

*Introducing Peace Education and Pluralism in Quranic Schools in Western Africa:  
Advantages and Challenges of the Islamic Peace-Building Model*

**Prof. Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Dr. Seddik Oubouhacen**

**Abstract:**

Quranic schools or Madrasas still play a central role in the education provision of many communities around the Islamic world. Despite their relatively small numbers in comparison to the formal education system, the Quranic school teachers in such countries tend to have a major function of introducing Islamic values and norms to the public. Thus, working with the Quranic School System (QSS) becomes a key strategy in influencing the local Islamic discourse in the community. However, due to the closeness and siege mentality that has been created towards many of QSS in various Muslim counties (such as, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Egypt, Sudan, Niger, Chad, Mali, etc.), it has become very challenging to gain access with such marginalized communities. This article explores how Quranic schools can be engaged from within the Islamic discourse and tradition to integrate teaching about tolerance, human rights, pluralism, diversity, coexistence, peace and nonviolence. This research upholds the view that Quranic schools cannot be engaged effectively unless the challenging issues of process, context and content related to Islamic identity, the compatibility and compliance with Shari ‘a or conceptions of what constitutes authentic Islam are addressed and managed throughout the process of engagement. The article is based on a case study of integrating peace, interfaith, and human rights education in Quranic and Islamic schools in West Africa drawing on the Islamic tradition in peace-building (Abu-Nimer, 2003) . Initial results suggest that this approach **offers some advantages in addressing the challenges inherent in** engaging Quranic schools and identifies the limitations of such approach.

**Introduction:**

Despite the advances in generalizing formal education throughout the Muslim world, Quranic schools and Madrasas still exist in big numbers. In some Islamic countries they form parallel educational institution that preserve and perpetuate certain Islamic teaching and learning and in

some settings they offer an alternative route- often the only one affordable or the most appealing to parents and communities- to formal education. This is particularly the case of West Africa - Niger and Chad . In Niger, an estimated fifty five thousand Quranic schools exist to serve a population of about 14 million inhabitants. In countries such as Niger, Quranic schools are very often the most cherished and the only form of accessible education available to many children, especially those living in remote and rural areas. Children attending formal schools also attend weekend, and afternoon and evening classes in Quranic schools to complete their Islamic education<sup>1</sup>.

Until recently, governments in Islamic countries and the international community paid very little or no attention at all to these traditional educational institutions. In fact, Quranic schools or Madrasas have always been a feature of Muslim societies for centuries (Riaz, 2008). However, since the events of 9/11, a shift happened in the way western countries and international organizations view and engage with Madrasas and Quranic schools. The latter, became associated with terrorism and were increasingly construed by western policymakers and media as a threat to peace and security thus being accused of being *citadels of militancy and factories for Jihad* (see Riaz, 2008; Bergen and Pandey, 2006; Looney, 2003; Malik, 2008; Rahman, 2008). For many western politicians, the type of education offered by Quranic schools is very problematic. Indeed, the exclusive focus on rote learning of Qur'an fosters an Islamic canon that leaves very little room for critical exploration of worldviews that tolerate difference and embrace the complexity of the modern world. Such view is certainly in need for more careful examination, especially that data and theoretical frameworks utilized to reach this conclusion have been based on very little genuine and long term engagement with such schools or teachers. In addition, data is often analyzed from a national security lenses or security studies frameworks.

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<sup>1</sup> The data shared in this article is based on a visit to 20 Quranic schools in Zinder, Niger between October 16-21-2010 and March 5-11, 2011. During these two field work trips, the researchers conducted a three days workshop, 3 formal focus groups, and 7 interviews with the leaders of the Union of Quranic Schools in Zinder district. The Union represented 76 Quranic schools in the area. In addition, five class observations were completed during this assessment and the implementation phase of the peace education in Quranic schools project.

While there is no compelling evidence suggesting that all or even majority of Quranic schools and Madrassa education systems constitute a serious national security concern for western states. Nevertheless, Quranic schools and Madrassa education still constitutes a regional concern for policy makers because they perceived to play an active role in creating sectarian violence and promoting radical Islamic discourses that are considered by some incompatible with human rights and international definitions of peaceful cultures. Additionally, the fact that these schools continue to offer a substandard education that is not conducive to development<sup>2</sup>constitutes a pressing concern for the policy agenda for many international development stakeholders.

In the context of the multidimensionality of school-based Islam, the education offered by Madrasas and Quranic schools particularly received an unparalleled attention in recent years from western media and policy makers. Controversies on school knowledge and content are traditionally dealt with within national and local contexts; however, that is no longer the case for Islam as pedagogic manifestation and school subject matter<sup>3</sup>. Thobani (2010) argues that “*It is uncommon in the history of modern education for a school subject to take on geopolitical significance in the way that Islam as a pedagogic manifestation has done in recent years*”.

Recently, several reform projects targeting Madrasas and Quranic schools around the Muslim world have been attempting to respond to the pressing need of eradicating or at least containing radicalizing discursive practices in the teaching content of these institutions. Several approaches have been adopted<sup>4</sup>. Common to many of these initiatives is the assumption that Quranic schools need to be either dismantled or reformed to become part of the formal public schools. It is rare that the western outside interveners endorsed the preservation of the Quranic schools’ main mission of teaching Islamic values to the local communities.

In this vein, this article reports on a case study based on a Quranic school reform project in West Africa (Niger) whose primary aim is to gradually introduce and incorporate peace education and values in the teachings of Quranic schools, without necessarily challenging the

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<sup>2</sup> See (Bergen and Pandey (2006)

<sup>3</sup> Thobani (2010)

<sup>4</sup> International donors such as US Government and private foundations have devoted some funds to work with Quranic Schools in Pakistan, Central Asia, and Sahel region in Africa, South Asia, and Middle East (Saudi Arabia). Majority of these efforts have been limited in comparison to the resources invested in security arrangements (policing, intelligence, border patrolling, prisons, etc.).

QSS' mission or functions . Departing from the premise that Quranic schools are an important component in the education provision of many Islamic countries<sup>5</sup>. The present research attempts to address the problematic issue of how to improve the allegedly substandard, intolerant and uncritical education offered by Quranic schools; the very education that allegedly leads to the creation of radicalizing Islamic discourses and ideologies that fail to meet the actual needs of their communities and pupils. The primary objective of the intervention was to build the capacity of Quranic teachers in learner centered-pedagogic skills conducive to the integration of more critical examination skills in the curriculum and teaching practice, as well as to introduce context-appropriate teaching tools for an effective integration of peace education in the teaching and practice of Quranic schools. The project draws on a burgeoning and increasingly important approach in the peace-building field, one that views religion as having an equally important potential for being used as a peace tool (Abu- Nimer, 2003; 2001; 1996; Appleby, 1999, Alger, 2002, Gopin, 200? Sampson and Johnston 1997;

### **Contextualizing Islamic Peace education:**

The QSS in this case study was conducted within peace education framework. The Choice of the framework of peace education in this particular context had implications both on the program design as well as the substantive component of the project (i.e. content of training and supporting materials).

Engaging Quranic schools to introduce and incorporate peace education values and content both through teacher training and the participatory design of supporting training and teaching materials was conceptually chosen as an attempt to create space for building and contributing to a culture of peace through an education improvement program couched broadly within the frameworks of capacity building and peace education. What is more, the present intervention was particularly informed by the Islamic framework and resources of peacebuilding (See Abu-Nimer, , 2003, 1996). . This general framework was used to guide and manage the intervention at the level of content, context and process to foster and contribute to building a culture of peace in the targeted community.

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<sup>5</sup> In Pakistan alone there are at least 5% of the children attend Quranic schools (Saleem Ali, 200?) .Thus, tens of millions of Muslim children in the Muslim world take classes in these QSS.

Building cultures of peace involves norm change (Richards and Swanger, 2009) and transformation. In this context, the Islamic peace-building model supports the claim that Islam is not intrinsically incompatible with nonviolence and peace despite the existence of arguments for conditioned uses of violence in the scripture (Satha Anand, 1989; Abu-Nimer 2003). Still, it also supports the claim that the inherent values of nonviolence, peace and unity of humankind are often downplayed in favor of more radicalized Islamic discursive practices that have thrived especially in the last two decades due to the increased sense that Islamic identity is under attack by various internal and external forces.

Adopting peace Islamic framework of peace education, by engaging Quranic schools to incorporate peace education and values automatically generates a setting of contestation and negotiation of cultural and religious meanings and norms. Like other QSS, those schools in West Africa, for instance, have for a long time detained a great deal of symbolic power as gatekeepers of the core values of Islam and media through which authentic Islamic faith and socialization is perpetuated in the community. Furthermore, projects attempting to improve or reform the way these institutions operate are presented with the huge challenge of dealing with the religious and cultural resistance that can turn to be counter-productive to the sought ideals and objectives of building and contributing to cultures of peace in these Islamic communities (Abu-Nimer and Kadayifci, 2011) .

In the context of an intervention aiming at engaging Quranic schools to foster and incorporate values of peace, tolerance, nonviolence, pluralism, human rights and coexistence, several questions arise. What content is taught in Quranic schools? What content is incompatible with the values of peace, nonviolence and human rights? What weight does that content and or its interpretation(s) have in the scripture and also for specific Muslim communities (i.e. teachers, students and parents)? What substantive issues are more prone to create animosity and contestation? Where does one start such work and what are the red flags that one should look for? What is the most effective entry point to engage QSS in which themes? The list of questions is by no means exhaustive and any such intervention should at least minimally deal adequately with some of these most pressing questions. However, such approach should circumvent the

risks of antagonizing indigenous communities by avoiding the “blunt imposition” of external worldviews that are not particularly accepted or viewed as antagonistic to Islam and Muslims<sup>6</sup>.

The intervention as captured in this essay was framed and designed according to the above set of assumptions and principles. The following is an elaborated discussion of how many of these principles were addressed during this specific intervention in Niger.

### **Introducing peace education in Quranic schools in Niger: Entry, Design, and Model**

The intervention in QSS in Niger and later in Chad is built around the premise that the Islamic religious and historic traditions are replete with messages of peace, tolerance, and nonviolence and multiple discursive invitations for the protection of human dignity, social justice and acceptance of the other. Indeed, it used a collaborative and participatory process for the identification of priority areas for needs assessment in teacher training and curricular change. The broad framework of peace education, and specifically the combined elicitive and prescriptive training framework (Abu-Nimer, 1998) were therefore adopted as a platform for the design of a project cycle that involved needs assessment, collaborative and participatory design of the content of a training and teaching manual, the training of about 56 teachers in learner-centered and context appropriate teaching tools and pedagogy, as well as planning sessions for the dissemination of peace messages in other Quranic schools.

Drawing on insights from previous fieldwork on the use of context appropriate and indigenous Islamic peacebuilding tools, the program design was highly participatory from the outset. This included a public acceptance of several assumptions and conditions articulated by the local partner and their community leaders. Some of these assumptions included: No intervention in the core curriculum of the QSS; no discussion of national political dynamics and issues; QS teachers are the experts on the Quranic interpretations; the emphasis on education for peace is not based on the assumption that the QSS is educating for violence.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the language and discourse of war on terrorism adopted by the United States government during the Bush era was offensive and rejected by QSS in Pakistan (see Abu-nimer and Kadayifci, 2011)

Gaining accesses to work with Quranic schools on substantive issues (i.e. gearing teaching practice and content towards the emphasis of values of human rights, diversity, coexistence, non-violence tolerance and peace) proved to be highly challenging and replete with risks. It required the incremental building of a certain level of credibility and legitimacy with various stakeholders at different phases of the project cycle (i.e. project stewards (local partners), participating Quranic school teachers, religious and traditional leaders as well as dignitaries in the community).

The Union of Quranic Schools in Niger (UECN), which is a newly founded association that federates owners and teachers of Quranic schools in Niger, served as the local partner in the region of Zinder, a Hausa region predominantly embracing a brand of Tijaniya Sufi Islam.<sup>7</sup> Zinder, the city where the intervention took place was the historical capital of the once powerful sultanate of Damagaram. It hosts around 140,000 Hausa-speakers (Masqualier, 2008). It is a characteristically Muslim town (Masqualier, 2008). Glew (1999:100) said that it is often referred to as “the heart of Islam in Niger”. Being very close to the borders of Nigeria, the region has been exposed to a rising surge of fundamentalist (Salafi) forms of Islam through the expansion of the **IZALA** movement (Izalatu Al Bid’a Wa Iqamatu Sunna) since (1970’s)<sup>8</sup>. The competition between proponents of the IZALA movement and their Sufi counterparts for credibility, legitimacy and authority in Zinder and other areas in Niger is important despite its subtle form.

What is more, given the fact that Islam in Niger is relatively very recent; it is constantly defending its authority against both pre-Islamic traditional beliefs as well as western incursions into Islamic identities. For Masqualier (2001:4), the Islamic hegemonic worldview is threatening

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<sup>7</sup> Tijaniya Sufism is a brand of Islam that was introduced to the sub-Saharan African communities by Arab traders from north Africa, especially Morocco. Tijaniya is based on several principles, especially simplifying the process of initiation, close relationships between the student and his sheik. (SEDDIK ADD HERE)

Brenner, Louis. *West African Sufi: The Religious Heritage and Spiritual Quest of Cerno Bokar*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1984.

Also see:

*Martin Van Businessmen, Julia Day Howell (eds.) Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007.*

<sup>8</sup> The main message of Izala is to remove any belief or practice added to the core Islamic belief and practice carried out by the Prophet and during his time. Thus they reject any form of foreign or western cultural affiliations. (return to the roots of the faith).

pre-Islamic traditional beliefs in Niger. Nigerian communities are constantly subjected to a negotiation of cultural meanings and the Islamic worldview is increasingly playing a central role in deconstructing once well-established beliefs and reframing them through the lens of Islam. Masqualier (2001:4) for instance argues that “*prayer, a conspicuous element of daily life that has become virtually synonymous with Islamic practice in this region of west Africa, is thus equated with the loss of tradition and what was once ‘authentic’ value.*”

In this context, Quranic schools and teachers along with religious and traditional leaders in the community play the central role of gatekeepers and custodians of authentic Islam. Their agency is undeniably important in informing discursive practices that foster the hegemony of Islamic worldviews over others. Thus the newly emerging local groups of Izala are competing with the traditional Tijaniya Sufism on defining the authenticity of Islamic faith.

In this vein, the rapport building with the local partner (the Union of Quranic Schools) took place gradually to dissolve their skepticism, apprehension and fear of the possible affiliation with the foreign trainers who arrive in their town. Nevertheless, be they Sufi or Salafi (Izala), religious leaders and Quranic school teachers have always been cautious in dealing with international organizations. Aid and cooperation have often been viewed with skepticism and are still somewhat scorned as a form of mild and cunning interventionism that aims at the gradual transformation of the Islamic identity of the community<sup>9</sup>. As gatekeepers, clergy and religious leaders view their role as being one of guarantor and filter of authentic Islamic values. They view it as their holy duty to wage resistance against any form of invasion or incursion into their perceived authentic Islamic faith and value system.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Such fear is not totally unfounded. Historically many Christian Europeans have gain accessed to African community and engaged in proselytizing through their faith based development and relief organizations. A recent example of such practice was evident in South Sudan, Rwanda, Afghanistan, etc.

<sup>10</sup> When the field work was conducted for this project, a national debate was engaged around the Family code. The Union of Quranic schools in Niger made it clear that they were against any reforms that were too secular or against Islamic Shari ‘a. Despite the fact that the project had different objectives they felt obliged to clarify their position in the national and local media. Such a position is attributed to their desire to preserve their reputation of custodians of Islamic values as well as unease and worries from negative stigmatization from rival Izala groups that can accuse them of siding with westerners to secularize the community.

In the context of the present case study, the initial contact with the local partner has been established through the implementation of an in-kind school improvement grant that aimed at the improvement of the shabby conditions of the Quranic schools. This in-kind aid (in the form of chairs, books, desks, zinc roof tops, computers etc) constituted an incentive for Quranic school owners who recognized the relevance of improving the conditions of their schools. This initial phase has been very crucial to engage and earn the trust of Quranic schools to start much more difficult conversations about the improvement of the sensitive and delicate substantive aspects of Quranic school teaching to wit the teaching skills, the content and its structure.

In a sense, the in-kind aid provided the needed **incentive** to give the intervention its initial boost. Given the fact that the local partner (UECN) in Zinder Niger was a newly created national association with aspirations of incrementally playing advocacy and lobbying roles to better serve the community of Quranic schools. The incentive of in-kind aid was higher than the apprehensions usually harbored about partnerships with international organizations and donors. This might also be attributed to the scarcity of development aid directed towards Quranic schools in Africa as well as the difficulty of reaching the exponential number of these schools. Additionally, this aid also served to consolidate the status of the schools affiliated with (UECN) and increase their ability to attract more students. Especially that such QS receive no form of any support or even link to the ministry of education and its formal system.

In designing the local team who was in charge of the implementation of this initiative and the engagement with the foreign or external organization, the UQSZ (Union of Quranic Schools in Zinder) extremely careful and strategic. The composition of the local team or committee was design to deal with the apprehensions of the different actors involved locally (i.e. the local partner (steward of the project), the Quranic school teachers, the religious leaders and local clergy). Thus the make- up of the team that was tasked with the implementation of the substantive part of the project was subject to careful scrutiny.

Similarly, the external intervention team composition was carefully designed to attract higher level of “energy” and trust. The fact that the external team was made up of Muslim Arabic speaking experts had a facilitative role in many respects<sup>11</sup>. The symbolic value that the countries

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<sup>11</sup> The external team included an Egyptian trainer who has been raised in a Muslim religious context, has received intense training in Islamic religious practices. and wealth of expertise in public civic education training; second member is a Moroccan education specialist in interactive learning and methodology; and a Palestinian American with expertise in Islamic peacebuilding and international training.

of origin of the team <sup>12</sup>as well as the ability of the experts to speak Arabic fluently has helped dissipate or at least tone down the apprehension that the international experts were foreigners coming with an agenda to westernize Quranic schools and transform their identity. In many occasions, the mere fact of being Muslim and Arabic speakers avoided the team the risk of being construed as threatening agents of change conniving to insert foreign or “community dividing ideas.” **For example, the issue of intra Muslim divisions or the status of women in Muslim societies are often considered controversial if raised by Western trainers, however the team was able to engage the group in such conversation during the third day of the workshop.**

Furthermore, the fact that team members had a proven record of working in the context of different Muslim countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Palestine, Pakistan, Philippines and Indonesia as well as the sharing of articles and books on Islamic peace-building has helped foster feelings of trust and established the credibility of the team. The establishing of the credibility of the team as pundits in Islamic peace-building as well as in sources of Quran, Hadith and Islamic history was a sine qua non condition for facilitating discussions about difficult issues in a non-threatening environment.

Drawing on insights from previous work in the context of Islamic peacebuilding, the intervention committed to showing and enforcing respect and acknowledgement of the basic function and roles fulfilled by Quranic schools as indigenous institutions that derive their legitimacy from the continuity of the links they have with the community and its culture. In this vein, the framing of the goals of the intervention emphasized that the objective was not to change the curricula, but rather to build the capacity of teachers in context-appropriate learner-centered teaching methods to make them more pedagogically capable. Thus, themes of how to utilize role plays, cultural rituals, stories, poetry, or cultural proverb provided excellent opportunities to introduce values such as tolerance, human rights, and nonviolence with little tension of suspicion of the interveners’ intentions.

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<sup>12</sup> Palestine,

Egypt is the host of Al Azhar an institution in which many religious leaders and clergy have been trained or aspire to attend, Morocco hosts in the city of Fes the shrine of the much venerated Sheikh Tijaniya. The originator of Tariqa Tijaniya that is very well represented in West Africa.

Most importantly, given the sensitivity of the intervention, despite the fact that the partnership with the participating Quranic schools explicitly emphasized the incorporation of peace education and values through the participatory design<sup>13</sup> of a training guide and manual for Quranic school teachers, a high level of emphasis has been put on compliance with Shari‘a and conceptions of true or authentic Islam as a condition for accepting the manual as a usable tool. In this vein, a firm commitment to using only Quranic verses and well established Hadiths as supporting illustrations has been shown both during initial contact with local stakeholders and during subsequent phases of the implementation where feedback has been recurrently sought from the local steward of the project to ensure suitability and acceptability. The assumption upheld is that building a culture of peace is feasible through the reinforcing of the already existing message of peace, tolerance, and diversity in Islamic religious sources used by Quranic schools and well known by the participants. This eventually was a the core assumption of the elicitive aspect of the design. Participants has the knowledge of Islamic peacebuilding framework

In order, to sustain a sufficient level of energy that can guarantee the appropriate implementation of this project, space was provided in several phases of program design for the gradual relationship and rapport building through candid and straightforward discussions about sensitive and delicate issues as well as any apprehensions that the local partner might have.<sup>14</sup>

### **Methodology of introducing peace education values and content:**

In brief, an assessment was conducted in 10 Quranic schools in Zinder Niger, where class observations and on-site interviews were scheduled with 20 Quranic teachers. Besides the class observations, in the assessment phase a systematic collection of materials and testimonies during informal meetings was carried out. The researchers collected samples of texts, manuals, guidelines developed the National Ministry of Education for Quranic schools as well as samples

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<sup>13</sup> The QSUZ had the full control over the content, design, Hausa translation of the material that was introduced by the external trainers.

<sup>14</sup> In Chad and Niger the practitioner/researcher team was examined in several sessions regarding its affiliation with donors, foreign groups, and its genuine agenda, even how authentic their Islamic identify. Such examination sessions took place during the first assessments trip and throughout the informal conversations with the local representatives of the Quranic schools.

and titles of books used by Quranic school teachers in their teaching practice as references. During the classroom observations and interviews with teachers, emphasis was put on the definition of structure of the curriculum, the specification of the content taught per each level, the exploration of the evaluation criteria for assigning students to groups and levels, the criteria adopted for progression to superior levels as well as the methods and materials used for teaching . In this phase of the assessment the team of experts was adamant on codifying all aspects of Quranic school education, including the conditions of teachers, students and the schools themselves.

Informal encounters were also set up with some parents and members of the community to get their input about how they view Quranic schools and why they send their children there.

Such deep and sincere interest in documenting the sever conditions and badly needed improvements to the QS infrastructure (through few days of actual visits to the 10 schools) was perceived as a genuine gesture of interest to help and support the survival of the schools and not a project that aims to serve external western agenda of changing Islamic beliefs.

Also, a two-day workshop was organized to substantiate priority areas and themes for the design of the teacher training manual to guide the desired curricular change. The framing of the intervention put more emphasis on teacher training rather than curriculum change.<sup>15</sup> The assumption being that the transformation in the worldview and conceptions of teachers of their roles as Quranic teachers would trickle down to change in practice and curricular change. Therefore a teacher training manual whose skeleton was collaboratively designed in a participatory exercise was used to introduce peace, non-violence, human rights and tolerance themes as well as learner-centered pedagogic approaches. The manual is supposed to serve as a companion and a reference to Quranic teachers rather than a syllabus or forma curriculum. The training manual was subsequently used with more than 70 Quranic schools in Zinder, Maradi, and Niamey at a pilot phase.

The skeleton of the training manual was practically collaboratively designed by the thirty Quranic teachers participating in the two-day needs assessment workshop. During this two-day

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<sup>15</sup> In most of contexts of Muslim communities any reference to changes in formal curricula often trigger suspicion, conspiracy theory, colonial policies, and anti Islamic sentiments. Such reality is based on the shared historical experience of many Muslim societies with the western European and American colonial and imperial policies since early 1800s.

workshop, the team of researchers facilitated sessions for the design of sample lessons on thematic themes such as tolerance and pluralism with illustrations from Qur'an and Hadiths provided by participants to support the spreading of the message of peace, pluralism, diversity, and peaceful conflict resolution.

After the assessment phase and the participatory workshops for the design of sample lesson plans for context-appropriate peace education lessons to be incorporate in local Quranic schools, the external team systematically analyzed all available data collected through interviews, classroom observations, informal discussions, input from the participatory and collaborative tasks in workshops as well as the collected documentation. This exercise culminated in the specification of the methodology and contents of (1) the training modules on context-appropriate learner-centered teaching methods and peace and human rights education for Quranic schools as well as (2) the specification of the content (especially the incorporation of the cultural and traditional stories and examples, the language (rhetoric) and the appropriate format of the training manual.

The capacity building effort, then, was two pronged. The five day training workshop was used as a platform for building the capacity of Quranic school teachers in the aforementioned areas as well as an opportunity for piloting content of the manual in view of getting feedback about its cultural appropriateness and suitability. This implied some overlap between the substance of the training manual and the modules of the training workshop. Additionally, a group of 15 Quranic teachers with a deeper understanding of Islamic studies, the Arabic language, and openness to human rights and peace education were identified to participate in an advanced training for coaching on how to use the manual. Throughout the intervention, the process and context was monitored and managed very carefully. The team avoided as much as possible being caught in local political dynamics and propaganda (this would have been perceived as an invader themes). Indeed, several formal and informal feedback sessions were organized with local partners to debrief their views about the progression of work. The identification of the future course of action was always done collaboratively and ample room for venting frustrations, apprehensions, and worries was provided for both sides as discussed in the later section on challenges.

### **Managing expectations of success:**

The question of determining success and impact of peace education programs is a challenging task for the field (Ian Harris, ???; Solomon, ??); Abu-Nimer, 1999). Such question is particularly difficult to answer in this context of the Quranic Schools training for peace education. Having completed two training workshops and designed the manual for future teachers' training, it was clear that the outputs and outcomes of the intervention were accomplished. However, measuring the success of the intervention on a large societal or political scale was impossible and was not part of the initial objective to the intervention. Thus when people asked the external team members, did you solve the problems between Izala and Tijaniya groups in Niger? Or did you bring peace to Zinder region? The immediate response was: these were not our goals.

The success of the intervention can be reflected through various indicators and measures. However these are all based on direct observations, individual interviews, and focus groups with the beneficiaries of the program. As a result of the intervention there have been clear shift in certain teachers' perception of their role as educators. "As a result of the training I began thinking bas about using violence in teaching the students, I notice that in this training we are relaxed and managed to learn lots of information about teaching."<sup>16</sup>

Majority of them expressed their appreciation of the fact that they gained new information and skills on how to manage their class in more effective ways.

"I learned that I can use the different methods of teaching (i.e. role play, storytelling, and open ended question, etc.) and still teach about Islamic values and Hadith."<sup>17</sup>

In addition, all participants agreed a more systematic integrating of the peace education values is necessary and does not contradict with their Islamic beliefs. Several teachers emphasized that this was their first professional training after 15 years of teaching and using the same memorization methods, despite the fact that it will be hard for them to apply all the new interactive teaching methods, but they expressed their willingness to try it within the next three months.

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<sup>16</sup> A Quranic school teacher in Teacher training in Zinder, Niger, March 8, 2011

<sup>17</sup> A Quranic school teacher, in a training workshop in Zinder, (Niger) March 2011

There are many of the above cited individual qualitative testimonies capturing the immediate impact of the training and manual on teaching Islamic values of peace, tolerance diversity in Quranic schools. In fact, such level of impact is probably the most visible aspects of the effectiveness of training and capacity building.

- The impact on the general schools' teaching methodology, institutionally the schools became owner of a manual that guide their new and existing teachers in how to utilize different educational methods
- Change in the discourse of the teachers in which they began using different terminology in referring to the teacher's student' relationship. The notion of respecting the students' views, needs is not as strange as it was prior to the training.
- Teachers' willingness and desire to receive training to improve their capacity grew great deal and they demanded more training sessions to enhance their performance.

In terms of wider behavioral impacts, it is difficult to identify and measure behavioral changes among teachers in such context and only after two interventions, nevertheless, there were some statement expressed by the teachers indicating their willingness to begin linking their activities in the schools with the local community needs and concerns. Such principles of peace education was absent from the teachers' perception of their role in the first workshop. In fact, they found it insulting when one of the trainers proposed the idea that a Quranic school teacher can organize a campaign to clean the trash from the school's immediate neighborhood.” However, at the end of the second workshop, participants were planning a project to involved parents and students in initiating a public celebration to support the school.

### **Challenges:**

Like any other intervention, this one faced certain challenges and obstacles in its design, implementation, and follow up phases. The following is a brief examination of a selected set of challenges.

One of the major problematic areas encountered in reform projects targeting Madrasas and Quranic schools is “the curriculum.” Traditionally, Madrasas and schools have enjoyed absolute freedom in structuring the educational practice as they deemed fit. The only criteria that were observed were qualitative and subjective ones based on the knowledge and religious authority

and his understanding of what constitutes authentic Islam. Attempts to change the curriculum are often viewed with skepticism. They are considered as an attempt to compromise a centuries-long cherished tradition centered on the exclusive rote learning of Quran for years before “Talibes” (the students) are able to move up in the hierarchy to be socialized in other Islamic disciplines and fields of enquiry such as Hadith, Sira and Fiqh (TRANSLATE). The introduction of new subject matters is therefore seen as a corruption and disruption of a longstanding tradition. It is also feared as a mechanism through which several stakeholders are seeking to gradually secularize Quranic schools therefore alienating them from their traditional identity. Additionally, because Quranic schools reflect the cultural and religious contexts in which they operate, they often promote a sectarian understanding of Islam (Thobani, 2010) that fosters the suspicions of clerics about interferences in the curriculum. This exclusive and sectarian promotion of certain interpretations can easily lead to deeper feelings of superiority and purity of faith when compared with others from outside or within the same religion. The heterogeneity of the Islamic groups to which Quranic schools’ clerics belong contributes to this wariness about external interference. At stake here, is the representation of the self, other Islamic groups, the type of Islam one belongs to, and every aspect of the Islamic identity (which in turns define Muslims’ communities’ social, economic, cultural, and political systems).

In analyzing the prejudices and biases that exist in school-based Islamic curricula in Pakistan, Thobani (2010) argues that Islamic education in Pakistan is “*overall....confessional in nature, and while presented ecumenically as appropriate to all Muslims, in reality [it] leans towards the majoritarian Sunni tradition presented from a normative perspective. Denominational differences are only observed for the higher classes when the Islamiyat syllabus becomes separated for Sunnis and Shi’as*” [Emphasis added] Similar conclusions were documented by Abu-Nimer and Kadayifci (2011) in their examination of Pakistani Madrassa and their efforts to educate and integrate human rights values in their systems.

In West Africa and Niger most specifically, a similar reality exists albeit through different forms. The region has been traditionally, affiliated with Sufi Islam with Sufi orders like the Tijaniya being strongly represented in this area. However, with the relatively new arrival of the **IZALA** (Izalatu Al Bid’a Wa Iqamatu Sunna) movement the map of mainstream Sufi Islam started shrinking, therefore creating occasional hot spots of sectarian tension and violence.

Quranic schools obviously have not been exempt from the consequences of such tensions. They have become privileged arenas where denominational and demarcation lines are being drawn to promote a sectarian understanding of Islam that reflects each group's worldview of what is authentic Islam.

Second, there are certain basic religious interpretations adopted by certain Muslims communities, especially among those who are affiliated with Quranic schools, such beliefs fundamentally contradict with the core values of education for peace. For example, in the context of Niger's training many participants expressed their belief that "Islam is superior to all faiths," this sensitive issues needed to be cautiously managed and addressed within the framework of diversity and equality. Due to the majority of the participants' limited exposure to other faith groups, external trainers chose not to confront such religio centric belief which contradict the basic assumption about diversity and inclusion.

Nevertheless, the issue emerged again in the second training and the external training team had to confront the participants with the need to recognize the fact that this is a relative belief or opinion and that other religious groups might feel the same way about their faith. However in the context of human rights in Islam, the discussion evolved to the question of how and can you insure that "Islam is a superior faith." At this point, participants have made the distinction between their own feeling and belief that their faith is superior and the rights of other individuals and groups to practice their own faith and preserve their religious identity.

**External pressure on Quranic schools:** Throughout the process of this intervention, the external team had to address multiple levels of pressure on the Quranic schools leaders, who were as mentioned above highly sensitive to their public image and wanted to prevent any possible back clash on their community from social and religious forces who opposed them. Such pressure was evident in various stages of the engagement, for example, when the team reviewed the manual they insisted on modifying the language of religious diversity. Their opening argument in opposing the integration of religious diversity in the manual was that their religious opponents will manipulate the public by arguing that they have equated Islam to other religions. Thus they suggested keeping all forms of diversity, but adjusting the language around the religious diversity in a way to avoid directly equating Islam with other religions. The second argument voiced by the leaders was: "we agree with you about religious diversity, but we are

unable to insert in the manual.” In negotiating this major obstacle in the relationship, it became clear to the external team that imposing and insisting on the direct language and phrase that equalize Islam with other religions, was a step that might endanger the participants and their status in the community, due to the high level of vulnerability with the Izala. It also was evident that despite the two capacity building workshops, the level of diversity awareness among them was still not allowing them to publicly confront or commit to such concept. Thus **although one of the objective of the intervention is to transform participants’ perception. Yet it was clear that this is a long term process and there are many points of resistance and trainers need to t be aware and ready to handle these points of resistance with flexibility and diplomatic tactics. Nevertheless,** the result of the negotiation process was a careful reframing of the language related to religious diversity section in a way that does not threaten the organization. However it should be noted that in a third meeting 18 months later, five of the leaders participated in a workshop to disseminate the manual and in their presentation of the manual to new group of teachers form other provinces of Niger, they publically committed to the principle of religious diversity and supported the trainer in the presentation of the concept<sup>18</sup>.

Third, Throughout this intervention it was clear that some participants and even members of the external team debated the approach of educating for peace, human rights, and diversity in an extreme poverty context. Many teachers in the Quranic schools challenged the external team with the question of: “how can we invest so many efforts in education for peace and all these values when our schools have no basic infrastructure such as roofs, desks, blackboards, chairs, and with 50 to 60 students in one class? Getting these basics is our priority.” Several responses to such challenge were proposed by both local and external team members: acknowledgment of the lack of these basic needs and the necessity to have them; educating for peace does not necessarily contradict with the need to work towards improving the infrastructure of the schools; recommending to the donors to link the project of educating for peace with development of the basic school infrastructure.

Fourth, the issue of follow up and sustainability of the outcomes: having trained the teachers and designed the manual was not sufficient to insure the sustainability of the project. The follow up and the dissemination of the manual to wider number of schools, especially in the rural areas

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<sup>18</sup> The third meeting is a workshop for disseminating of the Quranic School manual that took place in Niamey on 16-23, 2012.

required a basic budget to cover expenses. The lack of the funds was a major constraint faced the Union of Quranic Schools in Zinder form reaching out beyond their limited number of schools in their area. Like many other programs, this one was part of a three years cycle project which stopped just when the beneficiaries were ready to reach out and disseminate<sup>19</sup>.

### **Conclusion:**

Education for peace is an ongoing process that requires great deal of investments in building teachers' capacity and schools' general environment. This assumption certainly applies to peace education in Quranic schools. Any intervention in such context has to address several major needs: building the basic educational capacity of the teachers due to their lack of professional training; recognizing and creatively dealing with the fact that Quranic schools suffer from extreme level of poverty and lack of infrastructure. In fact, many of these schools in Niger are not fit for teaching due to basic safety issues (air ventilation, extreme heat, no water, or sewage faculties). Despite these conditions, teachers in such schools are devoted to their mission and duties with little compensation (in many cases without any compensation).

The Quranic school teachers enjoy certain level of social and community respect due to the fact that his/her job is to introduce "the faith" to the children. Thus in many cases the teachers are self defined and receive the community confirmation as defenders of the "faith." The public external and internal self perception that Islamic schools have deeper knowledge of the Islamic religious sources enhance the capacity and legitimacy of these schools and their teachers in both adopting and promoting Islam. Such teachers are already assuming certain role in the local community, thus engaging them to play a constructive role in their local communities is certainly within their realm of influence.

Despite the dire need for capacity building and infrastructure development, Education for peace training programs are no substitute for having a system approach (government responsibility to provide a clear policy and programs in dealing with these schools) to the inclusion and professional development of these schools in their societies. The intervention in this context of the Quranic schools in Zinder provided evidence that Quranic school teachers are

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<sup>19</sup> The Project was renewed and the Zinder Union of Quranic Schools was part of the second phase of implementation, however this follow was delayed 18 months.

open and willing to engage with agencies and third party intervention that take into consideration their high level of hyper sensitivity to outsiders. Such conclusion contradicts and negates the assumption that teachers in such schools are extreme, support militant groups, or a ground for violence.

The case study provides evidence that with careful and skillful relationship building with leaders in such Quranic schools, peace education programs can be introduced and effectively linked to the existing curriculum. Obviously in the process of implementing such intervention, there are major challenges that need to be addressed. However, once the entry is gained, the intervention quickly becomes similar to any other engagement with socially marginalized, economically deprived, and ideologically stereotyped communities, and the Quranic schools are not the only educational community that suffer from these symptoms.

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