Education for Tolerance: A Ray of Hope in a Troubled Region

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"Europe's soul is tolerance," said Angela Merkel at the official ceremony to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome. "Our history," she added, "obliges us in Europe to promote tolerance throughout Europe and across the globe and to help everyone practice it." Merkel is not alone. Other European leaders often speak of the value of tolerance that indeed appears to be the bon-ton of Europe. But to what extent is it manifested in policy?

At the global level, the ideal of education to tolerance has been a staple of the UNESCO agenda practically since its creation, as emphasized in the 1995 Declaration of Principles on Tolerance Proclaimed and Singed by its Member States: "without tolerance there can be no peace, and without peace there can be no development or democracy…Education is the most effective means of preventing intolerance."

However, this philosophy is not practiced in the curricula of the majority of Middle Eastern countries, although they are signatories to the Declaration of Principles. The schoolbooks of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Israel, the Palestinian Authority (under Fatah and Hamas), Syria and Tunisia have been studied by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education, a non-profit think tank specializing in analysis of schoolbooks, and the results are striking: the trend in most cases is that of belligerence, prejudice and slanted portrayals of the "other" as "the enemy of the people" or "enemy of the faith" upon which blame for conflicts and various societal ills is often placed, without any attempt to truly understand it. Moreover, at times, the "other" is subjected to dehumanization, demonization and even incitement to annihilation.

Schoolbooks published under the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority government in 2006 include blatant examples of the above trend, such as likening Jews to invading snakes: "By your life! How is it that snakes invade us and we still observe a protection covenant…? (Arabic Language – Linguistic Sciences, Grade 12 (2006), page 67)." Al-Fateh, the Hamas web magazine for children, (http://al-fateh.net) not only goes to new lengths in demonizing Jews and Israelis and actively inciting to murder of Jews and the annihilation of the State of Israel – "Al Quds (Jerusalem) will remain as a trust in our hands and the hands of all Muslims, and they are to unite and gather for its liberation and the liberation of the land of Palestine from the impurity of the Zionists, the descendents of apes and pigs (Issue 129, August 2008);" "…with Allah's help, the accursed Jewish state will be totally destroyed (Issue 43, January 1, 2005)" – but also demonizes the West: "The Jewish enemy kills our people in beloved Palestine, while America, Britain and the other European countries help it (Issue 2, October 2002);" "America is the terror, my child… she is the plague that destroys my liver … she is the viper that scatters poison inside me (Issue 15, October 15, 2003)."

Saudi Arabian schoolbooks fare no better, and are rife with expressions of hostility, blatant racism and intolerance toward the "other," namely Jews and Christians: "The

struggle of this nation [i.e., the Muslim nation] with Jews and Christians goes on, and it will last for ever…Jews and Christians are enemies of the believers [i.e., the Muslims]... (*Hadith*, Grade 9, pp. 148-149)." Jews and Christians are accused of taking part in a conspiracy against Muslims: "There is no doubt that the Muslims' power irritates the infidels and spreads envy in the hearts of Islam's enemies, namely, Christians, Jews and others. So they conspire against them, gather [their] forces against them, oppress them and seize every opportunity in order to eliminate the Muslims (Geography of the Muslim World, Grade 8, p. 116)." Genocidal tendencies toward the "other" appear within the context of apocalyptic religious teachings: "[It is told] by Abu Hurayrah that God's Messenger said: "the Day of Judgment will not arrive until the Muslims fight the Jews and the Muslims will kill them (*Hadith*, Grade 9, pp. 148-149)."

As if this weren't cause enough for concern, the presence of these Saudi schoolbooks at the heart of the media storms surrounding the King Fahd academies in London and Bonn and the Islamic Saudi Academy in Virginia highlights the problematic nature and relevance of the issue.

Notwithstanding, one should not mistakenly assume this is the Middle Eastern, Arab or Islamic way. In Tunisia, an entirely different approach can be found, following a reform of revolutionary proportions carried out by the Ministry of Education. The Tunisian textbooks emphasize the importance of tolerance, peace and dialog with the "other," equality between all human groups, openness toward the "other" and its culture (the West), use of religion for universal rapprochement, rather than alienation, and restriction of the ideals of jihad and martyrdom to historical events. The following excerpts are illustrative: "A funeral procession went by [in Medina] and the Prophet [Muhammad] stood up and we stood up [as well]. We said: "O Messenger of God, this is a Jew's funeral." He said: "Is it not a soul? Whenever you see a funeral procession, stand up!" (Islamic Education, Grade 9 (2007) p. 32);" "Tolerance, therefore, represents the basic idea in the Koran. How come, then, that some people have made the Book of God a tool of bigotry and narrow-mindedness? ([Literary] Texts, Grade 9 (2007) p. 159);" "It is impossible today to perceive our existence outside of the dialogue connection with the 'other'… The 'other' is essential and the dialogue with him – in whatever form – is necessary ([Literary] Texts, Grade 13 – Sciences (?) p. 154)."

The State of Qatar is another Arab country that has implemented positive changes in its national curriculum, with the help of the RAND-Qatar Policy Institute, by introducing new perspectives stressing the importance in a changing world of spreading tolerance through education. Such progressive educational programs could definitely serve to help create a healthy debate about the position of the "other" in the societies of the Gulf region.

Investment in education for peace and tolerance toward the "other" is indeed crucial for progress toward the brighter future we would like to see in the Middle East. Yet education that rejects the "other" and calls for violent struggle, martyrdom and death, will not contribute toward the fruition of this vision. Policymakers in the EU, US and international community should therefore act on the words of Chancellor Merkel and use

the power in their hands in order to distance this detrimental influence, firstly, from within, and, secondly, to encourage and fund those who seek inclusion, dialog and respect for the “other” in the tumultuous Middle East.