

Islamist Education: American-Funded Textbooks In Afghanistan

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Across Taliban controlled areas of Afghanistan, thousands of children are indoctrinated in an Islamist ideology through jihadist textbooks that incorporate violence and militarism through lessons to teach children basic reading and mathematics skills.¹ Learning the alphabet, these children are taught “*Jim* [is for] Jihad. Jihad is an obligation. My [uncle] went to the jihad. Our brother gave water to the Mujahidin . . .” Textbooks designed to teach math and language arts are filled with depictions of Kalashnikov rifles, grenades, and military ammunition.² However, the great irony is that these textbooks were produced, funded, and distributed by the US government using taxpayer dollars. The Taliban regime which President Bush deplored as an enemy which “aids terrorists” and “barbaric criminals who profane a great religion by committing murder in its name” is using and reprinting American-funded materials to propagate its radical ideology among the Afghan youth.³ Why would the United States fund textbooks that promote a dangerous message antithetical to American values?

After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the United States in coordination with regional partners such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan launched a covert campaign, Operation Cyclone, to support the Afghan mujahideen resistance to the Soviet occupation. While American funding for weapons and military equipment for the mujahideen is well known, many are unaware of the significant expenditures by the American government through USAID to provide educational materials and textbooks to mujahideen parties and Afghan children.⁴ Published and distributed by the University of Nebraska-Omaha (UNO), this program attempted to encourage a violent resistance to Soviet forces in Afghanistan by shaping the educational program of Afghan youth.

However, the content of these textbooks blatantly promoted jihad, militancy, and violence through graphic language and imagery. The textbooks included clear

messages aimed at evoking hostility towards Russian invaders and promoting violent retribution against occupiers of Afghanistan. Textbooks designed to teach children to read and basic mathematics simultaneously emphasize weapons, killings, jihad, and Islamism. Although American officials claimed that they did not want to impose American values on Afghan educators, their failure to question the radical content presented in the textbooks reveals how countering Soviet communist influence transcended the potential destabilizing consequences of this program on the Afghan political situation. This intervention in Afghan education is emblematic of a broader pattern in how American policymakers fail to consider the long-term ramifications of their actions on the everyday lives of the Afghan people.

Origins of USAID/UNO Educational Program

As depicted in the Hollywood film *Charlie Wilson's War*, the United States government through the CIA launched a covert operation to supply the Afghan seven-party mujahideen alliance with weapons through Pakistan's intelligence service ISI to fight back against Soviet forces which had invaded Afghanistan.⁵ This funding amounted up to \$500 million a year and was matched dollar for dollar by Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government intent on spreading their interpretation of Islam, wahhabism, in Afghanistan became aligned with American objectives in Afghanistan which aimed to undermine the Soviet Union in the Cold War.⁶

Alongside this funding for arms and military equipment, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) issued a \$50 million grant that ran from 1986 to 1994 to fund the development and publication of textbooks for Afghan children and mujahideen fighters through the creation of the Education Sector Support Project (ESSP) in Afghanistan.⁷ In a

Rapid Assessment submitted to USAID in 1988, the ESSP's central objective is described as supporting "primary schools in Afghanistan" and "literacy training in Pakistan for Afghan Freedom Fighters (Mujahideen)."⁸ This educational program would both educate the mujahideen fighting the Russians and children throughout Afghanistan. Through ESSP, USAID contracted the University of Nebraska-Omaha (UNO) to provide education for Afghan refugees in Pakistan as well as Afghans remaining in Afghanistan through the development and distribution of educational materials, particularly textbooks.

American education funding was utilized to provide an alternative to the Marxist and secular education imposed by the Soviets in Afghanistan. The ESSP coordinated with the mujahideen parties to form the Education Council of the Seven Party Alliance (ECSPA) composed of the education presidents of each party who in turn would set up the Educational Center for Afghanistan (ECA). ESSP documents produced by UNO describe the American intervention in the Afghan education system as a direct counter to the "'Sovietization' of Afghan education."⁹ Through the same CIA and ISI networks used to funnel weapons to the mujahideen, UNO oversaw the distribution of educational kits of textbooks and other materials funded by the USAID grant to schools across Afghanistan and the refugee camps on the Pakistan border.

Development of Textbooks

Despite their reprehensible Islamist ideologies, American policymakers exalted the mujahideen as exponents of American values solely because of their primary role in the opposition to Soviet forces in Afghanistan. These mujahideen parties, especially Hezb-e Islami led by Gulbadin Hekmatyar and Jamiat-e Islami led by Burhanuddin Rabanni, were dominated by hard-core Islamist factions resolved to establish a fundamentalist order in Afghanistan. While these parties are broadly condemned today, President Ronald Reagan praised the mujahideen as "brave freedom fighters challenging the Evil Empire" and "the moral equivalent of the Founding Fathers [of America]."¹⁰ UNO officials provided the mujahideen representatives in the ECA the freedom to develop the textbook content which would be taught to school age children and mujahideen fighters.

The content generated by the ECA was published by UNO in both Pashto and Dari, the most widely spoken languages of Afghanistan.

Mujahideen representatives in the ECA appealed to American anti-communist sentiment in pursuing educational aid. Writing to US Ambassador Robert Wood, they state how "the current struggle of the Afghans the holy Jihad ... routed from a strong faith and belief in Islam, peace and freedom is a fierce blow to the Russian communism which is the enemy of freedom-loving people everywhere. We should not forget the importance of education for the successful continuation of our struggle."¹¹ In this context, jihad is portrayed as aligned with American values of freedom which are being threatened by communism and the Soviet Union, and the ECA representatives use this rhetoric to justify American educational aid to the mujahideen.

Through these textbooks, the mujahideen officials of the ECA emphasized violent Islamist rhetoric promoting jihad and resistance to foreign invaders of Afghanistan. However, UNO officials did not object to these depictions of Islamic militancy in these textbooks for the first five years. In an interview with Raheem Yaseer, an Afghan educator in UNO's Peshawar office, Yaseer asserted that UNO staff did not intervene in the textbook development because of "Afghan religious and cultural sensitivities" and that the "University of Nebraska did not wish to be seen as imposing American values on Afghan educators."¹² American officials were clearly aware of the troubling violent depictions and content of these textbooks but did not object because the radical messaging was aligned with American objectives to weaken Soviet control and influence in the region. While UNO representatives and American officials argue that these textbooks were designed to teach Afghan youth to love their nation, the textbooks rather reflected a "love for militant ideology."¹³ The alignment of the Islamist jihadist ideology of the mujahideen parties with the American anti-Soviet agenda provided the conditions for the unquestioned development and widespread distribution of these problematic textbooks among the Afghan population.

Analysis of Textbooks

The content of these textbooks is extremely disturbing, for it exposes primary school children with

violent, militant material as part of their basic education. The purpose of this Islamist content is to shape and indoctrinate the minds of young people against the Soviet invaders of Afghanistan and support the radical interests of the mujahideen parties. In “‘A’ is for Allah, ‘J’ is for Jihad,” Craig Davis translates the textbooks and reveals its disconcerting content. A first-grade language arts textbook introduces children to the alphabet through violent examples:

Ti [is for] Rifle (*tufang*).

Javad obtains rifles for the Mujahidin . . .

Jim [is for] Jihad.

Jihad is an obligation. My [uncle] went to the jihad.

Our brother gave water to the Mujahidin . . .

Dal [is for] Religion (*din*).

Our religion is Islam. The Russians are the enemies of the religion of Islam . . .

Zhi [is for] Good news (*muzhdih*).

The Mujahidin missiles rain down like dew on the Russians. My brother gave me good news that the Russians in our country taste defeat . . .

Shin [is for] Shakir.

Shakir conducts jihad with the sword. God becomes happy with the defeat of the Russians . . .

Zal [is for] Oppression (*zulm*).

Oppression is forbidden. The Russians are oppressors. We perform jihad against the oppressors . . .¹⁴

This textbook teaches fundamental literary skills within the context of instilling hatred towards Russian invaders, promoting a normalization of violence and weaponry, and emphasizing a conception of Islamic honor through jihad. Rather than teach the alphabet through common everyday objects, young children are taught within the framework of a radical political ideology committed to defeating Russian invaders through violent jihad. The indoctrination of children with this militant ideology runs counter to American values and objectives in educational development, but because these ideas are beneficial to the American anti-Soviet agenda, the troubling nature of this content is overlooked by USAID officials and UNO employees.

Similarly, primary school math textbooks produced by UNO and funded by USAID incorporate Islamist ideology to promote violence against Soviet soldiers. A third grade math textbook teaches subtraction

through this problem: “One group of mujahideen attacks a group of 50 Russian soldiers. In that attack, 20 Russians were killed. How many Russians fled?”¹⁵ Furthermore, a fourth-grade math textbook puts forward this problem: “The speed of a Kalashnikov bullet travels at 800 meters per second. If a Russian is at a distance of 3200 meters from the mujahid, and that mujahid aims at the Russian’s head, calculate how many seconds it will take to strike the Russian in the forehead.”¹⁵ These examples normalize violence in the everyday lives of Afghan children and groom Afghan youth to participate in the mujahideen resistance to Russian forces.



Figure 1. A page from a third-grade language arts textbook¹⁵

These textbooks also included imagery of weapons which presented a visual emphasis on the themes of violence and militarism in a manner that is searing and profound to the minds of young children. Figure 1 pictures a page from a third-grade language arts textbook with a caption that reads “Jihad – Often many different wars and conflicts arise among people, which cause material damages and loss of human life. These wars and disputes occur among people for the sake of community, nation, territory, or even because of language differences, and for the sake of progress . . .”¹⁵ The striking visual component of Figure 1 serves to reinforce the message of the text, teaching the importance of sacrifice and imploring children to engage in violent jihad. By conveying

this persistent message, these American-funded textbooks designed to improve Afghan education serve a duplicitous purpose to bolster the ideological tenacity of the mujahideen resistance to Soviet communist invaders.

Distribution of Textbooks

The ECA was provided the discretion on the best strategy for distribution and where the educational materials should be delivered. USAID documents detail which ESSP schools materials were distributed to as well as their mujahideen party affiliation and the number of students at each school. These schools controlled by the ECA and ESSP were both within Afghanistan and “cross-border schools” in the refugee camps on the Pakistan border.¹⁶ Many of these schools were madrassas, Islamist schools often funded by the Saudi government, that provided a direct pipeline to the mujahideen fighting forces.¹⁷ American policy was geared to strengthening mujahideen forces, and these textbooks served to accomplish both developmental objectives as well as hardening Afghan youth against Soviet invaders.

The breadth and impact of this USAID program was not incidental but rather acutely transformative for the Afghan educational system, as these American-funded educational materials were able to reach and influence millions of children across Afghanistan. In the UNO/ESSP 1992 Annual Report to USAID, Thomas Gouttierre, the head of the Center of Afghanistan Studies at UNO, describes how “UNO's involvement has included the support of some 1180 schools inside Afghanistan, 1031 refugee schools in Pakistan, and logistical and professional support for curriculum development, teacher training, and monitoring through an on-site management unit, the Education Center for Afghanistan.”¹⁸ Additionally, the annual report describes how 62 grade 1-6 textbooks were prepared and printed and that 2.3 million textbooks were distributed to ECA schools and another 6.7 million textbooks were distributed to non-ECA and refugee schools.¹⁹ Through American taxpayer dollars, these radical and violent textbooks became core staples of Afghan education despite their potential consequences on childhood development and the stability of the Afghan political system. However, they were allowed to be widely produced and distributed unquestioned by the American government because of their success in fostering anti-Soviet sentiment.

Backlash to USAID/UNO Program

After 9/11, the role of American aid in promoting Islamist educational content during the late 1980s and early 1990s became subject to harsh criticism from journalists and American citizens troubled by the role of these textbooks in fomenting violent, radical ideologies in Afghanistan. In the aftermath of the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the United States government again committed to providing textbooks and educational support to Afghan schools. However, it wrestled “with the unintended consequences of its successful strategy of stirring Islamic fervor to fight communism. What seemed like a good idea in the context of the Cold War is being criticized by humanitarian workers as a crude tool that steeped a generation in violence.”²⁰ The textbooks sent to Afghanistan in the early 2000s were the same textbooks published by UNO decades earlier, and US foreign aid workers in Pakistan had to scrub the textbooks of their violent and disturbing content. Further revealing the destructive ramifications of the USAID/UNO program, international organizations such as UNICEF have resorted to destroying the old “militarized” textbooks paid for by American taxpayer dollars.²¹ The extensive efforts to minimize the consequences of these textbooks reveals how their content was antithetical to American values, and their development and distribution was inconsistent with American developmental objectives in the region. American policymakers did not consider the consequences of their militant educational material which may have contributed to the rise of radical Islamist organizations such as the Taliban in Afghanistan who now employ these textbooks for their ideological purposes today.

Additionally, the role of UNO in overseeing this USAID education program has come under intense scrutiny because the content of the textbooks UNO developed and distributed may run counter to the purported mission of American educational institutions. Millions of textbooks filled with propagandist and militant content all display the UNO logo on the back, indicating the university's direct and prominent role in overseeing this program. However, this involvement drew backlash from organizations such as Nebraskans for Peace who became troubled with the university's role in engendering radical, militant ideologies in Afghan children and argue that the program may violate the university's own ethics policy.²²

The Center for Afghanistan Director Thomas Goutierre has defended his organization's efforts in Afghanistan by calling criticisms "revisionist" and emphasizing the Center's efforts in building cultural understanding and empowering the Afghan people.²³ Nevertheless, after the US government stopped funding UNO's educational program, UNO became involved with many high-ranking leaders of the Taliban who they brought on tours of the United States despite the heinous human rights record of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and in particular facilitated overtures on behalf of the Unocal corporation to convince the Taliban to approve a pipeline through the country.²⁴ When asked to comment on UNO's involvement in the USAID program, the current Director of Afghanistan Studies, Sher Jan Ahmadzai, responded that "UNO's involvement, as I know it, was technical" and was "not sure if [he] can be of any help."²⁵ By absolving UNO of any material involvement in this educational program, Ahmadzai reveals how UNO's role in developing these textbooks may have harmed the university's reputation, and his response may serve to evade taking responsibility for the consequences of these textbooks in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The greatest legacy of this USAID/UNO program is how it primed a generation of Afghan youth for militancy and violent extremism. In her book *Schools for Conflict or for Peace in Afghanistan*, Dana Burdes describes how "educational content that teaches bias or hatred toward a particular group fosters discriminatory and exclusionary attitudes and behaviors, which contribute to underlying conditions for conflict ... curricular content that glorifies war, militancy, and the use of force is likely to increase normative support for violence and militancy more generally."²⁶ By propagandizing Afghan children with themes of violent Islamism for anti-Soviet objectives, American policymakers put their military and foreign policy goals over the wellbeing of Afghan youth by laying the groundwork for future conflict through shaping the psychology of an entire generation of Afghans towards violence. After the Soviet withdrawal, the ensuing civil war and the rise of the Taliban may indicate the detrimental repercussions of these textbooks on Afghan society, and their impact can be clearly seen in how the Taliban spent \$1 million in 2007 to set up schools in Southern

Afghanistan with the 1980s mujahideen curriculum.²⁷

These unintended consequences are emblematic of American policy in Afghanistan which has repeatedly pursued short-term objectives in self-interest without questioning their potential long-term effects. From President Bush's mission of nation building to the mass collection of biometric data, American policymakers have failed to consider how their policies impact the lives of Afghan citizens and potentially destabilize the fragile political system of Afghanistan. As the US withdraws its last remaining troops, Americans must critically examine the consequences of their involvement in Afghanistan and apply those lessons to future foreign policy and military endeavors around the globe in the coming decades.

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Endnotes

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