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Reza Eslami-Somea & Hooman Movassagh

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PEACE EDUCATION IN IRAN: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

REZA ESLAMI-SOMEA AND HOOMAN MOVASSAGH

Abstract

This article examines peace education in Iran at the primary and secondary levels. It starts by briefly reviewing the fundamental issues that need to be addressed to achieve a culture of peace in any given society, such as cycles in social relations that may establish endemic poverty, violence, and discrimination. The paper highlights the measures necessary to supersede these cycles and social arrangements and examines the need for promotion of peace education and empowerment across all segments of society. Among such measures, peace education is considered essential because it serves the dual roles of advancing awareness and providing capacity and skill to initiate social change. The case of Iran and the challenges that hinder the development of peace education in Iran are then examined. These include a lack of critical and diverse perspectives, lack of understanding on the part of most teachers and peace trainers about the importance of peace and all its aspects, and the content of the Iranian curriculum. Finally, the paper addresses opportunities for peace education in Iran, especially given a new, more open political environment. Such opportunities include the role and impact of women, youth, civil society organisations, and new religious readings favourable to peace.

Keywords: peace, education, economic and political development, Iran, citizenship rights

Introduction

Iran is home to a number of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and racial minorities. It has a rich and ancient history, and experienced a brutal eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s. It has tensions with several states in the region, and has been subject to numerous military incursions, terrorist attacks, popular uprisings, and dozens of reports concerning its human rights record. The history of Iran and the numerous threats it has faced over the centuries appear to have created a dichotomous mentality in which the compassion and hospitality that are common traits among Iranians coexist with a distrust of the 'other', where the 'other' in this context may refer to foreigners as well as Iranians, giving meaning to the phrase 'Iran compared to Iran' (Holliday 2013, 4). In other words, the 'other' is not always an 'external other', but may include 'internal others' — other Iranians who are deemed to fall outside particular identity lines. These identity lines drawn in support of an 'Iranian-Islamic' identity and a defensive approach to anything and anyone deemed to challenge this Iranian-Islamic identity in modern-day Iran are a cause and source of tension and conflict. The interaction and dynamics of the 'three cultures' in Iran (Iranian, Islamic, and Western) (Holliday 2013, 1) cause complexities for managing conflicts within Iranian society.

This particular context poses certain challenges for peace, having entrenched vicious cycles in the society. Overcoming such cycles requires a nationwide dialogue among all members of society, addressing root causes of tension within Iran and overcoming the cycles leading to the perpetuation of poverty, discrimination, and structural violence. Iran is in dire need of peace education, and yet Iran's school curriculum is surprisingly lacking

A review of current educational material reveals a lack of suitable content for creating a culture of peace.

in courses and content relevant to peace education. The current curriculum at primary and secondary levels does not, in any meaningful way, address issues of human rights, peace, democracy, tolerance, conflict manage-

ment, critical thinking, and a range of other subjects that are of utmost importance to Iran. Although certain steps have been taken, especially during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami when a book on dialogue among civilisations was introduced, a review of current educational material reveals a lack of suitable content for creating a culture of peace.

The ascendance to power of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013 has provided opportunities for the vigorous development and implementation of peace education in Iran. On numerous occasions, for example, he has stressed an active foreign policy with the aim of decreasing and eliminating tensions with other states, and has unequivocally voiced support for the fundamental rights of all Iranians. Within three months of having taken office, he addressed the nation to provide a transparent report on his activities, considered by many to have been unprecedented. He issued a Charter on Citizenship Rights that stresses non-discrimination and the right of Iranian youth to participate in activities that promote, strengthen, and advance peace in Iran and abroad. He recommended the adoption of a Declaration on a World Against Violence and Extremism (WAVE) when addressing the UN General Assembly (UNGA), a suggestion that was adopted by the UNGA.¹ This presents an opportunity in Iran to amend current policies and practices in providing a favourable atmosphere for peace education, especially where the revision of textbooks and introduction of new courses are concerned.

In approaching the subject, part one of this paper sets out some considerations regarding peace itself and the process of peace education, defining certain elements that are necessary for entrenching a culture of peace and breaking free of cycles that lead to violence. With regard to the Iranian context, an exhaustive review of textbooks used at primary and secondary levels in Iran for the scholastic year of 2013–2014 was undertaken, focusing on those which provide subject matter relevant to peace (literature, religion, sociology, history, defence preparedness, logic, philosophy, psychology, and research & thinking). For this purpose, text, pictures, drawings, and other content relevant to peace education were identified and the most pertinent results are described in part two concerning the practice and challenge of peace education in Iran. In discussing the policies of the educational system of Iran and the opportunities in that context, the authors reviewed educational policies and regulations in force at the time of writing and drew on their own experience of studying and teaching in Iran at various levels. While the paper provides short comments on informal education, it does so in passing and in providing a wider context relevant to understanding the values and dynamics that affect formal education in Iran.

Peace Education as a Bedrock for Peace and Development

Peace has been a fluid concept throughout modern history. A broad concept with theoretical and practical connotations, 'peace has always meant both just order and tranquillity, concord or harmony and the absence of violence' (Rumpf 1984, 431). In modern academic literature, peace has been used in both a 'negative' and a 'positive' sense. 'Negative peace', characterised by the absence of physical, emotional or psychological hostility, dominated international discussion until the end of the Cold War (Ramsbotham et al. 2005, 40–47). Yet, this negative, myopic description of peace disregarded the fact that peace suggests a form of tranquillity and stability not produced by the mere absence of conflict or a ceasefire, which, though prerequisites for peace, hardly encompass its true meaning. The new trends in peace studies that emerged in the 1990s have therefore additionally focused on the elimination of structural and cultural violence in the tradition of Johan Galtung's earlier work (Galtung 1976, 41), and have suggested a more nuanced approach to conflict resolution and transformation. In particular, social change and justice have been identified as critical elements of this 'positive peace' (Przetacznik 1997) and emphasis has been placed on allowing degraded individuals or factions 'to articulate their interests and revise existing norms and attitudes' (Przetacznik 1997, 22–23). In this view, peace and cooperation are only possible through 'equal choices for individuals, equitable distribution of power and financial resources, and equal access to legal supports' (Przetacznik 1997, 23).

In civil confrontation with obstacles of social peace, critical and innovative solutions are frequently needed, as eradication of preconceptions and biases is impossible without an inventive approach. If the human mind is in actuality the 'key to peace and war' (Hook 1940), then it necessarily follows that education and sustainability of peace are dependent on consideration of and attention to peaceful problem resolutions, thus 'developing peaceful people' (Nelson & Milburn 1999, 161). It has indeed been suggested that violence and armed conflict are the consequence of unimaginative approaches to hostile circumstances, since a creative consideration of complex and contentious situations could produce a peaceful solution to the issues. Proponents of this view argue that 'fostering public understanding of alternative ways of pursuing disputes ... would increase the support for an expanded repertoire of ways to mitigate conflict' (Nelson & Milburn 1999, 149–150).

Comprehensive peace education must therefore be twofold. First, peace education must address the fundamental personal or collective concerns, rather than simply concentrate on superficial dilemmas, in order to appreciate the nature and scope of a particular conflict or injustice. As each clash is born out of a particular set of circumstances, 'the point is not to construct a fixed, universal list of core beliefs, but rather to identify the core for each case and to study the relationship between the cores and their respective peripheries' (Salomon 2006, 43) in order to best attempt change. Second, peace education must promote 'guided group discussions about values and beliefs related to conflict and violence' (Nelson & Milburn 1999, 162). Even where underlying sources of a conflict are properly identified, a society must channel the resolution of contention towards peaceful alternatives. Since peace education is so dependent on advancing exposure to peaceful strategies, and shaping considerations of the concepts and implications of war and peace, it is only to be expected that the most successful forms of peace education are those which are institutionalised within the education structures of a society and focused on individuals from early childhood. Thus the existence of proper peace education curricula in schools at all levels is a central tenet of peace education.

Across the global community, every society is confronted with particular arrangements, concepts, organisations, and cycles that may produce and strengthen trends such as poverty, violence, intolerance, and discrimination, thereby resulting in a 'vicious violence cycle' (Galtung 1990, 295). In order to reach a culture of social peace, two fundamental steps must be considered: first, those cycles in social relations that may establish endemic poverty, violence, and discrimination should be recognised; second, measures necessary to supersede these vicious cycles and social arrangements must be ascertained and implemented.

The principal means of accomplishing these objectives and thereby establishing a 'culture of peace' is the promotion of peace education and empowerment across all segments of society (Chowdhury 2004). Empowering both disenfranchised and dominant groups aims to encourage understanding and respect of one's own rights as well as the rights of others, so hopefully leading to a permanent structural transformation of relationships among peoples and groups (Ramsbotham et al. 2005, 161). In fact, empowerment serves the dual roles of advancing awareness and providing capacity and skill to initiate social change and lies at the heart of development theory and practice. The process guarantees that, 'rather than reproducing inequity, conflict resolution that is action orientated, as opposed to primarily rhetorical', has the potential to dissipate prejudices and incorrect concepts of social relations which are considered obstacles of rights, justice, and liberty (Jeffries 2000, 19). Sustainable peace is established when these positive and empowering cycles are consistently promulgated in a society, and when 'the overall cultural ethos ... changes to a peace-oriented one' (Salomon 2006, 45).

Peace education is a holistic, participatory process that encompasses human rights, nonviolent responses to conflict, social and economic justice, equality, and human security, and encourages reflection, critical thinking, cooperation, and responsible action. Understood as 'education for mutual understanding', peace education strives to 'eliminate negative outlook by challenging stereotypes to break down "enemy" images and by changing perspectives and ways of relating to the other group' (Salomon & Nevo 2002, 16–17). Dismantling a society of fear through acceptance, tolerance, reconciliation, and compromise requires the recognition and legitimisation of (if not agreement with) inherent human values and often competing narratives. Each person or group's grievances and entitlements must therefore be addressed for a culture of peace to take root. An appeal to 'respect for others, open mindedness, empathy, concern for justice ... and commitment to human rights' is the basis of shared understanding among groups and of peace itself. Conversely, an absence of constructive dialogue and interaction and a refusal to acknowledge the intrinsic worth and rights of particular members of a society are certain to result in a self-sustaining sequence of injustice, victimisation, and conflict.

However, convictions and beliefs, even those detrimental to the institution of sustainable peace, 'are not easily changed; people are very certain about their appropriateness, and are often willing to sacrifice a lot to hold on to them' (Salomon 2006, 42). Challenging a belief, central principle or pillar — which may range from faith in the superiority of a particular ethnic, sectarian, national, or gender group, to claims of territorial birthrights — may threaten an entire belief system, and accordingly an entire collective truth (Salomon 2006, 42). Faith traditions, moral codes, and historical identities may not be subject to change in the short term, and in fact require concentrated long-term political, social, educational, and economic efforts. Moreover, even where peace education and empowerment produce perceptible change, it is difficult to distinguish whether the process has affected merely peripheral attitudes and concerns, or whether it has significantly altered an entire cultural context (Salomon 2006, 43). Small initial changes,

may, of course, eventually help to transform an entire society. Yet this conversion will likely have to take place over a significant period of time. Sustainable peace requires the resolution of core issues affecting a particular society. In order to be truly effective, rather than just satisfactory, peace education must address and eliminate the root causes of a conflict, and not merely its symptoms (Jeffries 2000, 22).

The Practice and Challenges of Peace Education in Iran

In view of the above requirements for peace and fundamental issues that should guide peace education as a bedrock for peace, several relevant issues can be identified in the current educational system of Iran. While there are elements in the Iranian context that are conducive to peace education, social, cultural, religious, and historical contextual factors must be kept in mind. In particular, any analysis of Iran's context should be cognizant of: women and their role in Iran's society; the large population of youth that is more modern and liberal than the traditional and religious structure of the state and powerful elites; the numerous ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities; and the specific educational policies of Iran. Navigating the potential tensions resulting from these elements is at the heart of social change and economic and political development.

At first glance, and considering the numerous human rights reports on Iran and the various concerns expressed about a range of civil, political, and group rights, the Iranian context may seem adverse to peace education. Specifically, there are numerous concerns about: freedom of expression and the free flow of information; freedom of religion and belief; rights of religious, ethnic, and linguistic minorities; and the rights of women. Such concerns are of immediate relevance to peace and peace education. They tend to divide people along identity lines, entrench the current power structure to the exclusion of numerous social groups, prohibit a break from cycles conducive to violence, and forbid the critical thinking and provision of educational content that are a sine qua non for peace education. But if one defines peace education as a 'social process through which peace is achieved' (Brock-Utne 1985, 133–134), there are promising signs of such potential within the diverse socio-political environment of Iran.

Iran has a unique social and political framework (Spencer 2004) and has retained its vast territory through different factors; inter alia, the peaceful sphere among peoples from different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds (Elling 2013). During its long history, invaders and immigrants were all absorbed within the strong Iranian culture of coexistence (Amanat & Vejdani 2012). This feature is mainly due to customary beliefs and religious traditions that directed the people to equip themselves with tolerance of others. Furthermore, one of the main cultural factors relevant to Iran is the Shiite belief system,

Shi'ism is an element of an ancient conservative society and has provided a form of 'cultural independence' for Iranians.

which has served to establish an independent identity for Iranians and has moderated xenophobic attitudes towards the 'other' (Holliday 2013, 58–61). Shi'ism is an element of an ancient conservative society and has provided a form of 'cultural independence'

for Iranians. While it may be viewed as having some divisive qualities and leading to an 'us' versus 'them' mentality, it contains concepts and narratives that are propitious for peace education and tolerance towards others. The fact that Iran is an Islamic republic and the official state religion has been proclaimed in the Constitution to be of the Shiite tradition means that this sect itself may be useful in overcoming challenges to peace education in Iran.

Islam and Shi'ism place high importance on education and the quest for knowledge. The sayings and practice (Hadith) of the holy Prophet and the imams of the Shiites on these issues are recited in almost every school and at every level of education in Iran. These sayings stress that all Muslims (regardless of gender) should seek knowledge wherever it is to be found, 'from cradle to grave', and from whoever holds the knowledge (Rizvi

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1993). This approach coupled with the constitutional and regulatory framework of Iran enables the provision of comprehensive education to everyone, and in fact a major

effort has been undertaken to enable all members of society to read and write. As a result, according to the latest census, in a total population of just over 67 million people who are six years or older, over 57 million are literate (Markaze Amare Iran [Iranian Centre for Statistics] 2012, 29).

Iran's population structure is also of importance for peace education. Currently, it consists of a large population (over 33 million) of young people under 24 years of age who comprise over 43% of the population (Markaze Amare Iran 2012, 27), almost 12.5 million of whom are students at primary or secondary level.² Several provisions of Iran's constitution declare that all citizens shall benefit from free education³ and there is an enormous effort to provide free primary education for all. Therefore, formal schooling can be a proper comprehensive medium for the development of peaceful individuals and society. If one accepts the premise that 'schools are in no way neutral arenas within which objective knowledge or skills are transmitted from the minds of specialists to those of passive individuals' (Bekerman & Zembylas 2012, 30), several factors will then be of relevance to peace education in Iranian schools: (1) the content being provided to the students; (2) the training that teachers receive in providing peace education; and (3) the students, who are also affected by their families and friends and many of whom have access to alternative media such as the internet and satellite programmes. The student element offers huge potential and they may be educated in peace and related disciplines via alternative media, as well as a more robust formal curriculum concerning peace in schools.

Another major consideration is Iranian women and their needs and demands. Contrary to traditional Islamic education aimed to develop the clergy only among males, the modern education system of Iran aims at national development requiring all children to be educated. This is one of those areas that finds resonance in Islamic teachings that *everyone* should seek knowledge. At present, females form a large part of the student population. With a view to the traditional role of Iranian women (Povey & Rostami-Povey 2012) in the transmission of knowledge to the next generation, along with the wide presence of females at various educational levels, peace education for women can be one of the main ways of engaging in the creation of a culture of peace which can facilitate the development of informed decision-makers. Considering that in the Iranian educational system certain textbooks have been developed for the sole use of female students,⁴ it is possible to develop courses and material on peace education for women that will take into account their demands and needs while strengthening their understanding and awareness of cycles and how to manage conflict.

Furthermore, women's movements in Iran date back to the constitutional revolution of the 19th century (Saleh Alessa 2010, 46). Such movements attempt to change the social conditions and status of women and can be enumerated among the factors affecting the process of peace education both within and outside the traditional context of the family. Specifically within the framework of civil society (Kamali 1998), although still suffering

from the consequences of the Iran–Iraq War and other economic and political factors, women’s movements have had an active presence and influence on various issues, including combating poverty and promoting peace, equality, social justice, human rights, democracy, and environmental awareness. Under the relatively moderate atmosphere created by President Rouhani, women’s movements have a better opportunity to actively pursue their various aims. Civil society organisations are an important vehicle for the promotion of women’s participation and gender-friendly policies, which are instrumental to the creation of a peaceful culture.

Within the particular social context of Iran, peace education activities can be carried out both informally through educational projects directed at families, and formally within institutional places of learning such as schools, universities, and seminaries. However, it must be noted that within the formal Iranian education system a Western-influenced model of modern schooling coexists alongside a traditional religious education model. Religious education is generally conducted even in private schools with state oversight.

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Since the 1979 revolution, education has been characterised by a close relationship between education and Islam, not just in religious but also in public schools, which significantly influences how human rights and peace are taught in schools (Toyoko 2003). However,

religious education curricula do not include content about other religions and belief systems and are focused on the Shiite understanding of Islam. Since the majority of Iranians are Shiite Muslims, the majority of religious courses are focused on this particular sect of Islam and only religious minorities may be educated in their particular faith in minority schools. This approach prevents understanding and knowledge of other faiths and results in identity lines being created between people of different faiths.

Furthermore, despite numerous Islamic narratives and even state policy on the necessity of rationality in faith,⁵ rarely do schools allow open debate on issues of religion and faith. The coursework does not include critical reflection either and mostly consists of the memorisation of certain texts and historical events, later to be recited without much reflection on the issues discussed or retrospection on the events. This absence of critical thinking is not confined to religious studies and exists in the majority of courses such as history, sociology, and literature and is further compounded by the very few courses dedicated to critical thinking, communication, and management skills.⁶ In view of the importance of these courses and practical training in conflict management and resolution (Jones & Compton 2003) as discussed above, peace education at the formal level in Iran will require the introduction of new courses and a review of the content and methods involved in several other courses in formal educational settings.

Despite some positive progress in the discipline of peace education, Iran remains plagued by problems that persistently hinder the development of peace education. There are significant shortcomings in the textbooks and certain issues such as human rights are simply not addressed. Also, apart from a very short and insufficient passage on respecting differences in people contained in three pages of the social studies textbook of the third grade,⁷ there are no textbooks and courses on peace at the primary education level. This has been of concern to researchers in Iran and a number of reports and papers have been published stressing the importance of peace education and the relevant values, knowledge, and skills related to this discipline.⁸

In addition to the shortcomings in the content of textbooks, the Iranian school curriculum's approach towards peace is also of concern. There are clear identity lines of belonging to the family of 'Iranians' and also the 'Islamic Ummah' (nation or community) in the curriculum as early as the fourth grade, but there is scant mention of belonging to humanity in general and commonalities with other people and nations.⁹ Furthermore, examination of Iranian textbooks reveals that in a few cases the content of textbooks is detrimental to peace. Such content is mostly found in two textbooks devoted to defence preparedness and holds that peace is unattainable under the current economic and political relations of the world. The textbooks state that the concepts of human rights, peace, and democracy are accepted by the nations of the world, but that these are 'interpreted by powerful States to suit their interests'.¹⁰ They portray an unjust global order that renders true peace unattainable at this time. Peace is considered a value aspired to by all and is said to be the message of Islam for humankind, but the means of achieving peace are ill defined and the textbooks mostly portray a defensive mentality, particularly with regard to Islamic and national values.

In sum, peace education in Iran is chiefly hampered by these factors:

1. Content

Educational material and courses lack critical and diverse perspectives, and are plagued by an inability to express divergent views and their endurance over generations. The content of textbooks is highly focused on one understanding of faith and religion, does not cover other belief systems, and is not favourable to critical thinking about the prevailing value system. Course content fails to address multicultural education in the diverse cultural context of Iran and does not take into account the variety of groups and minorities. Furthermore, by drawing clear and contrasting identity lines, the current curriculum favours a culture that is defined by the state and disregards minorities to a great extent. Thus, courses need to be developed to provide peace education at all levels, incorporating the necessary values, skills, and knowledge pertinent to peace education, and existing curricula need to be revised to ensure a holistic approach to peace in all courses at all levels.

2. Trainers and teachers

There is a lack of understanding on the part of most teachers, professors, and peace trainers about the importance of peace and all its aspects. For that reason, before peace education is introduced as an independent discipline, there should be thorough training of teachers in this subject. Teachers fail to set examples for conversation and practical exercises in the peace process. As a feasible solution, curriculum developers need to examine all the approaches and experiences in developing peace education so that the best approach may be used in this process.

3. Insufficient educational budgets

Insufficiency of financial resources for developing course content and training teachers is also an impediment to the development of peace education. To reduce the effect of this factor, both the public and private sectors should be encouraged to assist in the provision of financial and material resources for peace education to be included in the school curriculum.

Opportunities for Peace Education in Iran

The Rouhani administration launched its campaign by promoting an active foreign policy and calling for positive measures on the domestic level. Having taken office,

President Rouhani has followed up on his initial pledge and has issued a Charter on Citizenship Rights. The Charter expounds on the provisions of the Constitution and was issued to the public to receive comments on its provisions. The Charter stresses non-discrimination and a multitude of fundamental rights. It also stresses the right to education, prohibits discrimination in education, and highlights the accessibility of free primary and secondary level education for all. Furthermore, the Charter declares that the youth of Iran are a national asset and that, in addition to the various rights enshrined in the Charter, they have the right to 'participate in strengthening, supporting, and advancing peace in Iran and the world' (Manshoore Hoghooghe Shahrivandi [Charter on Citizenship Rights] 2013, 14). Since the Ministry of Education is under the authority of the presidency, the current approach by the administration may enable the introduction of curriculum and courses on peace for formal education based on the declared policies of the President.

It must also be noted that Iran has already engaged in several notable endeavours designed to promote peace education, and with it human rights, anti-discrimination practices, gender equality, cultural diversity, and peaceful conflict resolution. School textbooks place emphasis on the ideal of peace and coexistence, albeit in conjunction with material that seems to advocate war or, at least, an attempt for a more just world order. Although a differentiation is presented between Islam and other monotheistic religions, religious tolerance is on the whole promoted and inter-cultural dialogue is highly encouraged as the basis of world peace. Under the guidance of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), various university-level workshops have been organised to encourage student exploration of and involvement in peace studies. Women's issues and human rights have been the primary focus of such activities (Islamic Republic of Iran (442) n.d.). Finally, Iran has celebrated International Peace Day since 1981, and regularly organises events and ceremonies to commemorate the day.

In Figure 1, six features of Iranian society are indicated which represent the factors that should be taken into account to build a culture of peace. It should be mentioned that the illustration is not exhaustive, but includes some of the primary characteristics that are important to formal and informal peace education in the Iranian context.

The major resource for building a culture of peace is the people themselves. Therefore, the family as an integrated whole, which is considered to be a main value protected by social structure and institutions, is a foundation for a peaceful culture. In this framework, respect for religious values, such as compassion for others, is also a major asset that promotes intercultural understanding and respect for 'others'. The world's major spiritual and faith

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traditions — among them, Islam — inspire and motivate people to embrace peace as a mission. Although religious believers have gone to war and committed acts of violence in the name of their faith, 'the conflicts were actually rooted not in matters of faith, or even religion, but in conflicting claims to social and political (and economic) goals' (Machado 1993). Additionally, there are numerous tenets, concepts, and narratives in the Shiite tradition that stress justice, rights, and tolerance towards others, thereby being conducive to peace and readily applicable in the Iranian context.

Furthermore, the current population structure and presence of numerous civil society organisations provide vast opportunities for continued peace education. The existence of a vibrant NGO community and a large pool of young individuals presents the possibility

Figure 1: Six Features of Iranian Society



of engaging the youth in peace education and activities sponsored by civil society actors and creating momentum for greater attention to peace education. Iranian youth are more in tune with the rest of the world through alternative media and have a better knowledge of the internet and social media than the ruling elite. According to statistics issued in 2013, 60% of Iranians have access to the internet and 53% of those are under the age of 29.¹¹ Creating an interactive online programme on peace education with the participation of civil society and Iran's youth is therefore a feasible option. Other opportunities include the utilisation of sports programmes and activities to promote peace, encouraging global understanding and unity through alternative media, propagating peaceful understandings of religion and Islamic teachings, encouraging the inclusion of activities and teachings on peace and tolerance by preschool and childcare centres (which are in many cases run by the private sector).

The utilisation of all these and other opportunities must be structured with a holistic view to peace education, directed towards addressing the main issues necessary to overcome vicious cycles, and to instil individuals with the values, skills, and knowledge necessary for peace. As previously discussed, increasing awareness and capability among members of society have an important role in the process of peace. This process has two aspects: (1) edification of concepts relating to the existence of peace, and (2) prevention of factors that might ultimately result in violence. In the peace education process the composition and

character of the targeted population for training (students, civil servants, expert groups, etc.), formal and informal education opportunities, and necessary and available tools and methods should be taken into consideration.

Since students form a large segment of the Iranian population and are more open to the values and capabilities required for peace education, a variety of opportunities present themselves at different levels of education. Several approaches may be adopted for peace education at each level and type of educational institution. Each will be addressed separately below.

1. Primary education

There is a shortage of material and activities on peace education at this level in Iran, even though pupils at this age and level of education have good learning skills, are able to quickly adopt and internalise education patterns, and tend to apply learned principles in their general routines and interactions (Jeffries 2000, 20). Consequently, the first aspect of elementary school peace education should be recognising and appreciating 'the diverse population at the school and the need for all individuals to be represented'. From this, the school should move towards 'institutionalizing equity among school participants who have traditionally operated within a hierarchy' (Jeffries 2000, 20). Presuming that teachers and other relevant school staff have undergone peace education training, students should be exposed to observable instances of peace education in conversations and activities. Engaging in role-play conflict scenarios and examining past wars 'to determine if there were alternatives to the use of force' additionally promotes social equality, cultural respect, and peaceful resolution of arguments (Spencer 1989, 10). Among elementary school students, both formal and informal education is effective. Some possible approaches might be:

- developing courses and extracurricular activities with the purpose of introducing concepts such as equality, justice, and respect for others' rights;
- supplying educational posters, pictures, and murals on the walls of schools with motifs that promote peace;
- granting awards to students and conducting extracurricular activities focused on peace;
- integrating art into the curriculum and showing films, cartoons, and plays to promote understanding, tolerance, and alternative means of conflict resolution.

2. Vocational and high schools

At this level, students generally respond better to formal rather than informal training, but both may offer impressive results. In particular, peace education at this stage should attempt 'to counter hostile behaviors learned in the broader culture' and develop resilience skills and aggression management techniques 'that help students avoid fights in school and resolve angry disputes in their immediate lives without physical force'. Such an approach, especially in violent cultures or societies, 'allows peace educators to help heal wounds that create rage in the psyches of their students ... who have been traumatized by personal and structural violence' (Harris 2007, 353). Effective activities include:

- supplying books, films, and other materials that promote peace and cooperation;
- formulating a course on human rights and peace;

- introducing the study of international institutions, treaties, agreements, and documents;
- introducing students to the activities of international organisations such as the United Nations and specialised agencies such as UNESCO and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) as well as to non-governmental organisations that promote peace
- equipping schools with computers and internet connection and thereby facilitating access to information;
- setting up student associations and groups in peace affairs and related concepts;
- commemorating international days such as the International Day of Peace and honouring students, alumni, and faculty activities that promote peace.

3. Universities (higher education)

By this stage, students should have been exposed to some form of peace education, as the introduction of relevant concepts at a young age tends to lead to a greater degree of internalisation of the basic principles and attitudes concerning peace. There are courses on human rights in certain disciplines and an LLM programme on human rights has been successfully included in many law schools since 2002. But there is still a lack or shortage of courses on peace within other disciplines and the university community offers some unparalleled opportunities for the exploration and expansion of peace studies on the local, national, and international levels. Students should concentrate 'on social influence strategies and their probable effects on the escalation or de-escalation of conflict, and on human relationships' (Nelson & Milburn 1999, 162). As they are better equipped to be agents of social change, students should furthermore 'participate in projects for reducing inequalities in society, increasing tolerance for diverse groups, and promoting non-violent solutions to conflict' (Nelson & Milburn 1999, 162) These endeavours may include:

- offering optional or compulsory regular or short courses that pertain exclusively to peace education and related concepts;
- presenting courses in different areas of law and other fields relating to peace studies;
- commemorating international days such as the International Day of Peace and Human Rights Day;
- establishing research institutions or special faculty chairs in fields related to peace;
- supplying the latest publications that deal with peace and conflict in both online and print formats;
- facilitating access to information through sophisticated and easily available computer sites in universities;
- exchanging lecturers and students with a range of international and national centres to promote better understanding of other cultures and enabling a wider dialogue on peace;
- encouraging the participation of teachers and students in seminars, educational workshops, and associations that explore peace.

These are by no means exhaustive and an immense national undertaking is required to address the root causes of tension contributing to vicious cycles of violence, and to promote structured guidance on the values, skills, and knowledge necessary to overcome

these cycles and manage conflict peacefully. However, it appears that the time is ripe to address several issues in the formal education structure and current curriculum of Iran.

Conclusion

Iranian society is composed of a multitude of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and racial minorities whose culture and way of life are underrepresented in school curricula. While these minorities benefit from courses relevant to their particular culture and beliefs, the greater population is often unaware of many aspects of these cultures. The salient identity in Iran's curriculum, and indeed all state media, is heavily in support of an official reading of the Shiite sect and such aspects of Iranian culture that are not considered to be offensive to Islam. This has resulted in many voices being drowned out and sidelined, often leading to suppressed anger and hostility. The prevailing elite's version of an 'Iranian-Islamic' identity may even exclude a great number of Muslim Iranians, resulting in a large number of people falling outside the 'official identity' lines.

The current school curriculum is a reflection of the identity defined by the state and does not include courses necessary to instil in citizens the knowledge, skills, and values conducive to peace and development. The surprising lack of material at primary and secondary levels on peace and related disciplines is in stark contrast to the numerous courses and content on Islam. The moderate approach of the current administration in Iran and its understanding of some of the underlying sources of tension and conflict offers an opportunity to develop policies, material, and courses on peace education, but, given the particular characteristics of the Iranian context, these may need to rely heavily on Shiite teachings and values. Nonetheless, it is possible to develop material and curriculum for peace education in formal education by drawing on Shi'ism and Iranian culture in general. Such material may then be developed and complemented by means of informal education insofar as resources are made available.

REZA ESLAMI-SOMEA holds a PhD in law and is Associate Professor and Director of the Human Rights Department of Shahid Beheshti University (SBU) Law School in Tehran. His areas of research and teaching include civil and political rights, public liberties, rights of women and minorities, citizenry education, and peace and development. He works closely with civil society in organising workshops and seminars and has travelled often to the US and the Middle East to speak at conferences.

HOOMAN MOVASSAGH holds a PhD in international law and from 2002 to 2012 taught various courses on international law, human rights, and jurisprudence at SBU Law School. He was also one of the original faculty members of the UNESCO Chair for Human Rights, Peace, and Democracy of SBU from 2001 and was director of the Bioethics Group of that Chair from 2009 to 2012. He has published numerous papers in Farsi and is currently a scholar in residence at the University of Virginia School of Law.

Endnotes

¹ 'A World Against Violence and Violent Extremism', A/RES/68/127: http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/127

² <http://www.amar.org.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=99>. Also see Groth (2012).

³ In particular, article 30 of the Constitution provides, 'The government must provide all citizens with free education up to secondary school, and must expand free higher education to the extent required by the country for attaining self-sufficiency.'

⁴ These include specific religious teachings and rulings relevant to women, and particular courses taught only to female students.

⁵ See, for example, the documents on national education policies and guidelines on the website of the Ministry of Education: <http://medu.ir/Portal/Home/Default.aspx?CategoryID=ca78c9d1-def8-4929-a41b-448493e8e91c>

⁶ Currently, there are only two textbooks that include short sections on critical thinking (taught at sixth and seventh grades). In addition to textbooks on sociology, religion, and history, there is one textbook on logic, and another one on philosophy which is mostly dedicated to Islamic thought. The textbooks on logic and philosophy are only meant for humanities students.

⁷ *Motale'ate Ejtmaie* (Social Studies): 8–10: <http://www.chap.sch.ir/books/1129>

⁸ Fallah Nodehi (2009); Fathi Vajargah & Eslami (2008); Hashemi (2010); Naji & Khatibi Moghadam (2011).

⁹ There are short references in the literature textbooks, but these are not reflected in the broader curriculum to imbue students with a sense of belonging to the human family as a whole.

¹⁰ *Defence Preparedness* (Textbook), Second Year of High School (Grade 10): 8.

¹¹ <http://www.asirran.com/fa/news/267888>

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