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**Integrating US Context in Syllabus to Focus Spiritual, Intellectual and
Practical Needs of Students in Higher Classes**

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Abstract

Students in higher classes often struggle between their Islamic and western identities. Weekend Islamic schools have a role to soften any schism and tensions of identities by carefully selecting topics that are not only spiritual in purport but also provide practical guidance for contemporary situations.

The paper examines why topics used in higher classes can or cannot deliver the above objective. Due to lack of a structured curriculum in many Islamic schools, students of higher classes are still taught topics that should have been covered during the formative years. The situation is further complicated since the main focus of available text books is teaching rituals, and basic and fundamental spirits of Islam, not applied religion. Vast majority of other books on Islam are written for adults or academics, but hardly any addresses the needs of students in higher grades.

The paper discusses some of the elements of a structured curriculum on Islamic studies for senior youths, jointly developed by this author. The paper discusses how to approach the 'US Context' and how it can be blended with spiritual aspects of learning. The spiritual aspect of a topic must always represent Islamic viewpoints. If Christian or Jewish viewpoints are discussed to provide a comparative observation, they should not become the dominant discussion thread at the cost of Islamic teachings. The paper discusses wide array of topics included in the syllabus that are by all means western in context, but truly spiritual in intent. These topics are formulated not only to feed the intellectual drive of the senior youths, but also to prepare them to face the practical situations faced in the western world. Since no single book covers these topics, the teachers are clearly at disadvantage when it comes to teaching these topics. Knowing that topics included in the syllabus are not exhaustive by any means, the paper provides constructive guidance as to how a teacher can independently select these and other topics and prepare lesson for the class. The ideal approach must not tilt too much towards orthodoxy or heterodoxy but maintain moderation in approach.

INTRODUCTION

Students in higher classes, usually between ages of fourteen and eighteen, studying in 9th grade to 12th grade in regular public school, tend to struggle a lot more with their Islamic and western identities than any other students in other grades. This is so because their level of maturity, intellect, inquisitiveness and awareness is superior to students in any other grade. On one hand they are Muslim, required to uphold certain Islamic values and observe certain obligatory duties even when they are in public places, on the other they are Western, live in the western environment where they are constantly barraged with many values, beliefs and practice that run counter to their Islamic values and beliefs. These students constantly face media stereotyping, prejudice, and impact of global events that seem to put them on focus, yet there is constant appeal to 'fit in' the western identity, to which they invariably belong. Evidently there is a noticeable schism between these two identities that sometimes clash and sometimes blend together. A Muslim student can fast during Ramadan, observe daily prayers, do varieties of Islamic activities and at the same time be avid supporter of Sea Hawks or Steelers, play Mario, read and watch Potter or bike ride on a trail. The more these identities clash and blend the more is the challenge to know where the border line is that s/he cannot cross and when to step down one's feet and take a stand. Since weekend Islamic schools all over the United States cater to these youths, these schools have a role to soften any schism and tensions of identities by carefully discussing in class such topics that are not only spiritual in purport but also providing practical guidance for contemporary situations.

The objective of the school is not to create a 16-year or 17-year old Islamic scholars, who would take up the onus of 'safeguarding' the religion or spearheading Islam among his or her compatriots. Far from it, the school will simply prepare the students or at least put them in proper avenues, whereby they will understand religion of Islam came to them not only by their birth, but also by choice. This should enable the students to mitigate the concerns stated above and intelligently discuss about Islam, appropriate for their level, with others.

TYPICAL TOPICS IN HIGHER CLASSES

Higher class students in an Islamic Sunday school are those students who are studying in 9th to 12th grades in a public or private school. Before discussing the typical topics in a typical Sunday school, it is important to understand the experiences of the students in 9th to 12th grades in public schools. As they take compulsory or optional subjects in a class, upfront they know what would be taught in the class in the academic year. The teacher prepares lesson plan and provides valuable information before each lesson, sometimes weeks and months ahead. There are minimum state standard the school has to meet. The students are challenged with subjects and topics at grade appropriate level. Parents are often briefed and/or informed about the course material and level of expectations required of each student.

In contrast many Sunday schools enroll higher grade students simply to 'lecture' them about yet to be determined topics. Usually one of the most knowledgeable volunteer is entrusted with the teaching job. In most cases a formal syllabus is lacking but in many

cases a broad outline of 'expectation' and 'goal' of the class is stated. In order to achieve the objective, usually a best-selling children's or youth's text book is adopted that covers everything about Islam from A to Z. The volunteer teacher is required to identify topics from the text book that s/he can comfortably teach. In most cases s/he does not know what topics were covered in the previous grades or years, since the school does not have a formal syllabus. Sometimes such topics are taught that has no practical or intellectual challenge at that class level. Sometimes such topics as battles, Makkkan and Madinan periods, past prophets, Companions, Caliphs are taught that should have been covered long back in the formative years between 4th and 8th grade. It is easy to spend 45-60 minutes of class time, 27 classes in an academic year. But unless the students are intellectually stimulated, they lose interest in the class and enrollment declines. Even worst, some kind of disinterest towards religion ingrains in the minds of prime youths, who find religion boring and burdensome. The schools seem to be doing a service to the community, but actually they are doing disservice to the spiritual and intellectual needs of the youths.

Sometimes no book is selected since the volunteer teacher is able to come up with various topics s/he can think of and provide necessary study materials. This is definitely better compared to the previous approach mentioned above. But even then due to lack of a structured syllabus, well planned lessons and post lesson follow up; entire 27 academic Sundays are not fully utilized.

Question still remains if the school was able to address the spiritual, intellectual and practical needs of the students in those grades.

WHAT IS US CONTEXT

Ideally the US Context includes those situations, experiences and challenges any Muslim immigrant or first generation of Muslim immigrant ("Generation 1M") faces at school, workplace and public places while living in the US. The US Context is everything that is available in the US in terms of social, political, economical, cultural paradigm as given or practiced. The US Context surfaces in a person's life in two ways: (a) the person becomes a part and parcel of it as s/he immigrates/lives in the US, (b) the context is thrust upon them, to their dismay, as they start living in the US. One is natural way of immigration, which is why it the process of immigration is also 'naturalization', whereby a person is naturally integrated in the mainstream. The person is required to follow the law of the land, and in turn s/he is given the same rights and privileges guaranteed in the constitution. The other is, despite their naturalization, the obvious difference lies in the manner the person reflects his or her culture, religion, language, orientation. They are naturalized yet they are different, thus the US Context is thrust upon them since they seem to be so different. Evidently there comes conflict, challenges, tension in addressing both the problems.

As the US Context surfaces, the immigrant or Generation 1M brings certain things on the table as their own and they are also required to address or face certain other things on the table that they don't own, but they realize these are dominant realities. Things that they own are belief, custom and culture and the things that they don't own are also belief, custom and culture of others who are on the table.

It is important for the immigrant and Generation 1M to understand what other's belief, custom and culture are and how these are different from their own. They need to

be prepared to take a stand and when needed educate others about their belief, custom and culture.

Students in higher grades in school are gradually but increasingly exposed to the US situations, experiences and challenges. Lessons taught in the higher grades in Sunday schools can pick up some of these issues and address them in Islamic spirit.

ELEMENTS OF A STRUCTURED SYLLABUS

In this paper, 9th to 12th grade students are considered to be in the higher classes. A student who enrolls in 9th grade has four more years until s/he graduates from school. Depending on the facility of the school, 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grade students can have 27 classes in a year x 4 year = 108 total weekend classes or that many lessons. Even if 9th and 10th grade are combined and 11th and 12th are combined into one class, it is still possible to have around 108 total weekend classes or that many lessons. Clearly 108 lessons are quite a lot to fruitfully integrate some of the US Context in the syllabus if properly planned.

As pointed out above, the US Context can be integrated in the weekend school syllabus when two criteria are realized: (a) the students becomes part and parcel of US Context as they immigrate/live in the US, (b) the context is thrust upon them. Based on these two criteria, when topics are selected for higher classes, two broad outlines may be followed: (i) Naturally arising US Context, (ii) Context thrust upon the Muslims from US perspective.

Naturally Arising US Context: Under naturally arising US Context, those topics are introduced that naturally come to Muslim mind as they start living in the US. These topics raise pertinent questions in Muslim mind about the country, its origin, its culture, its values, its politics, its ideologies, its dominant religious groups and so on. Some of these topics are:

- Early immigration of Muslims in the US
- Immigration before Columbus
- Muslim stereotypes
- Contribution of Black Muslims in the US
- Islam and other religion – comparative study
- Early Christianity – its formative years - Trinity
- Origin of Judaism – its core teachings
- Friendship – who can be friends
- Islamic vs. un-Islamic – pure fun vs. Hidden trap
- Permitted and Prohibited Food
- Sex, sexuality, adultery
- Dating
- Free mixing of man and women
- Alcohol and intoxicants

Context thrust upon the Muslims from US perspective: This category includes those topics that non-Muslim counterparts are most likely to ask the Muslims, out of curiosity or serious interest.

- What is the Qur’ān – why it reads incoherent, disjointed
- Could the Prophet have ‘written’ the Qur’ān
- Is the present day Qur’ān the same as it was originally revealed and compiled
- God of Muslims vs. God of Christians
- Prophecy of Muhammad in the Bible
- What the Qur’ān speaks about war, jihad
- The Qur’ān teaches kill them wherever you find them!
- Terrorism in Islam
- Why Muslims marry 4 wives
- Why the Prophet married 13 women
- Position of women in Islam vs. women in the West

The above is by no means an exhaustive list of US context topics; these are only for indicative purposes.

FOCUS ON SPIRITUAL, INTELLECTUAL AND PRACTICAL NEEDS

Educators need to be very careful about the ways they would like to approach the US Context. Evidently the US Context can be approached from various angles and various perspectives. It can be from (a) US perspective, (b) Christian perspective, (c) Jewish perspective, (d) Islamic perspective. Depending upon which perspective is taken, the entire subject may look twisted and the message may be offensive. Many of the topics mentioned above can be found in the Internet, presented by all these interest groups. Inability to identify the motives of each group or each perspective could result into disaster.

Few examples are mentioned below. These may not be true US context, but the idea is to point out potential danger. This author found an article in a look-alike Muslim website, maintained by non-Muslim people, where it talks about how the Qur’ān was compiled. Based on the content and scholarly discussion, one would think it must have been written by a Muslim scholar, but one might fail to see doubt was expressed saying the present day Qur’ān was not the same Qur’ān revealed to the Prophet. The doubt was corroborated with various authentic or unauthentic references from past ‘scholars’ blended together with genuine Hadith, thus, giving a false impression that some of the quotes of the scholars were Hadith based. Discussion about Banu Nadir or Banu Qurayzah, given in Wikipedia talks about ‘alleged’ crime of the tribes or they ‘supposedly’ conspired etc. The sympathy is clearly and blatantly from Jewish perspective. Their punishment was mentioned as brutal but their ‘alleged’ crime was diluted. With reference to the Prophet’s multiple marriages, many Internet articles subtly show he ‘developed’ desire for female companionship after the death of his first wife. Well circulated book on Islam by Paul Lunde reads as follows: “... *women are as*

responsible for their actions before God as are men. They are legally inferior, however” (pp. 38). Such subtle punch words/sentences sound deceptively true, but unless these are understood and taught from proper Islamic viewpoints, students might get wrong message.

Regardless of from which source material for a particular topic is obtained, the teacher must be careful to maintain Islamic viewpoint as the dominant thread of discussion. If Christian or Jewish viewpoints are necessary for balanced discussion, the teacher must point out Muslims do not necessarily endorse their viewpoints. The Christian or Jewish viewpoints should not occupy entire 50-60 minutes of class time. There is absolutely no need to vilify their viewpoint. The students should be told their objective is not to curse or pronounce judgment upon other person's faith, even if it seems to be an outright shirk.

HOW TO TEACH THE 'US CONTEXT'

The ways to teach the US context will require careful planning. Although the guidelines mentioned below apply to all topics being covered in a weekend school, these will be particularly relevant with the US context.

1. The teaching should not be apologetic
2. The teaching should not portray a sense of superiority
3. The teachings should not be defensive
4. The teachings should not project offensive stance
5. The teachings should neither reflect orthodoxy nor heterodoxy

The above points can be best understood with few examples from lessons. One of the possible topics, mentioned above, is what the Qur'ān – why it reads incoherent, disjointed. Teaching this topic to the senior youths should emphasize the Qur'ān was revealed as an oral version, at different period, to different audience, under different circumstances. The Qur'ān is not a book of pages after pages of codes, nor is it a book of 'literature', genealogy or philosophy. Its objective is to give practical guidance. The idea of the Qur'ān was not to narrate stories, but to convey abiding moral and spiritual values through interludes of brief mention of past prophets juxtaposed with the moral teachings being conveyed. It is the literary style adopted by the Qur'ān. There is no reason to expect the Qur'ān should have followed literary style of, say, the Bible or any other book. A Bible audience should not expect to see similar textual and thematic styles in the Qur'ān. Thus, without being apologetic, unduly defensive, overtly offensive students can learn what the Qur'ān is all about.

In another example, seniors students are expected to understand why the Prophet married thirteen women in his life. It is very likely that the students will face incisive questions from people of other faith, either as pure inquisitiveness or casual inquiry punched with some derogation. In response if the students reply saying biblical prophets David or Solomon married hundreds of women, obviously the discussion will not yield fruitful result. Without being defensive about why the Prophet married so many times, it

can be pointed out throughout his prime youth; he remained strict monogamous married life, that too with a woman fifteen years senior to him. His multiple marriages took place during five year period, when the Muslim society was embroiled in consecutive wars, and increasing number of companions was martyred. He took some of the widows as his legal wife to provide necessary support and encourage the society to take care of the destitute and orphans. Some of the marriages were also political maneuver in order to bring various warring tribes into peace initiatives through ties of marital relationships. Once the frequency of war subsided, peace became the order, the requirement to marry multiple women also ceased.

During teaching any of these issues, emphasis should not be to simply narrate the stories, but to point out the underlying causes, principles, values and teachings.

The Muslims believe the religion of Islam is superior. But a person from other faith does not. When speaking to a person from other faith, if a Muslim person speaks with a sense of superiority of his or her religion, obviously the other party will very soon be disinterested. If the other party is offended with respect to his or her belief, again the discussion will no go too far. Muslims students cannot learn proper ways of communicating with people of other faith unless they are properly and respectfully taught about their own religion as well as about other religions.

The teachers should remain cautious when they simply pick a topic from the Internet and take a print out for the students. Regardless of who published the web sites, most of the contents are not designed for weekend school classes. The emphasis, coverage, point of angle and target audience of the website may not be suitable for the students in weekend schools. If a teacher must use topics from the Internet, s/he should customize the topic, making it suitable for the students.

CONCLUSION

The idea of this paper is to point out the importance of integrating US context in the higher grade classes in the weekend Islamic schools. The earlier the teacher/school realizes importance of incorporating these and many other topics in the syllabus, the better it is for the emerging youths who are 'western' in many ways. The biggest challenge in not able to realize this objective is lack of a proper syllabus, and when one is available, lack of proper focus. The search for a proverbial 'correct' syllabus may never be found, but a practical syllabus can always be developed. It may differ widely from school to school, but it cannot omit key Islamic theories, philosophies, teachings and application. Just as text books do not make scientists, application of the knowledge is important, so also Islamic knowledge will not make good Muslims, they will need to be taught the application of Islam in context of the environment they live and share.

The 4-year syllabus for students in higher classes is shown. For clarity, only ‘US Context’ topics mentioned in this paper are shown.

Classes and weeks in which these topics will be covered are tentative.

Entire syllabus, sample class lesson, teacher’s manual, home works for students will be made available in www.weekendlearning.com.

	SENIOR YOUTH – I		SENIOR YOUTH - II	
	9 th Grade – Age 14	10 th Grade – Age 15	11 th Grade – Age 16	12 th Grade – Age 17
Week 1			No compulsion in religion	Our God – their God
Week 2		Islam – comparative study	Coherence in the Qur’an	Equality of Man vs. Woman
Week 3		Did Prophet write the Qur’an		
Week 4	Compilation of the Qur’an			
Week 5	How Qur’an was preserved			
Week 6				
Week 7	Exam	Exam	Exam	Exam
Week 8				Muslim immigration in the USA
Week 9	Significance of Prophet’s marriages			History of Black Muslims in USA
Week 10		Friendship with non-Muslims	Prophecy of Muhammad in Bible	
Week 11		Peer Pressure		
Week 12				Tolerance in Islam
Week 13				
Week 14	Exam	Exam	Exam	Exam
Week 15	Jihad			
Week 16				
Week 17			Muslim Stereotypes	Qur’an on killing non-Muslims
Week 18				
Week 19	Origin of Judaism			
Week 20	Favored Nation theory			
Week 21				
Week 22	Exam	Exam	Exam	Exam
Week 23	Permitted and prohibited food	Alcohol and intoxicants		Dating
Week 24		Marrying 4 wives		Islam on marriage and divorce
Week 25		Sex, sexuality, adultery		
Week 26				
Week 27				
Week 28			Misuse of Fundamentalism	
Week 29			Islam in America	
Week 30	Exam	Exam	Exam	Exam

Note: In a typical academic year spanning from September to 1st week of June, schools can have approximately 40 Sundays. After accounting for registration, Labor weekend, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year, Eid, spring break, Memorial weekend, 4-exam, 1 snow day, 1 other activity day, most schools can have about ±26 teaching weeks.