The Role of Education in Implementing Social Justice: The Case of Shia Muslims

In honor of World Day of Social Justice, on February 24, 2014, Shia Rights Watch and American University held the first-ever conference devoted to presenting new paradigms for exploring how the rights of the minority Shia Muslim community can be protected against such entrenched realities as subordination, injustice, violence, discrimination, and marginalization. Social scientists define *minority* as a culturally, ethnically, religiously, or racially distinct group that coexists with, but is subordinate to, a more dominant group. This subordinancy, the chief defining characteristic of any minority, has nothing to do with numbers, a fact perhaps most vividly illustrated by South Africa under apartheid (c. 1950-91).

The conference, held at American University, was cosponsored by the Mohammed Said Farsi Chair of Islamic Peace. Well-known and high caliber policymakers, professors, and researchers shared their findings in order to offer solutions designed to foster peace, tolerance, and religious freedom for this group and the regions in which they reside.

In his capacity as the first occupant of the endowed Mohammed Said Farsi Chair of Islamic Peace as well as the founder of the university-wide Center for Global Peace, Abdul Aziz Said (School of International Service, American University) welcomed everyone. He remarked that peace is far more than the absence of war, that it is, in fact, inclusive of social justice, ecological sustainability, sustainable economics, and cultural diversity (peace as the absence of structural violence). Thus, conflict resolution is one of the building blocks of peace. Given that the ends we seek and the means that we employ in the study of peace and conflict resolution are interconnected, teaching these two fields must be based on a pedagogy that is itself peace and not merely a process of certification. He argued that education *about* peace and conflict resolution and education *for* peace and conflict resolution are two sides of the same coin. Peace and conflict resolution education combine information with liberation and procedure with transformation. He concluded

by saying that we need to re-conceptualize the art and science of teaching by considering the education principles underlying the study of peace and conflict resolution as well as the context of peace and conflict resolution education.

The first panel consisted of Kristin Smith Diwan (assistant professor, Comparative and Regional Studies, American University School of International Service), Michael Kugelman (senior program associate, South and Southeast Asia, The Woodrow Wilson Center), and T. Kumar (director, International Advocacy for Amnesty International USA).

Diwan spoke on the situation of the Shia communities located within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states from a political science perspective. She argued that sectarianism or sectarian strife between Sunni and Shia is shaped by political conditions: the process of state formation and the nature of integrating communities/individuals within the national community. She analyzed the conditions faced by Shia communities in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain within the wider perspective of the soicopolitical and historical process of modern state formation. She argued that while there are similarities, each of these three communities face different challenges. While making communal progress is difficult, there is an even more pressing need to forge cross-sectarian understanding and integration through a civil state. The awareness of political challenges is equally important.

Kugelman presented the plight of Pakistan's Shia minority. He started off by saying that Pakistan is arguably one of the deadliest countries for Shias outside the Middle East. What is particularly alarming is the recently rising rate of of Shia deaths there: In 2012, at least 325 were killed; in 2013, nearly 400 were killed. More and more commentators in Pakistan are now using the word "genocide." He then went on to argue that this grim situation is the country's greatest security threat. Their situation is alarming not only because the state has institutionalized sect-based discrimination, but also because sectarian intolerance has such a large constituency: In a recent Pew poll, 41 percent of all Pakistanis stated that Shias are not Muslim. He concluded that people need to become more aware of what is happening to this community – and for that, there needs to be more informational exchanges and education.

Kumar, who has served as a human rights monitor in various Asian countries as well as in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Guatemala, and South Africa, has also served as director of several refugee camps. He reported on the hardships faced by the Shia in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. What is alarming about these cases, in his opinion, is the fact that all of them involved Muslims discriminating – often violently – against fellow Muslims. According to him, the issue of sectarian violence should be addressed and resolved by Muslims

themselves via education and intra-faith dialogue. He concluded that sectarian violence should be resolved as if it were a "family feud," because when non-Muslims attack or oppress Muslims they do not stop to ask if the latter are Sunni or Shia.

The second panel consisted of Scott Flipse (deputy director, Policy and Research, US Commission on International Religious Freedom), Abdulaziz Sachedina (IIIT Chair in Islamic Studies, George Mason University), and Lisa Curtis (senior research fellow, Asian Studies Center, The Heritage Foundation).

Due to a family emergency, Flipse was unable to attend. A specialist in American foreign policy, particularly toward Southeast and East Asia, as well as a specialist in human rights, religious freedom, and foreign operation appropriations, he had planned to examine the recent restrictions placed on Shia religious practice in Southeast Asia, mostly in Indonesia and Malaysia. In his words, both Sunni-majority countries, backed by government officials, have banned, jailed, or threatened indigenous Shias.

Sachedina has spent the last ten years concentrating on social and political ethics, including interfaith and intra-faith relations, Islamic biomedical ethics, and Islam and human rights. Using this venue to present some of the results of his long-term research on Islamic education for young Muslims, he charged that the Muslim world's current textbooks make no serious effort to educate students about the religiously pluralistic world in which they are living. He went on to say that, more importantly, students are not even informed about the plurality of Islamic schools of thought within in the global Muslim community. He then asked: "How can early Muslim education ignore the interfaith and intra-faith reality of modernity and the way it teaches us to respect the rights of those who do not necessarily share membership in the same confessional community?" He suggested that the only way to deal effectively with sectarian violence is to thoroughly revise the Islamic curricula taught in Muslim schools throughout the world, for this is a serious problem in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority countries, so that it can become culturally sensitive and savvy at the same time.

Curtis, who focuses on the United States' economic, security, and political relationships with South Asia, looked at the correlation between the rise of militant groups and religious intolerance and violence against the Shia community in Pakistan. She argued that this community is being increasingly targeted through a brutal campaign that killed nearly 400 Shias last year. Although such sectarian violence has plagued Pakistan for nearly thirty years, the number and frequency of anti-Shia incidents is increasing at such an alarming rate that many are now trying to flee the country. The growing pattern of

religious intolerance not only endangers religious minorities, but also threatens the very fabric of Pakistani society and undermines its struggling democracy. She opined that the level of violence and intolerance exacerbated during the 1980s and 1990s is one result of the Saudi-Iranian competition over Pakistan and the resulting power plays in the region. She concluded that education is the key to combating sectarianism. The Pakistan government must prioritize the education of its youth and reform educational curricula so that young Pakistanis can learn the value of religious tolerance and pluralism as well as of a civic education.

One theme was notably present throughout the conference: the central role of education and dialogue as the key to combating intolerance, extremism, and violence. All across the world, minorities of all types – religious, ethnic, racial, national – suffer disproportionately from unequal or restricted access to quality education. The Shia are no exception. They face a twofold process of discrimination in terms of education: Many of them do not have a free and complete access to quality education, and many Sunni-majority countries deliberately misrepresent the Shia creed in their educational systems as a matter of state policy. The resulting reality is one of widespread injustice, violence, ignorance, and misinformation. Promoting and protecting the right to education is an indispensable instrument for achieving many other rights: civil, cultural, economic, political, social, and religious. It is not enough to call for education rights and tolerance. To achieve lasting change, policymakers, academics, and other interested parties must not only strive to create a political environment in which these changes can be promoted, but also to provide realistic policy solutions that are based on research and culturally sensitive approaches.

Education is central to the development of a tolerant society. Given this reality, any education for tolerance should seek to counter those influences that lead to the fear and exclusion of others. Moreover, it should help young people develop their capacity for independent thought and judgment, critical thinking, and ethical reasoning. Humanity's religious, linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity, as well as its members' increasingly close contact with each other due to globalization, is not a pretext for conflict, but a treasure that enriches us all.

Shia Rights Watch (http://shiarightswatch.org) hopes to convene similar conferences at other universities and become a resource of information and research for academic institutions and think tanks.

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