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Islamists and Education in the Arab World

The Islamist ascent to power in parts of the Arab world has stirred up many fears—not only those of minorities and secularists but also of Muslims themselves. A particular cause for concern is the effect this Islamist rise might have on education in the Arab world, with some wary that Islamic sharia may be introduced into curricula.

In this Q&A, Muhammad Faour argues that it is too soon to tell what kind of impact Islamists will have on Arab education systems. Acknowledging the importance of not lumping together all Arab states when looking at these issues, he reflects on Islamists' ideals, modern methods of instruction, and professed dedication to democratic principles.

- [Will the Islamists attempt to influence educational curricula?](#)
- [Can any parallels be drawn between the countries when it comes to religious education?](#)
- [How would Islamists' influence on education curricula be reconciled with the aspirations of other actors to improve and develop an education system as part of an open, pluralistic society?](#)

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- What about the interplay of religious and national identities?
- Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, have gone so far as to affirm that any legislation they present will be premised on equal citizenship. Will those promises be fulfilled?
- In terms of education in particular, how can religious minorities—especially Christians—be reassured that ascendant Islamist parties do not intend to marginalize them or violate their rights?

WILL THE ISLAMISTS ATTEMPT TO INFLUENCE EDUCATIONAL CURRICULA?



Muhammad Faour

Education is a very important target for any ideological party that assumes political power, and Islamists are no exception. They will definitely attempt to shape the education curriculum, though not necessarily in the realm of religion. It has not been clearly or decisively settled whether the main Islamist parties in Tunisia and Egypt

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intend to change religious education programs in government schools. Ambiguity persists for a number of reasons, including the difficulties of dealing with state policies and institutions.

The Islamists must first of all amend the articles of their nations' constitutions that address educational matters, and that alone is hindered by a number of obstacles, such as the staunch opposition of more than one political and military force. Moreover, the existing education programs do not fundamentally conflict with those elements' political goals: Islam and its values are already promoted in curricula in multiple ways, and each student in Egypt studies his faith with a teacher belonging to that faith, thereby ensuring that Muslim students are indoctrinated in Islam. In Tunisia, only Islamic education is offered in public schools.

But these parties have already experimented with administering private schools in which Islam has been incorporated into the educational environment, whereby Islamic culture and Islamic norms pervade the instructor's interaction with the students and their families. Such schools encourage and laud what they consider students' praiseworthy "Islamic" behavior, such as performing religious rituals and honoring one's parents. They also criticize what they consider to be behavior that violates the sharia, like consuming alcoholic beverages or, in the case

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of girls, failing to wear the headscarf or obey their legal guardians.

The major Islamist parties may seek to transfer their educational experiment in private schools into the public schools by influencing teacher training programs as well as through extracurricular activities that reinforce Islamic culture in the schools.

But it is important not to lump together all the Arab states in which Islamist parties have either risen to power or become major partners in the government—specifically, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Libya. The regimes that once governed these countries possessed vastly different natures before they were replaced or reformed. Moreover, the countries themselves differ from one another on the social and cultural levels, both in terms of their educational systems and their students' educational accomplishments.

CAN ANY PARALLELS BE DRAWN BETWEEN THE COUNTRIES WHEN IT COMES TO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

All their education curricula share a religious education component. Take the case of Egypt. During the reign of deposed president Hosni Mubarak, Muslim students would study the Islamic faith while Christian students would study the Christian faith in government schools. Their

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courses included instruction in their respective religious dogmas, rites, and codes of behavior.

In addition, Egyptian students, both Muslim and Christian, are familiarized with many aspects of Islam when learning other subjects, the most important of which are the Arabic language and history. For example, the Arabic texts selected for language study at the primary level include verses from the Qur'an and biographical episodes from the Prophet Muhammad's life found in the Hadith. Those verses are used to teach important social values like honesty and kindness. Yet there are also verses that challenge the beliefs of non-Muslims, such as those that preach God's absolute unity and that contradict the Christian belief in the Holy Trinity.

As for history, instruction tends to focus on the various aspects of Islamic civilization since the advent of Islam, while instruction in Coptic history is limited to its economic and social dimensions. There was an attempt to design a course that incorporated the common values and morals of Islam and Christianity. However, its syllabus, published as a textbook for the elementary level, has not been applied in practice.

In government-run schools in Tunisia, Morocco, and Libya, the subject of Islamic education is taught to students, though the specific content differs from country

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to country. Still, most subjects are taught from the Islamic perspective alone, as in the case of Egypt.

The picture differs somewhat in the private schools, particularly in Egypt, depending on the character of the school in question. International, secular schools, for example, do not offer classes in religion. Christian schools offer instruction in the Christian faith, and the environment and behavior of the teaching and administrative staff in those schools are stamped with Christian culture. Likewise, in schools managed by either Islamist-oriented individuals or Islamist organizations, Islamic culture pervades.

The religious curricula in these Arab countries do not familiarize students with sects or religions other than the dominant faith of their society. For example, in Sunni-majority countries, they do not acquaint students with the Shi'i or Ibadi strains of Islam. Moreover, the principal method of instruction is rote memorization. Research into sources that present different viewpoints is not encouraged and space for open discussion within the classroom is not provided.

This means that in their present form, religious education curricula do not contribute to the development of mutual understanding between adherents of different faiths living in a single country. Nor do they strengthen the notions of

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acceptance, respect for the other, or the concept of cultural pluralism.

HOW WOULD ISLAMISTS' INFLUENCE ON EDUCATION CURRICULA BE RECONCILED WITH THE ASPIRATIONS OF OTHER ACTORS TO IMPROVE AND DEVELOP AN EDUCATION SYSTEM AS PART OF AN OPEN, PLURALISTIC SOCIETY?

The Islamists in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco encourage reliance on modern methods of instruction in scientific subjects, such as critical thinking, dialogue, research, and open debate. Their published platforms call for providing training to instructors to make sure they have the necessary competence in those modes of teaching. They have already applied some of these approaches in the schools they administer in Lebanon, and they will perhaps do so in Egypt and elsewhere as well.

When it comes to teaching religion, the social sciences, and the Arabic language, however, the Muslim Brothers in particular advocate a specific form of dialogue enjoined by various Qur'anic verses. Namely, they call for gentle persuasion and civil debate. But this form of dialogue does not permit any open contravention of the Islamic creed, in the form of atheism or polytheism, for instance.

It is worth noting that in Egypt, the al-Azhar mosque, at the center of Sunni Islam scholarship, is now working with

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Coptic churches and representatives from various political and intellectual movements to prepare a new syllabus that addresses the monotheistic religions' shared values. Should this project be implemented, it will provide an educational model for the other states of the region.

WHAT ABOUT THE INTERPLAY OF RELIGIOUS AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES?

Islamists consider religion to be “the key” for the Arab peoples; they hold that religious identity is both more profound and more comprehensive than national identity. For them, religious identity derives from a wider conceptualization of life, the universe, and divinity, at the heart of which is man.

As for education, it stands as part of this conception, working in the service of man, society, and national institutions. Therefore, the main Islamist parties call for national belonging while still emphasizing the divine element and religious affiliation, particularly Islamic affiliation. This, however, is not to be accompanied by compelling non-Muslims to believe in Islam or treating them as foreigners within their own countries.

ISLAMISTS, SUCH AS THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD IN EGYPT, HAVE GONE SO FAR AS TO AFFIRM THAT ANY LEGISLATION THEY PRESENT WILL BE

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PREMISED ON EQUAL CITIZENSHIP. WILL THOSE PROMISES BE FULFILLED?

The parties representing the Muslim Brothers have stated clearly that they will not compel others to adopt the same beliefs or practices that they and their supporters have adopted. The Brotherhood's program, as represented in Egypt by the Freedom and Justice Party, affirms a number of fundamental political principles that must govern in democratic, pluralistic societies.

Among the most prominent of these are: "guaranteeing freedom for all citizens" in terms of beliefs, expressing one's opinion, forming political parties, and other areas; "equality and equal opportunity" without discrimination on the basis of religion, gender, or race; and "political pluralism" in addition to promoting the values of dialogue, tolerance, cooperation, responsibility, accountability as well as other democratic tenets.

But the proof is in the pudding, and we shall see what tomorrow brings. If the Islamists stand by their word and implement their published programs, they will gain the confidence of their people, particularly minorities, thus consolidating their legitimate authority. Otherwise, their new foray into state rule may not last long, with grave consequences for the Islamists in other Arab countries.

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IN TERMS OF EDUCATION IN PARTICULAR, HOW CAN RELIGIOUS MINORITIES—ESPECIALLY CHRISTIANS—BE REASSURED THAT ASCENDANT ISLAMIST PARTIES DO NOT INTEND TO MARGINALIZE THEM OR VIOLATE THEIR RIGHTS?

In Egypt, for example, where minorities have expressed these fears, the curricula that were applied prior to the recent revolution did not take into account the particularities of religious minorities. Instead, they imposed Islamic concepts upon all students via the texts used in teaching the Arabic language, history, and the social sciences.

The fear of the minorities in post-revolutionary Egypt—just as in Tunisia and Morocco—stems from a lack of trust in the officially declared intentions, programs, and published statements of the Islamist leaderships concerning their commitment to the principles of pluralism and democracy. After all, the revolutionary experiences in Egypt and Tunisia, following decades of stable authoritarian rule, is new and without precedent. What course these revolutions will ultimately take remains as yet unclear. Their uncertain future has prompted a great deal of anxiety from both Muslims and Christians, particularly in light of the existence of extremist tendencies among some Islamists and the worrying precedents set by the treatment of minorities in other states.

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The minorities' fears can only be assuaged through a commitment on the part of the Islamists who have now ascended to power to abide by their pre-election pledges and declarations. All groups in society, in both the majority and the minority, must carefully review the laws and legislation that the new authorities propose before rushing to judgment.

If the Islamists' fulfill their pledges they will have established a stable, civil state. And if not, they will open the door wide to conflict, which may well prevent them from remaining in power for the full length of their terms.

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