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# War and Peace in Iraqi Kurdistan's History Curricula

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Since its inception in 2003, Kurdistan's Regional Government (KRG) has implemented a wide range of reforms in Iraqi Kurdistan's (IK) education system. The history education curricula (HEC) students encounter glorify war, exclude different narratives or interpretations, and fail to foster critical debate or enquiry. In their explicit content, as well as in their implications, processes and delivery, IK's HEC encourage violence, foster divisions between Muslims and non-Muslims, and serve to establish the dominance of the most powerful group in society.

International law does not recognize Kurdistan as a defined area, although its de facto borders are acknowledged by the Kurdish people. Estimates suggest that there are 20 to 40 million Kurds in the world, with about four million living in Iraq; the majority are Sunni Muslims, and the remainder includes Shiia, Assyrian, and Yezidi minorities. Three main dialects are spoken in Iraqi Kurdistan and these differences, as well as geographical and political divisions, have been key factors in the failure of Kurds to establish autonomy and any cohesive sense of identity. Continual divisions and rivalry between Shiia and Sunni groups in Iraq and IK have helped to ethnicize the education system: when Sunni factions held power and decisions about education were made in Baghdad, history curricula promoted Ba'athist values and ideology. Under self-rule, HEC are being used to promote Kurdish national identity.

Iraq is, unofficially, divided into three demographically and ethnically separate parts, with Kurds in the north, Sunni Arabs in the middle, and Shiia in the south. IK in the oil-rich north is a de facto state thanks to its military and economic power, and although its resources have been reduced by war with Islamic State forces and its support for the basic needs of Syrian refugees and internally displaced Iraqi people, its strategic importance has created the opportunity for the historically disadvantaged Kurds to contemplate independence. The IK voted overwhelmingly in favour of independence in a non-binding referendum on 25 September 2017.

The KRG's growing confidence is evident in its work to develop HEC free from

Baghdad's influence that reflect the aspirations, identity, and history of the Kurdish people; however, these HEC do little to integrate and disseminate knowledge, values, and skills that support peace. Instead, IK's HEC contribute to the marginalization and delegitimization of other ethnic groups and to the consolidation of the dominant group's authority.

Although there is no consensus about how to define Peace Education, it is generally agreed, firstly, that it should be context-specific; secondly, that it should involve the promotion of knowledge, skills, and values that prevent direct, cultural, and structural violence and thirdly that it should build peaceful relations at all levels. It can be used to encourage reflection on the past and transformation and positive change at individual levels and beyond. Conversely, particularly when a society is in flux, HE can serve to legitimize the dominant group's existence and justify certain acts, behaviour, and attitudes. It can also facilitate the kinds of state-building work being undertaken by the KRG.

Since 1991, when the IK education system was reformed in line with a nationalist grand narrative that involved the "Kurdification" of HE textbooks, the narratives of other religious and ethnic groups have been repressed or manipulated in HEC in ways that aggravate intergroup hostility in a diverse, multi-ethnic society. Our study of IK's history textbooks for pupils in grades five to eight (ages 11–14) is based on research conducted in public schools in Duhok, Erbil, and Sulaimaniyah in 2013 and 2014. We observed classes, examined textbooks and interviewed teachers, curricula developers, policy makers, teacher-trainers, and pupils among others. We also coordinated a focus group with other parties including policy influencers, parents, and students.

We found that IK's history textbooks foreground the Kurds' national aspirations. Ancient Kurdistan is represented as a large state that extended from the Zakros mountains to the north-east of Mesopotamia, and Kirkuk is presented as being under the jurisdiction of the KRG, rather than an independent city. The textbooks state that Kurds have fought for self-determination as well as cultural and democratic rights throughout history. They also suggest that the host governments of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria have refused to respond peacefully, instead using violence to annihilate the Kurds and provoke the independence struggle. The Iraqi government regard the Kurds as an overambitious minority group, while Kurds believe they are an occupied nation,

denied their territorial rights and natural resources.

Since self-rule began in 1991, school curricula have taught students loyalty to their homeland of Kurdistan, which is represented as including oil-rich Kirkuk as well as the three provinces of Duhok, Erbil, and Sulaimaniyah. Schools deliver curricula through the Kurdish language, with English as the second language. Only a few Arabic-speaking schools are dedicated to internally displaced Arabs from elsewhere in Iraq, and so young people in Kurdistan neither speak Arabic nor consider themselves to be Iraqis.

HE textbooks explain that the international community fragmented Kurdish society between states after World War One. In focusing on the fight for Kurdish rights after the emergence of the Iraqi state, they present a picture of demoralization and powerlessness and engender distrust of the international community and the Iraqi government. Students are encouraged to yearn for an idealized past, without engaging with current realities. The Islamic state (662 CE–750 CE) is described as having been powerful and effective in ensuring equality, freedom, and justice for all of its citizens; Kurdistan is always mentioned as being separate from an Iraq that Kurds never wanted to be a part of; and cooperation with the Iraqi government is represented as an always unsuccessful strategy. HE textbooks have effectively facilitated the construction of national consciousness and identity based around the idea of a “great Kurdistan”, encompassing all of the places where Kurds live.

Teachers impart the pre-packaged history curriculum in good faith to students who believe that it transmits truth. This transfer occurs within a culture where a “successful school” is expected to deliver volumes of information to students who internalize it along with the principle of submission, not only to teachers but to course content which is avowedly war-like. HE textbooks suggest that it was through wars that empires gained territories, states gained self-determination, and resources became secure. No opportunity is provided for students to become critical of these views or to develop different interpretations. Only one narrative is promulgated, and opportunities for discussion are not embedded in course delivery.

Textbooks criticize wars in the pre-Islamic period, which they suggest were waged without justification. Meanwhile, wars waged under Islam are represented as legitimate efforts to spread the faith. The Prophet referred to nonviolent Jihad as being more important than its violent counterpart. Most of the teachers we interviewed agreed that Jihad has various nonviolent meanings, but HE textbooks conceptualize Jihad in

terms of violence rather than the pursuit of personal purity.

Textbooks claim the state can justify war to achieve the expansion of territory, the liberation of occupied areas, access to resources, deterrence, or self-defence, but students are not being equipped to think critically, to discuss the justification for wars, or to think about the relevance of the international humanitarian laws that govern them. The textbooks suggest that truly effective approaches to conflict resolution are based on force and power, and that peace can only be secured if states prepare for war and increase their military capability. Muslims emerge as winners over defeated nonbelievers or non-Muslims even in defeat because their fighters (peshmergah) are represented as martyrs for their religion and country. Students are shown that, even where peace is obtained, it is won thanks to enforcement and “power over” the other rather than “power with” the other (or “peace through strength”).

Iraqi Kurdistan’s HEC are silent about peaceful resolutions or education for peace, except when they refer to the constitution the Prophet Mohammed established in Madinah. Beyond mention of this agreement, which called for cooperation and peaceful conflict resolution between Muslims and non-Muslims, HEC textbooks teach that states declare war in order to instil beliefs and impose culture on others by forcing the religion of Islam on non-Muslims. For example, IK’s fifth-year textbook mentions the war that Abu Bakir and other *Caliphs* carried out against groups dissenting from Islam after the Prophet’s death. The textbooks ignore the conditions that led to this dissent, its meaning, implications, and its potential applicability to contemporary Kurdish history and politics. IK’s HEC imply that the use of violence is justified in such cases and so contradict their basic human right to exercise freedom of choice. Yet, when Muslims are shown to have been prevented from practising their religion by the Quraish tribe, they are described as having been wrongly persecuted. At moments like these, IK’s HEC overlook their own contradictions and sideline issues that might usefully cast light on contemporary issues in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The establishment of the Islamic state and the use of war to spread Islam are classed, without question, as forms of liberation, and the defence of one’s state by all means possible is presented as something valuable and as a source of pride. Iraqi Kurdistan’s HE textbooks insist that all means should be used to maximize harm to the other side in a conflict situation, and the destruction of people’s belongings, property, and lives are not assessed in relation to international humanitarian standards.

IK's HEC never link information about past wars with current conflicts in the Middle East or elsewhere. Students consume simple descriptions and narratives of events that exclude mention of the international community and third-party interventions for peacemaking and post-conflict reconstruction; they are never asked to consider the role of the United Nations or regional bodies in preventing violence, providing peacekeeping missions, or mediating and resolving conflicts.

Overall, IK's history textbooks promote war-like values rather than explore peace; even peaceful demonstrations are described as having been legitimately curbed by violent means. The idea that peace has only ever been achieved through violence helps legitimize its continued use in contemporary IK and Iraq. Our research interviews suggest that classroom delivery does little to temper this message. As one teacher explained, "we want to teach our students that the blessed life that they are in, did not come in vaguely, without sacrifices. KRG made a lot of sacrifices, martyrs, without peshmergah we would not be in this situation. These students have seen nothing, no wars, no sufferings, and it is good to be reminded from time to time".

When HE textbooks do discuss peaceful and constructive ways to resolve conflict, they focus on solutions that emerge from Islamic history and teachings. They explain, for example, that the Prophet Mohammed used conflict management techniques to evade war with the Quraish tribe and they discuss formal, informal, traditional, and religious methods of arbitration, widely accepted as a method of resolving conflict in most Muslim countries and in the Quran. Yet, even when a "diplomatic way" to approach non-Muslims about paying taxes according to Islamic law is discussed, the implicit message is that non-Muslims must cooperate with the state or face punishment.

Reconciliation, presented as another peaceful approach to conflict, is explained via information about the Prophet initiating *Sulh Alhudaibia* as an agreement of reconciliation with the Quraish tribe. The story, however briefly related, demonstrates that the Prophet preferred peace to war, but the textbooks highlight neither the conditions that led to the agreement, nor the fact that the interests and needs of the other party were met to facilitate it. The Prophet also negotiated with the Quraish to allow people who resigned from Islam to return to their tribe, but this fact is not used to open discussion about the right of religious affiliation or conflict resolution in contemporary Kurdistan. Instead, reconciliation tends to be presented as the last recourse of the

weaker side, or as a means to buy time or deceive others. In this way, HE textbooks reflect Kurdistan's prevailing social and cultural norms which stigmatize as weak anyone who attempts reconciliation or makes concessions.

Martyrdom, meanwhile, is celebrated repeatedly as a show of strength. HEC textbooks conceptualize martyrdom as a Muslim way of sacrificing oneself for the sake of one's religion and/or nation. Although the concept of martyrdom is mentioned in the Quran and has been used throughout history, it has been misused and exploited by political and religious organizations. It is therefore deeply concerning that it is presented without discussion to students who are given no reason to question its prevailing socio-cultural meaning. As one teacher observed, "the training we received ... lacked [a] participatory or critical approach and the teachers [have] been told to implement the curricula as it is". The textbooks also praise heroes in ways that may instigate violence or encourage pro-violence values. The media, many teachers and parents, as well as textbooks certainly endorse the cultural convention that the peshmergah – of whom there are more than 150,000 in IK, many connected to school-age students – deserve great respect.

The textbooks present, with little discussion or critical perspective, many other discriminatory and archaic concepts that were prevalent in the Islamic era and in Kurdish history. For example, crusaders are defined simply as "people who came from Europe and attacked Muslims and had Christian symbols on their clothes". This context-free binarized description is typical in the way it uncritically presents a narrow version of the truth, highly aligned with conventional accepted views in contemporary IK.

IK's teachers generally deliver history curricula without adding critical perspective. Our interviewees explained to us that they only "teach what is in the textbooks because otherwise students will complain and the teachers would have to include these definitions in the exams". In IK's HEC, key concepts such as war, conflict, liberation, invasion, conquest, Jihad battles, and other terms, are used in ways that reinforce the dominant social group's views. However, some of the teachers we interviewed voiced criticism of this approach and suggested that "the teachers know better what students need to know; hence, they should be given more freedom".

Muslim leaders have declared that there is a need to end discrimination and racism among Muslims, and this view is promoted in HE textbooks. Muslim leaders

can play constructive roles in sharing peaceful messages with the different ethnic and religious groups in IK, but their ideas need to be explained clearly and linked to current contexts if they are to be effective. At the present time, IK's HE textbooks address non-discrimination weakly and focus on it only as a problem among Muslims, rather than between Muslims and non-Muslims.

When IK's HEC suggest that inequality existed in the past and that preferential treatment for Muslims over non-Muslims was legitimized, these facts are delivered without critical commentary or consideration of their contemporary relevance to IK's status as a multi-ethnic and religious society. The textbooks describe methods that Islamic-era Muslim leaders used to differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims after the Prophet's death. For example, the seventh-year textbook explains that in the Abbassi state era (656 CE) there were attempts to end discrimination between Arab Muslims and non-Arab Muslims, and the fifth-year textbook states that non-Muslims who lived within the borders of Islamic state had to pay *Jizya* (Tax) for being non-Muslims.

The absence of critical analysis in relation to past discrimination is of particular concern in IK because, although there is a Muslim majority, Christian, Yezidi, Sabai, Buhai, Shabak and other religious groups also exist. Even segregated Christian and Yezidi schools use IK's standard textbooks, and the negative representation of groups who live alongside each other is liable to foster resentment and hierarchized divisions between Muslims and non-Muslims based on religious affiliation rather than citizenship. The HE textbooks clearly differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims and marginalize other ethnic religious groups. Jews are represented as untrustworthy, while Christianity and Zaradashti are presented as religions undeserving of worship. Claims that "the Prophet Mohammed came to spread the message of Islam to all people" and that he was a "messenger to all mankind" help to delegitimize and undermine non-dominant ethnic and religious groups.

When the textbooks deal with the history of Kurdistan, they overlook non-Muslim groups. The seventh-year textbook refers to various ancient societies within Kurdistan but ignores the Yezidis. Ministry of Education officials told us that this was because Yezidis are considered to be Kurdish, but Yezidi teachers countered that "the ME is lacking in fairness and inclusiveness". One head teacher explained that, "despite the fact we have complained many times to the ME about not having Yezidi committee to represent us like the Christians and Turkmen have, they did not reply to us – we feel

marginalized”.

The exclusion of non-Muslim religious and ethnic groups from HE curricula implies that they are insignificant and so strengthens prejudices and stereotypes against them. The HEC should at least highlight similarities between the peace values that religions share in order to encourage harmony and cooperation. Instead, the explicit and implicit content of IK’s history textbooks suggest the superiority of Islam and imply the inferior spiritual status of other religions.

While IK’s HEC mainly focus on teaching war values, they do discuss the role and responsibilities of the state in providing services to and protection for citizens. One textbook asserts that the state should foster “economic development and the provision of social services”, and while equality is only mentioned once, there are references to tranquillity, friendship, stabilization, security, and brotherhood. However, concepts such as forgiveness and reconciliation, and the peaceful values associated with different interpretations of Islam are not recognized.

The different traditional legal schools of thought in Sunni Sharia go undiscussed, and women’s roles are rarely addressed in the HE textbooks, which reflect the patriarchal nature of IK society, even though there have been many women leaders in Kurdish and Iraqi history. The school system could play a critical role in fostering gender equality by remedying this imbalance. Textbook exercises could also, theoretically, encourage students to participate in producing information in the classroom and relate it to their own social and political contexts; however, at the present time, such exercises take the form of rote-style recall and repeat questions, which make up 54 out of 55 questions in the 5<sup>th</sup>-year book alone.

In general, the HEC curriculum teaches one approach to understanding reality: the Kurds are always right, while the Iraqi government and the international community are wrong; Muslims are right and disbelievers are wrong, and all negative characteristics are attributed to the other. One teacher commented approvingly that “the Ministry of Education is right to give one narrative as it wants to unite people, make them agree on one statement; for us to have different opinions we need another fifty years of self-rule and independence”.

The present HE curricula inhibit exploration of other possible narratives. Information is presented as unequivocally true, and students are not directed to sources that might provide alternative perspectives. This binarized approach to right or wrong and

legitimate or illegitimate forms of knowledge works to restrict students' creativity and critical thinking and increase their dependency on teachers and other authority figures. While learners often take the blame for their passivity and their ignorance of nuanced narratives, the curriculum, its contents, processes, and delivery, clearly help to limit their knowledge and work to normalize and fuel cycles of violence.

In IK, the dominant group is clearly using HEC to stabilize and legitimize its authority. IK's HE textbooks ostensibly provide a straightforward description of events in history, and many students and teachers in IK schools understand them as neutral: one teacher explained that "HE is about knowing facts, story events, dates, numbers". However, others appreciate that, when students are not skilful enough to challenge authoritative knowledge and seek out diverse narratives, HEC texts contribute to the state's hegemony by offering an accepted and common interpretation of its character and narrative that becomes embedded and normalized in social consciousness.

To be effective in terms of PE values and education for peace, HEC must be enquiry-based and open to variations, different interpretations, and critical debate; they must also begin a process of de-victimization and encourage a more heterogenous collective narrative to emerge. Children learn a huge amount about history from their communities and families as well as from the media and school curricula. Nevertheless, the failure to provide students with a balanced perspective on the violence prevalent in IK's society helps dominant norms to go unchallenged and embeds in young people's minds an almost uncontested single narrative about their shared past, present, and future.

### **Recommended Readings**

- Aziz, M. A. 2011. *Ethno-Nationalism and National Identity in Iraqi Kurdistan*. London: I. B. Tauris.
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