Education, Education, Education… and Jihad

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Education as Security

The one-time Egyptian Minister of Education, Hussein Kamel Bahaa El Din, was not in much doubt about the link between education and security. He described education as "contributing to the military, economic and political security of the country. The political security dimension … includes contributing to democracy and internal peace through empowering students to think critically, thus protecting them from attempts at brainwashing by terrorists and extremists." He sums up well and – I believe – correctly, the centrality of education in building a society resistant to extremist ideas of any kind.

It is not a question of teaching children *what* to think – this is the biggest fallacy of all. Too much energy and intelligence is spent on 'counter-narratives' and nationalist histories which are, to be charitable, not the most efficient way of addressing the problem of a child's or young adult's susceptibility to seductive and simplistic accounts of the world. For that they need to be taught not *what* to think, but *how* to think – or as the Egyptian minister puts it, how to "think critically." Suggestive corroboration comes from an unexpected source: Saudi Arabia. Here, in 2011, CSIS did an intriguing poll amongst 4,500 students. Among many other questions, the researchers asked whether the students agreed with the statement "Teachers should let us develop our own opinions and not push us in certain directions." Of the students polled, 91% of women and 87% of men agreed with the statement: an appeal, in other words, to 'teach us *how* to think, not *what* to think.' The intellectual doldrum in which they languish is one they want to escape.

Engineers and Social Scientists

There has been research done over the last few years into the old observation that a strangely high proportion of violent jihadists are graduates of engineering faculties. Quite how strange is brought out in a recent book by Diego Gambetta and Steffan Hertog, called *Engineers of Jihad*. They note that in their sample an extraordinary 46% of jihadi recruits in the Middle East, whose education can be identified, are graduates; and of those, 45% are engineering graduates. In Europe, though the sample is much smaller and needs to be treated with caution, the figure is in the range of 25-39% of all graduates recruited, a remarkable figure in itself, at either end of the scale. The authors speculate carefully as to why this might be. Of course there are all sorts of contributory reasons in the sociology of the engineering profession and the dashing of expectations of upward mobility. But they conclude that there is something in the way engineering is taught, or understood, or the kind of outlook to which it appeals, that selects for a black-and-white, un-nuanced view of the world with a predilection for single, clear and conclusive answers to questions. While this phenomenon is very much 'on the margin,' and the numbers involved are tiny compared to the universe of engineers, it is clearly significant, a bellwether to which we must pay careful attention.

But there are two further points that are even more significant. The first is that there are almost no jihadi graduates of the humanities and social sciences

(with the exception of Islamic Studies). Intriguingly these graduates dominate revolutionary movements of the left, where engineers feature very little. It seems that in the context of jihadi recruitment at least, the humanities and social sciences provide some kind of immunity. This is counterintuitive. The vast majority of students in the MENA region study humanities and social sciences (about 63% overall, rising to 74-75% in Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Palestine and Oman), and these faculties are overcrowded, underfunded and often very uninspired. Their graduates also see much higher levels of unemployment than graduates in science, medicine and engineering (one North African Minister of Education memorably described the Faculties of Letters as "factories of unemployment"). So the common idea of the devil's making work for idle hands – of jihadists being recruited simply from the very real sump of misery that graduate unemployment in the region constitutes – is wrong. Why? There seems to be something different about the intellectual habits

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that the humanities and social sciences inculcate: a former Muslim Brother is quoted by Hazen Kandil as saying (of the Brotherhood, and therefore of a somewhat less violent extremism), "In social sciences one learns that someone made an argument; another criticized it; and history validated or disproved it. Questioning received wisdom is welcomed. In natural sciences by contrast, there are no opinions, only facts. This type of matter-of-fact mentality is more susceptible to accepting the Brotherhood's formulas which present everything as black or white."

Starting at School

And an education that teaches students how to question, think, use evidence and take nothing for granted, is a protection against the doctrinaire simplisticisms of Islamist extremism and jihad. But where do we see this educational inoculation as beginning? I don't for a moment believe that it's at university. In Britain, the President of the Royal Society, Venki Ramakrishna, said recently: "In schools, instead of encouraging active participation by students in exploration and experimentation, science is often taught as a dry collection of facts to be memorized for exams. Moreover we force students to choose between sciences and humanities far too early." It seems likely that the process of closing young minds, of shaping them to reject nuance and ambiguity and rendering them vulnerable to simple answers begins in the early school years.

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Across the Middle East there exists a fierce culture of memorization in schools. Some of the prestige, or acceptability, of rote memorization lies in Islamic educational traditions going back many centuries. But more of it comes from the unfinished nature of education reform since independence, the often clumsy grafting of secular 'modern' educational syllabi and pedagogy onto traditional ones to create a very overloaded and sometimes conflicting hybrid. This hybrid relies on a very rigid teacher-centredness and rote memorization, tested through exams which are all too often simple regurgitations of facts learned. And if this sounds familiar, it is because in a sense much of the educational hardware of the Middle East (and large parts of the wider Islamic world) is a selection mechanism for breeding the 'engineering mentality' hinted at, but a little unfairly so described, above – in which case it is a whole-system deformation which selects those most adept at learning and repeating, at absorbing and uncritically regurgitating. And in a system where the elite streams at secondary school are defined by maths and science and selected

into medicine and engineering at university, you may well be ending up with the carefully chosen best products of this very particular and mechanistic educational regime in the elite faculties. And of these a very few – but a disproportionate share, even more so of engineers than of medical graduates – take their intellectual training to extremes and swallow the easy – and mechanistic – certainties and unambiguous imperatives of dogmatic, extremist Islam.

Ambiguity

There may even be a correlation between a capacity to manage and internalize ambiguity, and an ability to exercise tolerance. This was explored by Else Frenkel-Brunswik half a century ago, and remains controversial, but is an interesting gloss on the way black-and-white binary thinking, the antithesis of comfortable ambiguity, *may* cohabit naturally with what Frenkel-Brunswick and Adorno called 'the Authoritarian Personality.' If this is so, it would suggest that an education which avoids ambiguity in favour of precision, clarity and binary thinking could actually contribute to – or at least evoke innate – intolerance. The end result of such an upbringing, in Frenkel-Brunswik's view is "a political philosophy and social outlook which has no room for anything but a desperate clinging to what appears to be strong and a disdainful rejection of whatever is relegated to the bottom."

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The Challenges to Schools Reform – and Authoritarianism

The answer is clear but problematic. In Bahaa El Din's words, children need to be taught critical thinking. But who is to teach them? There are a great many schoolchildren and students in the Middle East – Egypt alone has an education system with a population greater than that of the entire nation of Tunisia – and retraining the whole teaching profession in methods and attitudes that run, often, deeply against the grain is a very tall order. In education systems straining under the demographic pressures of the 'youth bulge' and driven by developmental orthodoxies to imagine that prosperity and development are in some way proportionate to the number of (undifferentiated) graduates in the population, radical reform towards child-centeredness and the teaching of critical thinking represents a real challenge.

It also offers a real challenge in quite another sphere. It's not just schoolteachers who don't like having their primacy and authority questioned. Critical thinking is a threat to authoritarian regimes, whether secular or clerical, which rely on compliance and acceptance of their authority by the populations they govern. This makes critical thinking a two-edged sword, because the same child who is trained to question the glib certainties of the radical preacher and the jihadi recruiter is also going to question the glib certainties of kings, mullahs and religious scholars. It is no surprise that regimes across the Islamic Middle East are very much in two minds about serious, radical education reform and much given to encouraging and funding science and technology in education – on the assumption that it is *safer* than history or sociology or anthropology. In cash-strapped countries it is also cheaper.

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But it is very necessary. Abdelwahab El-Affendi was talking about exactly this in a recent paper on Islamic education, when he wrote that "We need really to develop a new learning paradigm that encourages students to develop wings, rather than attaching deadweight to their feet." Good education is right at the centre of the questions facing the societies, peoples and governments of the MENA region (and not just the MENA region). It is a neces-

sary destabilizer of orthodoxies, glib assumptions, regimes, pomposities and the seductive lure of jihad. A well-educated population will think for itself. This is a remarkable prophylaxis against 'radicalization,' but it is also a mine dug under the foundations of authoritarianism. It certainly needs to be treated with care, but in the way that a noble and slightly unpredictable bird of prey – an eagle or a hawk – needs to be treated with care. It can certainly bite – but it can also fly.

The Unsettling Novel

The last word goes to a novelist. Reflecting on why it is that students of 'Letters' – of the humanities and social sciences – don't tend to become religious extremists or jihadis, Howard Jacobson recently, and memorably, wrote in an article entitled *Show me the jihadist with a well-thumbed copy of Middlemarch in his back pocket*, "Whoever has once been truly unsettled by a work of the imagination will never give loyalty to a single idea, belief system, religious faith or party. When demagogues or dictators ban art, this is the reason: art is the great solvent of obedient fundamentalism."
It's dangerous stuff, education.

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