

## **Education for Peace and Diversity in Muslim Schools: Navigating the Need for Development and Peace**

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### **Introduction**

It is challenging to engage in the experiential process of working in diverse communities, especially when examining the role of religion in seeking sustainable peace owned by the local communities by utilizing their wisdom and traditions. Dialogical engagement becomes an important methodology in this process.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, local community-owned peacebuilding models based on Islamic values for creating a foundation for forgiveness and reconciliation are an under-researched topic in Islamic studies.<sup>2</sup> Few organizations specialize in such processes in Muslim communities around the world. This short essay is an attempt to examine and present the work of the Salam Institute as a case study for Islamic peace education.

Since 2003, the Salam Institute model for Islamic peace has been applied in various parts of the world. It is based on a peacebuilding framework that has been promoting authentically owned and applied practices by the local elders and religious leaders. It counters the popular perception that such interventions are always seen as ‘outside’ inventions that come with pre-conceived and stereotypical notions toward local religious communities and their faith and cultural practices.<sup>3</sup>

It is essential to conceptualize a framework for building peace and fostering peace education based on the Islamic context and perspective. This framework should explain and highlight the very essence of Islam’s message of peace. It is also important to recognize that such potential exists in all other religions and faith groups. In fact, the field of interreligious and intrareligious peacebuilding has grown tremendously in the past two decades.<sup>4</sup>

### **Peace Education in Islam: Bridging Theory and Practice:**

There are many theories and studies on peace education.<sup>5</sup> However, there are very few sources dealing with Islamic peace education. For the purpose of this research, the working definition of Islamic peace education is as follows: the assumption that the primary message of Islam is peace

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you for Mohamed Othman for his copy editing and review of the draft article, and thank you for Frances Bulathsinghala for her transcribing notes of the lecture on this topic and compiling background data.

<sup>2</sup> Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*.

<sup>3</sup> Delavande and Zafar, “Stereotypes and Madrassas: Experimental Evidence from Pakistan”; Homeland Security News Wire, “Pakistan Grappling with the Problem of Hate-Breeding, Violence-Legitimizing Madrassas.”

<sup>4</sup> Abu-Nimer, “Religion and Peacebuilding: Reflections on Current Challenges and Future Prospects”; Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace: An Ethic of Political Reconciliation*; Said, Sharify-Funk, and Abu-Nimer, *Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, Not Static, Co-Edited with New*.

<sup>5</sup> Salomon, “The Nature of Peace Education.”

and that a certain set of values and beliefs should constitute this foundation for engaging youth and adults in formal and informal peace education activities.<sup>6</sup>

Based on this above statement, the following are some of the peace-centered Quranic values and terms that have been used by Quranic school teachers when they were asked to identify sources of peace in their faith: Sacredness of human life; Adala (Justice), Massawat (equality), Rahma (mercy), Mosamaha (forgiveness), Amal al-kheir (good deeds), and Ummah (Human solidarity); Sadaqa (charity); Sabr (patience); Taqwa (faith/belief); Leen (nonviolence); etc.

There is a growing volume of work by scholars and practitioners that put forth examples of Quranic sources in the process of encouraging pluralism and inter-religious dialogue. These sources include the Holy Quran, Hadith, Sira of the Prophet, and Islamic historical and cultural traditions and civilization.<sup>7</sup>

Such values are not strange to any educators who work in Islamic schools. According to Quranic schools teachers who participated in capacity-building seminars on these topics (in Chad, Niger, Pakistan, etc.), their students already knew that the teachers were teaching the above values. There was no shortage of knowledge on the theory part. Islam was perceived and presented by the teachers as a religion of peace for everyone: teachers, students, and parents. In fact, the belief in such a principle or assumption about Islam is so deep that the teachers were upset, and some were even insulted when the Salam trainer asked them, ‘how can you prove that Islam is a religion of peace?’

In response, they wrote many flip charts explaining the many reasons why and how Islam is a religion of peace. They memorized many chapters and verses that the trainer did not memorize from the Quran. What they wrote on their flip charts was values based on pluralism, diversity, and Islamic theological framework for the study of diversity. None of these were strange to them. The rituals, the values, and the stories were already there. Hence, peace education based on Islamic values was not strange to Quranic school teachers and their students.

A major threat to the Quranic schools and Islamic education in general is the perception that Western education is superior to any form of local religious education. Secular Western education is perceived by the government and by many local and international agencies as holding the ideal solution to the problems associated with the Quranic school system. For many teachers, the view that they should be teaching in a Western education style is a message that Islamic identity should be marginalized. This fear becomes more meaningful when we consider the fact that Quranic schools in most, if not all, Muslim communities are considered gatekeepers of the true and authentic Islamic religious identity.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Abu-Nimer, Nasser, and Ouboulahecn, “Introducing Values of Peace Education in Quranic Schools in Western Africa.”

<sup>7</sup> Satha-Anand, “The Nonviolent Crescent: Eight Theses on Muslim Nonviolent Actions”; Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*; Said, Sharify-Funk, and Abu-Nimer, *Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, Not Static, Co-Edited with New*.

<sup>8</sup> Looney, “Reforming Pakistan’s Educational System: The Challenge of the Madrassas”; Malik, *Madrassas in South Asia: Teaching Terror?*; Moeller, “Think Again: Bush’s War on Terror”; Homeland Security News Wire, “Pakistan Grappling with the Problem of Hate-Breeding, Violence-Legitimizing Madrassas.”

Such schools are even more affected than general public schools by the wider macro problems that face their communities, whether in Chad, where there is a civil war, or Nigeria, where there is an active war between Boko Haram and government forces. In any given Muslim country, if there is wide spread violence in the name of religion, that is a serious obstacle for Quranic schools and education for peace.

In addition, civic education is an integral part of peace education theory and practice. Unfortunately, in many Muslim societies and countries, there is no strong belief in citizenship among teachers and wider communities. Thus, when the concept of peace education is introduced with a focus on nonviolence, inclusivity, and equality, this can raise doubts and lack of sincerity among community members, including some teachers, due to the gap between what is taught and what is being implemented by policymakers or political authorities.

Such classic doubts are often encountered in the early stages of the intervention and reflected in posing challenging questions by teachers: “You want to teach us all these things? Please give examples from our current reality where are these things?. How are we supposed to answer this question from our students?”

In such cases, the trainer often shifted the question to the teachers themselves by asking them to provide the answer, “can you give us an example from Islam?” Teachers replied: “We do that, but the gap between reality and the ideal is too wide, and it is very hard for us to continue and deal with that. So we rather take to the theology only without the politics of the values.”

Based on the author’s research and practice in the past two decades, they found no compelling evidence that what is taught in the majority of Quranic schools poses a security threat. We have ascertained this from several interventions in the form of research and capacity-building seminars that have been completed. This includes multi-country research carried out by Salam Institute and IDRC between 2019-2022 in Cameroon and Chad among 400 teachers of Quranic schools who worked with thousands of students.<sup>9</sup>

In brief, peace education in Islamic religious schools is an emerging field of study and practice, and there is a further need to explore its theoretical and theological boundaries and possible implementations. Also, there is a need for empirical case studies to illustrate its effectiveness and limitations in comparison to secular and humanist peace education models that have been introduced in the global south as well.

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<sup>9</sup> Unpublished report on this comparative research have been compiled by researchers, as part of a larger project on Quranic schools in these countries conducted by Salam Institute and IDRC (international Center for Religion and Diplomacy). See Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice*; Koylu, “Peace Education: An Islamic Approach”; Jafari, “Islamic Peace Education: A Conversation on Promising Practices”; Daud, Husin, and Crow, *Peace Education Curriculum: Programa Pendidikan Damai*.

## **Islamic Peace Education: Salam Institute**

Salam Institute of Peace and Justice was created in Washington DC in 2003. It aims to provide capacity-building, scholarship, research, and practice-based training. Thus, the first challenge in this context is overcoming the perception of being seen as a team of ‘outsiders’ to Islam.<sup>10</sup>

The intervention of Salam Institute in promoting peace education in Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Cameroon is a case study that offers certain insights on facing the challenges of practicing the Islamic values of peace in such a context. Since 2008, Salam Institute began collaborating with the religious leaders and the Muslim community of these countries. The work with religious Quranic schools focused on the question: Can the Quranic religious schools teach conflict resolution, nonviolence, and religious diversity?

The Salam Institute has been operating across the world for the past twenty years, and the context of the work in peace education was initiated after the US withdrew from Afghanistan two years ago. The US and several European governments have observed an increase in violent extremism activities in a number of Muslim societies as well. For example, Mali, Lake Chad, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Niger, Cameroon, and Northern Nigeria were identified as high-risk areas for violent extremism activities.

In dealing with such conditions, Salam Institute’s team consisted of several theological experts of Islam. However, they were not presented to religious teachers in these countries as theologians of the Islamic faith. Instead, they were introduced as practitioners of peacebuilding and peace education in the Muslim community context.

Salam Institute was the only organization that was requested to provide peace education in a wider set of efforts of the US government’s operation in the Sahel region after 2007. The Islamic peace training program was a very small part of a series of wider training programs offered in the Sahel region by different Washington-based organizations, which placed much importance on security-related training that included military and police. Most of the funding (at least 95%) was allocated to traditional security and policing training. This ratio between peace education and security reflected how governments’ policies, at that point, viewed violent extremism solely as a security problem.

Such framing of the problem of countering violent extremism is contrary to peacebuilding framing. In twenty years of Salam Institute’s research and practice in different contexts of conflict (including United States and Europe), there are limited short term benefits that result from military and intelligence gathering approaches in dealing with CVE.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, in many contexts, violent extremism has partially originated due to harsh security treatments of local populations and caused severe aggravation of the problem. Based on the research conducted in exploring this issue in Northern Nigeria, participants asked those who were with Boko Haram ‘why did you join Boko Haram.’ Only 12% stated that they joined Boko

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<sup>10</sup> See more detailed description of Salam Institute work and interventions at [www.salaminstitute.org](http://www.salaminstitute.org)

<sup>11</sup> Abu-Nimer, “Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism. The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding.”

Haram in Northern Nigeria because of affiliation with a religious leader.<sup>12</sup> Other triggers include socio-economic grievances, political grievances, and the cruelty youth experienced at the hands of the security establishments even before they engaged in any terroristic activities. Such harsh treatment later provoked them to join terrorist organizations.

The theoretical and practical research conducted by Salam Institute and other organizations have clearly showed that wherever you find the spiraling of violence extremism, it can be directed to grievances related to access to power, poverty, and other forms of social and economic deprivation, a permeating sense of hopelessness amongst youth and their communities. Although, in some cases, religious identity and religious actors constitute the platform to manifest violent extremism, they are often not the root cause.<sup>13</sup> This points to the drivers of violence carried out in the name of religion but also relates to nonreligious issues and to factors which get further complicated with geopolitical factors interlinking and overlapping with local dynamics or contexts.

Unfortunately, securitization of the global efforts on eradicating or countering violent extremism remains central to the strategic approaches taken by various governmental and intergovernmental agencies. However, in the past decade, there has been some space and resources allocated to a more humane engagement with the local communities in which there is more attention to the community needs and a more systematic examination of the root causes of the problems faced by the wider society.<sup>14</sup>

Islamic peace education is one of these alternative approaches that has been utilized in the case of the Sahel region, but on a very small scale, and it was confined to a small community of Quranic schools.

Salam Institute's model aims to build the capacity of Muslim leaders and educators, enabling them to better articulate and propagate the values and norms of peace as outlined in Islamic scriptures and tradition. The theory of change behind this goal assumes that this can be an effective path for youth to be immune from exploiting their religious identity to justify exclusion and violence.

In Pakistan, Nigeria, and many other Muslim countries, religious education is done through Quranic schools in which the teachings of the Quran are the exclusive educational methods and content. In such a context, an educational peace framework of Islamic peace education has to be based on and incorporate values that promote the Islamic peace paradigm.

One of the primary challenges and dilemmas of introducing the concept of Islamic peace education in religious schools is the fact that these were religious schools exclusively teaching the Quran, Hadeeth, and the Sira of the Prophet – with marginal attention given to the history of

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<sup>12</sup> Afzal, "From "Western Education Is Forbidden" to the World's Deadliest Terrorist Group."

<sup>13</sup> Salifu and Ewi, "Boko Haram and Violent Extremism-Perspectives from Peacebuilders."

<sup>14</sup> Abu-Nimer, "Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism. The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding."

Islam or any other subjects. For example, mathematics, chemistry, languages, and so forth were unheard of in many of these schools.

In addition, the schools in the rural areas of Chad, Niger, and Burkina Faso lacked even the basic facilities such as desks, chairs and blackboards. In many cases, they were mud rooms that had 20-40 children squeezed and sitting on the floor for hours.

Overall, harsh poverty was their everyday reality. Children did not have access to public schools. Instead, the only school they knew was a small building with a single teacher, sometimes a shack. Sometimes, classes were even held under trees or against the shade of an outside wall. In the 57 Muslim countries of the world, there are many surveys that point to a serious lack of infrastructure and basic facilities in education. This becomes evident when we carry out peace education and visit such schools.<sup>15</sup>

The stereotype among security and intelligence agencies is that these schools are the hub of violent extremism. As indicative of the neglect and lack of support in many of the Quranic schools, Salam Institute was the first organization ever to provide professional development facilities to Quranic school teachers in the rural areas of Zinder, Niger.

### **Responding to Obstacles in Introducing Islamic Peace Education**

When Salam Institute began working in Chad, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, and Pakistan, the organization was faced with a lot of resistance from the schools in the initial phase of the intervention. There are many obstacles that face Islamic peace education intervention in such a context. The following are some examples of these obstacles. However, it should be noted that an effective way to deal with critique and resistance is to consistently bring the discussion back to the question of what would Prophet Mohamad do? What are the guiding Islamic values to deal with these obstacles? How can we support you to cope with these difficulties of integrating peace education in your schools?

### **Islam is peace: what do you want to teach us?**

When introducing Islamic peace education, teachers often revert back to the argument that the core belief of Islam and its very nature is peace. So teachers will ask trainers “what do you intend to teach us about Islamic peace? We know that Islam is a religion of peace.” Indeed, on various occasions, the teachers have compiled, in a small group activity in less than two hours, hundreds of Quranic and Hadith citations and religious illustrations in support of their argument that Islam is a religion of peace. The teachers stated that they had memorized these Islamic religious sources and statements.

A shift in such resistance took place when the Salam Institute team admitted that they were not theological experts and were not coming to teach Islamic sources of peace. Instead, they offer to work on the pedagogy of peace education in Islamic education.

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<sup>15</sup> See Ilham Nasser research on Islamic schools and values IIIT reports 2021-2020.



The conversation and dialogue with the teachers and their community dramatically changed when they were asked: “how can Salam Institute help you be more effective teachers in teaching values of peace in your Quranic schools?”

At that point of the process, teachers often began sharing their frustrations from the teaching conditions, students’ disciplinary issues, lack of material and resources to support their work, etc.

### **We are not a development or relief agency:**

Due to the enormous lack of resources faced by many of these schools, a major problem faced by Salam Institute in implementing its work is the inability to respond to the teachers’ typical tendency to request funding and direct relief and development assistance. Some teachers even stated, in the first and second encounters: “Without such relief and resources, it will be difficult for us to work with you;” “We need desks and chairs.”

The dilemma of focusing on pedagogical needs and neglecting the teachers' economic and infrastructural relief and development needs has been a major obstacle for Salam Institute’s intervention in many Quranic schools. Several alternatives emerged through the years to persuade teachers to engage in the process despite the fact that Salam Institute cannot provide such requested and much needed aid.

Several steps were taken to respond to this challenge. First, Salam Institute invested efforts in connecting the schools with international donors who have been working in the area and helped them to advocate for receiving basic aid to the schools. Second, jointly generated a few local initiatives to support the schools through local donations and charity made by the community leaders. Thirdly, using the authority of the grand Mufti office and other high religious authorities in the region to emphasize the relevancy and importance of engaging in Islamic Peace Education. After about two years, Salam Institute managed to secure the trust of the Grand Mufti in the highest religious council in Chad. Once he trusted the Salam Institute team, the path was open for Salam Institute to go and work with schools on a rigorous and regular basis. As a result, all the gates of the Quranic schools were open to the Salam Institute team in the country.

### **Foreigners Coming to Teach Islamic Peace**

Another major entry point challenge is related to the strong “conspiracy theory” and high level of suspicion from foreigners, especially those coming from the Western world.<sup>16</sup> The traditional teachers objected to foreigners coming and telling them to teach peace. This is seen as an invasive stance that does not recognize the many other factors that breed violence through religion, especially geopolitical factors.

The overall reaction of teachers was mistrust. They saw the Salam Institute team as those who came with a particular agenda to change the teachings of the school. In particular, some of them

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<sup>16</sup> Boko Haram as a movement has established its entire ideology on manipulating this fear of western foreigners. They have created and supported schools that reject any form of western knowledge or western education.

took offense because they thought the Salam Institute team assumed they were teaching violence in the name of Islam.<sup>17</sup>

Although the Salam Institute team was a diverse group from different Arab and Muslim countries, nevertheless, in the initial few meetings, the suspicion was high, and the leaders of the schools posed difficult questions to the team to clearly test their loyalties. For example, “are you here to change our Islamic personal laws?” teachers from Niger asked Salam's team? “Are you here to change our Sharia laws ?” “Do you follow Sharia in your life?”

The primary strategy followed by Salam's approach was to build personal relationships and spend more informal time with the teachers and their religious leaders and share personal experiences and stories about their work for peace in the Muslim world. They repeatedly emphasize that Salam Institute's approach does not interfere with the content of the religious curriculum. Salam Institute's intervention is exclusively educational and has no political agenda or negative implications for the schools or the community. Salam Institute's approach will target their ways of teaching instead of the content of the Quran or Hadith.

The Salam Institute team often repeated various assuring statements to build trust with the teachers and their leaders. Some of these statement included:

“You (Quranic teachers) are the experts in what you are teaching. We -the Salam team- are here to try and work with you based on your teachings, emphasizing how to be effective as educators.”

“We have no intention of changing the curriculum. You have been working for centuries – over thirteen hundred years teaching Islam this way and that there had not been any extremism.”

“If you wish to proceed, we were there only to make their teaching more effective.”

Another influential factor in gaining the trust of the Quranic schools in Chad, Niger, and Cameroon was related to the Salam Institute team's decision to work through local trainers who had experience working with the Quranic schools before. These Imams themselves have received training of trainers (ToT) seminars from Salam and other organizations. These local team members became the focal points for the intervention of Salam Institute in these communities. They supported the process of designing specialized manuals to guide the teachers and monitor its implementation process.

### **We can only teach in our local language and dialect**

After building a certain level of trust, the Salam Institute team began its training and capacity building in how to teach the core values, such as: diversity, nonviolence, problem solving, equality, dialogue, etc., through Quranic and hadith sources, and local traditional cultural songs.

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<sup>17</sup> Such assumption was fully accurate if applied to majority of international western donors who work with Islamic Quranic schools. (see Riaz and Gavriel, “Faithful Education: Madrassahs in South Asia”; Abu-Nimer, Nasser, and Ouboulahcen, “Introducing Values of Peace Education in Quranic Schools in Western Africa.”; and other literature and public image of these schools in media)



However, when teachers were asked to simulate or role play how they would teach in the class and how they will change their pedagogical approaches, many of them requested that Salam Institute provide a small (15-20 pages) guide in three local dialects. The production of such manuals proved to be a significant factor in empowering the teachers and enhancing their capacity to implement the new methods.

The guide included a direct and concise set of instructions that allowed the teachers to transfer these peace education values and basic skills in their daily teaching using a few new pedagogical exercises that they have not used before in their teaching. For example, the use of small groups, poem competitions, team building exercises, etc.

It is worth noting that using folklore and traditional stories and cultural sayings to teach such values in Quranic schools was a pioneer methodology by the Salam Institute Team. This pedagogy was introduced when teachers expressed their need to enhance the students' interests in the context and keep them engaged. When trainers asked teachers: what do your students like to do? And do they enjoy the most during your classes? The teachers identified storytelling and examples from students' real lives as the most engaging aspects. Following this realization, teachers began incorporating such examples in their teaching of the various values and also in their traditional Quranic lessons.

This was a shift for many teachers, considering the fact that Quranic schools, in their traditional pedagogy, rely exclusively on frontal teaching methodology. In particular, they use memorization of the Holy Quran verses. The primary objective is for the student to reach a level of complete and full automatic memorization of the entire holy book to become Hafiz (an honorary title for only those who memorized the holy book). Such a level of memorization is considered great success and honor to the family as well. Only a few of the students managed to reach this level of memorization of the entire holy book. For example, in Zinder, Niger, 1000 kilometers away from the capital, children between the ages of 5 and 15 memorize the Quran. This act of memorization does pose a challenge for teachers and students. The kids cannot sit for 5 hours and memorize. They quickly lose their concentration. Thus, teachers were trained on how to assist the students to be more focused by using interactive mixed methods of teaching. Considering the fact that this is a tradition of 1400 years of Quranic teaching, it was a remarkable change for many teachers to be able to inject small group exercises, poem competitions, and cultural storytelling as part of their process of teaching.

### **Conclusion:**

One of the principles of peacebuilding applied when working with communities is the capacity to prioritize their aspirations and utilize resources that fit their local contexts. Such adjustment of tools and conceptual frameworks for peace education cannot take place without a certain understanding and awareness of local culture and religious traditions. This requires those who carry out the intervention to have the humility and capacity to engage in dialogue with leaders of the local community and make a space for their perspectives and proposed framing of how to educate for peace in their "own house."

When the Salam Institute team worked with the community using their language and vocabulary, it was an effective response to the typical views of foreigners who are often viewed as bringing values, tools, and skills from London, Geneva, or New York, with no understanding of the local circumstances in which they operate. This has been one of the major challenges from Muslim communities Salam Institute team members have worked with globally. It is basically overcoming the perception that many outsiders who come have the answers and will tell local religious schools' teachers what to do in order to counter violent extremisms.

In applying Islamic peace education, the intervenors also have to address the comparison with the Western education system, which assumes that theological and religious education should be excluded from the public school system. This is contrary to the notion that Islam as a religion and Muslims as a people should follow their faith in all their areas of life. Thus, religious based teaching takes precedence over and should not negate all other areas of knowledge.

Hence, there should be serious reflections amongst key stakeholders and, especially, governmental and non-governmental organizations and donors who support education for peace, democracy, pluralism, etc., on the relevancy and effectiveness of intervention models for religious peace education. Such a theme is central to the widely spread campaigns to fight violent extremism by introducing secular models of interaction in religious communities and schools. Religious education for peace needs to be localized and integrated in many Muslim communities and their school system.

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