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Islamist Responses to Educational Reform

JOHANNES GRUNDMANN

Since 9/11 the United States has put pressure on several Muslim majority states to introduce extensive curriculum changes to prevent the further spread of extremist Islamist ideas. In 2003 Donald Rumsfeld spoke of a “war of ideas” and connected this expression with his perception of religious schools in the Islamic world as hotbeds of Islamist terrorism. In addition, the US administration criticized official school and university curricula as being partly responsible for the spreading of radical ideas among Muslim youth. Some observers argued that this line of criticism was far too general because it ignored that the role of religion in the education system varies from country to country. Others pointed out that the most extremist ideas are circulated by writings available in bookshops found almost all over the Islamic world while normally not included in official curricula.

Arab responses to American demands

Official reactions to American demands were crystallized by the Director General of the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO) Abdalaziz al-Tuwaijri, who admitted certain shortcomings in policies on education, but rejected any link between the present school curricula and terrorism.¹ But this position did not reflect actual political practice. Although it would go beyond the scope of this article to offer a detailed explanation of the complex connection between curricula and extremism, it is certainly true that states such as Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and most other GCC member states started to work on the assumption that a direct link actually existed. These states had realised that future economic aid and/or cooperation in other important fields would depend on their willingness to reform their curricula. Those states that dealt with moderate Islamism through integration (Jordan, Kuwait, Yemen) were aware that such measures would have a negative impact on their relationship with Islamist opposition groups. Curricula had been an issue of internal controversies in several Islamic states before 9/11, but the pressure the US now put on national governments led to an increased public interest in educational reform within the Islamic world. Moreover, the unexpected Western attention to school curricula added an almost global visibility to these controversies.

The Arab world responded in various ways to the American demands. In 2001, Yemen began to supervise the subjects taught at religious schools of the Islamist Islah party. At the same time, the government refused to restrict the autonomy of al-Iman University which had aroused American suspicion. All proposals to replace the curricula in use at al-Iman University by those of sharia departments at national universities were consequently blocked. In Kuwait, the government presented a strategy to reform the national education system in 2004, which involved a new structure of primary and secondary education. The Islamist opposition viewed this project as a prelude to even more fundamental changes, which would massively reduce their influence on schools, universities, and ministries. As a result, the mere suggestion to integrate faculties of

There is no doubt that the events of 11 September 2001 have had far-reaching consequences for the international perception of education systems in the Islamic world. The US government, in particular, has strongly criticized both religious schools outside state control and national educational curricula as sites of possible Islamic militancy. As a result, many Arab states, including Jordan, have witnessed public debates in which members of national governments and Islamist opposition groups appear at odds about the need for curriculum changes and educational reform.

Sharia into faculties of Law was enough to create a storm of indignation. The most extensive public discussion so far has taken place in Saudi Arabia where almost all sections of society have participated in a debate about the pros and cons of educational reforms. While many voices support the idea of educational reforms in principle, and acknowledge that new methods of instruction are absolutely inevitable, the American demands are seen as an attack on national sovereignty.²

Islamists and educational reform in Jordan

In Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood and its political wing, the Islamic Action Front party, quickly lead the opposition to a project known as *masfufat as-salam*³ (an educational plan to promote peace) which had been prepared by the Ministry of Education and was put before the Jordanian parliament in the spring of 2004. According to state officials, the *masfufa* was meant to bring the Jordanian educational system into line with global trends that encourage the spread of justice, tolerance, and equality of opportunities. Over a period of several years, concepts and ideas concerning topics such as human rights, civil society, and inter-religious dialogue would be inserted into textbooks dealing with Arabic language and literature, Islamic education, national culture, and contemporary history.

Whereas many teachers either welcomed or prepared to accept the planned changes, Islamists categorically rejected them, citing as their reasons aversion to external interference in Jordanian life in general and disapproval of foreign influence on the national education system in particular. Using the *masfufa* to propagate their political message, they equated the concept of *thaqafat as-salam* (culture of peace), which is of crucial importance to the *masfufa*, with *thaqafat al-istislam* (culture of surrender). The *masfufa* as a whole was presented as the result of foreign interference aimed at the consolidation of the American and Israeli positions in the region

by undermining the religious identity of Middle Eastern Muslims. The Islamists put forward that the liberation of Palestine was not explicitly mentioned in the new curricula and that some contents were in contradiction to the basic principles of Islam. Some Islamists also pointed out that textbooks had already been changed more than once since the signing of the peace-treaty between Israel and Jordan in 1994. Moreover, the American criticism was perceived as part of a globalization process exclusively shaped by the West. In this context, the UNESCO, which had helped to realise a number

of educational reform projects in the Islamic world long before 9/11, was presented as a key element of American and Israeli foreign policy.

From the very beginning the Islamists sought to co-operate with other political forces such as nationalists and traditionalists. Ishaq al-Farahan, one of the leading moderate Islamists and a former Minister of Education, proposed that the curriculum be modified to reflect *thaqafat muqawamat al-ihtilal* (a culture of resistance to occupation) rather than *thaqafat as-salam* (a culture of peace). Although terms such as *thaqafat muqawamat al-ihtilal* and *manahij al-muqawama* (resistance curricula) unquestionably lack substance, some nationalists joined in and proposed the

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liberation of Palestine as a basic theme in any revised curriculum. At the same time, they used the debate to denounce what they described as *thaqafat as-sulta* (state culture/culture of power). Politicians, scholars, and intellectuals who supported the ideas behind the *masfufa* were thereby effectively subsumed under the banner of those in power.

Despite their warning that the *masfufa* implies grave dangers for Jordanian society, Jordanian Islamists seem convinced they can at least partially counter its effects. In their opinion, identities cannot be changed by means of deleting or adding certain words and expressions in the curriculum. Replacing a passage from the works of Mawdudi with a paragraph on Islamic art, for example, will not achieve the intended goal. The influential Egyptian Muslim Brother, 'Isam al-'Iryan, likewise stated in an interview with a Jordanian Islamist weekly that family and mosque were as important to a true Islamic education as the school, and emphasized that they needed further attention in the light of current events.⁴ Jordanian Islamists also compare the present situation of external interference and internal opposition to the context which led to the anti-normalization campaign directed against all efforts to strengthen political, economic and cultural co-operation between Jordan and Israel. Despite the existence of a ratified peace treaty most contacts have been reduced to a minimum.

At the same time, Jordanian Islamists share the fears of their counterparts in Kuwait. The Muslim Brotherhood's decision to cooperate with the state in most areas, which has characterised domestic politics since the foundation of the Hashemite Kingdom, definitely paid off in the field of education. They were allowed to establish their own schools and managed to occupy important posts at the faculties of Sharia. In addition, they placed their members quite skilfully inside the Ministry of Education so that they were able to influence the development of official curricula. Members of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood also worked as advisers to ministries of Education all over the Gulf region. But in the nineties some Islamists occupying important positions in the field of education were replaced due to conflicts between the govern-

ment and the Islamist opposition. Most of these conflicts were directly related to the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel. Jordanian Islamists are now in great anxiety that their influence will be systematically reduced in the course of the anticipated reforms. The public debate on curricula changes is obviously far from over. The Jordanian Ministry of Education indicated that the implementation of the *masfufa* would not start before 2005/2006 so as not to obstruct the current debate which is intended to bring about a national consensus.

Educational reform in Jordan and much of the broader Arab world is not only about the future contents of textbooks, but also about those who teach the texts and, above all, about those who define the basis of education policy. Faced with the current situation, the states concerned have to think about the future role of moderate Islamists in national education systems as a whole. As a result internal opposition will increase even further, whereas external pressure will not stop until new strategies and plans are actually implemented. National governments find themselves in a dilemma. On the one hand, it is true that the integration of moderate Islamists has often served as an element of political and social balance in periods of crisis. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the current debate on educational reforms is directly linked with Western interests and to a number of Middle Eastern Middle trouble spots, which leaves national governments little room for manoeuvre. Although there is no indication that the strategic choice of integration will be completely revised in the light of the current controversies, it is hard to imagine that a national consensus on new curricula is still within reach. The question is whether effective educational reforms can do without such a consensus.

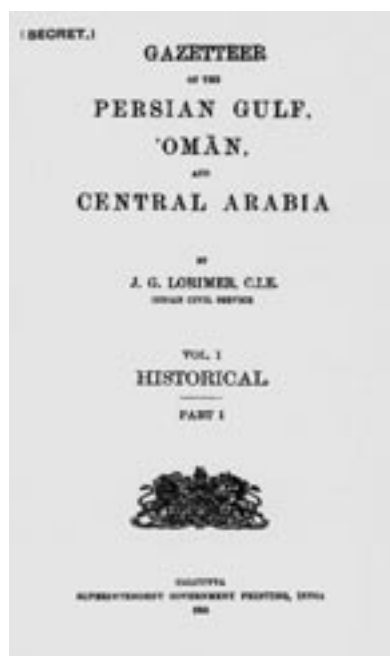
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Notes

1. *Al-Hayat*, February 20, 2004.
2. For further details on the debate about curricula changes in the Arab world see: *al-Hayat*, February 17, 2004.
3. Its full title is *masfufat mafahim huquq al-insan wa-thaqafat al-salam wa'l-qiyam al-alamiyya al-mushtaraka* (a project set up to promote human rights, a culture of peace, and global values).
4. *Al-Sabeel*, March 16-22, 2004.

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