

# **Arab Education Going Medieval: Sanitizing Western Representation in Arab Schools**

**Imed Labidi**

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, USA

### **Abstract**

In the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2000, debate about Arab education as the new apparatus for religious fanaticism used by Arab extremist groups to entice hate and violence against the West took prominence in Western discourse. Considerable ink was spilled confusing hostile narratives in Arab curricula and the metaphors of identity building with the vilification of Western cultures in Arab textbooks. Western critics and Pentagon scholars produced an extensive body of literature connecting violence to a flawed Arab intellect. Under staggering Western political pressure, Arab states had to rely on Western counsel and implement rapid reforms along the lines of Western methods in order to “polish” Western representation in Arab schools and distance their schools from any allegations of teaching hate. This study places the claim of this debate and current Arab educational reforms within the larger context of neoliberal politics and its neocolonial agenda. Moving between political discourses, major school reforms of the last decade, ambiguous teaching material, and new courses added to Arab curricula, the study engages the dialectic of hegemony and counter-hegemony of education not only as a colonial construct but as a renewed venue to recolonization. To this end, this study argues that these reforms did not help improve Western representation but rather disconnected education from reality and made it a mobilizing tactic that aims to teach Arab youth to accept the terms of the neocolonial project.

## **Introduction**

Anxiety over how to “handle” the Middle East has become a matter of open debate in Western discourse. The West is no longer satisfied with partial management, namely dictating the terms of dominance from a distance based on identifying allies and foes, and accordingly designing friendly or hostile foreign policies. Instead, it is clearly interested in more aggressive approaches to transform the internal order of Middle Eastern societies and nations. The purpose, we are told, is to eliminate anti-Western propaganda, particularly anti-Americanism, to contain the threat of terrorism and to prevent the emergence of “failing rogue states.” Since coerced democratization<sup>1</sup> has not worked and the attempts to penetrate Arab cultural formations, disconnect them from their Islamic tradition, or westernize them completely, as recommended by many policy makers and Pentagon scholars such as Samuel Huntington, have not worked either, neoliberals seem to favor the indigenization of a new cultural anthropology that would help reform Arab societies from within. As if operating independently from global politics was possible, the idea was initially introduced by Bernard Lewis and later validated by President Bush’s policies. The essence of this idea, as Mahmoud Mamdani explains in *Good Muslims, Bad Muslims* (2004), is rooted in Lewis’s division of Arabs into two blocs: good Arabs who are presumably secular, westernized, and modern versus bad ones who are fanatic, conservativel, and combative. Lewis urges the West not to get directly involved until “Muslims settle their internal accounts” (Mamdani, *ibid.*, p. 23); then the West can embrace and help what he referred to as good Arabs triumph. The political decisions that followed confirmed this belief. Between September 2001 and 2003, the State Department within the post-September 11 Middle East Partnership/outreach initiatives, increased the budget for public diplomacy targeting the Arab world by 58 percent (Colla, 2003). These initiatives opened up Arab air waves to new cultural programs. “We’re broadcasting the message of tolerance and truth in Arabic and Persian to tens of millions,” President Bush stated in his State of the Union speech in 2004. Even though Arabic has already been presumed the language of Islamic radicalism that cannot communicate values as tolerance and therefore it had to be replaced by English as is the case in the Arabian Gulf states.

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<sup>1</sup> Coerced or forced democracy is an imperial fantasy that liberal democracies adopted and relies heavily on the premise that if certain government structures in a particular nation are put in place, even with force, that nation’s system will eventually be fully converted into a democracy. Obviously the case of Iraq so far shows that such an assumption is not accurate.

Assertively, he added: “in some cities of the greater Middle East, our radio stations are rated number one amongst younger listeners. Next week, we will launch a new Middle East television network called, *Alhurra* – Arabic for ‘the free one.’ The network will broadcast news and movies and sports and entertainment and educational programming to millions of people across the region” (2004).

While rationalizing this sociopolitical logic, a parallel narrative emerged in the United States linking political violence to a problem in the Arab/Muslim mind and claiming that Arabs are collectively schooled to hate the West. The claim is founded on the presence of serious underlying racist notions in Arab textbooks, instructors’ attitudes and their political agendas, and ambiguous pedagogical methods. Making Arab education a legitimate source of terrorism placed Arab schools (especially Qur’anic or religious schools known in Arab nations and the larger Islamic world as *madrasa*<sup>2</sup>) at the center stage of Western political discourse. According to linguist Sohail Karmani, these religious institutions “primarily in Pakistan and Afghanistan, almost instantly became the focus of intense media attention and were soon being widely vilified and portrayed as little more than terrorists breeding factories that posed a very serious threat to the US national security” (2005, p. 263). Seemingly thousands of young Islamic radicals are being trained in these traditional schools or so claimed “[a] widely cited article in the *New York Times Magazine* [which] reported that in Pakistan ‘there are one million students studying in the country’s 10,000 or so Madrasas, and militant Islam is at the core of most of these schools,’” (Goldberg, 2000, as cited in Hefner & Zaman, 2007, p. 1).

Of course the idea of using education in order to conquer is not a new concept and has been examined before. For example, in Colonising Egypt (1991), drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Timothy Mitchell discusses the British educational project, its colonial vision, and its power dynamics; he argues that before being transferred to the colonies, European schools had

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<sup>2</sup> From a historical standpoint, the main function of madrasa was to teach religious knowledge along with other Islamic sciences. Currently, in the Arab world, the madrasa refers to both religious and secular schools; “however, in non-Arabic countries still today, the phrase typically refers to an institution offering intermediate and advanced instructions in the Islamic sciences” (Hefner & Zaman, p. 5). Among the subjects taught in these schools are Qur’anic recitation, Arabic grammar, and jurisprudence.

already turned into institutions that taught order and discipline rather than imparting knowledge (1991, p. 64). By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he continues to argue, education, cultural policy, and colonization had become inseparable. And it was within this triangle that ideas of containment and their political maneuvers gave birth to new cultural substance, material, and methods that European empires used to educate the colonized into submission. What is new about my study is the analysis of an emerging neoliberal method which seeks to use education to recolonize not through elite groups, Western Canon, or the Arab state as has been the case in the past, but by penetrating on a mass scale the language of popular culture through widely circulated curricula. In order to increase the numbers of “good Arabs,” I argue the West unleashed considerable political pressure on Arab states particularly Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and to an extent Jordan (given its large Palestinian refugee population) to reeducate their future generations according to different cultural ideologies. To date state school reforms in these nations are actually de-historicizing education, discouraging critical and creative thinking, and disconnecting learning from reality. Within the confines of the struggle between an anxious West and supposedly Arab agitators, the goal of reforming Arab education aimed clearly at distancing schools, textbooks, and teaching methods from any allegations of violence particularly after many studies found Arab education could be linked to terrorism. Although reforms continue to be introduced, textbooks have been tweaked, and topics modified, I have found no indications that Western representation has improved in the Arab world. On the contrary, the belligerence of state policies forced Islamic teachings to operate underground and contributed to the centralization of educational policy; Arab education is now a new lifeline for the failing Arab government making the state, as the only manufacturer of culture. What this means is that the Arab state has become the main instrument to funnel raw Western ideology to its student populations.

It should be clear from the outset that my goal is not to argue against the presence of anti-Western discourse in Arab classrooms or in some Arab textbooks. Rather, I place them within the larger context of the collision between some Western essentialist maneuvers that continue to validate colonial pedagogy’s seemingly uncontested position of superiority, for example “the classic triumphalist belief that English –in sharp contrast to Arabic-is exclusively endowed to promote the values of freedom, democracy, justice, openness, tolerance, decency, and so forth”

(Karmani, 2005, p.265), and the countercurrents of Islamic teachings resisting that very position. Accordingly, I examine the context within which these madrasa narratives are deployed to produce currents and counter-currents of self and other. In this context, it is important to understand that Arab education is not a homogenous discourse and, like any given curriculum, can be a terrain of contestation and subject to manipulation by different competing agents. In fact, the competition to control Arab teaching material and particularly identity narratives has escalated with the reemergence of neocolonial ambitions in the aftermath of September 11. In other words, neocolonial power masked in so many forms and doctrines such as “freedom” and “sponsored democracies” has tied together the concepts of representation, cultural difference, and pedagogy, thereby amending education’s rules of engagement to replace force with ideas. These seemingly necessary reforms of almost a decade continue to disconnect textbooks from reality by eliminating controversial topics such as Jihad<sup>3</sup>, resisting Western hegemony, political dissent, the American invasion of Iraq, Israeli occupation of Palestine, the pitfalls of globalization, and imperialism. In short, the neocolonial war of ideas has placed Arab education at the juncture between three competing forces: Western powers, the failed Arab state, and Islamic discourses.

## Section I

### Background

Despite the desire of Arab states to transform their populations to “knowledge societies,” the most recent study by the Rand Corporation in 2008 determined that Arab schools continue to produce skills that are irrelevant to their economic needs and “do not effectively prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy” (2008, p. 22). In the same year and only a few months apart, in another report on the progress of Arab development and education in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, poetically entitled The Road Not Traveled, researchers

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<sup>3</sup> Jihad (literally effort or struggle), as Mahmoud Mamdani explains, is part of the five pillars of the Islamic faith and entails a series of “spiritual and social, personal and political” (2004, p. 50) duties that every Muslim owes to his/her Muslim *umma* in order to create an egalitarian society. Scholars of Islam divided this doctrine into two concepts: *al-jihad al-akbar* (the greater Jihad) and *al-jihad al-asghar* (the lesser jihad). The greater jihad “it is said, is a struggle against weaknesses of self; it is about how to live and attain piety in a contaminated world. Inwardly, it is about the effort of each Muslim to become a better human being. The lesser jihad, in contrast, is about self-preservation and self-defense; directed outwardly, it is the source of Islamic notions of what the Christians call “just war” rather than “holy war” (ibid.).

state that “the success of future reforms will require instead changes in the behavior of key education actors—teachers, administrators, and educational authorities. This is the road not traveled in the education sector” (2008, p. xv). Recently, Arab media began to devote considerable air time to schools and Islamic education in particular (Hefner & Zaman, 2007, p. 107) making it clear that schools have securely shifted into a site of cultural and political criticism. In early 2010, Al Jazeera launched the first children channel entitled ‘*Taalam TV*’ (Learn TV). The channel’s main purpose is to help teachers use technology and video material to enhance the children’s learning capabilities (Al Jazeera Children’s Channel, 2010).

Arab TV highlighted some of the complex issues facing Arab education as well. For example, on Al-Arabiya TV, which regularly airs anti terrorist ads and talk shows (Death Makers, 2006), Montaha Al-Roumhi, hostess of the “Bilmirssad” program, talked with several expert guests in 2007, including Fahmi Houeidi, writer and Islamic thinker; Dr. Ali Al Karn, former director of the educational planning committee in Saudi Arabia; and Dr. Mozah Ghabbach, social scientist, speaking on behalf of Arab women and the challenges they face in the school system. They discussed some interesting details in the curricula that either reflect unrealistic situations or contradict normal, everyday practice that the students witness in society or statements that are confusing. For instance, schools teach that interest on loans is a sin while knowing that their parents and others in their extended families are making mortgage payments on their homes. Students are taught about democracy, but do not practice it. They are told the *Khilafat* system<sup>4</sup> is the ideal form of the state, but they do not see it in reality anywhere. In math, students constantly hear statements such as  $5 + 5 = 10$ , *In Cha a Allah* (God willing) (Taking Jihad out of schools, 2002).

Although these are valid problems that ought to be addressed, Arab education ministries seem interested mainly in strategic change, such as decisions to include ideas about tolerance, clarification of differences between resistance and terror, and Western versus Islamic traditions in school textbooks. These were the focal points of a recent debate in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Jordan; educators and members of the parliaments in these nations, at least 50 deputies called for

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<sup>4</sup> The *Khilafat* system refers to the political institution governed by a Khalifa whose role is not only political but also spiritual and social. Under the *Khilafat* system, the leader becomes a representative of God on earth; he insures the unity of the community and sustains its spiritual life by carrying the message of the prophet into the future.

a private session to discuss content and plans by the education ministries to introduce new textbooks in the 2004-2005 school year (Arab schoolbooks reform, 2004). Soon after, many controversial decisions were announced about canceling the memorization of Qur'an at an early age to eliminate the risk of indoctrinating children who are unable to think critically, and deleting any references to non Muslims from Qur'anic schools; the number of schools has to be regulated now (e.g., in Yemen, 400 schools were closed (Zaatirat, 2004)). Mosques' functions are also being restructured and brought under tighter state control.

As an ideological repository capable of dissipating and constructing certain mental dispositions, Arab education is now reflecting the Arab states' schizophrenic impulses while maintaining a new sociopolitical order that favors the teaching of a polished body of knowledge and a narrow approach to history. This body excludes the discussion of and learning about great civilizations such as those of India and China and centers instead on the Euro-American tradition as the model to be followed. This obviously facilitates the new role of the Arab state as a mediator whose task is to assert Western agency by restructuring the deployment of power, accepting and normalizing cultural encroachment, and to use Foucault's words "making the educational space function like a learning machine, but also as a machine for supervising, hierarchizing, [and] rewarding" (1984, p. 147).

On the other hand, Western observers and critics seem to have a different take on Arab states' compliance and ongoing clashes between the Middle East and the West. Many scholars, theorists, and media analysts have attempted to paint the entire geopolitical landscape in the contrasting terms of racial bias and religious militancy. One recent example is the research conducted by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education, formerly known as the Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace, which is led by Dr. Arnon Groiss. With the assistance of UNESCO, the institute produced extensive studies of primary and secondary textbooks used over the last decade in Egypt, Occupied Palestine, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and most recently Iran (2006). Great effort was spent selecting certain phrases and sections, translating, and speculating about the objectives of specific lessons and their underlying messages. In a straightforward narrative, the work explains how Arab school curricula create for Arab children their Western antagonist and cultural other.



In reviewing one of the most contested narratives, Groiss (2003) focused on the biased attitude that Saudi Islamic education textbooks construct about topics such as Judaism and Christianity, the way certain historical events such as the Crusades and the Palestinian struggle are taught, Western civilization, and imperialism. With great simplicity the complex issues that lie beneath the question of Western representation and that have links deeply connected to complex historical, colonial, and imperial factors shaping the relationship between the West and the Arab world are never acknowledged. Though ambiguous readings of certain texts, messages, and biases in religious curricula do exist and could be connected to the dominant political context, religious demagogues, fanatic attitudes, and serious pedagogical flaws, Groiss and other researchers focused on specific citations from Qur'anic verses and the Prophet Mohammed's *Hadith* (documented narrations about the Prophet's actions, sayings, and deeds), confused interpretation with translation, and offered broad and vague commentary. An example is the widely cited translation of *Al-Fatiha*, meaning literally "the opening of the revelation," the first chapter in the Qur'an. *Al-Fatiha*, which entails a recognition of God's characteristics and ends with a series of supplications for divine guidance and good behavior is described in the following terms: "Allah, guide us in the straight path, the path of those who you have favored, but not of those who have incurred your wrath, nor those who have gone astray [ . . . ] Those who have gone astray: the infidels." Then he explains: Qur'an commentators throughout the ages have generally agreed that the Jews were indicated by the phrase "those who have incurred your wrath" in this Qur'anic verse, while Christians were indicated by the phrase "those who have gone astray." "The text," Groiss continues, "avoids such explanations and uses the general term "infidels" (p. 27).

Persistently, the research conflates Arab education with Islamic education and the metaphors of identity building in the Arab world while citing the radicalization of Arab educational institutions as the main cause behind the rise of political violence. Assertions like these have served to validate the claim that some targeted madrasa narratives taught in certain Arab and Muslims schools overwhelmingly transformed Arab education into a new apparatus for religious fanaticism producing as Bernard Lewis would say, "bad Arabs." Hence, Arab curriculum is ideologically motivated, undermines any notions of cultural pluralism, and teaches hatred of

difference and Western cultures. Further complicating matters for the Arab state which has been directly responsible for the production and often distribution of teaching material, but either carelessly or otherwise paid no mind to political correctness, after September 11 it became greatly concerned with mediating ideas that were overtly favorable of the West. Interpreted as surrendering to Western pressure, this position was seen as the usual official defeatist state attitude and helped boost the popularity of some madrasa teaching which escape the limitations of formal curricula. From a critical pedagogy perspective, reformed and Arab schools are political and cultural sites validating messages that serve to privilege certain peoples, groups, and cultures over others. These schools are now engaged in producing tamed and disciplined subjects rather than enlightened and thinking citizens.

### **Legitimizing the Flaws of Arab Intellect beyond the Politics of Education**

In the Arab world, many intellectuals and liberals reacted to this attempt to masquerade Western hegemony through school curricula under the guise of modernization, penetrate mass culture, and pass off Western cultural norms as universal (Rubin, 2006). The discomfort with Western interference in Arab curricula began after September 11 and continued to snowball. In 2002, the United Nations' Arab Human Development Report revealed that “aspirations for freedom and democracy remain unfulfilled (p. 2) and during the last three decades Arab nations have achieved very little progress on a range of development indicators (pp. 25-31). Their performance in knowledge acquisition was exceptionally inadequate. The production of literary and artistic literature was extremely limited and interest in translation of relevant and contemporary books was minimal. According to some researchers, Arab states spend “less than 0.2% of their national budgets on science and technology research and development. This is more than ten times less than the amount that developed countries spend” (El Baz, 2007).

The 2004 updated edition of the UN report vaguely linked these issues to the politics of Arab regimes. The confessional character of this 284-page document and the attempt to present it as an Arab initiative, which ironically condemns Arab culture rather than political structures, and a document of self-criticism weakened the value of any constructive criticism it could have produced. Of course, the report could not be completed without at some point coming to terms

with the appalling status of Arab women, a colonial fixture not easily engaged without a Western model, or some sort of allegiance to the concept of affirmative action (United Nations, 2004, p. 11). Still under pressure, Arab allies undertook substantial initiatives sometimes even contradictory actions to introduce ideas favorable to the West and the United States, while sidestepping Arab reaction to clear and direct foreign interference with Arab curricula. For example, many educators I spoke with during my several visits to the Middle East in 2007-2008 informed me that the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Saudi governments have all focused on using a visual dimension by putting up images and murals on classroom walls in elementary and secondary schools with messages such as “Islam is peace,” “No to terrorism,” and “The mosque is for prayers not conspiracy.”

In the months following September 11, clashes between the West and the Middle East escalated rapidly, making it virtually impossible for the Arab “coalition of the willing” to abide with Western demands. New conflicts emerged proving that educational policy remains central to cultural imperialism and the propagation of a power relationship between the West and Arabs or Muslims. First, *l’affaire du foulard*, as French media called it referring to the act of outlawing the veil, became effective on March 15, 2004 (Scott, 2007, p. 1). A year later, Prophet Mohammed offensive editorial cartoons were published in the Danish newspaper Jyllands Posten. By this time, it became clear that the management of political dissent could no longer remain the only priority of educational reform in Arab nations. This preoccupation, which requires a constant restructuring of the humanities and social sciences to serve the political purposes at hand, had to be transformed. As the pressure was escalating, Arab states had to shift their positions temporarily and unleash narratives condemning the Westernization of Arab society under the guise of cultural identity guardianship in order to diffuse the tension away from their own failure. A good example was the way Arab states dealt with the controversial French decision to promote integration by unveiling Muslim female students. This act created a popular uprising among Muslims in France, throughout Europe, and in many Arab nations that Western media quickly portrayed as a clear indication of Islamic radicalism (Dougherty, 2005). Regardless of how France justified this *Talibanist* measure of policing the way its citizens dress and make a law to impose a dress code, this act was interpreted as Western aggression on Islam and Muslims. As usual, demonstrations were organized, flags were burned, and people protested

near Western embassies. Surprisingly, however, no one saw in such a reaction a moment of extreme hypocrisy considering that the veil, as an expression of a political position, implying the possibility of challenging secular laws or the yearning for an Islamic state, had been banned in many Muslim nations like Tunisia and Turkey since the early 1990s with no or minimal popular resistance. In these same countries, it is virtually impossible for a veiled woman to hold a government job before she unveils. This is also a good example of the kind of contradictions that the younger Arab generation encounters while in schools and in the public sphere.

## **Section II**

### **Examining the Neocolonial Arab Curricula: Examples of School Reforms**

Under tremendous political pressure, the need to reinvent the function of education and distance it from any ties to violence has taken schools' roles back to a pre-colonial era by introducing new strategic measures, particularly close surveillance of school material and teachers' attitudes (Ideological security on focus, 2008). The Saudi state, unarguably the most creative when it comes to compliance with United States' demands, extended this pathology with a new initiative entitled the "ideological security" project. Launched since 2003, the ideological security project aims at retraining mosque Imams and teachers to refrain from preaching dangerous thought and interpretations of religious texts, violent behavior, and extremist Islam as defined by the state. Another important goal of this project was explained by Dr. Ahmad Y. A. Ad-Darweesh, the Vice Rector for Community Service and Continuing Education, in a sermon at al-Masheliah Mosque, Najran, south of Saudi Arabia: "It guards the youth against misled thought; futile beliefs; and mistaken *Ijtihad* personal reasoning by non-competent people. It keeps them away from those trying to destabilize constants of religion within the community; playing games with the homeland potentials, values, and Islamic habits; implanting extremism into hearts of individuals and community; and planting seeds of sedition and sectarianism amongst community members" (ibid.). Though there are no clear guidelines as to what constitutes extremist Islam, in plain English this means that all teachers have to succumb to a uniform method dictated by the Saudi government. The state in this sense becomes the only manufacturer of culture and knowledge which now comes directly from trained and domesticated teachers to students.

Following in the footsteps of the Saudis, in 2004 Jordan printed new textbooks which to date remain the newest in the Arab world. A year earlier, Jordanian Education Minister Khaled Tuqan announced that these textbooks will make the difference between “terrorism and legitimate resistance” crystal clear (Jordan schoolbooks to address reconciliation, 2003). Mr. Tuqan assured international media that Jordan was fully engaged in supporting peace initiatives in the world and promoting understanding between cultures so as to affirm international values. He continued “We want to cultivate an enlightened youth who won't take their faith blindly [. . .] We want them to be thoughtful about what they are doing, and teach them that violence for the sake of violence is against our faith” (Fattah, 2005). A similar statement was later made about the new textbooks' content, by Fawwaz Jaradat, the head of school curricula in Jordan, who told Al Dustour newspaper that “the revamped textbooks will focus on ‘human rights in combating occupation, the differentiation between terrorism and legitimate resistance, [and] the concept of terrorism’ ” (Fattah, 2005).

More specifically, clear distinctions between social and religious responsibilities were made. Of course, the objective was to separate state and religion. The West was only addressed within the historical context of colonization that was presumed over. A comprehensive new textbook was introduced for all grades of secondary education entitled Islamic Culture, printed in 2004 by the Jordanian Ministry of Education. Islamic Culture was divided into 13 units which cover a variety of topics including the story of creation, family structure, kinship, citizenship, Muslim/Jordanian identity, society, human rights in Islam, and democracy. The title of Unit Five was: *Al-da'wa wal-jihad*, (conversion and jihad) (Islamic Culture, 2004, p. 139). The chapter defines the importance of conversion in Islam, illustrates its rules and methods, and explains the qualities of those who take on such a mission. Broad and hypothetical, the analysis relies heavily on examining Qu'ranic verses and unpacking their meaning rather than aim directly at discussing jihad and its implications. In 26 pages (from pp. 139 to 165), the text addresses different lessons concerning conversion without a single reference to jihad. By avoiding the discussion of jihad, its conceptualization as a religious duty and civic responsibility, or examining its ties to political violence, call for action, and use of force if necessary, the Jordanian state is never liable. Without the official spin however, the topic seems to be open to the teacher's initiative and interpretation.

So while we see a deliberate attempt to eliminate complex topics in the Saudi system, the Jordanians have opted for silence.

More problematic than the lack of interest in resolving these contradictions which clearly create a fragmentation between reality and curriculum, is the assumption that teachers and students are able to make the distinction between theories and political necessities. Beyond the impact of Western pressure, the lack of constructive criticism, the absence of or limited parents' feedback, the unconditional and often coerced tendency to praise government endeavors in my opinion constrain the efforts of administrators and teachers from implementing meaningful reforms. Many official educational initiatives that have been introduced in the last decade were immediate responses to emerging political circumstances, in particular September 11. Some are partial (Egypt, Jordan, and Syria), based on very little research; others are comprehensive and strategic (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar) where the English language and curricula prevailed and "Arabic and Islamic studies were being relegated" (Karmani, 2005, p.88). In all cases, neither is focused on dealing with the immediate needs of Arab societies. Actually, with this act of shifting positions between silence, glorification, and soft criticism of the West, Arab states have made the classroom a very confusing space and totally disconnected from everyday life. Still new allegations in Western media claiming that Arab textbooks represent "Western non-believers as enemies of the faith" (i.e. the Muslim faith) continue to be printed (Merkleson, 2010).

### **Section III**

#### **Analysis of Recent Reforms**

In order to illustrate my argument in concrete terms, I discuss examples of reforms as aspects of the emergence of a new narrative of colonization that operates under the guardianship of the Arab state itself. In Egypt, the new curriculum puts an extraordinary emphasis on secular notions of citizenship and presents the loyal citizen as the model whose belief in the nation state should supersede any other loyalties. There is no mention of any ethics that derive from Islam or Islamic principles regulating the Muslim's behavior. More critical is the misleading representation of the Egyptian family. The following example is similar to other reform cases of textbooks that have

been introduced in North Africa since the 1990s. In the textbook, the typical Egyptian family is nothing like the real Arab family. Neill states:

[t]he typical family depicted in these texts could very well be any American family. Each has only two or three children. (Egyptians, typically, have large families). The family members are clothed in Western fashions – moms can be seen in short pleated skirts and turtle-neck sweaters and dads in suits and ties. (2006, p. 4)

Other changes have targeted the study of *Fiqh* (jurisprudence and knowledge of Islamic laws), which represents a multidisciplinary field and one of the rarest occasions in Islamic curricula where students are actually exposed to logical and critical thinking. *Fiqh* entails a profound study and understanding of Islam and Islamic laws. Its methods and topics may be used to simplify for and introduce students to complex concepts such as constructing meaning based on existing rules and develop insightful inquiries. Through this process, students usually learn the rules of critical engagement and deal with linguistics, terminology, and the role of semiotics in producing a rich variety of interpretations of a particular text. *Fiqh* was replaced by *Al Fiqh Al Muyassar*, a less complex narrative produced by Al-Azhar under the supervision of the Egyptian government (U.S. Plan to Change the Methods of Islamic Nations, 2005). The topic of Jihad was eliminated; the Hadith, a topic usually taught in religious studies, is placed in a reading course instead. Last, French language study is now introduced in third grade in all Egyptian schools.

It is important to understand how these reforms translate in reality. According to Adnan Hussein, educator and former member in the Jordanian parliament, within the sweeping reforms that restructured the humanities, the teaching of Arabic, and religious and civic studies, “an extraordinary emphasis is placed on the nation state” (Addoughchi, 2004). Interestingly, similar to Egypt’s reforms, the new textbooks no longer teach about the Palestinian struggle and its relevance to the Arab-Israeli conflict. All references to the ambitions of Israel in the Middle East have been removed. References to Jerusalem and Al-Aksa Mosque as holy spaces for Arabs and Muslims and relevant to Arab history and civilization were deleted. Instead Mr. Hussein announced the introduction of new topics added to school curricula; two new courses in civic education that particularly stand out are “World Peace” and “Just Peace.” It is not clear exactly what both courses will teach.

In Qatar, starting in 2001, education reforms have been designed by the influential and conservative Rand Corporation whose reports are so obsessively bureaucratic and focused on administrative structures that they bring to mind early French practices in Algeria. Dominic Brewer, the director of Rand's education unit then, explains the objectives of the Qatari state and the reform mission in the following terms: "...changes like more openness in the economy, entrepreneurship, and ultimately democracy require a population that's used to these things. This was the opportunity to rebuild a model school system, to combine the best elements from around the world" (Glasser, 2003, p. A20). Rand promised to bring to Qatari society an international curriculum that fosters creative thinking, critical skills, teamwork, problem-solving, and the ability to use technology. The reforms also stressed the importance of breaking old habits of memorization. Rand was also concerned about "teacher control" of class material and classroom dynamics. The reforms are currently monitored by an annual quality-assessment system that includes surveys sent out to teachers, students, parents, principals, and social workers (Qatar, Education Reforms Continue, 2005), and some reports about positive results have already been published. To Qatar's credit, developing an assessment system is an excellent initiative and very critical to students' performance and the quality of education. However, some of the reforms seem controversial and deserve closer analysis. With the growing number of independent schools in a nation where education is becoming more and more decentralized, education has changed to a private enterprise where competition, profit making, and the marginalization of public interest become the criteria for measuring success.

The second problem in these reforms is the decision to prioritize English instruction above Arabic instruction. Since 2002, learning English has been mandatory beginning in first grade. More time is now devoted to English than Arabic or Islamic studies (Glasser, 2003, p. A20). By eliminating public education, requiring the learning of English, and prioritizing an Anglophone experience totally alien to the local culture, students are severely alienated with no cultural anchor, heritage, language of their own, pride, or source of political identity. In his critique of the dubious policy of "more English and less Islam", Karmani states wisely that "[...] the project of English in Muslim contexts has scarcely ever only been about the learning or teaching of a supposedly neutral linguistic medium but perhaps more about the broader protracted struggle to



defeat or pacify the formidable political force of Islam” (2005, p.86). I am not suggesting students’ exposure should be limited to a strictly Arab and Islamic experiences, but rather to encourage a multidisciplinary approach. John Dewey equated the lack of multiple experiences with slavery arguing: “There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences. Otherwise, the influences which educate some into masters, educate others into slaves” (p. 21).

In Saudi Arabia, the immediate educational initiatives do not differ greatly from the measures taken in Egypt or Jordan. Since 2004, Prince Turki al-Faisal, the Saudi ambassador to the United States, exhausted every means available to advertise Saudi efforts to change the curricula, appearing on television and other media outlets while also leading speaking tours. The Prince informed his American audience: “Not only have we eliminated what might be perceived as intolerance from old textbooks that were in our system, we have implemented a comprehensive internal revision and modernization plan” (Shea, 2006). Recently, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz praised Saudi Arabia’s “ideological security” project for bearing fruit since “2,000 teachers have been fired or transferred to administrative positions out of fear they were inculcating the youth with dangerous content” (Bar’el, 2010). They failed to consider the glaring contradiction of claiming to eliminate extremism and to teach tolerance through extremist measures and oppressive methods. In an interview with Asharq Alawsat newspaper, Saudi Interior Minister, Prince Naif Bin Abdulaziz expressed his dissatisfaction with the misplaced priorities of Imams, stating that: "Mosque platforms are focusing on minor or outside issues at a time when the homeland and its citizens are suffering from major events that influence the fate of this homeland." For Prince Bin Abdulaziz, imperialism, corruption, the state’s compliance with colonial policies, its failure to modernize its political structures and political oppression are “minor” issues. He adds "We must shift our focus to the greatest danger of all -- that is, deviation from religion and disobedience to those in charge" (Al Shemary, 2008). Actually, by reading carefully between the lines of this statement it becomes clear that extremism and political dissent became synonymous.

The Saudi government is also lobbying for new student visas at the U.S. State Department and hoping to increase the number of Saudi students enrolled in American colleges and universities

to 15,000 (Schwartz, 2007). The number fell around a 1000 in 2004 and started climbing back up to an estimated 10000 in the fall of 2006-2007 (Huston, 2007).

There is no doubt that writing textbooks and addressing the complexity of political and cultural goals for Arab nations while remaining politically and culturally sensitive is a challenging responsibility. Overt censorship of important historical issues, however, widens the fracture between Arab students and their reality. Past investments in quick fix approaches did not work in the long term. These current changes may not work, either, since most of them are not attached to an assessment process. Often, these reforms are amended as problems arise during the implementation phase, further complicating assessment development.

My point is that censoring students and avoiding questions about the representations of Westerners as colonizers, infidels, imperialists, antagonists, and cultural others do not eradicate these constructions. At the same time, Arab popular discourse has to address Arab identity issues and explain to younger generations why the West perceives them the way it does, collectively, tautologically, and often using psychological terms to describe Islam as enraged, ashamed, and victimized and why Islamist narratives respond with similar fixations. In short, omissions cannot replace clarity and understanding. In this sense, Arab curriculum is also a narrative that can engage the dialectic of hegemony and counter-hegemony of education. This engagement can be a liberating venue where a discourse of resistance to the evolving forms of domestication can develop but also a possible sphere to negotiate the crisis of Arab identity. To this end, madrasa narratives respond to the underlying arguments and assumptions of these claims which depict the Middle East as the historical antagonist of Western civilization. Inherent in these arguments is the belief that Muslims are unable to be part of civilization. Most surprisingly, perhaps, in the wake of these revived neocolonial and neo-orientalist discourses which seek to demonstrate paternalistically to Arab populations their backwardness, militancy, and volatility, is the recondite notion that when left to their own devices namely Arabic and Islam, these populations seek to institutionalize fanaticism. Therefore, monitoring them becomes necessary to prevent their deviancy and reduce their collective threat to global society.

Arab essentialist discourse cannot be separated from the stereotypical constructions of Arabs and Muslims in the West or from unfounded claims made by academics and politicians who subscribe to ideas like those embodied in Huntington's hypothesis of the inevitable clash of civilizations and Lewis's division of Muslims to "good" and "bad" (Mamdani, 2004, p. 24). Nor could it be taken aside from media campaigns in the West. In the United States, for example, it is almost impossible for many average typical Americans to think about the Arab world without evoking undercurrents of racial hatred and condescension. In the same manner, some Islamic discourses, which have impacted teachers' thoughts, attitudes, and teaching methods, build on these constructions a counter-narrative useful to their efforts to portray the American civilization as a decaying culture. Seen as the result of an exaggerated belief in materialism, they continue to argue, like their Right Wing Christian counterparts would, that separation of state and church means the rejection of God which is not only an emblem of the Westerners' arrogance but also of their spiritual bankruptcy. "Anti-Western militants construct a similarly absolute conflict between the degenerate, repressive, soulless, hedonistic, and women-exploiting West, and the justice, truth, and moral center represented by Islam" (Sells, 2003, p. 12). In this light, the United States, as the leader of the West, is understood only in terms of the destructive force of its weapons and the belligerent technological supremacy that it has achieved. American culture is seen as devoid of any moral credentials and struggling with the guilt it carries for creating and deifying profit and capitalist greed. Indeed, the lack of spirituality and the strong belief in selfish individualism, rather than in a sense of family and community, are seen as the pillars of American culture.

With this logic, the separation between an American people and a conceited American army becomes impossible. Such stereotyping becomes a possibility to respond to exaggerated vilification of the Arab world. Thinking along the same lines, Arab intellectuals and academics generally do not perceive the ongoing crisis in terms of educational policy or the failure to secularize education, but rather tie the crisis to the emergence of a new form of racism, namely Islamophobia. Most of them find a concept that juxtaposes the "bloody" boundaries of Islam, to use Huntington's description, and the West as the space of peaceful civilization rather shocking given the West's record of colonization and other disasters.

The question here becomes one of power and knowledge dialectics making Islamic teachings totally reactionary in an effort to respond to Western ontology by attempting to trespass into the “superstructure” and to transform itself into a hegemonic discourse. Frantz Fanon expressed this idea in Black Skin, White Masks, stating: “To speak is to exist absolutely for the Other” (1967, p. 17). The aim of these ambiguous pedagogical instructions (for instance, to challenge Western superiority, to learn about the West following a set of binaries, such as colonized/imperial, Muslims/infidels, spiritual/materialistic, and ethical/immoral) is not only to construct their other as a legitimate enemy (within the paradigm of producing knowledge about them in order to subdue them), but to monopolize the categories of otherness, to articulate their Islamic collective identity, and to define their political positioning and repositioning. These instructions are part of a larger Islamic project which seeks to craft for its members and followers what Spivak calls the “essential attributes” of a group of people as a “strategic use of positivist essentialism in scrupulously visible political interest” (Landry & Mclean, 1996, p. 214), in this case, the characteristics of a Muslim *Ummah* (community or people regardless of national or ethnic affiliations) through the authentication of common group traits. For instance, rhetoric highlighting the solidarity, harmony, and unity of a Muslim community guided by the precepts of Islamic law that, when followed righteously, as many claim, guarantees the well-being and prosperity of its members, is prominent in madrasa narratives. Since they understand education as a system of socialization that enables the normalization of cultural attitudes, norms, and behavior while also being a significant instrument of change, they utilize it to construct a temporary unity and a chance to challenge the present order and reproduce it as an order in which they are active participants.

## **Section IV**

### **Conclusion**

In order to improve Arab education, mutually deconstruct Arab/Muslim and Western stereotypes, diffuse the tension between the West and Arab populations, and put both sides on better grounds of negotiation, oversimplifications, inaccuracies, distortions, and de-contextualizations of certain facts ought to be addressed. Teaching a selective and sanitized history that centers on oppression, silence, and denial leads to ignorance and naïve judgments. Hence, the politics of hegemony and propagandist narratives masquerading as knowledge and

grounded criticism, still lend themselves naturally to the dangerous belief that violence always originates elsewhere beyond Western borders and that Western aggression or imperial and neocolonial policies are never the problem. Extremism cannot be eliminated with extremist measures. In his final summary, Groiss concludes that Arab textbooks are “marked by a biased and hostile stance toward the ‘other’ ” (2003, p. 10). His inflammatory interpretation turned into an interpretative extremism, which was ironically producing the very same discourse it was trying to critique. Put in its historical framework, however, the following Hadith taken from a ninth grade Saudi textbook, which was widely cited and circulated as proof of Arab hatred of the West, would mean something completely different. The Hadith states: “It is not permitted to emulate the infidels - Jews, Christians and others... Emulation of the infidels leads to loving them, glorifying them and raising their status in the eyes of the Muslim, and that is forbidden” (Doumato, 2003, p. 231).

This same Hadith read in the proper historical context of the cold war era when many of these school textbooks were printed it would have had a completely different meaning and political implications. It was during the 1980s, a period of relentless competition between capitalism and communism and other emerging ideologies, that these same antagonist ideas were very useful to the agendas of both Arab client states and the United States. The cooperation between them to contain the influence of communism and monitor very closely the spread of Shi’a Islam was phenomenal particularly after Iran announced the rise of the Islamic revolution of 1979. Back then the rigid Wahhabi interpretation (opposes secularism and modern interpretation of Islam) of Islam was mobilized through Islamic education and used against a different target audience in order to create an army of *maujahidin* or jihadist warriors against the Russian enemy. The madrasa curricula at least for the Afghani, Pakistan, and Saudi experiences including these same textbooks that carry narratives similar to this Hadith were developed at the University of Nebraska with the financial support of the United States Agency for International Development, “a \$50 million USAID grant that ran from September 1986 through June 1994” (Mamdani, 2004, p. 137). At that time, these hostile teachings were supposed to fend off the communist threat and demonize the Russians. “A third grade mathematics textbook asks: “One group of maujahidin attacks 50 Russian soldiers. In that attack 20 Russians are killed. How many Russians fled?” (ibid.). These very same books instructing Afghani children “to pluck out the eyes of their

enemies and cut of their legs, are still widely available in Afghanistan and Pakistan, some in their original form” (ibid.). Actually, this same Hadith cited above would read in the following terms: “It is not permitted to emulate the infidels – Russians, Communists, Shi’a, and others... Emulation of the leftists leads to loving them, glorifying them and raising their status in the eyes of the capitalist consumer, and that is forbidden.”

Gradually, Islamic indoctrination moved to a combative interpretation of religion which was encouraged in mosques and madrasa. Fatima Mernissi captures this in her description of “Palace Fundamentalism” or “petro-fundamentalism” when she assures us that this doctrine could not have developed “with its primitive messages of obedience (*Ta’a*), intolerance, misogyny, and xenophobia” and gone this far “is inconceivable without the liberal democracies’ strategic support of conservative Islam, both as bulwark against communism and as a tactical resource for controlling Arab oil” (2003, pp. 51-52). The current neocolonial narrative being nurtured by Arab educational reforms centered on the premise that less Islam and less Arabic produce “better” or docile Arabs aims at alienating a whole generation. In such a narrative, Arabs either negate themselves or disconnect their present from any past experiences that may facilitate their connection with or understanding of the present. This does not imply that religious fanaticism, violence, resistance, terrorism, Jihad, responsibility, and self-criticism should not be taught or discussed. On the contrary, curricula should address all these topics based on a multidisciplinary approach that does not resonate in silence, self-blame, or at worst buys into the Eurocentric bias that it is an Arab intellectual defect. The current reforms’ critical flaws are now forcing a whole generation of young Arabs to float between currents of state oppression from within and Western subordination from outside. Under such circumstances, Arab students can never learn to be in charge of their own thinking processes, value their ideas, form independent judgments, make intelligent choices, or understand the difference between knowledge and ideology.

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Imed Labidi

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Imed Labidi

**Writer's Details:** Imed Labidi lectures in Cultural Studies/Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

**Correspondence Details:** [labi0009@umn.edu](mailto:labi0009@umn.edu)