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Ideology and Education in Baghdadi's Caliphate

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Sep 7, 2016

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Brief Analysis

People around world are prone to oversimplify the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Some say, for example, that they are no more than a transitory or incidental phenomenon. Others posit that they are merely a gang of mercenaries who can be eliminated through military effort alone. Yet, regardless of their legitimacy, the founders and leaders of ISIS have a fully-fledged state-building project: It has land, people, a doctrine, a flag, and an anthem. It consists of economic, judiciary, and educational institutions, not to mention a fighting force that should not be underestimated. And they have established a caliphate in record time across a geographic area that is witnessing fierce clashes between regional, local, and international ethnic, religious, and sectarian forces.

For this – and due to the oppression that a large portion of Muslims around the world are experiencing – ISIS has enjoyed support, and even admiration, from Muslims that consider it a revival of the “just” Islamic state. The Islamic State’s will, determination, and powerful message transformed the state into a meaningful cause for a number of young Muslim men, despite reservations about its shockingly violent methods. In fact, ISIS also offers many attractive non-violent forms of waging jihad for the caliphate and against the enemy, such as contributing to its media program, providing healthcare services, and most importantly, educating the new generation of ISIS’ society.

According to Surah At-Tawbah, “Jihad is not limited to confronting aggression, but it also calls for the establishment of the rule of God and the invasion of infidels and diverting people from worshipping others to worshipping the one God” (Alseif verse). ISIS believes that Suraht At-Tawbah abrogates all the previous Surahs that preceded it (History book, preparatory level, level 1, pp. 48). So what is most different between education in the Islamic State versus other systems of Islamic education? It is the extent to which the curriculum is loaded with concepts of takfiri jihad, which serves to justify the actions of the Islamic State for future generations under the rule of ISIS.

Analysis of a school curriculum can be done in two ways: “What is said?” wherein the unit of analysis is the word or the idea, and “How is it said?” which is revealed through the image, the activity and the representation. For instance, the idea may be the call to jihad, but it may be presented in the context of a math problem, or in an image of a mujahid or a battle, or through a poem. Thus, even the most legitimate forms of learning can be infused with highly

politicized meaning. But who organizes and prioritizes these subtle messages? Who decides what to imprint upon the youth?

The Education Bureau was one of the first institutional offices established by the Islamic State. It designed an education curriculum consisting of primary, middle, and preparatory levels in addition to a university program. Our discussion will be limited to the first grade curriculum. This article will analyze what is said and how it is said, with special emphasis on the central role given to teachers, who embody the role of commentator, interpreter, and role model.

One of the first goals of ISIS' educational system is keeping it Islamic. According to this vision the key purpose of the education system is to "push Muslims to pursue Jihad under the banner of the Islamic Caliphate" (General Introductions to the Islamic Curricula). Accordingly, the state aims to prepare a generation of mujahideen who are physically, emotionally, ideologically, and politically capable. All the texts were developed by educational specialists for the first semester. They include a general introduction outlining the Islamic State's approach to education "based on the method of the Quran and the Prophet's guidance." Their education policy "proceeds from the vision of the Quran and the Prophet, which is neither Eastern nor Western, socialist nor capitalist, nor related to the agents of deviant parties and methods."

The first grade consists of nine courses: the Glorious Quran, Muslim doctrine, Hadith, the life of the Prophet (PBUH), Arabic language, calligraphy, mathematics, science, and physical education. Every course has educational aims that are in line with the nature of the material, in addition to procedural behavioral goals of which the outcomes can be noted and measured. These courses are divided into three sections. The first includes reading, mathematics, science, Arabic calligraphy, and physical education, which are infused with religious concepts, values, and proficiency (doctrine and Sunnah) by the teachers' own volition. For example, during the physical exercise, students are asked to chant "arise all and pay allegiance to Al Baghdadi Al-Hashmi" (Physical Setup Guide, Lesson Seven). Teachers also may display some pictures which have some connotations of jihad such as swords, a dark horse jumping, bulletproof vests, or photos of mujahideen carrying the ISIS flag. When it comes to Arabic literature, students study a poem by Islamic scholar Sayed Qutb, titled "Back to the Countryside." Students also study a poem written by Marwan Hadid, known as the "Levant Mujahid," entitled "The Call of Conscience." In the reading curricula, the students discuss Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's messages that deal with the Muslims' jihad in Iraq (Arabic Literature pp. 25-36).

The second section of the curriculum is an independent introduction to the life of the Prophet, Muslim doctrine, and hadith. Similar to the first section, the actual instruction is prepared by the teachers themselves. The third section is the 'compromise approach,' which focuses on the use of technology and computers, preparing skilled cadres to employ technology in times of both peace and war. Students use a program called "Scratch" to solve a range of challenges such as how to use a Kalashnikov rifle, bring down a helicopter, and hunt infidels (School Curriculum for All Intermediate Levels).

In the course on Muslim doctrine, the authors stress the need to educate the next generation: "the Ummah has entered an ideological struggle, and enemies aim to obliterate our Islamic identity and the heart of our monotheistic doctrine." The teachings prevalent in retaining and defending these values – taking pride in and defending the faith – include: declaring that "My lord is God", "God created me to worship Him", and "my religion is Islam"; learning that Islam means surrendering to God in monotheism and following God with obedience; disavowal of polytheism and polytheists; being loyal to Muslims and opposing infidels; and prayer, fasting, hajj, and zakat.

The course on hadith includes reading the Quran, keeping the Sunnah, prayers for the Prophet, stopping injustice, good manners, love of God, humility, respect for the elderly, honesty, the rights of neighbors, ties of kinship, honoring parents, praise as the gateway to peace, etiquette for eating and drinking, and the appropriate response to

sneezes.

The reading course uses texts similarly rich in militaristic symbolism framing normative concepts. For instance, the information one must memorize includes: information on common weapons, the pillars of Islam, Quranic verses, the differences between men and women, and the inevitable defeat of the infidels. The reading course also covers the duty of jihad, the qualities of the Muslim, cleanliness, obedience to God and the Prophet, and the value of martyrdom.

The science course includes information on the body, health, nutrition, organic and inorganic objects, and values such as the importance of the mosque, the value of the family, and giving thanks to God for the existence of everything. It also includes several life skills for the child at home and at school.

In the course on mathematics, the authors followed the traditional methods for teaching content, but they use loaded images and drawings as a means of instilling specific concepts and values. For example, the six-year-old students are taught to count tanks, hand grenades, automatic rifles, swords, daggers, handguns and their bullets, warplanes, fighter helicopters, rockets, military vehicles, and ISIS flags. Moreover, the desired concepts are even instilled in simple mathematical exercises such as addition and subtraction. One math question is framed as such: If the first mujahid seized 23 weapons while the second seized 17 weapons, how many weapons do both mujahid collectively have?

The ISIS education system is a formal system that is purposefully developed to prepare children and youth psychologically, ideologically, emotionally, and politically for the defense of the Caliphate through jihad against infidels. This educational process does not depart thematically from the Islamic State's online media. We must be aware that there is an increasing number of "cubs of the caliphates," who in time will be prepared to carry out suicide operations in the name of ISIS.

Dr. Raymon al-Maaloli is a Syrian university professor and researcher on education. This article was originally published on [the Fikra Forum website](#).

For a more detailed and comprehensive analysis of education in the Islamic State, please see Jacob Olidort, [Inside the Caliphate's Classroom](#). ❖

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