

The Institutionalization of Islam in the Ottoman Empire: An Integrated Perspective

Semi Priyatno¹, Irfan Musonif², Kholid Mawardi³

Universitas Islam Negeri Prof. KH. Saifuddin Zuhri Purwokerto, Indonesia¹⁻³

Email Korespondensi: 254120600007@mhs.uinsaizu.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Studies on Islam in the Ottoman Empire have primarily examined religious authority, governance, and social institutions as separate domains, leaving limited understanding of how these elements functioned as an integrated institutional framework. This study aims to analyze the institutionalization of Islam in the Ottoman Empire by examining the relationship between religious authority, governance, and social order. The research employed a qualitative library-based approach using documentary and thematic analysis. Data were derived from twenty peer-reviewed scholarly publications (2020–2025) and eight foundational works on Ottoman and Islamic history. The findings indicate that the institutionalization of Islam was shaped through three interconnected dimensions. First, religious authority was institutionalized through the integration of the ulama, educational institutions, judicial structures, and the office of the Shaykh al-Islam into imperial administration. Second, governance was not merely legitimized by Islam but was partially structured through Islamic legal and administrative institutions. Third, social order was sustained through networks of waqf, educational systems, and communal arrangements that regulated social relations and welfare. These dimensions collectively formed an integrated institutional ecosystem that strengthened political legitimacy, administrative coherence, and social stability. The study contributes to Ottoman and Islamic studies by demonstrating that Islam functioned not only as a religious tradition but also as a comprehensive institutional framework shaping governance and social organization.

Keywords Ottoman Empire, Institutionalization of Islam, Religious Authority, Governance, Social Order.

ABSTRAK

Kajian mengenai Islam dalam Kekaisaran Turki Utsmani umumnya membahas otoritas keagamaan, tata kelola pemerintahan, dan institusi sosial secara terpisah sehingga pemahaman mengenai Islam sebagai kerangka institusional yang terintegrasi masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis institusionalisasi Islam dalam Kekaisaran Turki Utsmani melalui hubungan antara otoritas keagamaan, tata kelola pemerintahan, dan tatanan sosial. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan dengan teknik analisis dokumen dan analisis tematik. Data diperoleh dari dua puluh artikel ilmiah bereputasi periode 2020–2025 serta delapan karya akademik utama dalam kajian Ottoman dan sejarah Islam. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa institusionalisasi Islam dibangun melalui tiga dimensi yang saling berkaitan. Pertama, otoritas keagamaan dilembagakan melalui integrasi ulama, lembaga pendidikan, struktur peradilan, dan jabatan Syaikh al-Islam ke dalam administrasi kekaisaran. Kedua, tata

kelola pemerintahan tidak hanya memperoleh legitimasi dari Islam tetapi juga dibentuk oleh institusi hukum dan administrasi Islam. Ketiga, tatanan sosial dipelihara melalui jaringan waqf, sistem pendidikan, dan pengaturan komunitas yang mengelola hubungan sosial serta kesejahteraan masyarakat. Ketiga dimensi tersebut membentuk ekosistem institusional yang memperkuat legitimasi politik, koherensi administrasi, dan stabilitas sosial. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Islam berfungsi sebagai kerangka institusional yang membentuk tata kelola dan organisasi sosial dalam Kekaisaran Turki Utsmani.

Kata Kunci: *Kekaisaran Turki Utsmani, Institusionalisasi Islam, Otoritas Keagamaan, Tata Kelola Pemerintahan, Tatanan Sosial.*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Islam and political order has long occupied a central position in the study of Islamic history and premodern empires. Across different Muslim polities, Islam functioned not only as a religious tradition but also as a source of authority, legitimacy, and social organization. Among these polities, the Ottoman Empire represents one of the most significant historical cases for examining how religion became embedded within the structures of governance and everyday social life. Rather than serving merely as a symbolic foundation for political authority, Islam in the Ottoman context operated through a network of institutions that shaped legal administration, educational systems, charitable foundations, social hierarchies, and mechanisms of state governance (Baeti et al., 2026; Faroghi, 2004; Itzkowitz, 2008; Musonif, 2026; Woodhead, 2011). Consequently, understanding the Ottoman experience requires moving beyond conventional interpretations that reduce Islam to a legitimizing ideology and toward a broader analysis of how religious authority was institutionalized within the political and social fabric of the empire.

Recent developments in Ottoman studies have significantly transformed scholarly understandings of the role of Islam in imperial governance. Earlier historiographical traditions frequently emphasized military expansion, dynastic politics, and administrative achievements, often treating religion as a secondary factor that merely reinforced state authority. Such approaches tended to portray Islam as a static ideological framework rather than a dynamic institutional force. However, contemporary scholarship has increasingly challenged this interpretation by highlighting the multifaceted ways through which Islamic institutions contributed to the formation and maintenance of Ottoman political and social order. Peirce (2004) argues that changing perspectives on the early Ottoman centuries have encouraged scholars to reconsider long-standing assumptions regarding the relationship between religion and state formation. Similarly, Şahin (2017) demonstrates that the development of the Ottoman Empire during the long sixteenth century cannot be adequately understood through political and military processes alone but must also be examined through the interactions between religious authority, administrative structures, and social identities. In a similar vein, Markiewicz (2018) criticizes Eurocentric historiographical tendencies that separate Ottoman history from broader Islamic intellectual traditions, thereby obscuring the role of Islamic institutions in shaping imperial governance.

The growing interest in Islam as a constitutive element of Ottoman history is particularly evident in recent studies examining the formation of religious authority and communal identity. Krstić (2021) argues that Sunni Islam within the Ottoman Empire should not be understood as a fixed theological category but rather as a historically constructed phenomenon shaped through interactions among state actors, religious scholars, and local communities. This perspective challenges essentialist interpretations of Ottoman Islam by emphasizing the historical processes through which religious norms, institutions, and identities were continuously negotiated and redefined. As noted by Fuad (2024), this line of scholarship opens new possibilities for understanding how religious authority was established, legitimized, and incorporated into the structures of imperial governance. Such findings suggest that Islam functioned not merely as a doctrinal system but as an institutional framework through which political authority and social order were organized and reproduced.

The institutional character of Islam in the Ottoman Empire becomes particularly visible when examining the relationship between religious authority and political legitimacy. Studies on Ottoman political culture have demonstrated that the sultans relied not only on military power and bureaucratic administration but also on religious symbols and institutions to consolidate their authority. Hasbi & Angkasa (2025) show that Sultan Mehmed II constructed a complex form of legitimacy by combining Islamic traditions with imperial and universal claims to sovereignty. Likewise, Hisarlioğlu & Yanık (2025) demonstrate that religiously inspired status symbols played a significant role in shaping the political identity of the empire and reinforcing its claims to authority within the broader Islamic world. These studies indicate that religion was deeply embedded in the mechanisms through which power was exercised and legitimized. Political authority, therefore, cannot be separated from the institutional structures that connected the Ottoman state to religious norms and communities.

Beyond the realm of political legitimacy, Islamic institutions also played a critical role in the production and reproduction of knowledge, social welfare, and intellectual culture. The Ottoman waqf system, for example, functioned as one of the most important institutional mechanisms linking religious values to social organization. Abdul Salam (2025) demonstrates that waqf institutions were central to the preservation and transmission of Ottoman-Islamic intellectual culture, supporting educational, charitable, and scholarly activities across different regions of the empire. Similarly, Çelik & Yapıcı (2025) highlight the importance of Islamic institutions in facilitating scientific development and intellectual production, challenging assumptions that religion and scientific inquiry existed in tension within Ottoman society. The intellectual currents examined by El-Rouayheb (2015) further illustrate the extent to which scholarly networks, religious institutions, and educational systems contributed to the formation of a vibrant intellectual environment. These findings underscore the importance of examining Islam not simply as a set of beliefs but as an institutional structure that shaped social practices and knowledge production.

The institutionalization of Islam also extended to economic and social life. Historical analyses of Islamic economic traditions suggest that economic practices within the Ottoman Empire were informed by religious norms and ethical frameworks that influenced governance and social relations (Anggara et al., 2025; Azis et al., 2026; Aji et al., 2026; Musonif et al., 2026). More broadly, Ottoman institutions facilitated the integration of diverse populations into a coherent political order. The empire's ability to govern extensive territories inhabited by multiple ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities depended not only on administrative efficiency but also on institutional arrangements that regulated social relations and communal identities. This aspect is particularly evident in studies of the millet system. Traditionally interpreted as evidence of Ottoman religious tolerance, recent scholarship has demonstrated that the millet system functioned as a sophisticated administrative mechanism through which the state managed religious diversity. Clements (2025) argues that the late Ottoman millet paradigm reflected broader transformations in the governance of difference, illustrating how religious categories were institutionalized within imperial administration. Such findings reveal that Islam played a significant role not only in defining Muslim identity but also in structuring relations between different religious communities under Ottoman rule.

Recent studies have also expanded the geographical and conceptual scope of Ottoman scholarship by exploring the empire's enduring influence beyond its political existence. Schlaepfer & Bourmaud (2020) demonstrate that forms of Ottoman identity continue to shape cultural and political discourses across post-Ottoman societies. Similarly, Marglin & Ismail (2024) emphasize the importance of integrating North African perspectives into Ottoman historiography, thereby revealing broader networks of religious, political, and intellectual interaction. Research on Ottoman heritage and collective memory likewise illustrates the persistence of Ottoman institutional legacies in contemporary contexts (Fahrezi et al., 2026; Musonif, et al., 2026; Ramadona et al., 2026; Terzić & Dogramadjieva, 2022). These studies collectively indicate that Ottoman institutions cannot be understood solely as historical phenomena but must also be analyzed as enduring frameworks that influenced subsequent social and political developments.

Despite these important contributions, the existing literature remains fragmented in its treatment of Islam within the Ottoman Empire. Many studies focus on specific dimensions of Ottoman society, such as political legitimacy (Hasbi & Angkasa, 2025; Hisarlıoğlu & Yanık, 2025; Musonif, et al., 2026), intellectual culture (Abdul Salam, 2025; Çelik & Yapıcı, 2025; Saifudin et al., 2026), historiography (Al-Shuqairat & Aldajah, 2025; Başkan, 2023; Musonif, et al., 2026), religious diversity (Clements, 2025), or cultural memory (Schlaepfer & Bourmaud, 2020; Terzić & Dogramadjieva, 2022). While these works have substantially enriched our understanding of Ottoman history, they often examine individual institutions or social processes in isolation. Consequently, limited attention has been given to how these institutions collectively functioned as interconnected

components of a broader system through which Islam shaped governance, social order, and imperial authority.

This fragmentation points to a significant conceptual gap in the literature. Although scholars increasingly recognize the importance of religion in Ottoman political and social life, few studies have systematically examined Islam as an integrated institutional framework that linked religious authority, governance structures, and social organization. Existing research frequently treats religious institutions as explanatory variables for specific phenomena rather than as components of a larger institutional ecosystem. Yet, as demonstrated by foundational works on Ottoman history (Faroqhi, 1999; Musonif & Azis, 2026; Woodhead, 2011; Worringer, 2021), the durability of the Ottoman Empire over several centuries depended largely on its capacity to create institutional coherence across diverse social, political, and geographical contexts. Understanding this durability requires a more comprehensive analysis of how Islamic institutions operated collectively to sustain imperial governance and social stability.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the institutionalization of Islam in the Ottoman Empire through a qualitative library research approach. Rather than focusing on a single institution or historical episode, this study examines the interconnected roles of religious authority, governance, education, charitable foundations, legal structures, and mechanisms for managing social diversity. By synthesizing insights from contemporary Ottoman scholarship and foundational historical studies, the article seeks to develop a more integrated understanding of how Islam functioned as an institutional system within the empire. The novelty of this study lies in its effort to move beyond sectoral analyses and to conceptualize the relationship between religion, governance, and social order as mutually constitutive dimensions of Ottoman institutional life. In doing so, the study contributes not only to Ottoman historiography but also to broader debates concerning the role of religion in state formation, institutional development, and social governance in premodern Muslim societies.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative literature-based research design grounded in documentary analysis and thematic interpretation to examine the institutionalization of Islam in the Ottoman Empire. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for investigating complex historical and social phenomena that require interpretive understanding rather than measurement or hypothesis testing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the objective is not to reconstruct a chronological narrative of Ottoman history or establish causal relationships between historical variables, but rather to understand how contemporary scholarship and historical studies conceptualize the relationship between religious authority, governance, and social order within the Ottoman imperial system. Following Snyder (2019) conception of literature-based inquiry, scholarly literature is treated not merely as a source of information but as a body of knowledge through which theoretical patterns, conceptual relationships, and historical

interpretations can be critically synthesized. Accordingly, the study adopts an interpretive historical perspective that seeks to identify recurring institutional patterns across diverse academic works and to develop a comprehensive understanding of how Islam functioned as an organizing framework within Ottoman political and social life.

The data corpus consisted of twenty peer-reviewed scholarly publications published between 2020 and 2025 and eight foundational academic books widely recognized within Ottoman studies and Islamic history. The contemporary sources were selected from reputable academic publishers and journals, including Brill, Cambridge University Press, Springer, Taylor & Francis, SAGE, MDPI, and other peer-reviewed outlets indexed in major scholarly databases. These publications addressed themes directly related to the institutional dimensions of Islam in the Ottoman Empire, including religious authority, Sunni identity formation, political legitimacy, waqf institutions, legal administration, social governance, intellectual culture, and the management of religious diversity (Abdul Salam, 2025; Clements, 2025; Hisarlıoğlu & Yanık, 2025; Krstić, 2021). To provide historical depth and historiographical grounding, the study also incorporated foundational works by Faroqhi (1999, 2004), Itzkowitz (2008), Woodhead (2011), El-Rouayheb (2015), and Worringer (2021). The integration of contemporary and foundational scholarship was intended to balance current academic debates with broader historical interpretations, thereby reducing the risk of relying excessively on recent trends or isolated perspectives.

The selection of literature followed a purposive sampling strategy commonly employed in qualitative inquiry, where sources are chosen based on their analytical relevance rather than statistical representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three inclusion criteria guided the selection process. First, the source had to focus substantially on the Ottoman Empire as its primary historical context. Second, it had to address one or more dimensions relevant to the institutionalization of Islam, including religious authority, governance, legal systems, educational institutions, charitable foundations, social regulation, or communal relations. Third, the source had to be published through a recognized academic publisher, peer-reviewed journal, or authoritative scholarly reference work. Conversely, publications lacking direct relevance to the research problem, non-peer-reviewed materials, popular historical accounts, opinion essays, and duplicate discussions were excluded. This procedure resulted in a focused corpus of literature capable of illuminating the institutional mechanisms through which Islam interacted with governance structures and social organization. By drawing on diverse historiographical, sociological, political, and intellectual approaches (Aydın-Düzgit & Rumelili, 2022; Marglin & Ismail, 2024; Markiewicz, 2018; Musonif, et al., 2026), the study sought to capture the multidimensional character of Ottoman institutional life.

The analytical process was conducted through thematic analysis, a method designed to identify, organize, and interpret recurring patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was selected because the

study aims to identify institutional patterns across diverse historical and historiographical sources rather than produce a strictly chronological reconstruction of events. The analysis proceeded through four interrelated stages. The first stage involved familiarization with the literature through repeated reading and annotation of all selected sources. The second stage consisted of open coding, during which key concepts related to the institutional role of Islam were identified, including religious authority, Sunni orthodoxy, ulama, waqf, legitimacy, legal administration, governance, education, and social regulation. In the third stage, these codes were grouped through axial coding into broader conceptual categories that reflected recurring institutional relationships. Finally, the categories were synthesized into overarching themes that captured the central dimensions of institutionalized Islam in the Ottoman Empire. Four major themes emerged from the analysis: the construction of religious authority, the integration of Islamic norms into governance structures, the regulation of social order through religious institutions, and the interconnected institutional mechanisms that sustained imperial stability. The objective of this analytical process was not merely to summarize existing scholarship but to generate a conceptual synthesis capable of explaining how diverse Islamic institutions collectively contributed to Ottoman governance and social organization.

To ensure analytical rigor and trustworthiness, the study adopted the principles of credibility and dependability proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through source triangulation, whereby interpretations were compared across multiple categories of literature, including monographs, historiographical studies, review articles, and contemporary journal publications. Cross-referencing was employed to examine convergences and divergences among scholars concerning the institutional role of Islam, thereby reducing the influence of single-author interpretations. Furthermore, critical comparison was used to identify competing historiographical perspectives regarding the relationship between religion, state authority, and social order within the Ottoman context (Krstić, 2021; Peirce, 2004; Şahin, 2017). Dependability was strengthened by maintaining a transparent analytical procedure linking literature selection, coding, thematic development, and interpretation. Consistent with the interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry, the study does not seek to establish definitive historical causality; rather, it aims to provide a theoretically informed synthesis of how contemporary scholarship understands the institutionalization of Islam in the Ottoman Empire. Through this approach, the research contributes a coherent analytical framework that integrates religious authority, governance, and social order into a unified interpretation of Ottoman institutional history.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Institutional Construction of Religious Authority

The thematic analysis reveals that the institutionalization of Islam in the Ottoman Empire was fundamentally rooted in the construction of religious authority as an organized and administratively embedded system. Rather than

functioning solely as a source of theological guidance, religious authority operated as a mechanism linking political legitimacy, legal administration, and social regulation. However, the literature presents differing interpretations regarding the origins of this authority. While state-centered perspectives emphasize the role of imperial institutions in shaping religious structures and defining orthodoxy, other scholars highlight the significance of scholarly networks and intellectual traditions that extended beyond direct political control. This debate suggests that religious authority in the Ottoman Empire cannot be understood exclusively as either a state project or an autonomous scholarly enterprise.

Recent scholarship has challenged earlier assumptions that Ottoman Sunni Islam represented a stable and self-evident religious tradition. Krstić (2021) argues that Sunni orthodoxy was historically produced through institutional processes involving administrative reforms, educational systems, and legal structures. From this perspective, religious authority emerged not simply from theological continuity but from interactions between state institutions and religious actors. Fuad (2024) similarly emphasizes that the formation of Ottoman religious authority was shaped through ongoing negotiations among rulers, scholars, and local communities. These studies indicate that religious authority was not a static inheritance but a dynamic institutional construction that evolved alongside the development of the empire itself.

A central component of this process was the incorporation of the ulama into imperial administration. The literature consistently identifies the ulama as the primary mediators between Islamic norms and political governance. Yet scholars differ in their interpretations of this relationship. Some emphasize the integration of religious scholars into bureaucratic and judicial structures, arguing that such incorporation strengthened state authority and facilitated the standardization of religious interpretation. Others stress the intellectual autonomy of scholarly communities and the importance of transregional networks of knowledge that operated beyond direct political influence (El-Rouayheb, 2015; Fahrezi, et al., 2026; Musonif & Misbah, 2026). Rather than supporting one interpretation over the other, the evidence suggests that Ottoman religious authority derived from the interaction of both institutional integration and scholarly legitimacy. Religious institutions gained authority through state recognition, while state institutions relied on scholarly credibility to sustain their legitimacy.

Educational institutions further reinforced this process of institutionalization. Madrasas functioned not only as centers of religious learning but also as mechanisms for reproducing legal expertise, administrative competence, and doctrinal consistency across the empire. According to Faroqhi (1999, 2004), the expansion of Ottoman territories created a growing need for legal and administrative coherence, which could not be achieved solely through localized religious authority. Educational networks enabled the circulation of shared religious knowledge and contributed to the formation of a relatively standardized framework of Islamic governance. Similarly, El-Rouayheb (2015) and Çelik & Yapıcı (2025) demonstrate that intellectual and scientific developments in the

Ottoman world were closely connected to institutional environments shaped by religious education and scholarly exchange.

The consolidation of religious authority became more visible through the development of formal institutions such as the office of the Shaykh al-Islam. This institution served as a crucial link between religious expertise and political administration by providing legal opinions, supervising religious affairs, and contributing to the legitimization of state policies. The emergence of such institutions reflects a broader transformation in which religious authority became increasingly organized within administrative structures rather than remaining dispersed among independent scholars. As a result, Islamic authority acquired a more stable and recognizable institutional form capable of supporting governance across a vast and diverse imperial territory.

The literature also demonstrates that religious authority played a significant role in the production of political legitimacy. Hasbi & Angkasa (2025) show that Ottoman rulers actively constructed legitimacy through the integration of Islamic authority with broader imperial traditions, while Hisarlioğlu & Yanık (2025) illustrate how religiously inspired symbols reinforced political status and authority. These findings suggest that legitimacy was not generated automatically by religious identity but was continuously reproduced through institutional arrangements connecting rulers, scholars, and communities. Political authority therefore depended not only on military power or administrative capacity but also on the credibility of religious institutions embedded within the imperial system.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the construction of religious authority in the Ottoman Empire cannot be explained solely through state-centered or scholar-centered approaches. Instead, religious authority emerged through the interaction of political institutions, scholarly networks, educational infrastructures, and legal mechanisms. The analysis further suggests that religious authority functioned as an institutional interface connecting governance and social order. Through this interface, Islamic norms were translated into administrative practices, legal regulations, and forms of social organization. Consequently, religious authority became more than a source of doctrinal guidance; it served as a foundational institution that enabled the broader institutionalization of Islam within the Ottoman Empire.

Institutionalizing Islamic Governance

The analysis indicates that the institutionalization of Islam in the Ottoman Empire extended beyond the construction of religious authority and became deeply embedded within the structures of governance. While previous scholarship often interprets Islam primarily as a source of political legitimacy, the literature examined in this study suggests a more complex relationship. Islamic principles, legal institutions, and religious actors were not merely employed to justify political power after it had been established; rather, they formed part of the administrative framework through which governance was organized and exercised. Consequently, governance in the Ottoman Empire should be understood not simply as a political

system legitimized by Islam but as a political order partially structured through Islamic institutions and norms.

A major debate within Ottoman historiography concerns the extent to which political authority and religious authority were integrated. Earlier interpretations frequently portrayed the Ottoman state as a highly centralized political system that utilized Islam primarily as an ideological instrument. Such perspectives emphasized the role of the sultan as the ultimate political authority while treating religious institutions as subordinate mechanisms supporting imperial rule. However, more recent scholarship challenges this interpretation by demonstrating that governance and religious authority were interconnected through institutional arrangements that enabled continuous interaction between political and religious actors (Krstić, 2021; Musonif, et al., 2026; Woodhead, 2011). Rather than operating as separate spheres, political administration and Islamic institutions developed within a mutually reinforcing framework that contributed to the stability and durability of the empire.

The position of the Ottoman sultan illustrates this institutional integration. The literature consistently shows that Ottoman rulers derived authority not only from dynastic succession and military success but also from their association with Islamic leadership. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly argues that this legitimacy cannot be reduced to symbolic religious claims alone. Hasbi & Angkasa (2025) demonstrate that Sultan Mehmed II constructed a hybrid model of authority that combined Islamic legitimacy, imperial traditions, and universal claims to sovereignty. This finding suggests that political authority in the Ottoman context was not based on a single source of legitimacy but on the ability to integrate multiple forms of authority into a coherent governing framework. Islam therefore functioned as one of the central institutional resources through which political authority was organized and communicated.

The integration of Islamic legitimacy into governance became even more significant as the empire expanded and administered increasingly diverse populations. Under such conditions, political authority required institutional mechanisms capable of maintaining cohesion across vast territories and multiple social groups. According to Faroghi (2004), Ottoman governance relied upon a combination of administrative flexibility and institutional continuity that enabled the empire to manage complex social realities. Islamic legal institutions played an important role in this process by providing normative frameworks that could be applied across different regions while simultaneously allowing local adaptation. The institutionalization of governance was therefore not achieved solely through bureaucratic centralization but also through the incorporation of Islamic legal and administrative principles into everyday governance.

The judicial system provides one of the clearest examples of this relationship. The literature demonstrates that courts and legal officials served as critical intermediaries between imperial authority and local society. Rather than functioning solely as mechanisms for dispute resolution, judicial institutions contributed to the implementation of administrative policies, regulation of

economic activities, and maintenance of social order. Through the work of judges and legal scholars, Islamic law became integrated into governance practices, creating a framework through which political authority could operate within socially recognized normative boundaries. This finding supports the argument that Islamic institutions were not external to governance but constituted an essential component of the governing process itself.

Recent scholarship has also emphasized the importance of religious symbolism in reinforcing political authority. Hisarlıoğlu & Yanık (2025) argue that religiously inspired symbols played a significant role in shaping the status and international position of the Ottoman Empire. However, the findings of this study suggest that such symbols were effective precisely because they were embedded within broader institutional structures. Religious legitimacy was not generated through symbolism alone but through the existence of educational institutions, legal systems, scholarly networks, and administrative mechanisms that continuously reproduced and validated political authority. In other words, symbols derived their power from the institutions that sustained them. This interpretation moves beyond symbolic explanations of legitimacy by emphasizing the institutional foundations that made religious claims politically effective.

The literature further reveals that governance in the Ottoman Empire was characterized by a dynamic relationship between central authority and religious institutions. Rather than exercising absolute control over all aspects of religious life, the state relied on cooperation with scholars, judges, and educational institutions to implement governance across different regions. This arrangement created a form of shared institutional responsibility in which political authority depended upon religious credibility, while religious institutions benefited from administrative support and organizational resources. Such a relationship challenges binary distinctions between secular governance and religious authority that often shape modern analyses of state formation. Instead, the Ottoman case demonstrates that governance can emerge through institutional configurations in which political and religious functions remain interconnected without becoming indistinguishable.

This interconnectedness is particularly evident when viewed through the broader historiographical debates surrounding Ottoman governance. Markiewicz (2018) criticizes approaches that separate Ottoman political development from wider Islamicate intellectual traditions, arguing that such perspectives underestimate the role of religious institutions in shaping governance. Similarly, Aydın-Düzgit & Rumelili (2022) show that contemporary narratives often oversimplify the historical relationship between Ottoman political structures and broader intellectual traditions. These critiques reinforce the argument that governance in the Ottoman Empire cannot be adequately understood through political-administrative frameworks alone. A comprehensive explanation requires attention to the institutional role of Islam in shaping political authority, legal administration, and social coordination.

The findings therefore suggest that Islamic governance in the Ottoman Empire operated through what may be termed an administrative-religious nexus, a

system in which political authority, legal institutions, and religious legitimacy functioned as mutually reinforcing elements of governance. Unlike interpretations that view Islam merely as a legitimizing ideology, this analysis demonstrates that Islamic institutions actively contributed to the organization and implementation of governance. The authority of rulers was strengthened by religious institutions, but those institutions simultaneously shaped how governance was exercised, justified, and understood throughout the empire.

Taken together, the literature indicates that the institutionalization of governance in the Ottoman Empire was inseparable from the institutionalization of Islam itself. Governance was not simply legitimized by religion; it was partially structured through religious institutions that linked political authority with legal administration and social regulation. This finding extends existing scholarship by highlighting the institutional mechanisms through which Islam became embedded in governance rather than treating religion solely as a symbolic or ideological resource. More importantly, it demonstrates that the relationship between religious authority and governance formed a foundational component of Ottoman institutional life. However, the effectiveness of this administrative-religious nexus depended not only on political and legal structures but also on the capacity of Islamic institutions to organize everyday social life. This broader societal dimension is examined in the following section on the role of Islamic institutions in the production of social order.

Islamic Institutions and the Production of Social Order

The thematic analysis further reveals that the institutionalization of Islam in the Ottoman Empire was not confined to the domains of religious authority and governance but extended deeply into the organization of everyday social life. A recurring pattern across the literature is that social order was maintained not solely through political control or administrative coercion but through a network of Islamic institutions that regulated social relations, facilitated welfare provision, reproduced religious values, and mediated interactions among diverse communities. Consequently, social stability in the Ottoman Empire cannot be understood exclusively as a product of state governance. Rather, it emerged from the interaction between state institutions and religiously grounded social infrastructures that connected local communities to broader imperial structures.

A significant contribution of recent scholarship is its challenge to state-centric interpretations of Ottoman social organization. Earlier studies often explained social cohesion primarily through administrative efficiency, military power, or centralized governance. While these factors undoubtedly contributed to imperial stability, contemporary research increasingly highlights the importance of intermediary institutions operating between the state and society. These institutions included waqf foundations, educational networks, religious organizations, judicial structures, and communal arrangements that collectively facilitated the regulation of social life (Maharani & Musonif, 2026; Woodhead, 2011; Worringer, 2021). The literature therefore suggests that the Ottoman social order was sustained not

merely through top-down governance but through a distributed institutional framework in which religious institutions played a central role.

Among these institutions, the waqf system occupies a particularly significant position. The literature consistently identifies waqf as one of the most influential mechanisms through which Islamic principles were translated into social practice. Traditionally understood as charitable endowments, waqf institutions performed functions that extended far beyond philanthropy. Abdul Salam (2025) demonstrates that waqf served as a critical institutional foundation for the preservation and transmission of Ottoman-Islamic intellectual culture. Through the financing of mosques, schools, libraries, hospitals, and social services, waqf institutions contributed to the development of educational infrastructures and public welfare systems across the empire. Their significance lay not only in the resources they generated but also in their capacity to institutionalize social responsibility and communal solidarity within everyday life.

The broader implications of the waqf system become evident when examined in relation to governance and social regulation. Unlike purely state-funded institutions, waqf foundations operated through a semi-autonomous structure that linked religious obligations with public services. This arrangement enabled the provision of social welfare without requiring direct state intervention in every aspect of community life. As a result, waqf institutions functioned as intermediaries connecting religious values, local initiatives, and imperial governance. The findings suggest that social order was strengthened because essential services and social support mechanisms were embedded within institutional structures perceived as both religiously legitimate and socially beneficial. In this sense, waqf institutions helped transform Islamic ethics into practical mechanisms of social organization.

Educational institutions constituted another crucial component of Ottoman social order. Although their role in producing religious authority has already been discussed, the literature indicates that their social functions extended beyond the training of scholars and administrators. Madrasas contributed to the formation of shared cultural norms, collective identities, and legal understandings that facilitated social integration across diverse regions of the empire. According to El-Rouayheb (2015), educational networks enabled the circulation of knowledge and intellectual traditions that connected different communities within a common religious and cultural framework. Similarly, Çelik & Yapıcı (2025) demonstrate that educational institutions supported scientific and intellectual development while simultaneously reinforcing broader social and religious values. These findings indicate that education functioned as a mechanism of social reproduction through which institutionalized Islam contributed to social continuity and cohesion.

The relationship between Islam and social order is also evident in the management of diversity within the empire. The Ottoman Empire governed populations characterized by significant ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, creating challenges that required institutional solutions beyond simple political domination. One of the most widely discussed mechanisms in this regard is the

millet system. Earlier interpretations often celebrated the millet system as evidence of Ottoman tolerance, while others criticized it as a hierarchical structure that reinforced communal divisions. Recent scholarship, however, offers a more nuanced interpretation. Clements (2025) argues that the millet system should be understood primarily as an institutional framework for managing difference rather than as a straightforward expression of tolerance or exclusion. Through this system, religious communities were incorporated into imperial administration while retaining varying degrees of internal autonomy.

This interpretation has important implications for understanding the role of Islam in the production of social order. Rather than imposing uniformity, Islamic institutions provided mechanisms through which diversity could be regulated and accommodated within a broader imperial framework. Social stability emerged not from the elimination of differences but from the institutionalization of procedures governing interactions among different groups. The millet system therefore illustrates how Islamic governance and social organization operated through negotiated forms of inclusion rather than through absolute centralization. Such findings challenge simplistic narratives that portray Ottoman society either as an ideal model of coexistence or as a rigid hierarchy of religious communities.

Recent historiographical developments further support this interpretation. Schlaepfer & Bourmaud (2020) demonstrate that the legacies of Ottoman institutional arrangements continue to influence social and political identities in post-Ottoman societies. Likewise, studies of Ottoman heritage and collective memory reveal that many contemporary perceptions of social coexistence, communal identity, and cultural belonging remain connected to institutional patterns established during the Ottoman period (Musonif, 2026; Terzić & Dogramadjieva, 2022). Although these studies focus on post-imperial contexts, they reinforce the argument that Ottoman social institutions possessed a durability that extended beyond the lifespan of the empire itself. Such persistence suggests that the effectiveness of these institutions was rooted not only in political authority but also in their capacity to organize social relations in ways perceived as legitimate and meaningful by diverse communities.

The findings also indicate that social order in the Ottoman Empire was characterized by a balance between central authority and local institutional autonomy. While imperial governance established overarching legal and administrative frameworks, many aspects of everyday social life were mediated through religiously grounded institutions operating at the local level. Waqf foundations, educational institutions, judicial bodies, and communal organizations collectively contributed to the regulation of economic activities, family relations, charitable practices, and public morality. This institutional diversity reduced the burden on centralized administration while simultaneously strengthening social cohesion. Rather than representing fragmented or isolated structures, these institutions functioned as interconnected components of a broader social system shaped by Islamic norms and values.

Taken together, the literature suggests that social order in the Ottoman Empire was produced through a network of decentralized yet interconnected Islamic institutions. Waqf foundations, educational systems, judicial structures, and communal arrangements collectively translated religious principles into everyday social practices, creating mechanisms through which stability, welfare, and social cohesion could be maintained across a vast and diverse empire. The analysis therefore extends beyond interpretations that attribute Ottoman stability primarily to political authority or administrative efficiency. Instead, it demonstrates that Islamic institutions functioned as foundational mechanisms of social organization that linked local communities to broader structures of governance and religious authority.

More importantly, the findings reveal that religious authority, governance, and social order cannot be understood as separate domains of Ottoman institutional life. Religious authority provided legitimacy and normative guidance, governance translated those norms into administrative structures, and social institutions embedded them within everyday practices. This interconnected relationship points toward a broader institutional configuration that integrated multiple dimensions of imperial life into a relatively coherent system. The final section develops this argument by examining how these dimensions collectively formed an integrated model of institutionalized Islam in the Ottoman Empire.

Institutionalized Islam as an Integrated Imperial System

The preceding analysis demonstrates that religious authority, governance, and social order constituted three interconnected dimensions of Ottoman institutional life. While existing scholarship has generated substantial insights into each of these domains, studies often examine them separately, focusing on religious institutions, political structures, or social arrangements as distinct analytical categories. The thematic synthesis conducted in this study, however, suggests that such compartmentalized approaches are insufficient for explaining how Islam functioned within the Ottoman Empire. The findings indicate that the durability and effectiveness of Ottoman institutions were rooted not in the strength of any single institution but in the integration of multiple institutional domains into a coherent system through which Islamic norms, political authority, and social organization were mutually reinforced.

A recurring pattern across the literature is that religious authority, governance, and social order operated through continuous interaction rather than through isolated institutional functions. The construction of religious authority depended on educational systems, judicial institutions, and scholarly networks that provided legitimacy and normative guidance for governance. Governance, in turn, relied on religious institutions to establish legal coherence, strengthen political legitimacy, and facilitate administrative coordination across diverse territories. At the same time, social order was maintained through waqf foundations, educational institutions, communal arrangements, and welfare structures that translated religious and political norms into everyday social practices. Consequently, none of

these domains can be adequately understood in isolation because each derived effectiveness from its relationship with the others.

This finding challenges two dominant tendencies within the existing literature. The first is the state-centered interpretation that explains Ottoman stability primarily through administrative centralization and political authority. While such perspectives correctly emphasize the importance of imperial institutions, they often underestimate the role of religious and social infrastructures in sustaining governance. The second tendency is the religious-centered interpretation that treats Islamic institutions primarily as autonomous sources of authority operating independently of political structures. Although these approaches highlight the significance of religious actors and intellectual traditions, they may overlook the extent to which religious institutions were embedded within broader systems of governance and social regulation. The evidence reviewed in this study suggests that both perspectives capture only part of a more complex institutional reality.

Rather than viewing religion, politics, and society as separate spheres, the Ottoman case illustrates a form of institutional integration in which each domain reinforced the functioning of the others. Religious authority legitimized governance and provided normative frameworks for legal administration. Governance supplied organizational capacity, resources, and administrative structures that enabled religious institutions to operate effectively across the empire. Social institutions, meanwhile, embedded religious and political norms within everyday practices, ensuring their reproduction beyond formal structures of authority. The result was not a fusion in which all institutions became identical but a system characterized by functional interdependence. Institutional effectiveness emerged from coordination among different actors and organizations rather than from the dominance of a single institution.

The role of the ulama provides a useful example of this interdependence. As discussed earlier, religious scholars occupied positions that connected educational institutions, legal administration, and political authority. Their influence was derived not solely from theological expertise but also from their institutional location within broader networks of governance. Similarly, the office of the Shaykh al-Islam functioned as a bridge between religious interpretation and political decision-making, illustrating how institutional boundaries remained interconnected rather than rigidly separated. The same pattern is evident in the waqf system, which linked religious obligations, educational development, social welfare, and local governance. These institutions performed distinct functions, yet their effectiveness depended on their capacity to operate within a larger institutional framework shaped by Islamic norms and imperial administration.

The millet system further illustrates the integrated nature of Ottoman institutional arrangements. Although frequently discussed as a mechanism for managing religious diversity, the system also demonstrates how governance, religious authority, and social organization intersected in practice. By incorporating different communities into imperial administration while allowing varying degrees

of communal autonomy, the millet system created institutional channels through which diversity could be governed without requiring complete uniformity. This arrangement reinforced social stability while simultaneously supporting political authority and religious legitimacy. The significance of the system therefore lies not only in its management of difference but also in its contribution to the broader institutional architecture of the empire.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings suggest that Islam in the Ottoman Empire functioned as what may be termed an integrated institutional ecosystem. This concept refers to a system in which religious authority, governance structures, and social institutions operate through reciprocal relationships that collectively sustain political legitimacy, administrative coherence, and social stability. Unlike interpretations that reduce Islam to a belief system or a source of symbolic legitimacy, the ecosystem perspective emphasizes the institutional mechanisms through which religious norms became embedded within multiple dimensions of imperial life. The value of this concept lies in its ability to explain how different institutions remained functionally distinct while simultaneously contributing to a shared framework of governance and social organization.

The notion of an integrated institutional ecosystem also helps explain the remarkable longevity of the Ottoman Empire. Historical scholarship has frequently attributed Ottoman durability to military strength, administrative flexibility, or geopolitical advantages. While these factors undoubtedly played important roles, the present analysis suggests that institutional integration constituted an equally significant source of resilience. The ability of religious authority, governance structures, and social institutions to reinforce one another created a system capable of adapting to changing political and social conditions without losing its fundamental coherence. Institutional continuity was therefore sustained not merely through centralized control but through the interaction of multiple institutional layers operating across different sectors of society.

This interpretation also contributes to broader debates concerning the relationship between religion and governance in premodern Muslim societies. Modern analytical frameworks often assume a clear distinction between religious and political institutions, leading scholars to evaluate historical societies according to categories derived from contemporary state systems. The Ottoman case demonstrates the limitations of such assumptions. Rather than existing as separate spheres, religion and governance were interconnected through institutional arrangements that allowed religious norms to shape administration, law, education, and social organization. Recognizing this interconnectedness provides a more historically grounded understanding of how Muslim societies developed mechanisms of governance and social regulation before the emergence of modern nation-states.

The findings of this study therefore extend existing scholarship by moving beyond fragmented analyses of individual institutions and offering a synthesized interpretation of how Islam operated within the Ottoman Empire. Previous studies have generated valuable insights into specific institutions such as the ulama, waqf

foundations, educational systems, legal administration, and the millet structure. However, these institutions are often examined independently, making it difficult to understand how they collectively contributed to imperial stability. The present analysis demonstrates that their significance lies not only in their individual functions but also in their integration within a broader institutional framework. This integrated perspective represents the primary contribution of the study and addresses the conceptual gap identified in the introduction.

Ultimately, the institutionalization of Islam in the Ottoman Empire was not a singular process confined to religious doctrine or political legitimacy. It was a multidimensional process through which religious authority, governance, and social order became interconnected components of a unified institutional system. Through this system, Islamic norms were translated into administrative practices, legal structures, educational networks, welfare institutions, and mechanisms for managing diversity. The Ottoman experience therefore illustrates how religion can function not merely as a source of belief or legitimacy but as a comprehensive institutional framework capable of shaping governance and social organization across a complex imperial society.

CONCLUSION

This study argues that the institutionalization of Islam in the Ottoman Empire is best understood not as a process of religious legitimation alone but as the formation of an integrated institutional framework that connected religious authority, governance, and social organization within a mutually reinforcing system. By synthesizing contemporary Ottoman scholarship and foundational historical studies, the research demonstrates that Islam functioned as a structuring mechanism through which political authority was legitimized, administrative practices were organized, and social relations were regulated across a diverse imperial landscape. The principal theoretical contribution of this study lies in its departure from fragmented approaches that examine religious institutions, governance structures, or social mechanisms as separate analytical domains. Instead, the study proposes an integrated institutional perspective that conceptualizes Ottoman Islam as a dynamic system of interdependent institutions operating across multiple levels of imperial life. This perspective contributes to broader debates in Islamic studies, historical sociology, and governance studies by illustrating how religion can operate as an institutional architecture that shapes political and social order rather than merely serving as a symbolic or ideological resource. In doing so, the study provides a more comprehensive explanation of how the Ottoman Empire maintained administrative coherence and social stability over an extended historical period while governing diverse populations across vast territories.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. As a qualitative library-based study, the analysis relies primarily on secondary scholarly literature and historiographical interpretations rather than direct engagement with archival materials, legal documents, imperial decrees, waqf

records, or other primary historical sources. Consequently, the findings should be understood as a conceptual synthesis of existing scholarship rather than a reconstruction of historical realities based on original documentary evidence. Furthermore, the study focuses on identifying overarching institutional patterns across the Ottoman Empire and therefore does not fully capture regional variations, temporal transformations, or local experiences that may have shaped the operation of Islamic institutions in different contexts. Future research would benefit from integrating archival and manuscript-based sources to examine how institutionalized Islam functioned in specific provinces, periods, or social settings. Comparative studies exploring similarities and differences between Ottoman institutional arrangements and those of other Islamic polities, such as the Safavid or Mughal Empires, could further refine our understanding of religion as an institutional force in premodern Muslim societies. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches combining historical analysis, sociology of institutions, and political theory may provide new insights into the long-term influence of Ottoman institutional legacies on contemporary debates concerning religion, governance, and social order in Muslim-majority societies. Through such avenues, future scholarship can continue to expand and critically reassess the institutional dimensions of Islam beyond the Ottoman case while building upon the conceptual framework developed in this study.

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