

**Committee: Social, Humanitarian and Cultural (GA3)**

**Issue: Eliminating religious extremism in education**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Our world is constantly changing and evolving. We live on a globally accessible planet where religious borders are increasingly opaque. Religions are penetrating more and more international borders; tolerance, however is becoming growingly fraught. Recent times have also seen an increase in religious extremism leading to radical events such as suicide bombings, public beheadings and indiscriminate attacks. Nine documented suicide attacks involving Palestinian minors occurred between October 2000 and March 2004. In Africa, an estimated 20,000 children are involved in active combat roles in the Sudan area alone. The Parisian attacks of 2015 affected people of all ages and backgrounds. Malala Yousafzai, a Muslim female teenager in Pakistan was shot when boarding her school bus, attempting to attend school. The profile of most instigators of such attacks is of a teenage to early twenty-something, most typically a single male at a period in their lives that is highly influenced by their social and educational grounding. Religious patronage for these individuals frequently takes precedence over citizenship. "Education" for such youths can start at an early age where previous suicide bombers or such similar perpetrators are seen and adorned as martyrs by their teachers, parents and society. In their early to mid-teens they may have enter religious schooling whereby trancelike repetition of religious scripts is enacted and a cult of martyrdom is established.

Is religious extremism in education the root of the above actions? On a planet of increasing migrating peoples, our world must seek a more tolerant social and religious balance, a world of mutual respect for colour, race and creed; as human beings led through education. We must seek to remove barriers and increase education; an education of understanding, respect, awareness of racial and religious values. Religious extremism can only lead to isolationism, paranoia, fear and cycles of never ending retribution.

The elimination of extremism, particularly in relation to religion and youths must be eradicated globally.

## **DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS**

### **Education**

"The act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgement, and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life"

### **Extremism**

"The holding of extreme political or religious views; fanaticism"

### **Extremist**

"A person who holds extreme political or religious views, especially one who advocates illegal, violent, or other extreme action"

### **Religion**

"The belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods"

### **Madrassa**

"A school or college, especially a school attached to a mosque where young men study theology"

### **Secular**

"Of or relating to worldly things or to things that are not regarded as religious, spiritual or sacred, temporal"

### **Cult**

"A particular system of religious worship, especially with reference to its rites and ceremonies"

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **Links between religion and education**

Prior to the introduction of state-funded educational systems, the availability of education was restricted. Primarily, access to education depended on financial status. This meant that even talented students from poor families could not pursue educational opportunities. Religious organisations generally became involved in education of the poor or other marginalised groups as a benevolent act. As countries became wealthier and more developed, a publically funded education system is normally developed. Even when such a system is available, some groups may be excluded from educational opportunities. Examples of this include the education of women, where convent schools in Ireland and missionary schools in Africa and South America played a key role, and the education of individuals with specific disabilities, like deafness and blindness. In countries with developed public education systems, private schools may be supported by religious groups and may result in a two-tier system. Specific educational programmes run by religious groups may prioritise the development of “faith” above all other subjects. Such education may be integrated with all educational activities as the foundation of the daily curriculum. Alternatively, it may take the form of supplemental classes outside of normal school hours, supported by members of the religion, to prepare children for specific religious observances like baptism, communion or Bar and Bat Mitzvah or to teach them based upon sacred texts, like the Koran.

The participation of organised religion in the educational system is considered to have some advantages by its supporters. These include the creation of standard norms of behaviour and beliefs that may form the basis of civil society. A less benevolent interpretation of religious participation in education is that it allows the recruitment of a new generation of followers of a specific faith. Religious participation in the education system may therefore be a strategic means of expansion. Critics of religious involvement in education cite concerns about indoctrination with ideas that may be contrary to the common good, exclusivity and isolation from broader society. Others support an atheist viewpoint and reject any educational system that is based on the existence of an omnipotent being.

### **Subversion of associations between religion and education by extremists**

Religious prejudices and extremist behavior can be connected. This is the main reason concern over tension and extremist religious reactions at schools. Religious faiths appeal to a sense of belonging to a group of like-minded individuals. At its extreme, followers may believe themselves to be superior to others in society who do not share their

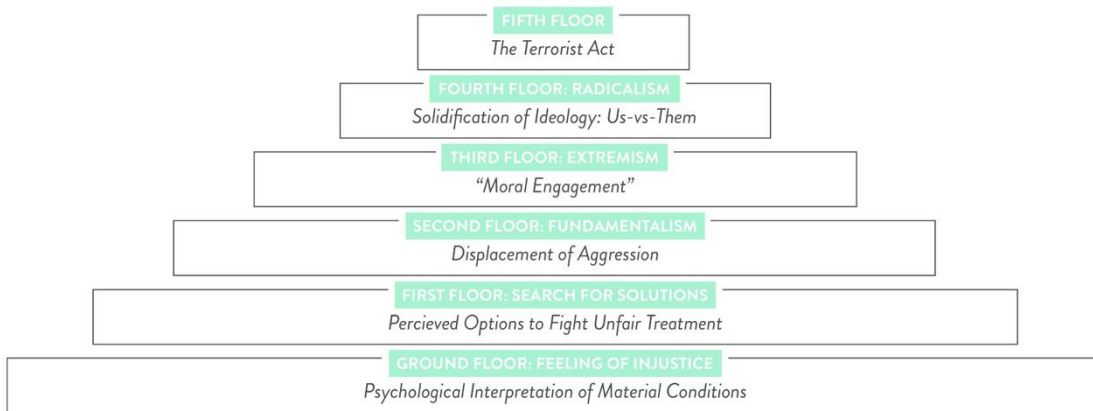
views. Believing that others are inferior is common to many extremist groups and has been a characteristic of many terrorist and genocidal groups throughout history. Examples include the atrocities committed against Jewish citizens in Nazi Germany and the so-called “ethnic cleansing” that characterised the Balkan conflict. In both examples, education systems were used to spread propaganda. Religions vary in their degree of hierarchy and in the strictness of their interpretation of ancient texts around which they are based. Religious leaders who support a very literal interpretation of sacred texts may espouse views that are contrary to current norms about the dignity and equality of every person.

Another example is the one of Saudi Arabia. Religious prejudices and extremist behavior in some Saudi schools have recently increased. Any sacrilegious move towards other Islamic denominations is forbidden, since the importance of unity among Muslim communities consist the main priority. But if the tensions continue and the authorities do not take measures against the issue, then the main stakeholders should not keep silent against disrespect to certain ideas and rights. Sometimes, the heart of the problem is considered to be the predominance of an indoctrinatory approach to learning and teaching about Islam. This confines Islamic education to uncritical transmission of a revered set of texts. This form of Islamic education is exploited by extremist recruiters in both majority and minority Muslim societies.

Extremism relates to a form of religiosity involving a highly rigid interpretation of Islam. A complex mix of individual or collective identity needs, peer pressure and personal grievances – including Islamophobia – has led some young Muslims gradually to adopt an extremist personality. This has been nurtured by formal and informal indoctrinatory educational activities that use a narrow religious content which shapes the ideology of religious extremism. The results can leave people vulnerable to negative influences and be used to legitimise irrational hatred via an “us versus them” narrative.

Consequently, although education can tremendously improve one's life it also has equally negative potential when misused. Extremists use education very effectively as a weapon to lure children from all over the world to participate in their activities. Moreover, extremist groups attack educational institutions by using violence, while at the same time use education as a tool in order to promote their ideologies through the religious and educational systems they control. According to the Tony Blair Faith Foundation Education, the steps that lead to a terrorist attack are displayed in the following picture. The individual perceives injustice and seeks means by which this may be addressed. Extremist groups may take advantage of vulnerable individuals, encouraging aggression and developing an “us

versus them” mentality that may result in a terrorist act. Extremists actively desire to create educational cultures which encourage violent extremism and are based on a divisive violent worldview.



### Current examples of ways to reduce the risk of religious extremism in education

To tackle religious extremism in education, it is necessary to challenge indoctrinatory practices, including those on the internet. It is mandatory to provide students with literacy that integrates reflective thinking skills and intercultural understanding to help them engage intelligently and confidently with their faith heritage and wider society. Unfortunately, so far neither communities nor educational policymakers have shown interest in developing such alternative educational models.

Moreover, the introduction of state-funded education is generally associated with regulations or guidance regarding the degree of religious education considered acceptable. In some countries, such as France, government-funded education is secular and religious education is forbidden. Elsewhere, for example the UK, a programme of education giving equal attention to all religious beliefs is mandated. Higher levels of education in society may be beneficial by encouraging debate and dissent. Religious education often highlights separation by gender so initiatives that enable equality of access to education by males and females, such as those in Greece, may be indirectly protective.

All in all, extremism in education can be defeated by robust and competent internal intervention. The struggle against extremism needs to include a measured, long-term educational response where religious communities, without being stigmatised, can join wider civil and educational efforts to counter it.

### MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

#### Afghanistan

Since the 1920s, when the first high schools were established public education in Afghanistan was subjected to pressure by religion and faced stringent government restrictions. That was the time that extremist Islamist ideology started being misused. Later on, during the 80's, the schools and higher education institutions were controlled but also used by the pro-Soviet communist regime in order to promote its ideology and political objectives. The idea that the government has the right to control public institutions still exists in Afghanistan and is used as a political tool.

Since the mujahedin victory over the communist regime in 1992, communism has been virtually eliminated and the education sector has been destroyed. It got even worse after 1996 when the Taliban took over the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul. Their brutality forced thousands of local teachers and technocrats to leave their country while at the same time, education for female students was completely banned in the areas under the control of the Taliban.



Male schools were forced to include many hours of Islamic teaching, while at the same time clerics were given senior positions in the education bureaucracy. Literature, arts and sciences were also banned, even great mystic poets rooted in the Sufi orders of Afghanistan - the popular form of Islam in the country.

The Taliban were defeated in 2001, but they still manage to retain ideological power and attempt to impose their beliefs through force. These regions are close to Pakistan's northwestern regions, which face similar problems. If a solid solution to the education crisis in these border regions is not applied, there will be unrest, violence, and terrorism for decades.

## Iran

Iran, formerly Persia, was once the largest and most powerful empire in human history. Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, Shari'a is the governing law of the country, which was forcibly imposed by religious extremists. Under Shari'a, citizens do not have the right to change or renounce their religious faith, even though the Quran states: "Let there be no compulsion in religion". The latest example of Iran's extremism is the idea that other Muslims must be declared apostates in order to justify their murders. Their, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei declared that Iranian youngsters should volunteer to fight against disbelief, in Syria. There are both free public schools and private schools in Iran at all levels. After the

1979 revolution, the most important change was the Islamisation of the education system as all students were segregated by sex. The Centre for Textbooks, composed mainly of clerics, produced around 3000 textbooks that reflected Islamic views.

### **Nigeria**

Islam started to be known in Nigeria between the 9th and 13th century. Islamic extremism in Northern Nigeria is mainly represented by the Boko Haram insurgency. The first recorder Jihad was waged in the 14th century. Boko Haram has similar practices to other extremist organizations, forcing young males to war and forbid young females to attend school. The influence of religion varies by geography. The pattern of education in the South and North has been very different. Christian missionaries were allowed to set up mission schools by the British colonial powers. The government schools were generally Christian orientated. Muslim students were forced to study “bible-knowledge” and attend church. It was up to the parents to choose whether their children would attend a modern school thus risking the loss of their faith or to keep their faith but lose the opportunity to succeed at the highest levels of government and public service.

### **Syria**

In recent years the turbulent situation in Syria between the government, the rebels and the ISIS fighters has increased a number of extremist attacks. The ISIS fighters have limited the access of education of the children in Syria especially those that believe in a different religion to theirs. They also have been very violent to Muslim children not following them, thus limiting their chances to a better education.



## UN INVOLVEMENT: RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

According to the Global Terrorism Index, religious extremism has become the main driver of terrorism in recent years. This is why terrorism and religious groups that have committed or are related to acts of terrorism have been the main focus of the UN bodies' agenda.

- Resolution 2178 (2014): the Security Council adopted this resolution aiming to prevent the international flow of terrorist fighters to and from conflict zones. All member states unanimously decided that they should prevent the "recruiting organizing transporting or equipping of individuals who travel to a state other than their states of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning or participation in terrorist acts.

They also agreed upon the ensuring that "their legal systems provide for the prosecution, as serious criminal offenses, of travel for terrorism or related training, as well as the financing or facilitation of such activities"

The member states also expressed their concern over the establishment of international terrorist networks, the Council underscored the "particular and urgent need" to prevent the travel and support for foreign terrorist fighters associated with the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL-also known as ISIS), Al-Nusra Front (ANL) and other affiliates or splinter groups of Al-Qaida.

- Resolution 2170 (2014): the Security Council through the resolution "demanded ISIS, Al-Nusra Front and all other entities with Al-Qaida cease all violence and terrorist acts, and immediately disarm and disband. Recalling that their attacks against civilians on the basis of ethnic or religious identity might constitute crimes against humanity"
- Resolution 36/55: the General Assembly agreed upon the issue concerning religious freedom which was decided in 1981 that declared "the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief".
- Resolution/56/116: United Nations Literacy Decade: education for all "affirms that the realization of the right to education, especially for girls, contributes to the eradication of poverty" and "invites Member States, the specialized agencies and other organizations of the United Nations system as well as relevant intergovernmental and



non-governmental organizations to intensify further their efforts to implement effectively the World Declaration on Education for All,<sup>11</sup> the Dakar Framework for Action and the relevant commitments and recommendations to promote literacy made at recent major United Nations conferences and at their five-year reviews with a view to better coordinating their activities and increasing their contribution to development within the framework of the Decade in a manner that is complementary to and coordinated with the ongoing education for all process”

- “The resolution titled “Education for Democracy” (document A/69/L.54), introduced by the representative of Mongolia and adopted without a vote, also strongly encouraged Member States to integrate education for democracy, along with civics and human rights into their education standards and to develop and strengthen programmes and activities aimed at democratic values and governance.”
- The Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon declared "I condemn in the strongest terms all persecution and violations of the rights to life and physical integrity of individuals and communities based on religious, ethnic, national, racial or other grounds"

## **PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE**

Many previous interventions have been attempted but the increasing number of terrorist attacks suggests that current efforts are insufficient. Some NGOs have worked to improve education in the above-mentioned countries and give access to schools for a greater number of children in poverty-stricken countries that seem to face such problems. Historically, Nazi Germany resulted in a large number of atrocities against those of Jewish descent in a way that was institutionalized and propagated by the educational system. After World War II, the allied powers (Soviet Union, France, UK, US) ensured that Nazi ideology was eliminated from the curriculum. They installed educational systems that reflected their national ideologies and these varied between zones of occupation. A universal solution was not implemented. When West Germany gained partial independence in 1949, its new constitution granted educational autonomy to the state governments. At present, in most of Germany, the constitution currently makes religious instruction part of the curriculum but secular students can opt out. In Berlin, Bremen and Brandenburg religious education is optional.

Another sensible alternative is the establishment of long-term educational policy that would support Muslim communities to address the rise of religious extremism in their midst, which is already established in the United Kingdom.

## **POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

In order to discover a solution that will solve this matter it is crucial to research on your own, but you can also broaden your ideas with a little bit of the points below. It's well known that issues related to extremists are very hard to solve as religious beliefs are closely held. Nevertheless, there some solutions that will improve if not tackle the issue in hand, can be found.

So far, the policy response to such threats has focused on law, security and intelligence. As the problem spirals out of control, this one-dimensional response, which includes the government's preventive policy in schools, appears to be merely repeated more aggressively. Nevertheless, in the case of the Islam specifically, applying security and surveillance policy across society not only risks limiting civil liberties, but also isolating mainstream Muslims. This does not counter the manipulative interpretation of Islam being used by extremists to play upon grievances held by some Muslims.

Using education to eliminate religious extremism in education may sound strange, but is one of the most important ways to solve the matter. Education is both a target and a tool. Improved public awareness of the problem might lead to its solution. In most countries where religious extremism in education exists, a large number of young people are restricted from going to school, and others when going to school are manipulated by their teachers in order for the government or the extremists to take control and be in charge of them. Policies that increase equity of access to education may help. Another possible solution would be for governments to require teachers to provide secular education. Freedom, or rather its absence, plays a major role in countries governed by extremists. People are not given the right to believe in the religion of their choice. Initiatives requiring government support of freedom of speech or action may be helpful. Similarly, poverty and social exclusion are factors exploited by many terrorist organisations. Interventions focused on these factors may be useful.

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