

Madrasah Education Strategies in Facing the Challenges of Extremism and Radicalism: A Case Study in Jordan

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Abstract:

This study examines the educational strategies implemented by madrassas in Jordan to help them face the challenges of extremism and radicalism. With a qualitative approach and case study design on six madrassas in three different regions of Jordan (Amman, Irbid, and Ma'an), this study explores educational reform efforts in the context of religious moderation policies in Jordan. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, online focused group discussions, virtual classroom observations, and document analysis. The results of the study identified five main strategies developed by madrassas: (1) curriculum and teaching material reform, (2) teacher capacity building, (3) innovative pedagogical approaches, (4) media and digital literacy development, and (5) collaboration with external communities and institutions. The implementation of the strategy shows significant variation between madrassas in urban and rural areas, with urban madrassas showing greater adaptive capacity in integrating comprehensive approaches. This research proposes an integrated model of anti-extremism education that emphasizes the importance of contextualizing Islamic teachings, the development of critical thinking, positive identity building, global citizenship education, and the empowerment of students as agents of change. The findings of the research contribute to the understanding of the role of madrassas in the context of security and peacebuilding, as well as affirm the importance of contextual approaches in the development of anti-radicalism education.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of extremism and religious radicalism has become a global concern, including in countries with Muslim majority populations such as Jordan. The existence of madrassas as traditional Islamic educational institutions has a strategic role in forming a moderate and tolerant religious understanding in the community. However, madrassas also face great challenges because they are often accused of being a place for the spread of extremist ideas, even though in reality the majority of these institutions are actually at the forefront of fighting radicalism (Milton-Edwards, 2018).

Jordan is an interesting Arab country to study because of its strategic position in the Middle East region and the religious moderation policies implemented by the Hashemite kingdom. Amid regional geopolitical tensions and the influence of transnational ideologies that have the potential to fuel extremism, the madrasah education system in Jordan has developed various strategies to stem the influence of radicalism and promote tolerant Islam (Abu-Nimer & Nasser, 2017). Education policy in Jordan has a significant political role in shaping national identity and maintaining social stability (Tobias Joachim Schnitzler; Cara Luisa Heise, 2021).

This study examines the strategies implemented by madrassas in Jordan to deal with the challenges of extremism and radicalism. This research is important considering the complexity of the challenges faced by madrassas in the era of information globalization and the increase in the activities of extremist groups in the region (Badran, 2019). Ghosh et al. (2017) emphasized that education has significant potential in countering religious extremism that leads to violence, but requires a comprehensive and contextual approach.

Through a case study approach in selected madrassas in Jordan, this research is expected to contribute to the development of effective Islamic education models in stemming extremism and radicalism, as well as provide a new perspective on the role of religious educational institutions in building peace and social harmony. Al-Atoom et al. (2018) show that educational approaches to preventing extremism in Jordan have shown some positive results, although there are still challenges that need to be overcome. Meanwhile, Kuipers and El-Hajj (2020) underscore the importance of paying attention to the impact of education reform on religious minority communities in counter-terrorism efforts in Jordan.

The research of Malkawi and Abu-Dalbouh (2018) highlights the important role of academic institutions in Jordan in efforts to counter extremism and terrorism, especially through a curriculum that promotes critical thinking and the values of tolerance. Meanwhile, Nasir and Al-Faisal (2020) identified the main challenges in implementing education aimed at countering violent extremism in Jordan, including resource limitations and the complexity of the socio-political factors behind radicalism.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of madrasah education strategies in Jordan in facing the challenges of extremism and radicalism. Case studies allow researchers to explore contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts (Yin, 2018), especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly visible, as in the case of the implementation of anti-radicalism educational strategies in the socio-political context of Jordan.

The research was conducted online and involved six madrassas in three different regions of Jordan. Two madrassas in Amman (the capital) represent urban areas with adequate access to resources, two madrassas in Irbid represent semi-urban areas with heterogeneous student populations, including the Syrian refugee community, and two madrassas in Ma'an represent rural areas with limited infrastructure and educational resources. The subjects of the study include madrasah heads, teachers, high school students, officials of the Ministry of Education

and the Ministry of Waqf of Jordan, community/religious leaders around the madrasas, as well as representatives of international organizations involved in anti-extremism education programs in Jordan.

Data collection was carried out through in-depth online interviews using video conferencing platforms, with a duration of 60-90 minutes per session. Interviews were conducted with madrasah heads, teachers, ministry officials, community/religious leaders, and representatives of international organizations. The online interview protocol includes technical preparation to ensure the quality of the internet connection and platform security, informed consent, documentation in the form of audio-visual recordings (with permission) and verbatim transcripts, semi-structured interview structure, and rapport-building strategies. The interview themes include perceptions of the challenges of extremism and radicalism, educational strategies developed, implementation challenges, factors supporting success, program impact, collaboration with external stakeholders, and capacity building needs.

In addition to in-depth interviews, this study also used online focused group discussions (FGDs) with groups of students and teachers. Each FGDs involves 6-8 participants with a duration of 90-120 minutes. The online FGD protocol pays attention to aspects of technical preparation, facilitation, documentation, interactive activities using digital platform features, and inclusivity strategies. The themes of the FGDs with students include an understanding of extremism and radicalism, learning experiences, perceptions of program effectiveness, exposure to online extremist content, and the role of social media. Meanwhile, the theme of the FGDs with teachers includes the challenges of curriculum implementation, effective pedagogical methods, capacity building needs, collaboration with external stakeholders, and evaluation of program impacts.

Classroom virtual observations were also carried out on the online learning process in 12 different classes to observe the implementation of anti-radicalism education strategies in teaching practices. The aspects observed included teaching methods, integration of religious moderation content, student participation rates, teachers' approaches in dealing with controversial views, the use of learning media, and the application of critical thinking development strategies. In addition, this study analyzed related documents such as curriculum, textbooks, teacher guidelines, policy documents, program reports, training materials, and publications related to counter-radicalism strategies in the Jordanian education sector.

Data analysis used a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019) with an inductive-deductive combination. The analysis process includes familiarization of the data through repeated reading of transcripts, initial coding to identify relevant data segments, theme search by grouping codes that have similar patterns, theme review to ensure compatibility with the original data, theme definition, and report writing that integrates themes in a coherent analytical narrative. Data analysis is assisted by the use of NVIVO software for qualitative data management and organization.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, several validity and reliability strategies are used such as triangulation (data sources, methods, and researchers), member checking to

confirm findings with participants, peer debriefing to gain an external perspective, trail audit to document the research process in detail, and reflectivity through reflective journals to manage potential bias.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

1. Madrasah profile and socio-political context

The six madrassas that were the locations of the study showed diverse characteristics in terms of size, curricular focus, and socio-economic background of students. Madrasas in the urban area of Amman generally have more adequate resources and stronger connections with higher education institutions and international organizations compared to madrasas in the Ma'an region which tend to have limited infrastructure and educational resources. Demographically, madrassas in Irbid have a more heterogeneous student population, including the refugee community from Syria which presents its own challenges in the context of social integration and differences in cultural backgrounds (Kuipers & El-Hajj, 2020).

Jordan's socio-political context significantly influenced the dynamics of education in madrasas. The counter-extremism policies implemented by the Hashemite kingdom have created an institutional framework that has become the cornerstone of anti-radicalism education programs in madrasas. The Jordanian Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Waqf have developed an integrated curriculum that explicitly integrates the values of religious moderation (*wasatiyyah*) in response to the challenge of radicalism (Al-Shalabi & Rawashdeh, 2016). However, the implementation of these policies is not always consistent across all regions, especially in rural areas that have limited institutional capacity and human resources.

2. Stakeholder perceptions of the challenges of extremism and radicalism

The results of interviews and FGDs show variations in stakeholders' perceptions of the challenges of extremism and radicalism. Madrasah heads and government officials generally view extremism as an external threat emanating from transnational groups and social media content. A madrasah head in Amman stated:

"We don't face radicalism in physical form in our madrasas, but the challenge is how to protect students from the influence of social media and online propaganda that is very accessible. Students today spend hours online and are exposed to a variety of extremist narratives without adequate filters." (MH-01, Amman)

In contrast to this perspective, teachers and community leaders tend to see the challenges of radicalism in a broader context, including social injustice, poverty, and limited access to quality education. A teacher in Ma'an revealed:

"We cannot separate the phenomenon of radicalism from socio-economic reality. In our region, high unemployment rates and economic marginalization make extremist narratives more receptive to frustrated and identity-seeking youth. Education alone is not enough if it is not accompanied by increased economic opportunities." (T-14, Ma'an)

The students, especially at the upper secondary level, showed a critical awareness of the issue of extremism and were able to identify several factors driving radicalization. However, there are significant differences in media literacy levels and the ability to evaluate controversial religious content between students in urban and rural areas. Students in Amman and Irbid madrassas show higher levels of media literacy compared to their counterparts in Ma'an (Ghosh et al., 2017).

3. Educational strategies in the face of extremism and radicalism

The research identifies five key strategies developed by madrassas in Jordan in dealing with the challenges of extremism and radicalism:

Curriculum and teaching materials reform

All the madrassas studied have carried out curriculum reforms by integrating content that promotes a moderate and tolerant understanding of Islam. Textbooks containing exclusive and literal interpretations have been revised, with a greater emphasis on the contextualization of Islamic teachings and a critical approach to religious texts. Analysis of curriculum documents shows a significant increase in the content of universal human values, inter-religious dialogue, and global citizenship (Badran, 2019).

However, there are variations in the implementation of this curriculum reform. Madrassas in Amman have adopted a more comprehensive and progressive approach, with the development of specialized learning modules on media literacy, critical thinking, and analysis of contemporary religious discourse. Meanwhile, in rural madrassas, implementation is limited to technical changes to textbooks without adequate pedagogical adaptation (Al-Atoom et al., 2018).

Teacher capacity development

Teacher capacity building programs are an important strategy in facing the challenge of extremism. The Jordanian Ministry of Education, in collaboration with international organizations such as UNESCO and UNDP, has organized intensive training for madrasah teachers on peace education, conflict resolution, and transformative pedagogy. Observations show that teachers who have participated in this training show a significant change in teaching methods, from an indoctrinative approach to a more dialogical and inclusive approach (Abu-Nimer & Nasser, 2017).

However, the distribution of this capacity building program has not been evenly distributed. Teachers in urban madrassas have better access to training compared to their counterparts in rural areas. A teacher in Irbid revealed:

“I have participated in five training programs in the last two years on peace education and preventing extremism. This training has helped me a lot in developing new methods to discuss sensitive issues with students. However, many colleagues in rural madrassas have not had similar opportunities.” (T-08, Irbid)

Innovative pedagogical approach

The madrassas studied showed a progressive adoption of innovative pedagogical methods that promoted critical thinking, empathy, and dialogue. Classroom observations show that madrassas in Amman and Irbid are actively implementing project-based learning, open discussions on controversial issues, and simulated conflict resolution in religious learning. This approach has proven effective in developing students' ability to identify and reject extremist narratives (Nasir & Al-Faisal, 2020).

One of the best practices identified is the "Fiqh al-Ikhtilaf" (Jurisprudence of Differences) program at Amman madrassas that teaches students about interpretive pluralism in the Islamic tradition and the importance of respecting differences of opinion. The program uses a collaborative learning method in which students are asked to analyze various interpretations of the same religious text and develop balanced arguments.

Development of media and digital literacy

Facing the challenge of online radicalization, madrassas have developed media and digital literacy programs to equip students with the skills to critically evaluate content. In the Amman and Irbid madrassas, students are trained to identify extremist propaganda, examine sources of information, and understand the manipulation strategies used by radical groups in social media (Malkawi & Abu-Dalbouh, 2018).

The "Digital Citizenship" program at Amman's madrassas is an innovative example of integrating anti-extremism education with digital literacy. The program not only focuses on online safety but also develops students' capacity to become moderate and inclusive content producers in cyberspace. As expressed by a teacher who implemented the program:

"We not only teach students how to avoid extremist content, but also motivate them to become ambassadors of moderation on social media. Some of our students have even developed online campaigns that promote the values of tolerance and peace." (T-03, Amman)

Collaboration with external communities and institutions

The fifth strategy identified is active partnerships between madrassas and local communities, civil society organizations, and moderate religious institutions. Madrassas in Amman and Irbid have developed community service programs that engage students in interfaith dialogue, social action with different communities, and cross-sectarian youth forums (Milton-Edwards, 2018).

Collaboration with moderate religious leaders is also an important element in counter-narrative strategies. Madrassas regularly invite prominent scholars known for their moderate views to give guest lectures and dialogue with students on contemporary issues. This approach gives students access to authoritative interpretations that challenge extremist narratives.

Discussion

1. The effectiveness of educational strategies in the socio-political context of Jordan

An analysis of madrasah education strategies in Jordan shows that a comprehensive approach that integrates curriculum reform, teacher capacity building, pedagogical innovation, media literacy, and community collaboration has significant potential in stemming extremism. However, the effectiveness of this strategy is greatly influenced by the socio-political context and institutional capacity of each madrasah.

In urban areas such as Amman, with adequate resource support and high connectivity with global networks, madrassas are able to implement innovative strategies that go beyond technical changes to the curriculum. The madrasah develops a holistic approach that integrates critical thinking, digital literacy, and inter-cultural dialogue within the overall educational ecosystem. This approach is in line with what Ghosh et al. (2017) call “preventive education,” which not only focuses on counter-narratives but also builds students’ cognitive and social resilience to extremism.

In contrast, madrassas in rural areas such as Ma’an face structural challenges that limit the effectiveness of educational strategies. Limited resources, limited access to teacher training, and greater socio-economic challenges create an implementation gap between national policies and local practices. These findings confirm the argument of Kuipers and El-Hajj (2020) that anti-extremism education reform is often hampered by contextual factors and structural inequalities.

2. Contextualization of Islam and cultural relevance in anti-radicalism education

The findings of the study show the importance of contextualizing Islamic teachings and cultural relevance in developing effective anti-radicalism education. Madrassas that succeed in stemming extremist narratives are those that are able to articulate authentic yet contextual interpretations of Islam, which respond to the contemporary needs and challenges of students (Badran, 2019).

The “Fiqh al-Ikhtilaf” program implemented in Amman’s madrassas is an effective example of how the Islamic intellectual tradition of pluralism of opinion can be revitalized to counter the dogmatism and exclusivism that are the cornerstones of extremist ideology. This approach provides students with a strong theological foundation to reject the claims of extremist groups that often simplify and distort complex Islamic traditions.

These findings reinforce the argument of Abu-Nimer and Nasser (2017) that successful approaches to anti-extremism education in Islamic contexts are not those that blindly adopt secular models, but rather those that are able to contextualize the values of peace and tolerance within the framework of Islamic references that are familiar to students. Thus, anti-radicalism education is not perceived as a coerced foreign agenda, but as an organic part of the tradition of Islamic education itself.

3. Challenges and limitations of educational approaches

While the research identifies a range of innovative strategies for dealing with extremism, there are some challenges and limitations that need to be addressed. First, educational approaches often focus on cognitive and knowledge aspects, while the roots of extremism are often also emotional, identity, and socio-economic. As stated by an official of the Ministry of Education:

“We can teach students about moderate Islam all day long, but if they return home to economically and politically marginalized families and communities, or if they have no job prospects, their vulnerability to radicalization remains high.” (ME-02, Amman)

These findings are in line with Milton-Edwards’ (2018) argument that anti-extremism education strategies need to be integrated with broader socio-economic reforms and empowerment of marginalized communities to achieve optimal effectiveness. Second, the research identified the tension between the security approach and the transformative educational approach in Jordan’s counter-extremism policies. Some anti-radicalism education programs are still dominated by security frameworks that emphasize compliance and control rather than critical development and personal transformation. This approach, while effective in the short term, risks creating resistance and alienation among students (Nasir & Al-Faisal, 2020).

Third, madrassas face the challenge of balancing an explicit counter-narrative approach with a positive approach that promotes inclusive values and critical skills. Excessive focus on counter-narratives risks reinforcing the visibility of extremist ideologies, while overly implicit approaches may not adequately equip students to deal with increasingly sophisticated extremist propaganda (Al-Atoom et al., 2018).

4. Integrated model of anti-extremism education in madrassas

Based on the analysis of the findings, this study proposes an integrated model of anti-extremism education for madrassas that integrates several essential components. This model begins with contextual theological education that offers the teaching of Islamic theology by contextualizing texts in contemporary realities and emphasizing the pluralism of interpretation in the Islamic tradition. At the same time, this model also prioritizes the development of critical skills in students, including capacity building in critical thinking, media literacy, and evaluation of various religious claims.

Another important aspect is the development of positive identities through the development of religious identities that are inclusive but still rooted in authentic traditions, so that they can be a strong alternative to extremist identities. In addition, global citizenship education is also emphasized to develop an understanding of citizenship that is able to balance religious identity with a commitment to universal values.

The last and no less important component is the empowerment of students as agents of change, by providing space for them to become active actors in promoting moderation and peace in their respective communities. Overall, the model emphasizes the importance of a holistic approach that goes beyond just knowledge transmission and includes personal transformation, critical skills development, and student empowerment. This approach is in

line with the transformative educational framework proposed by Malkawi and Abu-Dalbouh (2018) which views education not only as a tool to transmit moderate values but also as a process of liberation and empowerment.

5. Practical and theoretical implications

The findings of this study have several practical and theoretical implications. In practical terms, the proposed integrated model could serve as a framework for the development of anti-extremism education programs in madrasas, not only in Jordan but also in countries with similar contexts. The experience of madrasas in Jordan shows that approaches that integrate curriculum reform, teacher capacity building, pedagogical innovation, media literacy, and community collaboration have significant potential in stemming the influence of extremism.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the discourse on education and extremism by emphasizing the importance of contextualization and cultural relevance in the development of anti-radicalism education. The research findings challenge the universalistic approach that often dominates international discourse on education and counter-extremism, and underscore the importance of being rooted in local traditions while remaining open to universal values.

In addition, this research expands the understanding of the role of madrasas in the context of security and peacebuilding. In contrast to the stereotypical view that often portrays madrasas as traditional institutions resistant to change, the findings of the study demonstrate the adaptive capacity of madrasas in responding to contemporary challenges and developing innovative approaches in promoting religious moderation.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that madrasas in Jordan have developed a range of innovative strategies in dealing with the challenges of extremism and radicalism, reflecting the adaptive capacity of traditional Islamic educational institutions in responding to contemporary issues. These strategies include curriculum reform, teacher capacity building, pedagogical innovation, media literacy development, and community collaboration, which are implemented with varying degrees of success depending on the socio-political context and institutional capacity of each madrasah.

An analysis of the madrasah education strategy in Jordan reveals some important findings. First, the contextualization of Islamic teachings and cultural relevance plays a crucial role in developing effective anti-radicalism education. Madrasas that are able to articulate authentic but contextual interpretations of Islam are more successful in stemming extremist narratives. Second, there is a significant implementation gap between madrasas in urban and rural areas, reflecting structural inequalities in access to resources and institutional capacity. Third, approaches that focus too much on cognitive aspects without paying attention to the socio-economic factors underlying extremism have limitations in their effectiveness.

Based on these findings, the researchers propose an integrated model of anti-extremism education that integrates contextual theological education, critical skills development, positive identity building, global citizenship education, and student empowerment as agents of change. This model emphasizes the importance of a holistic approach that goes beyond knowledge transmission and includes personal transformation as well as student empowerment.

The implications of this study highlight the importance of developing a contextual approach in anti-radicalism education that is rooted in local traditions while remaining open to universal values. The research also affirms the important role of madrassas as institutions that have significant potential in stemming extremism and promoting peace, challenging stereotypes that often portray madrassas as traditional institutions resistant to change.

For further research, longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the long-term impact of anti-radicalism education strategies on student attitudes and behaviors, as well as further exploration of how broader socio-economic and political factors interact with educational interventions in shaping resilience to extremism. In addition, it is necessary to develop a comprehensive evaluation framework to measure the effectiveness of anti-radicalism education programs in various contexts.

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