

## Updating the Conventional Curriculum in Toronto (Canada)

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### Introduction

Most Muslim Shī'ah Ithnā 'Asharī English-medium madāris around the world largely divide their study programmes into Qur'ān and Dīnīyāt Studies. The four main areas of study under Dīnīyāt are 'Aqā'id (Articles of Faith), *Fiqh* (Islamic Law), *Tārikh* (Islamic History) and *Akhbāqiyāt* (Ethics). This paper is focused on the Dīnīyāt curriculum presently used in Toronto (Canada), named the Širāt Books.

### Two Questions

**Question One: What** knowledge and values must every Shī'ah Ithnā 'Asharī Muslim child acquire before graduating from the madrasah?

This question is relevant because whilst traditionally we have always argued against developing new madrasah curricula asking, 'why reinvent the wheel?', rarely has any madrasah looked at its programme holistically to evaluate its objectives and/or identify gaps in their programme.

I will first summarize what our madrasah ambitiously sought to define as the answer to this question and thereafter discuss the flaws we found in most existing madāris curricula that we reviewed between 2004 and 2009.

**Question Two: How** do we ensure the above (i.e. what is taught at the madrasah) goes beyond the transfer of information and nurtures piety and a strong Islamic faith based on understanding rather than simply conforming to the community's culture?

This question is relevant firstly because most madāris still struggle with students graduating without appreciating the fundamentals of Islam's faith and practice. And secondly it becomes an urgent need when the child leaves home for university and is outside the community's influence.

I will answer this question by explaining the key objectives we set when creating the Širāt programme and how these were achieved in the strategies we employed when designing our syllabus and books.

### Answers

**Question 1: What knowledge and values must every Shī'ah Ithnā 'Asharī Muslim child acquire before graduating from the madrasah?**

- Know the fundamental articles of Islam ('*aqā'id*), the basic duties (*taklīf*) of Islam that are incumbent on them, of what is *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām* and how to perform the obligatory rituals of the *sharī'ah* (*fiqh*), who the true leaders of Islam are and what their legacy is (*tārikh*), and What Islam regards as righteous conduct versus harmful behaviour (*akhbāqiyāt*).
- Appreciate the 'middle path' of moderation as the Right Path in Islam.
- Have strong conviction and the ability to defend their faith.
- Have a passionate desire to serve Allah and His creatures.

- Build a strong love to continue studying Islam and seeking ways to grow spiritually and attain proximity to Allah.
- Know what resources are available for further Islam studies.
- Become mentors and/or role models in society.
- Have a strong appreciation of the Qur’ān, both in reciting it as well as using its message and themes to derive one’s worldview and influence one’s goals in life.

#### Weaknesses Found in Other Curricula Reviewed (2004-2009)

- 1) The four main areas of study were not given equal weighting and importance. ‘Aqāid very minimal, often bundled with Fiqh.
- 2) Tārikh limited to the history of the Anbiyā (‘a) and Aimmah (‘a), without a broader perspective.
- 3) Akhlāq lessons often failing to show how religion (*dīn*) is a means rather than the end in perfecting human character.
- 4) Primary Islamic sources (*muṣṣūṣ*) - Qur’ān and ḥadīth - absent or insufficiently used and applied in the student texts.
- 5) Very poor illustrations/artwork.

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#### **Key Objectives of the Şirāt Programme**

- 1) To create study material that is *muṣṣūṣ*-(Qur’ān and ḥadīth) centred rather than relying on opinions and weak reports.
- 2) To bridge the gap between theory and practice.
- 3) To inculcate fundamental Islamic values including an emphasis on the importance of:
  - a. Taqwā (God consciousness)
  - b. Using life to serve the Creator and His creation
  - c. Seeing religion as a means and not an end
  - d. Being non-materialistic (Children of the Hereafter)
  - e. Being conscientious that we are accountable before God and must therefore know what He expects of us.

#### **Strategies Employed in the Şirāt Programme**

- 1) Each grade to have exactly 28 lessons – 7 for each of the four subjects.
- 2) Wherever relevant Qur’ān and/or ḥadīth to be used and emphasized.

- 3) Encourage practical activities and field trips that demonstrate the objectives of the programme.
- 4) Important concepts to be taught before age 13 because of the high attrition rate in the higher grades. Memorization to be emphasized more at the lower grades and analytical and independent research skills at higher grades. Some core material to be reiterated in cycles due to differences in levels of understanding between the age groups.
- 5) Material to be developed with each book flowing seamlessly and building on the previous book. Detailed material to be taught gradually over several books instead of at-once.
- 6) Increase use of colour illustrations and picture stories. Provide a ‘Teacher’s DVD’ with multimedia as teaching aid, fully cross-referenced to the text books.
- 7) Create separate workbooks to allow teacher contributions and regular updates without requiring main text book revisions.
- 8) Introduce the use of (a limited) Arabic transliteration system in the texts. Replace all Farsi/Urdu terms with Arabic equivalents and use Arabic rather than English terms wherever possible.

## **Final Words**

### Immediate Future Plans for the Şirāt Programme

- 1) Lesson Plans and Workbook Updates.
- 2) Colour printing and continued artwork enhancements.
- 3) Quiz Book.

### Where the World Federation / MCE can help:

- 1) Create our own brand of ‘Diego and Dora’ characters. The case of Yusuf and Amina.
- 2) Teacher Training - mobile/online ‘hawzah’ programme for madrasah teachers.
- 3) Print text books in colour.
- 4) Produce interactive software and websites, animations and apps for mobile gadgets to ‘edutain’.
- 5) Link the end of the madrasah programme to an accredited college programme.
- 6) Explore ways to continue madrasah education during extended (summer) breaks.