

Eliminating Radicalism in the Arab and Islamic World: Education before Prison and Court

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Brief Analysis

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Despite the numerous incubators of radicalism, such as the internet, social media networks, mosques and other religious or social centers, it may be said that a major factor at the root of radicalism is the educational curricula in the Arab and Islamic world. Words like “jihad,” “killing atheists,” “punishment of God,” “fires of Hell,” “Crusades,” and “dhimmis” are still taught and used in school, especially in Islamic educational material.

Radicalism in Arab and Islamic countries has many causes: tyranny, monopolization of freedoms, civil war, poverty and illiteracy, the 1979 occupation of Afghanistan and the 2003 occupation of Iraq, and the spread of Wahhabism funded by Saudi oil money. However, the most important among them all is education. Books on the Arabic language, religious education, civics, general culture, and religious texts do not only prevent students from having a moderate, open-minded point of view that accepts the other, but also encourage in them an extremist mentality that rejects the other, as shall be discussed further in the article.

School books on religious education, language, and culture have remained open to curricula and ideologies hostile towards open-mindedness, philosophy, and social sciences. Nor have schools in the Arab and Islamic world divorced themselves from the academic doctrine of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), which guided the “systematic school” in Baghdad during the second half of the eleventh century and forbade the teaching of philosophy and social sciences.

This sort of radical activity is not limited to schools in any one specific country, but rather is present in a majority of the countries in the Arab and Islamic world. One can identify its characteristics through ancient educational methods, which do not help students to understand the wider world and the religious, ethnic, and cultural differences within it, and on the other through ideological activity that Islamist parties and Salafi movements inside educational institutions practice. For example, in spite of the fact that Christians constitute 10 percent of Egypt’s population, Islam is the official state religion.

Muslim students in public schools learn about Christianity through the lens of the Quran and Prophetic Hadith. Mohammed Faour, a Lebanese scholar whose studies focus on promoting citizenship and diversity in the Arab world

through educational reform in schools and universities, points out a verse from the Quran which already exists in in the primary school, grade eight. The verse says, “And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him, and in the Hereafter, he will be one of the losers”. Faour also noted that nine hours per week were designated for religious studies in Saudi schools, whereas religious studies do not exceed more than ninety minutes per week in Tunisia.

It is also worth mentioning that in 2014, an Egyptian reform project to replace religious education with another course under the title “Values and Ethics” also encountered intense opposition, not only from Islamist and Salafist circles, but from academic and university circles as well. However, the course material was eventually changed in 2017, making Egypt the second Arab nation, after Jordan, to institute changes in religious education. The question yet remains over the essence of these changes, as well as the method of applying them and making them easier to digest in schools. Can reform in religious education bring changes to multicultural awareness and religious coexistence? Is it enough to omit some religious texts or studies on Saladin or Uqba ibn Nafi from curricula?

In Tunisia, which pursued a modern and open system of education since its independence. However, religious schools started to proliferate after 2011, working to spread radicalism and intolerance; in certain districts where these schools have been established, the author has observed higher levels of religiosity. Nonetheless, Tunisia is still one of the most secular – or tolerant – Arab societies and political systems, with millions more voting against the Islamist party rather than for.

Religious institutions disseminating radicalism were not only limited to the Arab region; they were also established in foreign countries to serve expatriates. A prominent example of one was the Dawa mosque in Paris, attended by the Charlie Hebdo attackers. In Canada, A parliament report issued in 2015, indicates that a number of mosques and religious schools in Canada are directing young people to radicalism..

The Jordanian Ministry of Education has been the target of wide-ranging attacks by Islamists because of the Ministry’s reforms to religious education and Islamic culture books, made for the purpose of “developing the critical-thinking and analytic skills in students to separate them as far as possible from excessive indoctrination.” Before the reforms, which took effect at the beginning of the 2016 school year, Islamic culture books in Jordanian high school classrooms contained several texts on murder, fornication, slavery, and jihad.

Before the 2016 reforms, the Islamic education books at the high school level contained many texts instigating radicalism. One author of these texts, Jordanian Dalal Salama, wrote in an article: “The Sharia punishment for adultery is one hundred lashes in public without mercy and without reducing the force of each strike.” Another text on slavery from a ninth-grade Islamic culture book states, “Islam never abolished slavery. It only recommended that one treats their slave well and encouraged the owner to free their slave through various means.”

Attempts have been made to make changes to religious educational material in regions and countries of the Arab and Islamic world, such as in Tunisia, Jordan, the UAE, and Iraqi Kurdistan. However, most of those attempts have faced opposition from Islamist parties and their supporters. Some of those changes have been formal, or copied the Egyptian model of teaching other religions according to Islam. However, in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2012, all of the Christians and other religious minorities rejected the changes made to religious curricula. Christians rejected these reforms because of misinformation on the birth of Jesus and on the very basis that the reforms were made from an Islamic viewpoint.

In an interview with the author, Abu Bakr Ali, a presiding member of the supervisory committee, explained that the goal of the religious education reform project in Iraqi Kurdistan was to replace religious education with a religious studies curriculum that recognizes and studies other religions to encourage a culture of tolerance in students before they enter college.

Curriculum reform in the Arab and Islamic world is not limited to removing those texts that encourage violence and radicalism. Rather, it involves emphasizing the importance of artistic, cultural, and human rights curricula to highlight the principles of coexistence and acceptance of others. Additionally, the reforms must include women's rights education, and provide women the opportunity for true participation in decision-making and planning of educational systems.

The Arab Spring largely failed to reduce the scope of sectarian and religious radicalism in Arab societies. However, will this failure lead to a reevaluation about the challenges still facing Arab societies after 2011? Will the political elite examine the outdated educational system that did not promote citizenship, justice, and political participation? Educational reform must be the first step. ❖

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