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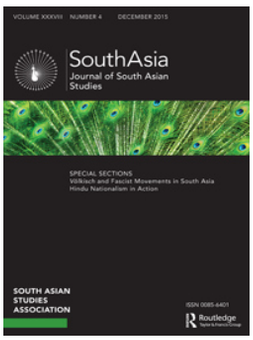

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Schools for Conflict or for Peace in Afghanistan, by Dana Burde

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Dana Burde, *Schools for Conflict or for Peace in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), ISBN 9780231537513, 232 pp., US$40.00, hdbk.

A Pashto-language edition of a textbook printed in 2011 refers to the letter T thus: *Topak* (gun). '*My uncle has a gun. He does Jihad with the gun*' (p. 77). These and similar references to war are not uncommon in what Dana Burde calls the negative curriculum of jihadist textbooks. In her study *Schools for Conflict or for Peace in Afghanistan*, she traces the history of jihadist books which were first developed during the Cold War as part of the United States' propaganda against the Soviet Union's influence in Afghanistan. Due to their widespread distribution and poor revision, they continue to have a damaging effect on education in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Burde's in-depth study of these textbooks is part of a broad analysis of unequal access to education. She argues that 'negative curricula' are likely to nurture conflict, while expanding access to high-quality community-based education that uses 'positive curricula' could contribute to peace in Afghanistan.

Burde's book is based on her considerable experience as a consultant and academic researcher in Afghanistan and other conflict-affected regions, and she draws together a selection of research projects carried out over the past decade. In doing so, she presents a rich, but at the same time somewhat eclectic, story of the role of education (interventions, policies, practices) in—and sometimes beyond—Afghanistan. Yet the selective reader might find the clear structuring of separately-organised chapters around themes quite useful. The author has written the book with varied audiences in mind, as she sets out in the Introduction, including 'scholarly' readers from a range of backgrounds such as International Relations and Political Science as well as 'the curious non-specialist' (pp. 23–4), although we wonder if the child's drawing on the front cover is really best suited to attract academics, or reach beyond the regular 'Education in Emergency' audience.

Chapter 1 gives a broad introduction to the topic, and presents Afghanistan's educational institutions as a key battlefield for historical and present-day struggles between progressive and conservative, urban and rural, secular and religious forces. Education is framed as a deeply political instrument of state-building and a potentially dangerous tool deployed for projects of radicalisation and indoctrination, which makes control over it necessarily contested. Chapter 2 explains how and why support for education has been largely excluded from historical—and current—narratives of humanitarian aid. This neglect by both practitioners and policy-makers is due to two myths, the 'emergency imaginary' and the positioning of humanitarian intervention as apolitical and only focused on fulfilling urgent needs. In criticising this needs-based framework, Burde calls for a revision of the concept of emergency to move it away from separating humanitarian aid from development support.

The analysis of the jihadist textbooks, in Chapter 3, further supports one of Burde's main arguments: that aid to education is never 'a-political'. The reader's interest is triggered when the author further asserts that negative curricula are potentially *more* problematic in religious schools than in secular schools (p. 59). However she does not fully develop this thesis. Chapter 4 illustrates how foreign-led stabilisation efforts through counter-insurgency strategies have further intensified underlying conditions of conflict. More specifically, the book shows how stabilisation initiatives—both by design and by default—have enhanced disparities in education and exacerbated (real or perceived) horizontal societal inequalities and produced grievances against the government.

Towards the end of the book (Chapter 5) the author turns towards exploring a more hopeful scenario of how education could help to mitigate conflict and promote peace. Burde convincingly argues that community-based schools could improve access to education because they solve problems of proximity by providing alternative schooling in remote areas as well, possibly also improving girls' attendance rates. However the chapter offers only limited findings about the actual impact of curriculum content and leaves unexplored whether educational spaces are likely to remain safe from attacks in the long run. One should remain cautious about the assumption that government-affiliated and foreign-backed community-based arrangements can avoid the danger of schools being attacked by various insurgent groups, of which the Taliban are but one example.

Throughout the book the author vigorously critiques the strategic past and current involvement of the US government and military. This is an important message that deserves to be read by a broad audience. While the book succeeds in providing a solid elaboration of American involvement, it largely refrains from analysing similar interventions by other international actors and countries. This perhaps makes it particularly relevant for an American audience. While more emphasis could have been placed on exploring the underlying causes and mechanisms that drive existing frameworks of foreign interventions, we appreciate the author's effort to also address policy-makers and aid practitioners. Overall, the book provides an excellent overview and diverse analysis of the historical emergence of, and currently existing relationship between, education, peace and conflict within and beyond Afghanistan.

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