



Beirut Declaration

On Educational Reform for Preventing Violent Extremism in Arab Societies

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Introduction

In partnership with the Arab Thought Forum, Adyan Foundation's Institute of Citizenship and Diversity Management called for a meeting, held in Beirut on September 29 and 30, 2016, bringing together 50 educational policy experts from Iraq, Bahrain, the Sultanate of Oman, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon. The meeting was held with the participation of the UNESCO Regional Bureau, the Arab Institute for Human Rights, the UNESCO National Commission, the Center for Educational Research and Development in Lebanon and several public and private academic and educational institutions, with the aim of thinking together about educational reforms as a means of resilience in the face of extremism in Arab societies. The participants reached the following conclusions.

1) General context

The Arab scene has witnessed during the past few years growing extremism patterns, related to regional events and dynamics, which threaten the development process, as well as societal peace, security and stability.

Transcending national and Arab boundaries, extremism is linked to closed and monolithic reasoning, contradicting the concepts and values of the civil modern democratic State, and of citizenship, freedoms, diversity and difference.

Against such a backdrop, Arab educational systems are facing many challenges, as they suffer from a lack of clear and defined strategic vision. Reforming these systems on the basis of the values of citizenship, diversity and living together, is thus a vital gateway to countering extremism.

In fact, an educational reform calls for an integrated and comprehensive societal reform, which – in turn – calls for an educational revolution towards humanization.

2) Discussion topics

The sessions of the regional meeting held constructive and indicative discussions characterized by a bold and realistic analysis of the crisis and a clear vision laying the foundations for solutions based on success stories. Interactions and points of view focused on the following topics:

- 1- Extremism, its tools and its roots in Arab societies
- 2- Educational reform requirements to face extremism
- 3- Obstacles to educational reforms in Arab societies
- 4- Educational reform experiences and lessons learnt

3) Recommendations

1. Work on establishing an educational system that promotes the values of citizenship that is inclusive of all forms of diversity and that affirms the principles of non-discrimination and acceptance of difference.
2. Endeavor to steer the educational system towards building human beings with free, independent personalities, who are able to express themselves using critical thinking tools and communication and dialogue skills.

3. Strive to focus the educational system on the learners and involve them in its multiple dimensions, including assessments, so that they use what they learn as a means of self-development and active participation in life.
4. Give importance to having an integrative and comprehensive formation for the learners, incorporating to the educational system: culture, communication, arts, sports and promoting scientific innovation.
5. Focus on the teachers' central role in the educational process as facilitators helping learners obtain knowledge rather than as sources of knowledge, and continuously form teachers and persons working in the educational sphere, building their capacities to spread the values of citizenship, ban discrimination, prevent extremism and accept diversity and difference.
6. Promote schools as an open space to consolidate democratic concepts and human rights values.
7. Work on freeing curricula from stereotypes, hate speech and all kinds of discrimination against any cultural, religious, ethnic or gender component of society.
8. Pay special attention to social studies, humanities, languages and arts in accordance with the values of citizenship and inclusion of diversity.
9. Include philosophy as a core subject matter throughout the different cycles of school education in order to develop the learners' critical skills.

10. Make sure to include the variety of the cultural heritage of society in history subject matters, which should encompass social history and the history of peoples.
11. Pay particular attention to religious education, focus on its role in terms of education to the common values of public life, and beware of the selective approach to and ideological exploitation of religious texts.
12. Stress the urgent need to review the religious heritage and adopt a renewed rhetoric that would consolidate the values of citizenship and living together.
13. Call for the establishment of independent higher councils for education, culture and sciences in order to develop educational policies and curricula.
14. Establish independent national committees to monitor extremism symptoms, assess the education system, and check its compliance with quality criteria.
15. Promote partnership between public educational institutions, civil society and experts, in the drafting and building of the new educational systems, in the development of educational policies, curricula and programs.
16. Establish an Arab education network for humanization and citizenship inclusive of diversity in order to coordinate efforts and exchange expertise.