The educational intentions of the Islamic State through its textbooks

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

This article’s results are part of project Sami, which examines the school system imposed by Islamic State (ISIS) on the territories under its control between 2014 and 2017. It describes and explores ISIS’s educational intentions as formulated in the textbooks and workbooks the organization produced to frame how secular subjects were taught in primary schools. The results shed light on how ISIS describes its curriculum and analyzes what has been included in the Arabic, mathematics, science, geography, history and English textbooks. The article concludes that each of these school subjects has been used by ISIS to further its political and religious agenda, although in very different ways like militarization, banalization of violence and the establishment of its complex and extreme but also fragile Islamic doctrine. It also suggests possible courses of action, intervention and research for internally displaced children or children in detention who have experienced this alternative education system during wartime.

1. Introduction

Armed conflicts have a major impact on civilian populations. With millions of children around the world affected by past and present war and conflict, there is an urgent and growing need for research to illuminate the potential harm of this violence for children, for present and future generations. Political violence and armed conflict endanger people of all ages; however, developing children are a particularly susceptible population to the negative and persistent psychosocial effects associated with these contexts ( Nemeth and Glozman, 2020 ). The literature thus highlights that research with children exposed to political violence and armed conflict is essential to (1) promote healthy child development; (2) enhance the resilience and human capital of affected communities; and (3) promote positive long-term outcomes, including preventing the recurrence of violent conflict ( Cavazzoni et al., 2020 ).

Armed conflicts generally pose a threat to children’s education, because they destabilize education systems and make going to school dangerous ( Mundy and Dryden-Peterson, 2011 ). In certain circumstances, when war leads to the emergence of a parallel and violent education system, it is important to document what they have been exposed to ( Cairns and Dawes, 1996 ; Cicchetti and Cohen, 2006 ; Sroufe, 2013 ). Such a situation occurred recently in Iraq and Syria, when the Islamic State ( ISIS, or ad-dawla al-islamiyya in Arabic ), a terrorist political group, took control of a large part of the country.

On 29 June 2014, after ISIS captured Mosul, the country’s second city, its leader al-Baghdadi, announced the establishment of a caliphate and abolished the existing borders between Syria and Iraq. At the time, his group controlled an area the size of Great Britain (300,000 km2) containing a population of over 10 million people ( Authors, 2020a ). From then on, ISIS functioned as an ‘authoritarian regime’ and created a number of ‘ministries’, one of the first of which was the ministry of education ( Winter, 2015 ). Thousands of children and teenagers had to flee or saw their school destroyed, losing access to safe, stable, quality schooling. At the same time, others spent three years in an alternative education system designed by ISIS and which was implemented in the territories under its control. Its education system occupied a central place in ISIS’s political plans and was even presented as one of the first cornerstones of the new Caliphate, whose restoration was announced by the group on June 29, 2014 ( Authors, 2020a ).

Following the announcement, ISIS’s hopes of becoming a state led it to quickly build a government structure and establish the means to ensure strict enforcement of its religious and moral ideals ( al-Tamimi, 2013 ).

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As a result, the Diwan al-Ta’lim, or Ministry of Education and Teaching (al-Tamimi, 2015) was tasked with developing and rolling out new curricula to replace those of the Syrian and Iraqi governments (al-Jablawi, 2016; Authors, 2016). In September 2014, the Committee for the Development of Curricula and Textbooks was formed by holding an open meeting for the teachers and instructors who supported ISIS (Authors, 2020a). The first 50 members, grouped per subject, fell behind, leading to the addition of more members in each group. In the end, nearly 400 teacher-authors, inspector-editors, secretaries, research assistants, modelers, graphic artists, computer specialists, and more were working on the committee. They included volunteers as well as people forced to serve under threat. The majority of members work on one subject group only. Each group’s work was supervised by a member of the ministry and the committee’s work as a whole was placed under the authority of ISIS’s minister, Dhu al-Qarnayn (Authors, 2020a).

In September 2014, the new curriculum was imposed across all territory under ISIS’s control (Authors, 2020a; Stern and Berger, 2015). Despite clashes that forced ISIS to gradually retreat the group held on in Iraq until December 2017, when the government announced that it had defeated ISIS and taken back the areas that the group still held (Burch and Pizzi, 2020). An estimated 800,000 children and teens lived on the Iraqi side of the Caliphate (United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019), and about 250,000 of them, mostly boys, are believed to have gone through its education system (Authors, 2020a).

With ISIS defeated, the humanitarian crisis in Iraq entered a new phase. Since 2018, Iraqi authorities, UNESCO, and multiple international NGOs have slowly begun launching programs to help rebuild the school system and provide support to children whose education was interrupted. However, reconstruction of the formal schooling system has been hindered by factors such as endemic corruption, instability caused by popular uprisings, and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic. It also appears that a better understanding of what children may have learned during ISIS’s rule is required in order to help them successfully reintegrate into the formal system.

Knowledge of the curriculum imposed by ISIS remains sparse. To date, only a few copies of textbooks and official documents from the Diwan al-Ta’lim have been translated into languages other than Arabic. Furthermore, the few descriptions and analyses of the curriculum that are available (Al-Jablawi, 2016; Olidort, 2016) have largely ignored the curriculum at the primary school level and educational material that was not explicitly religious in nature. This explains why we rely heavily on previous published work of our team. Moreover, obtaining first-hand information from young students of their experiences at school is also challenging, since it remains taboo to discuss the experiences of teachers and students under ISIS. In addition, interviewing students directly is inadvisable because of their age and the potential sensitive nature of their experiences.

Furthermore, this is not the first time in history that totalitarian regimes have put in place totalitarian education, which can be defined as “the systematic training and development of the capacities of the individual” that is “typical of the total state, [which] subordinates the individual citizen completely to the power and purposes of the state” (Kirkconnell, 1952, p. 61). They have used their education system as the main instrument allowing them to perpetuate their power (Kirkconnell, 1952). We can see examples of this in Nazi Germany (Pine, 1996), Maoist China (Kwong, 1985), post-World War II Albania, Fascist Spain (Pinto, 2004), Fascist Italy (Colin, 2010), etc.

It is important to keep traces of what has been done, as a duty of memory, but also to be able to intervene more quickly when such situations inevitably recur. A description of the corpus also allows researchers to make better comparisons between different situations and to know their particularities for future research. Also, our team is studying ISIS’s curriculum to provide direct support to practitioners in the field. Among the authors, all are education specialists and two are Arabic speakers. In addition, one of them is a trained translator and has worked for many years on interculturality and cultural dialog between English and Arabic. Our team worked both on the original documents in Arabic and on translated versions. With all those objectives in mind, we have already published three articles: one on how the curriculum was implemented (Authors, 2020a), another on the infusion of religious content into “complementary” subjects (Authors, 2020b), and a third on science education and its relationship with religion (Authors, 2019). This article focuses specifically on the educational intentions of ISIS in Arabic, Mathematics, Science, Geography, History and English at primary school level for three reasons. First, because they have been less studied than other parts of its education system, and secondly because most children who attended ISIS’s schools were enrolled in primary school. Indeed, at the beginning of adolescence, a large number of boys were already trained for war (Horgan et al., 2017). Third, we selected subjects that are generally present in most curriculum throughout the world, which allows us to compare more readily what is considered essential knowledge to be a functioning citizen.

2. Our study of ISIS’s potentially implemented curriculum

Since ISIS never published a curriculum framework or syllabuses for every subject and grade, and since it is difficult to interview those who had first-hand knowledge of the curriculum development’s process, the textbooks offer us the most information on how the group’s directives translated in the classroom. Textbooks represent the potentially implemented curriculum, that is, the resources given to teachers to teach the official curriculum (Johansson, 2003). They also have a considerable, more direct influence on teaching than the official curriculum, particularly in Arab countries, where they are usually the main classroom resource; further, to set the content they taught, textbooks also serve to define teachers’ objectives and actions (Aldashash et al., 2016; Reys et al., 2004; Wijaya et al., 2015). In Iraq specifically, where there has been no curriculum framework since the 1980s, textbooks used to represent the only access to a written curriculum (Iraqi Curriculum Framework, 2012). Teaching materials published by ISIS therefore offer a gateway to understanding the school experience of students under ISIS’s school system.

Textbooks also reflect certain ideologies (Souza and Porto, 2012). Kwong (1985) indicates that “Textbooks bear the strong imprint of the political structures of the societies producing them […] and they form an integral and important aspect of educating the young, providing them with values fundamental to the society’s political structures and cultures” (p. 197). For a long time, research into the politics of textbooks has shown the conflict potential of these powerful medium (Anderson, 2006). For example, “history textbooks have been commonly politicized, becoming a significant pawn and a key stake in struggles and conflicts over identity and power” (Bentrovato, 2017). The impact of textbooks on society is real, and in some cases has even exacerbated existing conflicts (Naseem, 2014). For example, in Afghanistan, primary school textbooks published in the 1980s and early 1990s, promoting war against the Russian and violence against the enemies of Islam, were still in circulation in 2000, limiting the efforts of education reform and peace-building (Davis, 2002).

ISIS divided teaching into two blocks. The first block consisted of religious teachings, which were considered fundamental (asliyya), and included the Doctrine, Study of the Qur’an, the Prophetic Traditions, the Life of the Prophet, Calligraphy, Arabic (grammar and dictation), Islamic Education, and Physical Education. The second block was composed of “complementary” (takmiliiya) subjects, for example, science, mathematics, history, geography, and English. The analysis that we present in this article attempts to describe and explore ISIS’s educational intentions as formulated in textbooks and workbooks produced to teach Arabic, Mathematics, Science, Geography, History and English in primary school. It thus mainly considers the second set of subjects, to which we have added subjects related to the teaching of Arabic, since they are traditionally considered secular in most curricula.

We define educational intentions as the desired path of a student’s
education in matters of advanced intellectual ability and in their drive, work habits, and attitudes (Legendre, 2005). They help guide how the curriculum is taught (Maury, 2007). Educational intentions reflect what ISIS wished to accomplish by instituting its education system and manifest in three ways: teaching aims indicate the intentions of the textbook’s author, instructors direct the teacher on how to act or to teach a concept, and educational objectives indicate the academic or social lessons that students are to learn. Educational objectives are most often stated using an action verb in the subjunctive, imperative or infinitive tense.

2.1. Study corpus

As didacticians, we asked ourselves how we could contribute to the educational reintegration of children impacted by ISIS. In order to do so, our analysis was based on a corpus of 28 textbooks and workbooks used in Years 1 through 5 of primary school. We define a textbook as a reference book in which students were not intended or required to write, while a workbook is a hybrid book that contained both explanations of material and exercises meant to be completed directly in the book. Table 1 lists the documents we analyzed for each year of primary school.

The corpus we analyzed comes from schools in the Kirkuk governorate, from where they were recovered immediately after the territory was retaken by the Iraqi army and by Shia militias in early 2018. ISIS circulated its textbooks on a large scale (in PDF format) and sent them well beyond the regions controlled by ISIS by posting them on the internet and social media (Authors, 2020a). During our research, we noted that the majority of the textbooks we analyzed could still be viewed online and downloaded in their original format (PDF).

2.2. Analyzing educational intentions

The textbooks and workbooks we studied all contained the same foreword along with a table of contents, and they all took the form of a series of lessons accompanied by objectives. Apart from the English workbooks, all also featured an introduction. In some cases, particularly science, lessons were grouped into units or chapters.

Our analysis focused primarily on the foreword and introductions and on the objectives accompanying the lessons, since those sections reflected the educational intentions formally stated by ISIS. The first two authors worked together to analyze the books and resolved differences in interpretation by consensus.

To start, we went through and noted all the descriptors that illustrated how ISIS wished to present its curriculum. Next, we coded each educational intention using a mixed system that we developed based on the textbook; W = workbook.

Table 1

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References to the books are indicated as follow. Foreword refers to the page that is identical in every book. For other references, the type of book, workbook (WB) or textbook (TB) is followed by the first four letters of the subject and the year. The page number is then indicated. Introductions are not numbered; they are thus identified by their title.

ISIS’s Sunni doctrine focuses on three primary doctrinal fundamentals. The first is “jihadism.” ISIS speaks explicitly of its intent to train “soldiers of the caliphate.” Second, the strong Salafi influence is confirmed by the importance placed on the concept of tawhid (oneness) in ISIS’s doctrine. Finally, the takfiri tendencies of ISIS can be seen in the Doctrine textbooks through their emphasis on the final judgment and the punishment that awaits “unbelievers.”
education was one of its priorities (TBMATH 1–2: Introduction), ISIS explicitly highlighted the ideological components that dictated the curriculum design, including the notion of putting people back “on the virtuous path toward unity and the immense grandeur of Islam under the banner of the caliphate” (FOREWORD) and of meeting people’s “moral, social, cultural, jihadist, economic, and health needs” (WBREADT 4: Introduction). Thus, the foreword explicitly affirmed ISIS’s religious, jihadist, and political aims in its educational pursuits.

However, the introductions specific to each book glossed over those elements, instead focusing on explaining the new curriculum to parents and convincing them that it was beneficial. Indeed, unless parents were convinced en masse to allow their children to go to school, the powers that be’s ability to teach the social and cultural norms they desired would be limited (Jones, 2007). In the book introductions, ISIS portrayed its curriculum as being comparable to those of other countries. The group claimed that theirs was based on sound science and pedagogy, while describing it as “modest,” “progressive,” and “simplified.” ISIS also made numerous references to the quality of the teaching, citing certain pedagogical strategies, for example, the importance of reviewing and repeating information in the form of in-class exercises, practicing grammar rules using exercises based on actual texts (TBGRAM 4: Introduction), and ensuring that students have mastered a concept before continuing with the lesson (WBCALL 3: Introduction). It also emphasized the allegedly educational quality of its textbooks and workbooks, highlighting the use of explanatory illustrations and diagrams (TBSCIE 1–2: Introduction), the presentation of simple, age-appropriate topics (WBREAD 2: Introduction), and the use of activities to solidify understanding (WBGEOG 4: Introduction). The sections that follow examine how ISIS’s educational orientations translated in the classroom.

### 3.2. Textbook and workbook content

Documents published by the ministry dictated that 70% of class time should be spent teaching fundamental and religious material and 30% should be spent on complementary and secular material (Authors, 2020a). However, this division of teaching time is at odds with the number of pages dedicated to each subject. At least 49% of book pages in Year 1 were dedicated to secular material, and the percentage increased gradually up to 78% in Year 5. This contradiction can be explained by the fact that the pages of secular textbooks and workbooks contained large amounts of blank space, with little information but lots of pictures and space in which to write. Religious books, on the other hand, were dense and contained only text.

The books for each subject seem to have been written in silos, as interviews with head teachers involved in the process revealed (Authors, 2020a). Each committee also could not rely on a curriculum framework, which might explain the differences observed between subjects, for example, the inconsistent use of specific learning objectives in the introduction. Differences can also be seen in the way each subject was used as a tool to achieve the ideological objectives that ISIS wished to accomplish by implementing its curriculum. These objectives will be discussed later.

These variations are apparent in some of the book covers. For example, the cover of the Year 5 reading workbook features a striking visual perspective and depicts some of the extreme violence mentioned in the text (Fig. 1). On the other hand, the Year 5 geography textbook cover lacks coherence between its discourse, teachings, and images. It shows a man making the symbol for oneness against a background photo of America’s Canyonlands National Park in Utah (Fig. 2).

Most textbook writing committees had the same vision of education centered on content and the instructor. Furthermore, many general objectives for the Arabic and science classes were formulated as learning aims or instructions to teachers. In addition to being written by different committees, the books did not include complex lessons. Though most of the educational intentions (84%) we tallied were related to learning the material, we also noted that the stated learning objectives mostly hovered near the bottom of Bloom’s taxonomy, in particular remember (48%), understand (11%), and apply (29%). Another 10% of objectives were categorized as motor learning. Only a handful of objectives (less than 1%) were coded as analysis or creation, and some books struggled to meet even this threshold. There were no learning objectives coded as evaluation. The curriculum proposed by ISIS was therefore not “simplified,” but rather provided a low intellectual level of education to primary school students, which we’ll detail further for each subject in the next sections. This focus on the bottom of the taxonomy is not unique to ISIS’s textbooks, although it is very pronounced in this case. In comparison, an analysis of the questions contained in “Our Arabic Language” Textbooks used in Jordan in grade 4, 5 and 6 has shown that the relative percentage of remember objectives was similar (46,45%) to the one found in ISIS books, but that almost 27% of the objectives were focusing on syntheses (9,74%), analysis (8,88%) and evaluation (8,14%) (Dabat, 2015). Another factor beside the percentage of objectives in each category is the complexity and quality of the information students are expected to remember, understand and apply. More generally, ISIS’s curriculum was diametrically opposed to the one the Iraqi government was implementing before ISIS took over, which focused on the development of key competencies such as inquiry (Iraqi Curriculum Framework, 2012).

Out of the other educational intentions declared for secular subjects (16%), religious intentions (6.8%) made up a non-negligible percentage, especially when 70% of teaching time was already dedicated to religion. There were fewer intentions for emotional (4.7%) and social (2.7%) aims, and those mostly had to do with love for the language, having beautiful handwriting, and learning hygiene rules. Finally, there were relatively few explicitly militaristic educational intentions (1.9%). However, this contrasts with the use of military references in ISIS-
importance they placed on developing a love of the Arabic language, averaging 162 pages per year out of an average total of 390 pages (42%). This emphasis was particularly marked during the period of ISIS’s rule, when the curriculum was heavily influenced by the group’s educational objectives.

For example, the lesson titled ‘Journey of a Martyr: Immigrant Abderrahim Al-Usturali’ (WBREAD 4: 37) recounts the life of an Australian man who converted to Islam and joined up with ISIS in Syria. The text tells of how he set off a car bomb in the middle of a crowded area. The questions had to answer then reinforced the message of indoctrination contained in the texts. For example, in the same lesson, one of the reading comprehension questions that students were asked is “What phrase did he repeat?” The correct answer is “I have read the Qur’an and I know that jihad is a shortcut to heaven.”

The learning methods and the contexts used to introduce concepts also pose certain problems. First, the use of religious and militaristic texts undermines ISIS’s claim that the subjects it taught were age-appropriate and diversified. Second, the lack of children literature, such as fictional stories and descriptions of daily life, is a major departure from the usual fare for students of that age.

In the reading classes, learning objectives tended to be the same from one lesson to the next and from one year to the next. They can mainly be categorized as application (41%) and motor learning (15%). In fact, apart from a few new objectives in Year 5, ISIS expected students to be able to “perfectly” read a text out loud, and to read, comprehend, and write using a selection of vocabulary words. Comprehension questions emphasized religious or jihadist information that students were supposed to retain from the text, rather than developed reading strategies.

Writing classes focused mostly on ingraining the muscle memory needed to reproduce letters, write out words, and have beautiful handwriting. This was a deliberate choice by ISIS, which repeatedly affirmed the need to improve students’ ‘poor handwriting’ throughout primary school. Learning objectives for calligraphy fell into the categories of application (66%) and motor learning (30%). Learning objectives for dictation and grammar focused mostly on remembering (71% and 74%, respectively). The books seldom asked students to write cogently or even complete sentences. Dictation books did not offer any exercises for transcribing oral text; rather, they merely contained rules on how words are written or pronounced depending on the context. The grammar books contained only nine exercises asking students to write sentences with certain characteristics. Thus, for all intents and purposes, the curriculum lacked any opportunity for creation (composition of texts or sentences) or teaching of text structure. As a result, it is highly questionable whether students who underwent ISIS’s curriculum were very literate or able to comprehend and write advanced texts.

3.4. Mathematics

The mathematics curriculum was influenced by ISIS’s religious ideology. In accordance with official directives (Authors, 2020b), the books made no mention of money, statistics or probability. In addition to these expected gaps, a number of other lacunae—along with learning objectives, most of which can be categorized as application (55%) and almost never (less than 1% of the time) understanding—meant that the curriculum was quite limited.

These limits manifested in many ways. First, the curriculum only included whole numbers, except for a mention of fractions in Year 2. Students were not asked to represent numbers in different ways, identify their place values, estimate them or round them. Next, students were given a few problems to solve, but complex mental operations—for example, identifying pertinent information or understanding the problem—were not necessary. Finally, geometry and measurements were mostly absent from the curriculum. Students had only to distinguish, draw, and recognize a few two-dimensional shapes (squares, triangles, rectangles) in Year 1. The usual primary school lessons of describing geometric shapes, classifying them, and understanding their properties were not taught. The curriculum mentioned distance measurements only once and touched only briefly on units of liquid volume and mass. Measurements of area, solid volume, and angles were not covered.

Some parts of the curriculum were surprising. Students were taught skip counting (i.e., counting by twos, fives, etc.) and the difference between odd and even numbers quite late, even though they are generally considered rudimentary. Similarly, multiplication and division were
Seventy mujahideen (jihadists) took part in the invasion to liberate Al-Sukhnah, and only 29 jihadists were able to enter the city. How many jihadists were unable to enter the city?

3.5. Science

The educational intentions were stated more clearly in the science curriculum and were also related to the teaching of science in 88% of cases. Science teaching took on a spiral shape, with topics repeated and studied in more depth with each following year. For example, the curriculum introduced animals (Year 1), followed by their habitats and food sources (Year 2), reproduction (Year 3), and finally their classification (Year 4). In Year 5, the concepts of viruses, bacteria, and microbes were added. The selection of topics and the way the objectives were stated suggest, at first glance, that the curriculum was similar to those of other countries. Yet it did not teach the same things.

Eighty-six percent of the stated learning objectives had to do with memorizing material and required generalizations or creating mental categories. But the information presented in each lesson was extremely scant and consisted primarily of commonplace, even trivial, observations. It did not seem to lead students to achieve the stated objectives. Moreover, the failure to teach scientific reasoning or the scientific process made the subject of science a mere collection of facts to be memorized.

Unlike in other subjects, the science textbooks contained only the odd militaristic image. Nonetheless, religion occupied a special place in this school subject. A thorough analysis of the matter has already been published (Authors, 2019), but in any case, we note the presence of religious educational objectives unrelated to scientific knowledge in the curriculum (“Talk about the power of Allah in creating the Earth,” WBSCIE 4: 55). Content was accompanied by introductory surahs and references to interpretations by theologian Ibn Kathir. These additions indicate a certain Salafi influence on teachings specific to the science curriculum.

3.6. Geography

Geography classes were influenced by ISIS’s political vision. In keeping with the group’s rejection of the nation-state system, the textbooks made no reference to human geography, regions, countries or borders. Instead, the curriculum focused on physical geography and various topics like geographic formations, soil types, hydrography, fauna and flora in different regions, the water cycle, the winds, and astronomy. In some ways it complemented the science curriculum.

Information contained in the textbooks was mostly descriptive. Seventy-seven percent of educational objectives consisted of memorizing facts, and nearly all the rest (22%) focused on understanding. Overall, the level of intellectual thought required was very low, and students were not required to perform socio-spatial analyses (Lebrun and Araújo-Oliveira, 2009) or solve problems. Furthermore, despite the very few educational intentions related to religion (2.8%), we noted that the Qur’an was used as a reference to identify celestial bodies and that the textbooks highlighted the role of Muslims around the world and their contributions to the field of physical geography.

As a whole, the geography curriculum was used to highlight Muslims’ contributions in advancing knowledge and to justify the possession and occupation of territory.

3.7. History

History classes were based on “revelations,” in which history was revealed to students by the teacher. Eighty-one percent of lessons called for memorization and 19% for understanding. The history that was taught covered a rather short period of time—ranging from the beginning of Muhammad’s spiritual quest, through the Night of Power, and ending around the time Usama’s army was preparing to conquer Rome—and centered on the life of the Prophet. Due to the time period and events covered, it is not surprising that there were more religious educational intentions (9%) in history than in others. Even so, the textbook advocated for a utopia, a return to a glorious past, the Golden Age of the Caliphas. The curriculum glorified the past and major battles and conquests and adopted overtly militaristic aims.

For the subject of history, we noted that 39% of the educational intentions were militaristic in nature, the highest proportion of all subjects. The reason for this is because most of the textbook contents focused on analyzing the military strategies used in various battles during the Prophet’s life and their parallels to battles waged by ISIS. The stated educational objectives were consistent with the mission of the ISIS army and some of its principles, for example, “Students should understand that one of the Muslim army’s duties is to incite terror and panic among the infidels” (TBHIST 4–5: 42). Several of the principles directly violate international conventions, such as “Students should understand that the execution of prisoners of war is necessary to fulfill the needs and interests of ISIS” (TBHIST 4–5: 42). By celebrating the past and a return to the Golden Age, ISIS’s history classes formed the underpinnings of a totalitarian doctrine.

3.8. English

The English curriculum closely resembled the international standard, closer than any other subject. Certain clues suggested that the English workbooks were partially copied from existing books. For example, a photo of an Arabian Peninsula family was used to portray a typical family (WBENGL 5: 81), and certain words were spelled the American way (“gray”), while others were spelled the British way (“color”). We also saw discrepancies between content taught in English classes and content taught in other subjects, suggesting that exercises had been reused. The workbooks contained activities on specific topics—mathematical operations, angles, time, the seasons—that were lacking from the curriculum in other subjects or that were only taught much later.

Even when the textbook content seemed to have been mostly borrowed from existing works, traces of modifications made by ISIS could be seen. Some of them suggest that the textbooks were edited by people with a limited grasp of English. There are some glaring errors: for example, “Islamic Personalies” (WBENGL 5: unit 1), “What are there in your classroom” (WBENGL 4: lesson 3), and “What does he work?” (WBENGL 4: 90). The errors were even more problematic for the fact that the books contain very little text. In addition, some words (wudoo’, umm) were not translated, while in other cases, anglicized Arabic words (“bazaar,” “souk”) were used interchangeably with their English equivalent (“market”).
A fair portion of the learning objectives (38%) was devoted to application, meaning students had to be able to read a text or pronounce words correctly. However, there were very few learning objectives devoted to understanding (3%), which is surprising for a foreign language class. Only one religious objective and no militaristic objectives were observed. Nevertheless, they were explicitly brought up in the lesson content. For example, one short dialog discussed a child’s wish to become an imam (“Islamic scholar”) to spread Islam in Japan (WBENGL 5: 54). Mentions of a militaristic nature took the form of multiple references to ISIS as a political group (Fig. 3) and the inclusion of violent content.

As in the Arabic reading textbooks, jihad and war were mentioned many times in the English exercises (see Table 2). We also noted more than 20 vocabulary words (“battlefield,” “enemies,” “martyr,” “sniper,” etc.) and several images (bombs on which students learned to tell time) that referenced war.

These excerpts are examples of how violence and the perpetual state of preparing for war that characterizes militarism were normalized (Naseem, 2014). Finally, based on the concepts taught and the emphasis on conversation, our hypothesis is that English, was chosen for militarism reasons as was computer programming. We believe that basic conversational skills were deemed useful for communicating with some non-Arabic speaking foreign fighters.

4. How ISIS utilized each subject

Our analysis of the potentially implemented curriculum leads us to conclude that it was at a lower level compared to the formal Iraqi curriculum or other primary school curricula. There were three main issues with ISIS’s secular content. First, the absence of certain important topics in the Arabic and mathematics classes suggest that students had a low level of literacy by the end of their primary school education. Second, the learning objectives stated in the books all fell into the lowest categories of Bloom’s taxonomy. In addition, the content accompanying them lacked complexity and nuance and were not always sufficient to realistically achieve the stated objectives. Third, the presence of so many religious educational intentions in Arabic, Mathematics, Science, Geography, History and English only added to the amount of time spent teaching religion. Also, ISIS’s religious doctrine influenced the content students were given, for example, by removing probability and human geography as topics, or by depicting women, who were mentioned rarely as it was, in traditional roles.

Our analysis also revealed differences in how ISIS used each subject to further its aims. Militarism (the call to jihad and violence) was most prevalent in history classes, including in the explicit way the learning objectives were stated. The Arabic word jihad has different meanings, as Saikal (2018) reminded: the “spiritual struggle” of devoting oneself to loving God, (2) the “intellectual struggle” to understand His message and decrees, and (3) the “physical struggle” to defend and spread the “one true faith,” (Holy War). These meanings belong to the mainstream belief in the Muslim world, but ISIS shares only the last definition (Holy War), and considers it the only “true jihad”, as stated in the doctrine textbooks (Authors, submitted; Roy, 2017).

The contexts used to teach reading and English were also problematic and cast martyrs and jihad in a positive light. There were many examples of men engaging in jihad, clearly designed to inspire students to emulate them. In the English classes, the content covered suggests that the language was only taught so that combatants who did not speak Arabic could communicate with other ISIS members or even with future captives. Images and contexts with violent connotations were also found in the mathematics books, but less often and in a less structured way. These books did not offer a structured discourse so much as helped normalize the violence in the children’s lives.

The history books also contained the group’s well-established political aims, specifically of rejecting the nation-state system, while paradoxically trying to be one. The books also omitted 1400 years of contemporary history covering the development, rise, and adoption of the nation-state system. The same political aims were seen in the geography classes as well, in which the texts glossed over topics of human geography and thus of its national borders.

Finally, calligraphy and science were used primarily for religious ends, to develop students’ faith and love of the religion. As can be seen by the references to Ibn Kathir in the science books, and the inclusion of mosaics in the calligraphy books as the only form of art permitted, lessons presented a strict version of Islam. The textbooks for English, reading, and science contained many references to practices that good Muslims were to follow.

In general, ISIS’s potentially implemented curriculum was insufficient to provide students with basic knowledge and skills. Instead, under the guise of educating students in a modern, simplified way, the curriculum served as a vector for ISIS’s ideology, primarily its political and military aims.

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**Table 2**

| Excerpts of Exercises with militaristic references. |
|-----------------|-----------|
| **Excerpts** | **Page** |
| I came with my parents to Wilayat Al-Mosul for Jihad. | 25 |
| What are the subjects in the timetable? Jihad education, Islamic education, Arabic, maths and English. | 41 |
| Rhaudah Abu al-Waleed was a famous […] (farmer, fighter) | 78 |
| Answer: fighter |
| He died in 642 after achieving major conquests in Iraq and Syria. | 85 |
| I […] Jihadah. (like/dislike) |
| Ammaar was a fighter. He lived with his family in a small town near Ninawa. | 86 |
| He went to fight in one of the battlefields, a fighter plane bombed his family and killed them. We asked Allah to accept them with Martyrs in Al-Jannah. |

**Write (Yes) or (No):**
- Ammaar was an engineer.
- He lived with his parents.
- He had five children.
- He went to wedding.
- Fill in the blanks with these words. (Whose, Where, Who, What, When) |
- […] is the winner? My uncle.
- […] color do you prefer? Red.
- […] is the winner? My uncle.
- […] you are going to school? At 8 o’clock.

**Fig. 3.** Dialog describing the ISIS flag (WBENGL 4: 49).
5. Recommendations for child intervention

To this day, many of the children who experienced this education system live in internally displaced people (IDP) camps. Others, especially in Syria, have ended up in detention centers because they have reached a certain age (approximately 12 years old). Our team has published several articles on the analysis of ISIS curriculum. The knowledge we generated has been used to develop support and intervention programs for these youths. In this regard, we are still actively collaborating with three NGOs in Syria and Iraq. Our research supports the development of programs for return to formal education, psycho-social support and prevention of violent radicalization.

ISIS curriculum had strong ideological and political components which are perceptible in every subject. While the organization had touted the modernism of its curriculum, boasting its quality, as well as its scientific and pedagogical basis, the reality is that it absolutely did not allow for the development of the skills and competencies children need to cope with the challenge they now face. Furthermore, taking into account the shortcomings of their education so far, we can target interventions in schools to both develop their skills and foster peace. By using problem solving as a teaching strategy in science (through the use of the scientific method), history and geography, we can promote the development of critical thinking skills. In teaching languages, a variety of texts can be used to demonstrate the richness of a diversity of viewpoints, develop empathy and constitute the basis of conflict resolution and dialog pedagogy. Discussing where knowledge comes from and showcasing diverging opinions can also reduce the fear caused by diverging ideas.

As far as learning in common school subjects was possible under ISIS’s rule, we believe that children who attended its education system very likely have only a limited knowledge of facts in basic subjects. To help them learn Arabic, we suggest basing lessons on a range of children’s literature and working with students particularly on the use of reading strategies. We also believe that it is important to give them opportunities to write short texts, since the ISIS curriculum went no further than writing single sentences. Symbolic play could also be used with young children to help them practice their oral communication skills.

When working on mathematics with younger students, it would be beneficial to work on learning place values, how to represent numbers in different ways, and basic operations. With older students, introduce the concepts of measurement and the basics of geometry, fractions, and decimals to give them the tools they did not learn under the ISIS curriculum but that will help them function in daily life. Likewise, prioritize teaching students to solve short mathematical problems that reflect real-life, non-violent situations.

In science, the ISIS curriculum did not teach the scientific process and, on the whole, offered students little useful information. Though it may be difficult to allow students to take an investigative approach when attempting to bring them up to speed in their education, we will collect first-hand information on the portions of the curriculum that provoked resistance in schools and on the teaching strategies that came with the use of the textbooks. This will be crucial to translating our findings into actual applicable practices.

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6. Future avenues of research

The results presented in this article are the first step towards a better understanding of children’s educational experience under the ISIS regime. The next steps in the research project are in progress and will allow us to gather information on the curriculum that was actually implemented by talking to teachers, principals, and other school system employees who taught under the ISIS regime. In this second phase, we will collect first-hand information on the portions of the curriculum that provoked resistance in schools and on the teaching strategies that came with the use of the textbooks. This will be crucial to translating our findings into actual applicable practices.

References


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