Islam. The lack of sectarian conflicts in Turkey is an advantageous situation for the country according to students. The biggest difference between other countries and Turkey is that it hasn't regressed to conflict between sects and religious groups, and it has the formation of a culture of respect. In a regional sense, the most important of the common public findings on the perception of Islam in Turkey is that Turkey leans towards being a European country because of its closeness with the West. A Muslim country's participation in the EU is also the most important difference. The students also wonder about the position of a Muslim state within Christian communities.

The students have begun fulfilling their religious practices on a regular basis since coming to Turkey. Most of the students' changes after beginning their studies in the IHL are on the topic of the five daily prayers. According to the students, alongside these prayers being a very important form of worship in terms of the many religious services nestled within them, they are the pillar of the religion. Other forms of worship and Islam's obligations are important in terms of creating a healthy society and establishing order. Together with the many forms of worship, Islam has already established this order through its many attributes. Of them, the most important is that believers are brothers and sisters according to Islam; this is a positive feature for Muslims. At the same time, Islam also provides some beautiful advantages for non-Muslims, such as brotherhood/sisterhood. This concept is "tolerance" according to the students. Tolerance is the most important characteristic of Islamic belief.

According to the students, "Islam" alone is no longer enough to unify the Islamic community. The students tell of experiencing difficulties when communicating the messages of Islam. Non-Muslims misunderstand Islam because of radical groups like Hezbollah, the Taliban, and especially ISIS, and because of the mistakes of Muslims. In order to both prevent Islam from being misunderstood and to provide Islamic unity, many more studies need to be done on the topic of worship that is reduced

to formalism through a sense of piety fundamentally as worship, and the unifying elements of Muslims need to be emphasized because according to the students, Islamic Unity is the first stage of being the Islamic community. These days it is impossible to discuss the concept of one Islamic community in terms of qualities. For this reason, the obstacles in front of Islamic unity must be removed.

Among the most important reasons in the splintering of the Muslim world are sectarian bigotry and racism, along with racism, nationalism, individualism, colonialism, incompetent statesmen, dictators, and external focuses. The most pressing issues that need to be solved are the removal of unqualified statesmen from their duties and the departure of Muslim countries from sect-based state administrations. The students have heard of no international organization or non-governmental organization implementing the unity of Muslims. In their eyes, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in particular, which was established in order for Muslims to be unified, and many communities, foundations, associations, organizations, and media institutions have left their purpose and stopped possessing the most important feature of Islamic belief: siblinghood. Moreover, most of these organizations are quite far from being a union based on the Qur'an and Sunnah. Neither the European Union nor Arab Union represents Muslims. Studies on the new union that will encapsulate Muslim countries need to be started.