

## Syria and the Need for Peaceful Conflict Resolution

By Richard Rubenstein, University Professor of Conflict Resolution and Public Affairs, rrubenst@gmu.edu

Once again, with the United States on the brink of war with Syria, the public debate is focusing on the wrong issues. The problem is not that these issues are irrelevant or unimportant, but rather that they leave out something absolutely essential: the continuing urgent need for a peaceful and just resolution of the Syrian Civil War. We know that a U.S. military strike against Syria cannot be justified unless it is a last resort. The tragic flaw in American foreign policy is that we go to war repeatedly without having made serious efforts to resolve conflicts peacefully.

The issues currently dominating discussion in Congress, the news media, and the streets leave us caught between two apparent alternatives: punish the Assad regime for using chemical weapons or “do nothing.” But there is another

alternative: convene a peace conference, as the Russians have suggested, make sure that all the conflicting parties participate, and conduct the conference according to conflict resolution principles, and not as a typical Versailles-style exercise in hard bargaining and power politics.

I will describe these principles further in a moment. First, though, it is worth noting how inconclusive the debate has been over the three



"I love Syrie". Photo: Flickr User Kevin Vanden.

issues most often discussed: who used chemical weapons, the scope and consequences of intervention, and the question of legal and moral norms.

In all this argument and counter-argument, the issue that is NOT being discussed (except by the Russians, Germans, Brazilians, South Africans, and others willing to defy the Obama administration) is peaceful conflict resolution. Why not? Because the “realists” in Washington consider the idea utopian. Max Fisher of the Washington Post recently summarized their position by noting, “There’s

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Commentary

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# The National Action to Realize the Dream: S-CAR's Involvement in the 50th Anniversary on the March on Washington

By Jean-Renold Altidor, S-CAR Alumnus and CWBI staff, [jaltidor@gmu.edu](mailto:jaltidor@gmu.edu)



Some prominent participants at the 50th Anniversary of March on Washington. Photo: CWBI.

**O**n August 24th 2013, the nation celebrated the 50th anniversary of a seminal moment in the history of the United States—the 1963 March on Washington. The commemoration was organized by Communities Without Boundaries International, Inc. (CWBI) and the National Action Network (NAN) and led by Martin Luther King III and Rev. Al Sharpton. They were joined by a coalition of organizations and individuals from across ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds, as well as labor leaders, elected officials, civil society, and religious leadership. Acknowledging the importance of the progress that has been made over the past fifty years, but also recognizing the work that is still left to be done, the coalition of individuals and organizations together with CWBI and NAN titled the commemoration the National Action to Realize the Dream: 50th Anniversary March on Washington (NARTD-MOW).

On the eve of the march, CWBI hosted a reception at the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (S-CAR) to welcome the speakers including Martin Luther King III, U.S. House Minority Leader, Nancy Pelosi, Dr. Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi and several other speakers and members of the larger coalition. The School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution was well represented by seven current and former students and faculty—Johnny J. Mack, Dr. Maneshka Eliatamby, Dr. Michael Shank, J. R. Altidor, Joann Kim, Addis Aseffa, and Mark Perez—speaking at the march. George Mason University President Angel Cabrera was the only university president to speak at the march. Each speaker focused on the achievements of the past fifty years and the work that the United States is tasked with in order to realize the dream for all members of our communities.

President Cabrera focused his speech on the importance of education noting that “thousands of young men and women are denied a college education every year shutting them out of the American dream. It is only because of their low economic status and others’ perception that they are not American enough or are not documented enough”.

Johnny Mack, president of CWBI, and a PhD candidate at S-CAR, introduced Martin Luther King III. He saw the 1963 event as one of the most significant events in the history of mankind’s struggle for its own identity. He reflected on the multitude from all ethnic persuasions that gathered to hear the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. “Dr. King’s son has called us all to celebrate, not nearly to commemorate, but to inoculate our human spirit, to galvanize, and energize our collective consciences to take action to realize the dream”, he said.

Dr. Maneshka Eliatamby, Vice-President of CWBI, highlighted Dr. King’s vision of freedom, justice, and equality for the world and added, “closely associated with the same challenge is a society that makes them possible by ensuring equal treatment and access to the pursuit of happiness. This is the time to launch a new challenge that will raise the consciousness of the world and the urgency of now.” She concluded with a call to action. “Join Communities Without Boundaries International in the National Action to Realize the Dream: America Speakers Tour as civil society and Americans from all walks of life galvanize and take on the challenges of now.”

Dr. Michael Shank focused on nonviolence and America’s capability to lead the way in this revolution of values by trying to understand the enemy’s point of view. He made reference to Robert Kennedy’s remarks after the assassination of Dr. King on the menace of mindless violence to our society and the corrosive effect of institutional violence. He quoted Present Kennedy: “. . .the pursuit of peace is our most urgent task.”

Addishiywot Aseffa Girmammo (Addis), Joann Kim, and Mark Perez approached the podium together to represent Youth Without Boundaries to highlight the difference the youth are making around the world. Addis opened with “youth can play a pivotal role to bring about positive and tangible change in society and will only succeed if society invests in them.” Joann chimed in to rally support: “Won’t you join us? We aren’t irresponsible! We aren’t indifferent! We are passionate! We are creative! We are capable! We are leaders.” Mark Perez concluded with: “History will affirm that it is the youth that have always been at the forefront of change. Each of us has a unique gift to either advance the rightful causes of humanity or aid its destruction.”

I used this opportunity to reflect on my accomplishment in this country as an immigrant who has realized the dreams formulated as a child in Haiti. It would not have been possible for certain immigrants to realize their dreams in America if the status quo of the pre-civil rights movement era had remained unchallenged. I am thankful to Dr. King and those who sacrificed so much during the civil rights movement. The march was a great success and well attended. People came from all over to participate. The 50th anniversary commemoration launched the National Action to Realize the Dream initiative, which will be spearheaded by CWBI in collaboration with its partners. ■

# Teaching Conflict Resolution and Peace in Iran:

## Reflections on CRDC's New Online Program

By Sahar Namazikhah, PhD Student and Director of CRDC Iran Program, [snamazik@masonlive.gmu.edu](mailto:snamazik@masonlive.gmu.edu)

**O**n August 19, 2013, the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution (CRDC), an affiliate of S-CAR, started its second semester of its Iranian online School for Conflict Resolution and Peace. The first semester had over 70 students, and CRDC was pleased to welcome to the second semester over 130 new students.

The current students hail from every corner of Iran including Kurds, Turks, Arabs and Persians; an unprecedented achievement for online work in Iran. This accomplishment is partly due to the extraordinary and tireless efforts of CRDC's Iran team, and of course, the commitment of a renown faculty team: Professors Michael Nagler from UC, Berkeley, Marc Gopin from S-CAR, Ramin Jahanbegloo from Canadian York University, Mubarak Awad from American University, Hadi Semati from University of Tehran, and Nayerreh Tohidi from CSU, Northridge. More importantly, the active and continuous commitment of the students themselves is key to the success of the program.

The Iranian Online School is an initiative of the CRDC and is designed to teach students in Iran from diverse backgrounds how to approach ongoing disputes that can cause conflict and how to resolve them through the practical application of non-violent methods. Students are admitted based on their educational level, their background in social and civil activities, and their work experience and interests in social change. Upon finishing their final project, students receive a certificate from the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution.

The theme of this year's program is "Conflict Resolution and Minority Rights" and its main goals include empower-

ing minority groups, improving public knowledge of minority and majority rights, advancing conflict resolution skills, stimulating new ways of preventing racial, ethnic, gender or religious discrimination, and building lasting peace between social groups in an integrated society. The Basic level of this program was successfully offered during the spring of 2013 and the advanced level has begun for the Fall semester. The distinguishing characteristic of this program is that the courses

are offered in the students' native languages. In addition to receiving program materials in Farsi and English, students of Turkish/Azari, Kurdish, and Arab descent will have the opportunity to read selected material, attend classes and conduct course activities in workshops, all using their mother tongues. Our Farsi and non-Farsi speaking

professors are internationally renowned in their respective fields. In order for students to communicate and learn more effectively, live lectures delivered in English will be simultaneously translated into Farsi. The professors even hold office hours. Students also have the opportunity to ask questions in their native language. Their questions are then translated and sent to the professor. Responses are then translated and sent back, as well as being uploaded in the forum, so other students with similar questions can study them. A syllabus has been devised for each of the two semesters, and students follow a constructive regimen of reading and preparing for class. The course literature is housed in the online School Library, an unprecedented resource for peacebuilding in five languages; English, Farsi, Kurdish, Arabic, and Turkish/Azari.



Sahar Namazikhah.

Photo: Sahar Namazikhah.

initiatives

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# The Thanksgiving Challenge

By Katelyn Waddle, kwaddle@gmu.edu and Sam Waddle, sparson6@gmu.edu, S-CAR Undergraduate Students and members of the Working Group on Displaced Populations

## EVENTS

The Working Group on Displaced Populations (or better known as WGDP) is entering its second active year at George Mason University. We acknowledge that there are many definitions of a displaced person in all fields including academia, politics and practitioners; however, for our purposes, a displaced person is anyone who has fled their home for fear or want. The group was started as one of many steps to persuade GMU administration to allow a Center for Displaced Populations to open here at George Mason University. The ultimate goal of the student organization is to foster and consolidate support for the creation of the Center from students, faculty, prospective students, community members, and outside groups. The student organization is also trying to raise awareness concerning the conditions that displaced persons endure and the process of resettlement. By increasing awareness we hope to create a more welcoming and tolerant university environment.

This year, WGDP hopes to increase our membership and outreach to other organizations, faculty members, and community allies. Our first major event of the semester, the Thanksgiving Challenge, will take place in November during the full school week leading up to Thanksgiving Break as we challenge other student organizations to compete in a fundraiser to celebrate the first time refugees were resettled in the United States. Funds raised will go to community-based organizations that help with resettlement in the Fairfax area. In April, we will host our second-annual Displacement Days in an attempt to raise



WGDP meeting. Photo: Katelyn Waddle.

awareness of the displacement crises happening around the world and connect students with internship and career opportunities with organizations that help those who have been displaced. This will be a two-day event comprised of building shelters out of recycled materials and hosting speakers.

In addition to these two major events, we will host bi-monthly meetings on campus and a multitude of other functions. Many of our events include speakers who work or study aspects of this topic or who have been displaced. At each meeting we invite a speaker to come for about fifteen minutes to speak and take questions. The subjects of these talks are open to all possibilities that relate to displaced people in some way. Another event that is speaker heavy is called *My Story*. We tried this for the first time at the end of last academic year. We invite people who have been displaced to come and talk to a small group, and we will create rotations to keep the audience small and intimate.

Considering our goals of further membership recruitment and extended outreach, we welcome the involvement of students at all levels of higher education and we encourage further involvement of George Mason University's faculty and staff. Whether one is interested in joining our general membership, partnering with us on future events, connecting us with community organizations that could use our help and advocacy, or speaking at a meeting or event about their personal experience with displacement, we welcome you! If you are interested in working with us in any of these capacities, contact us at [cdp.gmu@gmail.com](mailto:cdp.gmu@gmail.com). ■

### Upcoming S-CAR Community Events

#### Saturday, September 21, 2013

Welcome Dinner  
6:00pm - 9:00pm

#### Tuesday, September 24, 2013

Personal Narratives as Representative of the Experience of  
Poverty and Power in the US  
2:00PM - 4:00PM

#### Tuesday, October 1, 2013

Narrative on Syria with Rich Rubenstein  
2:00PM - 4:00PM

<http://scar.gmu.edu/events-roster>

# Student Opinion: Politics and the Social Media in Cambodia

By Sarah Rose-Jensen, PhD Candidate, [rosejen@gmu.com](mailto:rosejen@gmu.com)



Mother, and Daughter demonstrating for the freedom of Yom Bopha, a jailed activist. Photo: Sarah Rose-Jensen.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has been in power, in one way or another, since the end of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. He has been “democratically elected” for 28 years. When Cambodian friends and colleagues asked what I thought of that in the lead-up to July’s general elections, I tried to reply diplomatically that if he was in power that long he was either very good at it, or very corrupt. I’ll let readers come to their own conclusion there.

This summer I traveled to Cambodia for preliminary dissertation research, and was fortunate enough to be there for two very important events: the June resumption of the appeal of activist Yorm Bopha and the July general election. Bopha, a prominent land rights activist, was convicted of an assault in December – a conviction that many activists and members of the Cambodian public allege is false and a punishment for her activism – and has been declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. While her case is of interest on its own, what is of real interest to me regarding both her case and the election is the incredible mobilization of civil society and peaceful demonstrators around both issues. Given Cambodia’s history as a repressive regime, including fairly recent murders of activists (including Chea Vichea in 2004 and Chut Witthy in 2012), activism is often considered a dangerous pursuit in Cambodia. However, despite the real and/or perceived dangers, Cambodians are taking to the street in ever-greater numbers. Recent opposition party demonstrations have drawn tens of thousands, something even more surprising when one considers that opposition party leader Sam Rainsy was only allowed to return to the country nine days before the election in which he was not even allowed to vote.

How is this happening? A large part of the answer is Facebook. While Americans are decrying Facebook’s lack of privacy, Cambodian youth are using it to generate and fuel political activity in a country with few or no free

## Recent S-CAR Articles, Op-Eds, Letters to the Editor, and Media Appearances

### Why Water is Key to Syria

Michael Shank, S-CAR Alumnus  
*CNN World, 9/17/13*

### Options for Action in Syria

Sandra Cheldelin, S-CAR Professor  
*SCAR News 9/17/13*

### Look to Iran for a Solution in Syria

Dennis Sandole, S-CAR Professor  
*Financial Times, 9/10/13*

*Conflict Analysts from S-CAR have appeared 20 times since the last issue of the newsletter. These 3 represent a sample at time of publication. For complete list visit <http://scar.gmu.edu/media>*

Khmer-language news sources – all television stations and many radio station are controlled by the ruling party, and Freedom House ranks Cambodian media as “not free.” However, internet usage has increased by 60% in the past year, and there are currently more SIM cards in Cambodia than people. This, combined with the fact that 70% of the population is under 35 years of age, is creating a potent nexus for youth internet activism. While in Cambodia I met Ou Ritthy, a blogger and activist who founded Politikoffee, a hybrid online and in-person organization dedicated to “raising political, legal, and social awareness for a positive change in Cambodia.” Like many young Cambodians, Ou is foreign-educated, articulate, and underemployed. Through Politikoffee, Cambodia’s emerging educated youth share ideas as well as information on Cambodian and regional politics. When election violence broke out in a Phnom Penh suburb, the official channels were silent, but Cambodians and supporters were sharing photos and updates via Facebook.

Media freedom and activism will continue to be hot-button issues globally, and with the ASEAN integration slated for 2015, Southeast Asia will likely be an area of increasing interest for scholars of conflict analysis and resolution, foreign policy, and related fields. While the Twitter and Facebook Revolutions of Egypt and Iran have been greatly exaggerated and the very real turmoil in those countries remains unresolved, it is also the case that social media will continue to affect activism, organizing, and how activists network with others around the world. As Cambodian internet usage will likely continue to grow, the people are learning demonstrate a desire for governmental changes. It will provide an interesting view into the interactions of social media and a repressive government. ■

press

## Joshua Ballew, Undergraduate Student

By Catherine Walsh, MS Student, cwash1@gmu.edu

Joshua Ballew, a third year undergraduate student at S-CAR, is double majoring in Community Conflict and Religious Studies. When Joshua was four years old, his family moved from the U.S. to the small port city of Macau. At that time, Macau had been a Portuguese colony for over 400 years and in 1999 was handed over to China as a Special Administrative Region. Growing up in this unique part of the world, Joshua was exposed to a rich blend of European heritage and Asian culture. "It's taken for granted that you can walk down the street and see a one-hundred year-old Catholic Cathedral standing right beside an even older Chinese Temple." Fluent in both Cantonese and English, Joshua was educated through the local school system in Macau, from the first year of kindergarten all the way through secondary school. "I grew up as a tall, white, Christian, male... minority. It wasn't until I arrived in the U.S. in 2010 that I realized how uncommon my experience really is." His first year in the U.S. was spent working at a middle school in Sacramento, California. Regarding his



Joshua Ballew. Photo: Joshua Ballew.

time there, he remarked, "there's nothing like working with a class of middle schoolers to prepare you for the study of conflict."

This semester, Joshua is joining six other undergraduates, two of whom are S-CAR students, to form an interfaith fellowship on the Fairfax campus. The group is currently made up of a Jew, a Muslim, a Mormon, two Protestants, a Catholic, and an Atheist, and is ready to welcome others. The main focus of the group is to build friendships through fellowship that,

according to Abigail Lash, a junior studying social work, will "bridge the gap between religious divisions." The fellowship meets Fridays at 3pm and is a great place to "learn about people of other faiths." Coming from the multicultural urban environment of Macau to the diversity of the Mason community, Joshua is thankful for the opportunity to share and learn alike. "I look forward to learning a lot from the others but also from the experience itself. Hopefully what we do here will contribute to the transformation of relationships across campus." ■

## Ariana Harner, S-CAR MS Student

By Kwaw de Graft-Johnson, PhD Student, kdegraft@gmu.edu



Ariana Harner. Photo: Ariana Harner.

Ariana Harner is a second-year Masters student at S-CAR who is very much into outdoor activities such as hiking and camping as well as equally passionate about preventing complex political and social disputes that lead to intractable conflict.

"Being able to escape into nature helps me to recharge and resume my professional work with renewed hope and optimism." Before she became a student at S-CAR, Ariana worked with the Genocide Prevention Program (GPP), an affiliate of S-CAR, where she contributed to a project that supported an emerging regional genocide prevention system in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. As she indicated, "I was very impressed with the knowledgeable team members I worked with on the project. It was a great feeling to collaborate with people who share my enthusiasm and devotion to genocide prevention, and I immediately wanted to be a part of that

community." Ariana's work at S-CAR has been focused on prevention, specifically researching mechanisms, such as systems of early warning and proper responses, which confront emerging conflicts early enough to prevent outbreaks of violence. She spent the past two semesters working with an APT team on genocide prevention and integration, with a specific focus on Kenya and the Great Lakes Region of Africa. Ariana and the team monitored and reported on the 2013 Kenyan elections during the spring semester and then developed a guidebook on preventing electoral violence during the summer. Also with the support of APT colleagues, she coauthored two policy briefs, one on the U.S. Atrocities Prevention Board and one on the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). The briefs outlined ways in which the two national and regional bodies can cooperate, collaborate, and strengthen systems of atrocities prevention globally. Ariana will start an internship in the fall of 2013 at the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations at the U.S. State Department where she will work in the policy office. She explains, "Working with the State Department will be an incredible opportunity for me to gain a deeper understanding of the field of conflict analysis and resolution. S-CAR has been preparing me to face such challenges with confidence." ■

## Syria and the Need for Peaceful Conflict Resolution

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no indication that either side is interested in [peace talks] or that there's even a viable unified rebel movement with which to negotiate" (Wash. Post, 8/29/13).

Conflict resolution professionals are all too familiar with this sort of glib pessimism. Upon arriving in Northern Ireland to initiate what turned out to be a successful peace process, mediator George Mitchell was informed by all parties, Catholic and Protestant alike, that he was wasting his time because (1) too much blood had been shed, and (2) the parties were too disunited to participate in negotiations. Max Fisher's reasons for declaring a Syrian peace conference impossible are equally spurious.

Neither side is willing to talk? Even before its recent military successes (which some analysts consider the real reason for America's turn toward direct intervention) the Syrian regime declared its willingness to enter into negotiations with the rebel leaders. Clearly, if the Russians and Americans agree to make peace talks happen, the Assad government will have no choice but to participate. Last year, one greatly respected opposition figure also agreed to attend a peace conference, but he was repudiated by competitive leaders. Did the U.S. then use its vast power to persuade its clients to pursue a diplomatic solution to the conflict? Or did it look aside with mock disengagement while its Saudi, Qatari, and Emirati allies poured billions in money and weapons into the rebel coffers? We know the answer to that one.

Of course, administration officials are quite right to note that the rebel movement is not unified. But we also understand that when parties to conflict insist that they have no "partner for peace," this generally means that they are uninterested in peacemaking! Disunity is clearly not an insuperable obstacle to peace talks. If it were, there would have been no Northern Irish or South African negotiations, since both sides in those conflicts were riven by deep internal differences, nor would Secretary John Kerry's current attempt to re-start Palestinian-Israeli talks have the slightest chance of succeeding.

In fact, engaging in processes of conflict resolution sometimes helps to create a unity that seemed illusory before talks started. The IRA long declared its passionate opposition to Northern Irish peace talks, finally joining in when it became clear that they would otherwise lose their chance to help shape the new Northern Ireland. In Syria, some militant Islamists may also be induced to participate, as the Taliban is now preparing to do in Afghanistan and, possibly, in Pakistan.

What accounts for the current opposition among Syrian rebels to joining in peace negotiations? Three related reasons



Richard Rubenstein. Photo: Mason Creative Services.

seem germane. First, the anti-Assad forces are losing the war and are fearful that any peace agreement will ratify the status quo on the battlefield. Second, they believe that they can depend on the Americans and their allies to keep them alive, despite military reversals, because they would rather see Syria bleed to death (as one Israeli figure recently put it) than abandon their hope for regime change. Third, they do not understand that, unlike traditional negotiations "from strength," conflict resolution does not mean ratifying the military status quo. It means exposing and solving the underlying problems generating the civil conflict.

This is a crucially important point. What happens in a conflict resolution process – and often not in traditional diplomacy – is that experienced, independent facilitators assist the warring parties to confront and deal with the social-constitutional questions that are tearing their country apart. Without this kind of discussion (as we now see in Iraq) power-based diplomacy only sets the stage for future conflict. In the case of Syria, these social-constitutional issues include not only governmental forms and behaviors, citizen rights, abuses of power, and the like, but also the need to reorganize and stabilize relations between Sunni and non-Sunni communities; the best and most acceptable methods of regulating the oil industry and distributing its vast revenues; rethinking Syria's relationships with neighboring powers and the need for a regional confederation; rebuilding the nation's ruined agricultural economy; reintegrating returning refugees, and more.

Because conflict resolution means attending to such underlying issues, not merely imposing some outsider's "peace plan" on the parties, it is important to engage the Russians, as well as the Europeans, Americans, and Syrians, in discussions of what a multilateral peace conference would entail. Among the many horrible examples of conferences that ended up producing even worse conflicts, one recalls the Versailles Conference following World War I, in which traditional power-based diplomacy actually exacerbated the conditions that would end a few decades later by killing more than 60 million people, most of them civilians.

Peace is the goal in Syria, which, heaven knows, deserves security, prosperity, and freedom after losing more than 100,000 of its people in an atrocious civil conflict. Peace is not an impossible dream, if all parties concerned determine that serious peace talks must be attempted before any new attacks on the Syrian regime are launched. We can still remedy the tragic flaw in American foreign policy by insisting that peace is the means as well as the end, and that no military action can ever be considered a last resort without going all out for conflict resolution. ■

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## Teaching Conflict Resolution and Peace in Iran

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Coupled with that, more than 500 pages in the field of conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and nonviolence have been carefully selected under supervision of some S-CAR faculty. The selected material consists of excerpts from 22 books and over 30 articles. All these materials have been translated into Farsi, Kurdish, Azari/Turkish and Arabic and made available online through the school's portal.

The school's operating theory is that empowering minority groups, as well as cooperation and collaboration between the majority and the minorities, is key to resolving internal tensions and preventing destructive conflict. The educational and intellectual empowerment of our students through this program is meant to instill in the student's a sense of their ability to make a difference, and a way to

participate in change at the level of the social, political and cultural structures of minorities. While leading toward this goal of empowerment through peace education, the program makes sure that the message is treated carefully in a way that does not entail paternalism nor lead to a new form of social control over minorities by majorities or external actors. Learning how to manage crises and resolving them peacefully are all achieved through public participation and cooperation between the majority and the minorities in a joint educational process of learning the skills of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Peace education is based on the assumption that not only peace and nonviolence, but also empowerment can be learned. More information about this program is available at [www.iranonlineschool.com](http://www.iranonlineschool.com). ■



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