

Contextualising Controversy: Narratives of Sensitive Issues in Tunisian, Pakistani and Iranian School Textbooks

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Abstract

How school curricula address sensitive topics remains a persistent challenge in education. While much of the literature focuses on how teachers address controversial issues through classroom pedagogy and discussion-based learning, comparatively less attention has been paid to how such issues are framed in textbooks and other curricular materials, including the ways in which language, imagery, and narrative structure shape their presentation. This paper examines how different national curricula present sensitive or controversial topics and whether these discussions are accompanied by narratives that promote or limit critical reflection and nuanced understanding. The study draws on case studies from national curricula in selected countries in the Middle East and South Asia region, as such state-approved textbooks often play a uniquely authoritative role, with a single textbook per subject and grade typically authored and published centrally by the Ministry of Education. The paper examines how and to what extent sensitive topics such as colonial history, gender, religion and violence, are contextualised in textbooks and learning materials. The findings suggest a consistent pattern: where controversial topics are embedded within broader historical and social contexts, curricular narratives more often emphasise critical reflection and invite consideration of coexistence or reconciliation. Where contextualisation is limited or absent, narratives are typically characterised by polarised perspectives and the normalisation of violence. These patterns suggest that contextualisation provides a key analytical lens for evaluating how curricula engage with controversial issues and their broader alignment with educational standards promoting peace, tolerance, and responsible civic understanding.

Keywords: contextualisation, controversial issues, school textbooks, critical thinking, peace and tolerance education

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Introduction

Sensitive and controversial issues have long formed part of education. Topics such as war, colonialism, religion, political conflict, and gender remain inherently contested because they involve competing interpretations of history, identity, and collective memory. This challenge is particularly significant for young students, whose social identity is still developing. The central question is therefore not whether sensitive issues should be taught, but how they should be framed, contextualised, and understood within educational narratives.

The teaching of sensitive issues has received sustained attention within history education scholarship. Cooper and Nichol (2017) argue that such issues emerge where history and identity intersect, using the metaphor of colliding “tectonic plates” to describe the interaction of competing national, political, religious, and cultural identities (p. 15). Historical controversy arises not simply because the past is disputed, but because different communities construct competing forms of historical consciousness through which they interpret the past, understand the present, and imagine the future.

What constitutes a sensitive issue varies across historical, political, and cultural contexts. Elmersjö and Persson (2023) define such issues as those that “engage students emotionally, and... provoke a reaction from them” (Introduction, para. 2) while Britzman (2003) describes “difficult knowledge” as “representations of social traumas in curriculum and the individual's encounters with them in pedagogy” (p. 755). Dearden (1981) similarly argues that controversy exists where “different viewpoints... exist without there being any contradiction in reason and logic” (pp. 37–44). Together, these perspectives suggest that sensitive issues are both intellectually contested and emotionally significant. Accordingly, this paper uses the terms *sensitive*, *controversial*, and *difficult knowledge* interchangeably to refer to curricular topics that challenge students' understandings of history, identity, and society.

Huijgen et al. (2018) argue that historical contextualisation enables students to develop more nuanced understandings of sensitive issues. Building on this premise, this paper argues that the degree of contextualisation within curricular materials shapes the narratives students encounter, ranging from those that encourage critical engagement, empathy, and coexistence to those that reinforce polarisation and antagonisation of the other. Huijgen et al. identify four principles of contextualisation:

1. Raising Awareness of Presentism: Highlighting the limitations of interpreting past or external phenomena through contemporary assumptions.
2. Reconstructing Relevant Contexts: Enabling an understanding of issues by situating them within their relevant temporal, spatial, and socio-political contexts, thereby reducing simplified interpretations.
3. Using Contextual Understanding to Explain Phenomena: Supporting the development of analytical skills that enable students to use context to explain events by identifying causes, consequences, and underlying dynamics, rather than relying on surface-level or descriptive accounts.
4. Cultivating Empathy and Engagement with Multiple Perspectives: Encouraging an empathetic understanding of diverse actions and circumstances through recognising multiple perspectives and humanising experiences.

Drawing on this framework, the paper examines representations of colonialism, gender, and jihad in state-approved textbooks from Tunisia, Pakistan, and Iran. It argues that contextualisation is a necessary condition for fostering multi-perspectivity and coexistence and

considers the extent to which these narratives align with UNESCO's educational guidelines relating to peace, tolerance, and responsible civic understanding.

The study adopts a qualitative comparative case study based on close textual analysis of representative textbook units. It examines how individual examples function as coherent knowledge units through which students encounter and interpret contested topics. Each example is assessed using Huijgen et al.'s four principles.

This study broadens existing scholarship beyond history education. Colonialism, jihad, family roles, and beauty practices provide valuable case studies because they are historically, religiously, and socially contested issues that require curricula to balance factual content, moral values, and national or religious identities. Their sensitivity makes them particularly suitable for examining how textbooks contextualize controversial topics through historical explanation, ethical reasoning, and social norms. Colonialism in Tunisia and Pakistan reveals how curricula interpret historical injustice and national identity. Jihad in Pakistan and Iran illustrates how religious concepts are explained and situated within broader narratives. Beauty practices and family roles in Tunisia and Iran demonstrate how curricula contextualize evolving social norms, gender expectations, and cultural values. Additionally – like most countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia – their governments (through the Ministry of Education) not only approves but authors the textbooks, thereby actively shaping historical narratives, civic values, and collective identities to future generations.

Contextualising Colonial Pasts: Tunisia and Pakistan

French colonialism remains one of the most historically and politically sensitive issues in Tunisia. While colonial rule was associated with economic exclusion, land dispossession, political inequality, and discrimination, it also profoundly shaped the country's modern development. Perkins (2014) describes the establishment of the French protectorate as a “turning point of enormous importance” (p. 14), arguing that it transformed Tunisia's political, economic, and cultural institutions. Conversely, Challand (2020) emphasises the enduring legacies of colonial-era violence and racialisation, arguing that these continue to shape social inequality and political life long after independence. The framing of the French colonial period is therefore significant, as it can either reinforce antagonistic and polarising narratives or encourage more nuanced and critical engagement with Tunisia's complex historical experience.¹

When assessed through Huijgen et al.'s framework, Tunisian textbooks generally apply the principles of contextualisation in their treatment of the French colonial period, particularly reconstructing relevant contexts (principle 2) and using contextual understanding to explain historical phenomena (principle 3). A Grade 12 History textbook (Lyaşır, n.d.), for example, introduces French colonialism through the political, economic, and social conditions that preceded foreign domination. Rather than portraying colonialism solely as an externally imposed conquest, it presents it as the outcome of a “comprehensive crisis” marked by internal structural economic weakness, declining revenues, foreign debt, political corruption, and

¹ To examine how this sensitive issue is presented in practice, this study analyses textbooks obtained from the National Pedagogical Centre (CNP), ensuring that the analysis reflects official materials currently used in schools. Although the digital textbooks do not specify publication dates, comparison with earlier editions and their acquisition during the 2024–2025 school year indicate that they are current and have undergone little substantive change over time. See Daniel Zisenwine and Itam Shalev, *2025 Tunisian Curriculum: Between Progress and Prejudice*, ed. Madeleine Ferris (London: IMPACT-se, December 2025), 10.

administrative decline. The textbook emphasises that “many factors interacted to produce [this crisis]” (p. 89), encouraging students to understand colonialism as the product of multiple interconnected causes rather than a single event.

Figure 1

Grade 12 History Textbook, p. 89.



Translation from Arabic:

“Introduction:

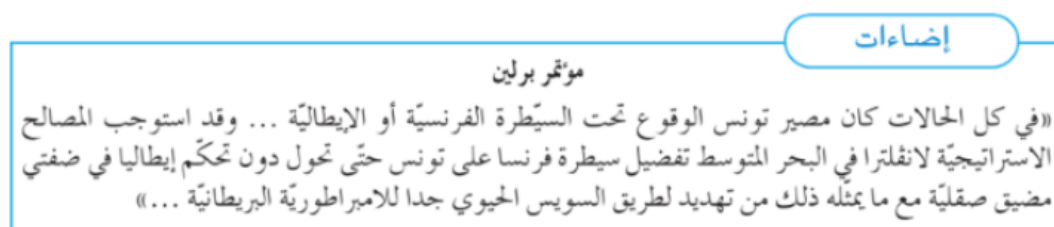
The conditions of the Tunisian Beylik have gradually deteriorated since the death of the Hammouda Pasha in the year 1814 toward decline that turned into a comprehensive crisis, coinciding with the worsening of European economic penetration.

[...] Many factors interacted to produce a deep and comprehensive economic and financial crisis [...].”

At one point, the textbook even suggests that “Tunisia’s fate was to fall under French or Italian control” (pp. 94–95), portraying colonial domination as part of a wider historical context of imperial expansion rather than solely the product of French actions. This framing reflects the textbook’s application of the principle of temporal contextualisation, reflecting an attempt to situate events within their historical context (where imperial expansion was widespread), rather than directly attributing responsibility to unnamed French actors. Colonialism is thus framed more broadly as a product of its historical context rather than the action of a single national actor.

Figure 2

Grade 12 History Textbook, p. 94.



Translation from Arabic: “[...] In all cases, Tunisia’s fate was to fall under French or Italian control. France responded to Britain’s suggestion by hastening to impose its control over Tunisia before Italy, especially to avoid threats to the Suez Canal, which was vital to the British Empire [...].”

It is important to note that when colonialism beyond Tunisia is addressed, Tunisian textbooks present it in strongly negative terms. This is illustrated in the Grade 9 Social Studies textbook (Al-Tilī, n.d.), which, following its discussion of Tunisia’s “comprehensive crisis,” devotes a

section to Algerian resistance against French occupation. Students are instructed to use primary sources to “show France's position on the armed revolution and the policy it adopted toward the Algerian national resistance.” These sources describe French repression, including a “violent air raid” that “kill[ed] 79 citizens... wound[ed] 130, and struck 87 with artillery” (p. 107). Graphic images of dead, injured, and humiliated Algerian civilians reinforce this portrayal, presenting the French as employing excessive force while depicting Algerians primarily as victims of colonial violence. At the same time, the textbook omits major infrastructure projects undertaken during French rule, including the Algiers–Blida railway (Maravall, 2019) and the development of ports in Skikda, (Entreprise Portuaire de Skikda, n.d.) Bône/Annaba, and Philippeville (Hidalgo Castillo & Ducruet, 2017).

Figure 3

Grade 9 Social Studies Textbook, p. 107.



Translation from Arabic: “[...] Document No. 17: Events of Sakiet Sidi Youssef, 8 February 1958 – 25 French aircraft carried out a violent air raid on the village of Sakiet Sidi Youssef and destroyed three quarters of the village, killing 79 citizens and wounding 130, and striking 87 with artillery [...]”

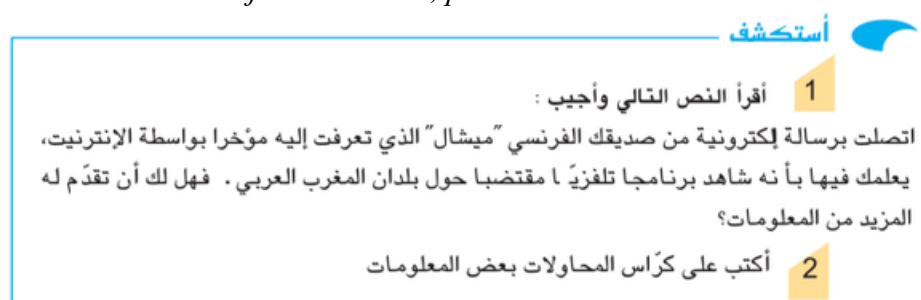
The use of graphic imagery and the emphasis on the disproportionate violence used to suppress Algerian resistance may evoke strong emotional responses, including antagonism towards the French, raising questions about the appropriateness of such material for students of approximately sixteen years of age. Nonetheless, primary sources remain central to contextualisation. Huijgen et al. identify them as essential to reconstructing historical contexts

(principle 2) and cultivating empathy and engagement with multiple perspectives (principle 4). However, as UNESCO (2017) notes, while primary sources can lend “authenticity” and “credibility” to textbooks, they must be “carefully selected” and presented in a “balanced” manner (p. 62). Although graphic evidence of violence can foster empathy with victims, it may also overshadow critical engagement. This illustrates an important limitation of contextualisation: while necessary for developing nuanced understandings of sensitive issues, it does not by itself ensure balanced or age-appropriate engagement. Nevertheless, by situating French repression within the wider history of North African colonialism, the textbook contributes to a more contextualised understanding of French colonial rule.

The examples also reflect a clear distinction between past and present. Rather than extending its critique of colonialism into contemporary antagonism, a Grade 6 Social Studies textbook (Al-Shaṭṭī, n.d.) asks students to write to a “French friend, Michel” about the Arab Maghreb (p. 73). Although intended as a geography exercise, the choice of a French correspondent encourages students to distinguish between the colonial French state and contemporary France, demonstrating awareness of presentism (principle 1). This also reflects UNESCO's (2014) recommendation that textbooks present “personal and cultural identities as fluid, shifting, contextualised and multiple” (p. 16). By separating historical colonialism from present-day relations, the lessons may promote cooperation and coexistence rather than inherited antagonism.

Figure 4

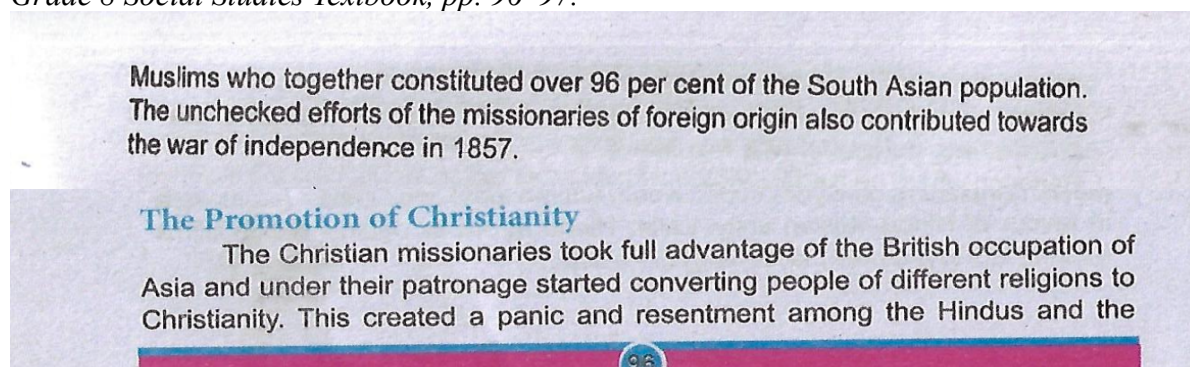
Grade 6 Social Subjects Textbook, p. 73.



Translation from Arabic: “[...] Read the following text and respond: Your French friend Michel, whom you recently met online, sent you a message informing you that he is watching a short television program about the states of the Arab Maghreb countries. Can you provide him with more information? [...]”

The Pakistani curriculum presents a different perspective on colonialism. As in Tunisia, British rule is central to understanding the origins of the Pakistani state and national identity, yet its legacy remains contested. Saleem and Rizvi (2011) argue that colonialism introduced administrative institutions while entrenching extractive governance, social inequality, and the decline of local industries and education. By contrast, Moradi et al. (2024) emphasise its contribution to Pakistan's modern state capacity despite its imperial origins. These competing interpretations illustrate that the way colonialism is contextualised in school textbooks especially significant.

Illustrating this point, a Grade 8 Social Studies textbook (Ahmed, 2022) portrays Christian missionary activity during British rule as coercive and socially destabilising, claiming that “the Christian missionaries took full advantage of the British occupation” to convert locals to Christianity, generating “panic and resentment among the Hindus and the Muslims” (pp. 96–97).

Figure 5*Grade 8 Social Studies Textbook, pp. 96–97.*

This passage relies primarily on evaluative and emotive assertions rather than evidential explanation. Although its claims regarding missionary activity may be historically grounded, they are presented without the context needed for students to understand the relationships between Christian missionaries, colonial authorities, and local communities. As such, the textbook is silent about the missionary organisations' broader educational and social contributions, including institutions such as Kinnaird College for Women in Lahore (Maskiell, 1985). Instead, missionary activity is subsumed within a narrative of colonial oppression and religious threat. In Huijgen et al.'s terms, the excerpt neglects raising awareness of presentism (principle 1), presenting missionary activity through a contemporary lens that portrays it primarily as religious aggression. Assertions that missionaries “took full advantage” of British occupation and caused “panic and resentment” are offered without evidence or competing perspectives, encouraging a simplified interpretation of colonialism that may foster antagonistic attitudes towards British rule and Christianity.

Contextualising Gender and Social Norms: Iran and Tunisia

In Iran, women's appearance has long been a site of ideological struggle and state intervention. Reza Shah's modernisation reforms of the 1930s, including the banning of veils, the promotion of Western dress, and the expansion of girls' education, sought to secularise Iranian society but were resisted by many religious and conservative communities. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, these policies were reversed through compulsory veiling and gender segregation. Afary (2009) argues that “women's bodies became sites of political and cultural struggle” (p. 9), through which the state negotiated morality, religion, and national identity. Consequently, discussions of femininity, appearance, and social norms constitute particularly sensitive—and arguably traumatic—issues, exemplifying what Britzman (2003) describes as “difficult knowledge.” As the following analysis demonstrates, Iranian textbooks present these themes with limited contextualisation, reinforcing ideological polarisation and processes of othering.

A Grade 10 Sociology textbook (Intizārī, 2024–25), for example, constructs a binary distinction between Western secular and Islamic societies, presenting the former as exclusionary and materially driven while portraying Islamic society as spiritually and morally superior. This framing is made explicit in the claim that “in a secular world, the religious and spiritual identity of individuals cannot have social manifestation and appearance,” citing the “prevention of education for veiled girls in some Western societies” as evidence (p. 90).

Figure 6

Grade 10 Sociology Textbook, p. 90.

در یک جهان سکولار، هویت دینی و معنوی افراد نمی تواند بروز و ظهور اجتماعی داشته باشد. در این جهان فعالیت هایی که هویت دینی افراد را آشکار کند، منع می شوند. برای نمونه، می توان به جلوگیری از تحصیل دختران محجبه در برخی جوامع غربی اشاره کرد.

Translated from Persian: "[...] In a secular world, the religious and spiritual identity of individuals cannot have social manifestation and appearance. In such a world, activities that reveal people's religious identity are prohibited. For example, one can point to the prevention of education for veiled girls in some Western societies [...]"

Here, the "secular [Western] world" is constructed through a decontextualised narrative that portrays Western societies as innately hostile to religion while presenting Islamic society as spiritually and morally superior. This characterisation is later supported by the claim that "the law prohibiting the use of hijab in French schools deprives Muslim women wearing hijab of the opportunity for education and employment" (p. 89). Yet the discussion provides almost no legal or historical context-fundamental principles such as *laïcité*, the 1905 law separating church and state, distinctions within French legislation, and Iran's own history of regulating women's dress are all omitted (Beydoun, 2025) Instead, the textbook reinforces its interpretation of the West as uniquely restrictive by juxtaposing it with the French Revolutionary slogan "liberty, equality and brotherhood," (Intizārī, 2024–25, p. 89) implying French hypocrisy. Rather than encouraging students to evaluate the historical development and application of French secularism, the lesson promotes a simplified, presentist narrative that generalises the French case to the Western world as a whole.

Figure 7

Grade 10 Sociology Textbook, p. 89.



■ قانون ممنوعیت استفاده از حجاب در مدارس فرانسه، فرصت تحصیل و اشتغال را از زنان مسلمان با حجاب سلب می کند و مغایر شعار معروف انقلاب فرانسه «آزادی، برابری و برادری» است.

Translated from Persian: "[...] [France's] ban on the hijab in schools deprives Muslim women who wear hijab of opportunities for education and employment. The famous slogan of the French Revolution is 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' [...]"

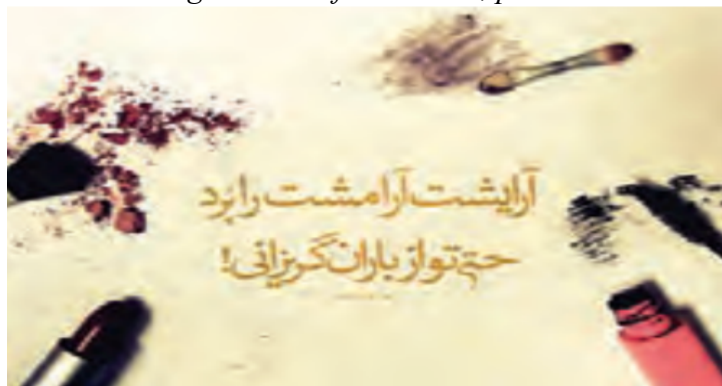
The section also fails to cultivate empathy and engagement with multiple perspectives (Huijgen et al.'s principle 4). As demonstrated in the Tunisian case, meaningful contextualisation requires engagement with primary sources that enable students to examine competing interpretations and lived experiences. Here, however, the only source is an image of a Muslim woman wearing a hijab while protesting, presented as evidence of broad restrictions on the

hijab in France. Yet French law distinguishes between restrictions in specific contexts: the 2004 law prohibits conspicuous religious symbols, including the hijab, in public primary and secondary schools, while the 2010 law prohibits face-covering garments, such as the niqab and burqa, in public spaces (France, 2004, art. 1; France, 2010, art. 1). Rather than situating the discussion within this legal context or presenting alternative perspectives, the image reinforces the textbook's consistent portrayal of the West as hostile towards Islam.

This pattern extends beyond discussions of secularism. A Grade 10 Religion textbook (Āzādī, 2024–25b) presents chastity through a binary between an “ignorant” self and a morally upright, God-centred self before linking these qualities to women's clothing and makeup. Reinforced by the statement “your makeup takes away your peace of mind; you even run away from the rain!” (p. 140), makeup is reduced to a symbol of vanity and moral weakness. Female students are encouraged to monitor their appearance through guilt and shame, presenting modesty as the singular moral ideal and constructing a binary between the virtuous Islamic self and a superficial, Westernised feminine other.

Figure 8

Grade 10 Religion and Life Textbook, p. 140.



Translated from Persian: “[...] Your make-up takes away your peace of mind, you even run away from the rain! [...]”

By contrast, Tunisia provides a useful case study for examining representations of gender because debates over women's roles have long been shaped by the interaction between Islamic traditions and the legacy of French colonialism. Rather than completely overriding traditional values, post-independence reforms created an ongoing negotiation between Islamic traditions and social change. Beginning with Habib Bourguiba's 1956 Personal Status Code, successive governments expanded women's legal, educational, and political rights, with further commitments to gender equality reflected in the 2014 Constitution and the 2017 law addressing violence against women (Charrad, 2001). Representations of gender therefore remain politically and culturally significant, making them a useful lens through which to examine how curricula contextualise competing social values.

A Grade 12 Philosophy textbook (Al-Qimāṭī, n.d.) illustrates the curriculum's emphasis on critical inquiry and contextual understanding. In a lesson on prejudice, students are presented with the statement, “Household work is a matter that concerns women” (p. 71), and asked to explain how imitation and habit contribute to this belief before evaluating its dangers. Rather than treating gender stereotypes as natural, the lesson explains them as products of family practices, community expectations, and wider social norms. This reflects Huijgen et al.'s argument that contextualisation requires learners to explain beliefs through their underlying causes before evaluating them (principle 3). At the same time, it encourages students to

recognize that such attitudes are socially learned, fostering empathy without requiring acceptance of prejudice.

Figure 9

Grade 12 Philosophy Textbook, p. 71.

ج- رصد مصادر الأحكام المسبقة

"إنّ المنابع الأساسية للأحكام المسبقة هي المحاكاة والعادة والميل. إنّ للمحاكاة تأثيرا عاما في أحكامنا، ذلك أنّه يوجد سبب قويّ لأنّ نعتبر حقيقة ما أقرّ آخرون أنّه كذلك. ومن ذلك الحكم المسبق التالي: إنّ كلّ ما يشترك الآخرون في فعله هو حسنٌ. أمّا عن الأحكام المسبقة المتولّدة عن العادة فلا يُمكن أن تستأصل إلا بعد زمن طويل، وذلك حين يرى الذهن أحكامه تنحس بالتدريج وتُوجّل بفعل بواعث متناقضة، فيجد نفسه، نتيجة لذلك، منقادا إلى نمط مضاد في التفكير. أمّا إذا كان حكم مسبق ما نابعا من العادة وصادرا عن المحاكاة في آن، فإنّ من العسير شفاء الإنسان منه. ويُمكن للحكم المسبق الناشئ عن المحاكاة أن يسمّى أيضا الميل إلى الاستخدام السلبيّ أو الآليّ للعقل استخداما يحلّ محلّ فعله العفويّ الذي تحكمه قوانين."

امانويل كانط "المنطق" ص 85 و ص 86

تمرين أوّل : أستحضر مثالا عن كلّ منبع من منابع الحكم المسبق.

تمرين ثان : أبين من خلال الاشتغال على المثال التالي: «العمل المنزلي شأن يخص المرأة» تظافر كلّ من المحاكاة والعادة في نشأة الأحكام المسبقة وأقَدّر خطورة ذلك.

Translated from Arabic: "[...] Identifying the Sources of Prejudices

The principal sources of prejudices are imitation, habit, and inclination [...]

As for prejudices that arise from habit, they can only be overcome after a long period of time. [...] Using the following example, 'Household work is a woman's responsibility,' show how both imitation and habit contribute to the formation of prejudice, and evaluate the dangers of this [...]"

Contextualising Jihad: Pakistan and Iran

Across much of the MENA region, Islamic Education plays a significant role in shaping religious understanding, moral values, and broader social worldviews. Within Islamic thought, jihad occupies a particularly important position. As Firestone (1999) notes, it has historically influenced "politics and policy, international economics and law, and the self-perception of Muslims and the universal Muslim community as a whole" (pp. 5–6). Although jihad encompasses meanings ranging from spiritual self-improvement to armed struggle (Afsaruddin, 2013), repeated associations with extremist violence have often narrowed public understandings of the concept (Esposito, 2002). Consequently, how jihad is framed in educational materials may significantly shape students' understandings of Islam, conflict, and religious difference. Rather than adjudicating between competing interpretations of jihad, this analysis examines the extent to which curricula contextualise the concept and engage with the diversity of its meanings.

Pakistan provides an important case study because Islam has occupied a central place in national identity and education since independence in 1947. As Jalal (2008) argues, colonial India witnessed the growing politicisation of jihad, linking it to anti-colonial mobilisation and Muslim political identity. Acknowledging this historical context is essential if students are to understand jihad within its broader historical, theological, and legal traditions rather than reducing it to armed violence alone. This is particularly important given research suggesting that some students educated in Pakistan's public-school system express relatively high levels of support for political violence (Fair, 2007). The key question, therefore, is whether school textbooks contextualise jihad in ways that foster historical understanding or instead reinforce a narrower, militarised interpretation.

A Grade 7 Qur'an translation textbook (Malik & Khuda Bakhsh, 2022) illustrates these concerns. It interprets verses 1–6 of Surah Al-'Adiyat, which depict warhorses charging into battle, as exemplifying jihad (p. 105). Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the unaltered word

of God, with many regarding it as applicable to all times and places. Historical contextualisation of jihad is therefore vitally important, since students may otherwise interpret verses revealed within the specific circumstances of seventh-century Arabia as universally endorsing armed struggle. Although the verses themselves do not explicitly mention jihad, the textbook reinforces this interpretation with a hadith (a normative oral tradition) compiled in the authoritative source *Sahih al-Bukhari* stating that “those who ride horses for jihad receive both spiritual rewards and spoils of war.” While such interpretations are not uncommon within parts of the Islamic tradition, neither the Qur'anic verses nor the hadith are situated within the historical circumstances of the early Muslim community, when armed conflict formed part of the consolidation of the new religious community. The absence of this context risks limiting students' understanding of the relationship between scripture, history, and later interpretations of jihad.

Figure 10

Grade 7 Qur'an Translation Textbook, p. 105.



Translated from Urdu: “[...] In this Surah, horses are praised because they serve as a means of carrying out jihad. Jihad is a significant branch of Islam. It is such a noble act that anything associated with it also becomes virtuous. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said that goodness has been tied to the forelocks of horses until the Day of Judgment. Those who ride horses for jihad receive both spiritual reward and spoils of war.”

(Sahih Bukhari 25)

“By the [steeds] that run swiftly, panting,
And striking sparks of fire [with their hooves],
And charging at dawn, Stirring up clouds of dust,
And penetrating into the midst of the enemy ranks—
Indeed, mankind is ungrateful to his Lord.”
(Surah Al-‘Adiyat, 100:1–6)”

The textbook further undermines contextualisation by adding an authorial statement absent from both the Qur'anic verses and the hadith: “[jihad] is such a noble act that anything associated with it also becomes virtuous.” This assertion not only omits historical context but renders it unnecessary, presenting virtue as arising automatically from any association with jihad rather than from its historical, ethical, or religious circumstances. Students are not encouraged to consider the conditions or consequences of armed struggle. Such framing leaves little room for critical engagement with the ethics of violence and risks legitimising even extremist violence if presented as serving the cause of jihad. By emphasising both spiritual

reward and material gain, the passage promotes military action without explaining the circumstances in which it may or may not be considered legitimate.

The significance of jihad in the Iranian curriculum cannot be understood apart from the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), commonly known as the “Holy Defence.” More than merely a military conflict, it came to symbolise the defence of the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic, transforming the war into a broader religious and national narrative (University of Chicago Library, 2011). This understanding has since become embedded within educational materials, where jihad and martyrdom are frequently presented as religious and national duties (IMPACT-se, 2026). Examining representations of jihad therefore provides insight into whether these themes are presented as subjects for critical examination or as unquestioned imperatives.

A Grade 9 Islamic Education textbook (Āzādī, 2024–25a) illustrates this approach through a section on “Defensive Jihad” bolstered with an emotive account of Iranian special forces sacrificing their lives while crossing the Karun River during the Iran-Iraq War. While the qualifier *defensive* frames jihad as a response to aggression rather than the proactive use of force, the textbook states that, when attacked, “it is obligatory on all Muslims [...] to stand up to defend [...] with everything they have and drive the enemy out of their land” (p. 137). Without clarifying what “everything they have” entails, the passage leaves open the possibility that defensive jihad is understood primarily in violent terms. Yet Islamic legal traditions also recognise non-violent forms of defensive jihad, including financial support (*al-jihād bi-l-māl*), treating the wounded, and providing logistical assistance (Anzalone, 2016). Apart from an illustration of women tending to an injured soldier, these interpretations are absent, leaving students with a singular understanding of defensive jihad.

Figure 11

Grade 9 Islamic Education and Training Textbook, p. 137.

انواع جهاد

جهاد دفاعی: وقتی دشمن به یک کشور اسلامی حمله می کند، بر همه مسلمانان - مرد و زن، پیر و جوان - واجب است با آنچه در توان دارند، به دفاع از کشور اسلامی برخیزند و دشمن را از سرزمین خود بیرون کنند. جنگ های احد و احزاب در صدر اسلام، نمونه هایی از جهاد دفاعی مسلمانان در آن زمان هستند.

دشمنان می دانند دین اسلام همواره باعث بیداری و اتحاد مردم در برابر ظالمان و غارتگران بوده است. از این رو، برای اینکه بتوانند ملت های دیگر را همیشه اسیر خود نگه دارند، پیش از هر چیز نقشه نابودی اسلام را در سر می پروراندند. از این رو، هرگونه سستی و کوتاهی در دفاع از میهن اسلامی، گناهی نابخشودنی خواهد بود و عذاب الهی را در پی خواهد داشت.



Translated from Persian: “1 - Defensive Jihad: When an enemy attacks an Islamic country, it is obligatory on all Muslims, male and female, old and young, to stand up to defend the Islamic country with everything they have and drive the enemy out of their land. The Battles of Uhud and the Trench (al-Aḥzāb) at the beginning of Islam are examples of Muslim defensive jihad at that time.

The enemies know that Islam has always awakened and united people against oppressors and raiders. Therefore, in order to be able to keep other nations as their captives, above all else, they have sought to destroy Islam. As such, any weakness and failure to defend the Islamic homeland will be an unforgivable sin and will result in divine punishment.”

Figure 12

Grade 9 Islamic Education and Training Textbook, p. 138.

در آن جمع، محمود نوجوانی بود که حتی قبل از اینکه وارد آب شود از شدت سرما می لرزید و تا وارد آب می شد، عضله های پایش می گرفت. یک بار در مقابل چشمانم بی هوش شد. همه بدنش کرخت شده بود و قدرت حرکت نداشت. به سرعت از آب خارجش کردم. مدتی طول کشید تا حال خود را بازیافت. وقتی متوجه شد که بیرون آب است، شروع کرد به گریه کردن که چرا نمی گذارید من هم غواصی را یاد بگیرم تا جزو غواصان خط شکن باشم...^۱

۱- برگرفته از کتاب لشکر خوبان، خاطرات مهدی قلی رضایی.

Translated from Persian: “[...] Among them was Mahmoud, a young boy who would begin shivering from the intense cold even before entering the water, and as soon as he entered it, his leg muscles would cramp. Once, right before my eyes, he lost consciousness. His entire body had gone numb, and he was unable to move. I quickly pulled him out of the water. It took him some time to recover. When he realized he was out of the water, he began to cry, saying, ‘Why won’t you let me learn to dive too, so that I can become one of the assault divers who break through the enemy’s front lines?’ [...]”.

This framing is reinforced through the account of a teenage volunteer becoming an assault diver during the Iran-Iraq War. By combining an unconditional religious obligation (“it is obligatory on all Muslims”), the claim that failing to defend the Islamic homeland constitutes “an unforgivable sin,” and a narrative celebrating youthful sacrifice, the textbook presents armed defence as both a moral and religious ideal (p. 138). It further portrays Islam as under constant threat from hostile enemies, later identified as Israel, the United States, and other Western countries, transforming defensive jihad into a politically charged narrative of existential confrontation.

The lesson makes only a limited attempt to contextualise jihad by referring to the early Islamic battles of Uhud and the Trench as examples of defensive jihad. However, these references situate the concept solely within seventh-century Arabia without connecting it to contemporary political, legal, or theological debates. Consequently, the lesson fails to raise awareness of presentism (Huijgen et al.’s principle 1) and reduces complex geopolitical conflicts to a binary struggle between Islam and its enemies. As in the Pakistani curriculum, students are presented with a singular narrative rather than encouraged to engage with competing historical, political, or religious interpretations.

Conclusion

This study has expanded on the premise that the contextualisation of sensitive issues shapes how students understand identity, memory, conflict, religious obligation, and social relations. Drawing on Huijgen et al.’s framework, it has argued that contextualisation extends beyond providing historical background to helping students recognise present-day assumptions (principle 1), situate events within broader contexts (principle 2), explain actions through historical circumstances (principle 3), and engage with multiple perspectives (principle 4). Together, these principles encourage more nuanced understandings by allowing competing interpretations to coexist rather than reducing them to singular or polarised narratives.

The cases of Tunisia, Pakistan, and Iran suggest that the way sensitive issues are contextualised reflects not only how they are explained but also the civic values curricula seek to promote.

Curricula that consistently employ historical inquiry and multiple perspectives are more likely to foster UNESCO's educational values of peace, tolerance, dialogue, respect for diversity, and responsible citizenship. Although contextualisation varies within every curriculum, Tunisia emerges as a strong—though imperfect—example through its emphasis on coexistence, gender equality, non-violence, peaceful conflict resolution, and cultural diversity (Zisenwine & Shalev, 2025). By contrast, the Pakistani (Chakraborty, 2025) and Iranian (Pardo, 2022) curricula more frequently frame sensitive issues through singular ideological narratives centred on religious identity, external threat, and conflict. While both contain isolated messages promoting tolerance, these are often undermined by limited historical and conceptual contextualisation, leaving little room for complexity or alternative interpretations. As a result, they privilege ideological certainty, collective struggle, and militarised understandings of national and religious identity, diverging from UNESCO's vision of education for peace, tolerance, and responsible citizenship.

This study therefore argues that contextualisation is not simply a pedagogical technique but a valuable analytical framework for evaluating how curricula construct and communicate collective narratives. Contextualised teaching encourages historical thinking, empathy, multiperspectivity, and critical analysis, whereas decontextualised presentations risk reinforcing simplistic or ideological understandings of the past. Because collective narratives are often constructed around sensitive issues, the degree of contextualisation should itself be considered an indicator of curricular quality and alignment with international standards for peace and tolerance in education. Future research could extend this framework by examining the relationship between curriculum policy, textbook content, and classroom practice to better understand how educational priorities are translated into the narratives students ultimately encounter.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that OpenAI ChatGPT was used to assist with word count reduction, language editing, and improving clarity. The authors further declare that, apart from OpenAI ChatGPT, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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