

Egyptian Education Minister Discusses Curriculum, Religious Education, Jihad, and Democracy

In interviews with the London Arabic-language daily Al-Sharq Al-Awsat [1] and the Egyptian government daily Al-Ahram [2], Egyptian Education Minister Dr. Hussein Kamel Bahaa Al-Din discussed reform in the Egyptian curricula. The following are excerpts from the interviews:

The Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Interview: 'No One Dares to Interfere with Egypt's Curriculum'

Question: "What is the scope of the international aid to fund education in Egypt?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "There is in fact foreign aid [and] aid for education, but ultimately this is only a small percentage of all of Egypt's spending on education."

Question: "Does [the aid] come from countries or organizations?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "[The aid comes] from both countries and organizations."

Question: "Where does the U.S. place [relative to other countries giving aid] for education?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "[The U.S.] is one of the countries giving the most aid."

Question: "Is the grant given [by these countries] conditional on special provisions or is it unconditional?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "We do not accept conditions on any grant given us."

Question: "Doesn't the U.S. interfere at some stage?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "No one dares to interfere with Egypt's curriculum, and no one has suggested adding [anything] to or changing the Egyptian curricula. If the trend now is to fight extremism and terror, Egypt, in the framework of its fight against terror, has [already] paid a heavy price [by sacrificing] its sons and its martyrs [and has spent] funds [for this purpose] when the countries leading the campaign against terror surrendered to terror. Another thing is that these same mottos and principles - on which many countries pride themselves for calling [to cling to] - were already instilled and implemented by Egypt in its curriculum of its own free will, seven years ago."

Change Has Not Happened in Our Curricula; Religious Education has Increased

Question: "What are the characteristics of the [curricular] development that Egypt undertook even before there was any international push for it?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "Everything connected to human rights, children's rights, women's rights, accepting the other, denouncing extremism and terror, labor market and globalization values, and denouncing discrimination on the basis of gender, race, or religion."

Question: "Is this development carried out by adding [new things] to the curriculum or by removing [certain things]?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "[It is carried out] by introducing these perceptions into the curriculum without removing anything."

Question: "Is the talk about change in the religious curricula true?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "This has not happened. [In practice], the number of religious education lessons has increased, not decreased. The content of the religious study material [is determined] in cooperation with Al-Azhar, and with its full agreement. The **Sheikh of Al-Azhar** himself looks over and approves the curricula, and trains some of the teachers."

Question: "Was there really an examination of the religious study material that ultimately caused the removal of [some] Qur'an verses and stories about *Jihad* against the Jews and Israel?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "In the early 1990s, I was surprised [to hear about] nine books published by [some] groups of extremists who accused us of blurring religious identity and removing Qur'an verses and *Hadiths* of the Prophet [from the religious curricula]. When this came to my attention, in 1994, I phoned **the late Sheikh Muhammad Al-Ghazali, Dr. Sayyed Tantawi, Dr. Omar Hashem, and Dr. Abd Al-Sabour Marzouq** and asked them to come to the [Education] Ministry... In a letter, I told them: 'It is not I who compiles these curricula and not I who must defend a mistake. If there is a mistake, I deserve thanks for correcting it.' Four hours later, Sheikh Al-Ghazali told me, 'I am sure that what is taught is the correct religion and that the statements that were circulated were absolute falsehood.' This matter was published in the media at the time."

'The U.S. Said the Egyptian Curricula are a Model that Other Countries Should Follow'

Question: "A [certain] Arab organization submitted a report to the **Arab League** criticizing religious education in Arab countries, and describing it as education that does not encourage respect and acceptance for the other. What have you to say [about this]?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "These statements do not apply to us."

Question: "During your visit to the U.S. in May of last year, did [the Americans] have any comments or demands, or did you discuss the stages of study in Egypt?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "They did not set demands, but made [several] comments, one of which was that the Egyptian curricula were a model that the other countries should follow."

Question: "Is the teaching in Egypt appropriate to the world's current political and social needs?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "It is none of my business whether we adapt ourselves to the foreign countries. What interests me is that it will suit the nature of the people, its values, its religion, its heritage, its history, and its interests..."

Question: "To what extent, in your opinion, do some of the extremist streams infiltrate the teachers' ranks, and is there a supervisory apparatus [dealing with this]?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "I have expelled thousands of extremist teachers from teaching. A teacher who proves that he is extremist will be expelled from teaching absolutely."

Question: "How do you verify this?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "I receive security reports, ongoing reports from the supervisory apparatuses of the [Education] Ministry, and from the authorized bodies, and publications from the media. When I am certain that there is a trend deviating from the national line, I expel the teacher immediately."

The Al-Ahram Interview: 'There Are Many Lessons Dealing With Jihad'

Question: "Has the religious studies curriculum in fact been reduced?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "This is not true. This is a complete lie. Furthermore, a number of religious lessons have been added in the schools. No one thinks [of cutting back] and no one dares to cut back the religious curriculum in Egypt. Al-Azhar supervises it consistently."

Question: "But there is talk of abolishing everything connected to *Jihad* in the Islam curriculum, and that even the wars of the Prophet [Muhammad] do not appear in the curriculum any more."

Bahaa Al-Din: "That isn't true at all. There are many lessons dealing with *Jihad*, [\[3\]](#) *Da'wa*, and the wars of the Prophet. There are many other curricula that deal with this, such as history..."

'The Word 'Democracy' Does Not Appear [in The Curriculum] Because At This Age [the Student] Is Not Ready to Absorb It'

Question: "There is no mention of the word 'democracy' in the study material for [teaching] good conduct in the first three years of elementary school. Indeed, there is no mention of it at all – even though the spirit and good conduct of [our] time are based on this word."

Bahaa Al-Din: "The exact word does not appear, but its meaning is there."

Question: "In which lesson?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "Actually, I don't have the lesson [plans] in front of me."

Question: "Excuse me, Mr. Minister, but I went over every curriculum and I did not find [the word 'democracy']."

Bahaa Al-Din: "Perhaps the explicit name does not appear, because at this age [the child] is not ready to absorb [the meaning] of the word. We ... interpret it and convey the message indirectly and in ways that have more of an effect [on children]. Likewise, we do not forget that the most important thing in democracy is actually applying it."

"The core of democracy is full knowledge of rights, obligations, and positive participation in these rights and obligations. This will not come about unless democracy is applied in practice. Now in the school we have a school parliament and discussion groups."

Question: "Doctor, please [tell us] frankly, when will the word 'democracy' be introduced in the school?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "We are in a process of ongoing growth. In the National Council of Education that convened in 1994, we decided that there was a need for development. [Now] there is development; it exists, is alive, and is growing [all the time]."

Question: "Is it possible to teach good conduct and democracy in an atmosphere of fear?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "It is not only good conduct that cannot be taught in the shadow of fear. It is not possible to teach anything in the shadow of fear. [Fear] kills creativity, prevents comprehension, stops understanding, and eliminates the capability for talent..."

Question: "Regarding [the U.S.] Greater Middle East [initiative]: Do you, sir, think that the study of the subject of good conduct in the schools is connected to sowing the idea of coexistence with and acceptance of the Israeli neighbors?"

Bahaa Al-Din: "The core of our belief is peace. Our greeting in Islam is peace. [And the word 'peace'] appears explicitly in Qur'an verses – but we have a particular perception about peace. This is peace that is based on justice that includes everyone, peace that is based on recognizing the legitimate rights of the other, and not on imposing facts on the ground. And this is what we teach our children."

[1] *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* (London), March 9, 2004.

[2] *Al-Ahram* (Egypt), March 16, 2004.

[3] A similar answer was given by the Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Muhammad Sayyed Tantawi, in the Egyptian government weekly *Aqidati*, to the question: "Some claim that curricular development [program] has [included] the removal of [Qur'an] verses calling for Jihad and dealing with the Jews. What is Your Excellency's response to this?" He answered: "We show everyone the textbooks on religious law studied at Al-Azhar and we tell them: 'What you say is groundless.' All these chapters are in the religious law textbooks, from the first stage [of study] to the end of the second stage [of study]. They appear extensively, in the specialized faculties, such as the Shari'a Faculty and the Religious Roots Faculty, and Islamic and Arab Studies." *Aqidati* (Egypt), March 16, 2004.

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