

Peace Education in Middle Eastern Countries: A Comparative Analysis of Curriculum, Conflict, and Non-Formal Learning

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Abstract

Peace education in the Middle East operates within a difficult setting influenced by war, displacement, occupation, religious and community divisions, state reform, and unequal educational conditions. This paper compares peace education across nine countries: Lebanon, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, Palestine, Syria, and Iraq. It uses Galtung's idea of negative and positive peace and Freire's view of critical, humanising education as its broad theoretical base. The paper proposes a Spectrum of Peace Education Contexts to place countries from active conflict zones to states that have formally adopted peace, tolerance, or civic education goals. The analysis focuses on curriculum and textbooks, the role of teachers, and non-formal peace education where formal schooling is weak or disrupted. It also considers how the war in Gaza and the wider regional confrontation involving Iran, Israel, and the United States have affected the space for peace education. The main argument is that a lack of interest in peace does not limit peace education in the region. It is impacted by conflict, trauma, state control, weak institutions, and unequal power relations. The paper concludes that peace education in the Middle East is shaped less by formal policy alone and more by the real conditions in which teachers and learners live.

Keywords: Peace education; Middle East; comparative education; conflict and education; curriculum and textbooks; teacher agency; non-formal education; positive peace; conflict-affected education

1. Introduction

In Gaza, the school has become one of the clearest signs of how conflict enters a child's life. Since the escalation of war in October 2023, hundreds of thousands of children have lost regular access to schooling, and many school buildings have been damaged, destroyed, or used as shelters (UNICEF State of Palestine, 2024). Similar conflicts and pressures are evident in other parts of the Middle East, where war, displacement, occupation, economic collapse, and political tension shape what teachers can teach and what children can learn. In such conditions, peace education is not only a classroom topic. It becomes linked with survival, dignity, memory, and future citizenship. Peace education is generally concerned with helping learners develop the knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills needed to reduce violence and build more just and peaceful relationships (Reardon, 1988; UNESCO, 2014). Harris (2004) explains that the field has grown from anti-war education into wider work on human rights, conflict resolution, global citizenship, environmental responsibility, and social justice. Galtung's (1969) distinction between negative peace and positive peace is useful here. Negative peace means the absence of direct violence, while positive peace refers to justice, equality, cooperation, and fair social conditions. In this sense, peace education is not only about stopping violence. It also prepares learners to understand and question the social conditions that produce violence.

This paper examines peace education across nine Middle Eastern countries: Lebanon, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, Palestine, Syria, and Iraq. These countries have been selected because they show different conditions for peace education. Some face active war and educational destruction. Some are managing refugee education, religious and community divisions, or post-conflict recovery. Others have introduced state-led reforms linked to tolerance, civic values, or national development. The paper briefly acknowledges Yemen, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Egypt, and Turkey, but they are not discussed in depth as case studies because the paper requires a focused, manageable comparison. The discussion is situated in the present regional context, especially the continuing war in Gaza, the wider regional confrontation involving Iran, Israel, and the United States, and unstable conditions in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine. These developments matter because peace education in conflict-affected societies cannot be judged by the same standards used for peaceful and stable systems. Salomon (2004) shows that peace education in an intractable conflict faces serious limits because learners return from the classroom to a social environment shaped by fear, anger, loss, and competing collective narratives. Bar-Tal and Rosen (2009) also argue that societies involved in long conflicts require both direct and indirect forms of peace education because conflict-supporting beliefs often become part of public culture. Hajir and Kester (2020) further remind us that peace education must be examined critically, especially when programmes ignore unequal power relations, colonial histories, or local voices.

Methodologically, this is a secondary-source comparative analysis. It introduces a Spectrum of Peace Education Contexts to place countries along a continuum from active conflict zones to states that have formally adopted peace, tolerance, or civic education goals. The analysis is organised around three themes: curriculum and textbooks, the role of teachers, and non-formal peace education when formal schooling is weak or disrupted. The main argument is that peace education in the Middle East is not limited mainly by a lack of public desire for peace. It is limited by conflict, trauma, state control, weak institutions, unequal power relations, and political systems that often contradict the peace values schools are expected to teach.

2. Conceptual Grounding: What Peace Education Means in this Context

Peace education is a broad term, so it is important to explain how it is used in this paper. It is not restricted to telling children not to fight, nor is it only about moral stories, slogans, or symbolic activities. In academic use, peace education refers to planned educational work that helps learners understand violence, conflict, justice, human rights, dialogue, and social responsibility. Harris (2004) explains that peace education comprises several interconnected strands: human rights education, conflict resolution education, development education, environmental education, and international education. Reardon (1988) described peace education as a process through which people learn the knowledge, values, and skills needed to build peace in personal, social, national, and global life. Harris (2004) further explains that peace education is not one fixed model. It includes human rights education, conflict resolution education, global citizenship education, and education for social justice. This wider meaning is important for the Middle East because the region faces both direct violence through war and attacks, and structural violence through displacement, poverty, occupation, discrimination, weak institutions, and restricted rights.

Galtung's (1969) distinction between negative peace and positive peace provides the main theoretical lens for this paper. Negative peace means the absence of direct war or physical violence. Positive peace means the presence of justice, equality, cooperation, and fair social conditions. This distinction matters because a society may stop fighting but still carry fear, hatred, inequality, and mistrust. Recent work on positive peace education also argues that peace education must move beyond direct violence and address structural and cultural violence within educational systems and everyday practice (Arystanbek et al., 2026). Peace education, therefore, should not be limited to silence after violence. It should help learners understand how peace can be built through fairness, dialogue, dignity, and social responsibility.

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Freire's (1970) idea of critical and humanising education is also useful here. Freire argued that education should not treat learners as empty minds into which teachers deposit information. Instead, learners should be encouraged to think, speak, question, and understand the social conditions that shape their lives. Recent work on critical pedagogy in peace education also argues that peace education should centre students' questioning, lived experience, and active imagination of peace (Nicoson et al., 2024). In conflict-affected contexts such as Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, this point is important. Children and young people are not only victims of war or crisis. They are people with memories, voices, feelings, and the ability to imagine a different future. Peace education should therefore create space for learners to reflect on their lived realities rather than merely receive official messages about harmony. At the same time, peace education cannot be transferred from one context to another without care. Bar-Tal and Rosen (2009) argue that societies affected by long-term conflict need both direct and indirect models of peace education. Direct models openly address the conflict, while indirect models build values such as tolerance, empathy, critical thinking, and respect without always naming the conflict directly. This distinction is useful for the Middle East because open discussion of conflict may be possible in some settings but politically sensitive or unsafe in others (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009).

Critical peace education cautions us, too. Bajaj (2008) argues that peace education must deal with power, inequality, and injustice, not only interpersonal harmony. Hajir and Kester (2020) also caution that peace education can become weak or even harmful when it ignores colonial histories, unequal power relations, and local voices. For this reason, peace education in the Middle East must be studied within the actual histories and conditions of each country. A model designed for a peaceful or stable society cannot simply be copied into Gaza, Beirut, Baghdad, or Damascus. This paper, therefore, uses peace education in a broad but careful sense. It refers to formal and non-formal educational efforts that aim to reduce violence, build justice, support dialogue, and prepare learners for more peaceful social relations. Critical peace education reminds us that peace cannot be separated from power, justice, and context. These ideas guide the comparative analysis that follows.

3. The Regional Landscape: A Spectrum of Contexts

The Middle East cannot be treated as one uniform educational space. It includes countries facing open war, countries managing displacement and social tension, and countries using state policy to promote tolerance, citizenship, or national reform. A comparative study of peace education must therefore locate each country within its political and educational context.

The analysis uses a Spectrum of Peace Education Contexts, a comparative framework developed for this paper. The spectrum is not a ranking of education systems from better to worse. It is an analytical tool that places countries along a continuum based on the levels of conflict, displacement, state control, and institutional stability that affect education. The countries are grouped into three broad positions: active conflict and post-conflict pressure, managed tension, and deliberate state-led peace or tolerance education.

3.1 Active Conflict and Post-Conflict Pressure

At one end of the spectrum are Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Israel, and Iran. These countries are different, but all face conditions that make peace education difficult, including war, occupation, sectarian division, militarised national narratives, regional confrontation, or the long-term effects of past conflict.

Palestine is one of the most urgent cases. Since the escalation of war in Gaza in October 2023, formal education has been severely disrupted, with widespread damage to schools and universities (UNICEF State of Palestine, 2024). In the West Bank, movement restrictions, insecurity, and occupation affect

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school access and learning. For Palestine, peace education cannot be separated from rights, protection, displacement, and educational survival. The World Bank study on UNRWA schooling also shows that Palestinian refugee education has developed amid long-term adversity, with schooling tied to community identity and hope for the future (Abdul-Hamid et al., 2016).

Lebanon represents a different difficulty. Its education system has long been affected by sectarian division, unequal provision, and disagreement over shared history and citizenship. Shuayb (2012) shows how education in divided societies is closely tied to identity, social unity, and social cohesion. Akar (2016) also shows that dialogic and peacebuilding pedagogies are promoted in Lebanon, but classroom practice remains limited when wider social and institutional conditions do not support open dialogue.

Syria's education system has been deeply damaged by more than a decade of war. UNICEF reported that thousands of schools have been damaged or destroyed and that millions of children remain out of school or at risk of dropping out (UNICEF Syrian Arab Republic, 2023). In such conditions, peace education often moves outside the normal school system into emergency education, psychosocial support, and community-based learning.

Iraq is a post-conflict case that remains fragile. Decades of war, sanctions, occupation, sectarian violence, and ISIS have affected education and social trust. UNICEF Iraq notes that conflict and under-investment have damaged children's access to quality learning (UNICEF Iraq, n.d.). Mousa's (2020) randomised study in post-ISIS Iraq found that mixed football teams improved some tolerant behaviours between Christian and Muslim youth. However, the effects were stronger within the sporting setting than outside it.

Israel has a stronger formal education system than most countries in this group, but it is still shaped by long-term conflict. Research on Jewish-Arab education and coexistence programmes shows that contact and dialogue can reduce prejudice and increase understanding, but effects are limited when wider political conflict continues (Salomon, 2004; Maoz, 2004). Bekerman and Zembylas (2012) also show that contested narratives of identity, memory, and reconciliation shape educational practice.

Iran is placed in this part of the spectrum because education is strongly shaped by state ideology, religious identity, and regional conflict narratives. Mehran (2003) shows how education in the Islamic Republic reflects tensions between tradition and modernity. The school system provides limited space for peace education as an independent civic field. However, peace-related ideas may still appear through universities, cultural work, interfaith discussion, and civil society spaces.

3.2 Managed Tension

Jordan and Saudi Arabia occupy the middle of the spectrum. They are not active war zones, but regional pressure, state control, refugee concerns, or rapid reform shape their education systems. Jordan has carried a major refugee education responsibility since the Syrian war. UNHCR data show that Jordan hosts a large registered population of Syrian refugees, and the education system has responded by implementing double-shift schools, donor-supported programmes, and inclusion efforts (UNHCR, 2023). Jordan's case shows that peace education may be connected with refugee inclusion, social cohesion, and everyday management of diversity.

Saudi Arabia is a context of managed tension for several reasons. Vision 2030 includes moderation, tolerance, and education reform as part of wider social and economic change. Earlier scholarship on religious education in the Middle East shows that textbooks and religious curricula are closely linked with state priorities and public identity (Doumato & Starrett, 2007).

3.3 Deliberate State-Led Peace and Tolerance Education

The United Arab Emirates is placed at the far end of the spectrum because it has made tolerance, moral education, and civic values a formal part of state policy. Its Moral Education curriculum includes character, civic responsibility, cultural studies, and community values. Research on UAE education reform shows that schooling has been linked with national development and social modernisation (Litz & Scott, 2017). Alhashmi et al. (2020) also show that tolerance has been promoted within UAE Islamic education textbooks. The UAE is therefore an important example of state-led peace and tolerance education, although the model remains bounded by top-down policy.

Box 1. Contrasting Cases of Peace Education: Israel and the United Arab Emirates

Israel and the United Arab Emirates illustrate two distinct approaches to peace education in the Middle East. Israel represents a conflict-affected model. Peace education there is shaped by long-term conflict, contested historical narratives, and separate schooling arrangements for different communities. It often appears through Jewish-Arab dialogue, coexistence initiatives, bilingual education, and efforts to reduce prejudice. However, these initiatives operate within a wider context of fear, security concerns, and unresolved political conflict. Research shows that such programmes can support understanding, but their wider impact remains limited when the broader conflict continues (Salomon, 2004; Maoz, 2004; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2012).

The United Arab Emirates represents a more state-led model. It is not an active conflict zone, and peace-related education is linked with moral education, civic values, tolerance, interfaith engagement, and national development. The UAE has embedded tolerance in formal policy and curriculum reform, including Islamic education textbooks that emphasise justice, compassion, moderation, civic engagement, and protection against extremism (Alhashmi et al., 2020). This reflects wider regional reform trends in which education is used to balance cultural identity, global citizenship, and social harmony (Sharma, 2026).

The contrast is useful because Israel illustrates the difficulty of teaching peace amid unresolved conflict, while the UAE illustrates the possibilities and limits of a stable, state-led tolerance model. These two cases confirm that peace education in the Middle East does not follow one pattern. It depends on the conditions of conflict, state policy, curriculum control, and the space available for dialogue.

3.4 Other Countries in the Wider Region

Several other countries in the broader Middle East are not studied in detail here but deserve mention. Yemen has experienced severe conflict and educational destruction and needs a separate, focused study. Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman have more stable education systems, but their peace education contexts differ from the conflict and post-conflict cases examined here. Egypt is often studied within both North Africa and the Middle East, while Turkey has a distinct position because of its European, NATO, and regional links. Their exclusion is only a boundary decision made to keep the comparison focused and manageable.

The region's peace education challenges should also be viewed in light of the colonial history of the modern Middle East. Colonial powers helped draw borders and create political arrangements that did not always reflect local identities, communities, or historical relationships. The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, the British and French Mandate systems, and the creation of Israel in 1948 all shaped later conflicts, displacement, and competing national narratives. These histories continue to affect how peace, citizenship, identity, and the "other" are represented in schools. This is why critical peace education must pay attention to colonial legacies, unequal power relations, and local voices

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(Hajir & Kester, 2020). Therefore, peace education in the Middle East cannot be separated from the colonial legacies that shaped the region's borders, conflicts, and curricula.

4. Three Comparative Themes Across the Region

The following three themes cut across the nine countries: curriculum and textbooks, teachers, and non-formal peace education. These themes show that peace education is shaped by curriculum control, teacher agency, social pressure, and community-level learning.

4.1 Curriculum and Textbooks: Who Controls the Peace Narrative?

Curriculum and textbooks are central to peace education because they shape how young people understand history, identity, citizenship, and the "other." In the Middle East, textbooks often reflect state priorities, conflict memories, and political limits.

In Iran, education is strongly shaped by the ideology of the Islamic Republic. Iranian education is also characterised by the paradox of tradition and modernity (Mehran, 2003), especially around religion, gender, and national identity. Peace is usually linked with religious duty, national resistance, and the memory of the Iran-Iraq War.

In Syria, pre-war schooling was closely connected with Arab nationalist identity and loyalty to the state. Faour (2012) shows that citizenship education in many Arab systems has followed official narratives rather than open democratic debate. After years of war, Syria's curriculum situation has become fragmented.

In Iraq, curriculum reform remains tied to a difficult political history. Under Saddam Hussein, schooling promoted Ba'athist nationalism and state loyalty. After 2003, reform attempted to remove regime propaganda and introduce civic ideas. However, Iraq's Arab, Kurdish, Sunni, Shia, Christian, and Yazidi communities make a shared civic narrative difficult.

In Palestine, textbooks remain a subject of sensitive debate. Israeli and Western actors have often criticised Palestinian textbooks, while Palestinian educators argue that the curriculum reflects lived experience under occupation. Adwan et al. (2016) found that both Palestinian and Israeli schoolbooks present strong national narratives and give limited space to the other side's history, culture, and suffering. A useful response to this problem was the joint Israeli-Palestinian history writing initiative associated with the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East. Its dual-narrative resource placed Israeli and Palestinian accounts of key historical events side by side and allowed space for classroom reflection. This example shows how peace education can open space for understanding without denying the pain or historical memory of either side.

In Israel, textbook research also shows the persistence of national and conflict narratives. Teff-Seker (2020) found that Israeli state-approved textbooks included peace-related content, but also continued to present Arabs, Muslims, and Palestinians through limited and sometimes unequal frames. Bar-Tal's (1998) work helps explain how conflict narratives become part of public culture, including education.

In Lebanon, the curriculum problem is linked with sectarian division. Since the civil war, Lebanon has struggled to create a shared national history curriculum. Shuayb (2012) shows that divided societies need curricula that support shared citizenship, not only community identity.

In Jordan, the curriculum challenge is different. Jordan is not an active war zone, but its schools respond to refugee education, citizenship, social cohesion, and diversity. Here, peace education is linked with inclusion, tolerance, and civic responsibility.

In Saudi Arabia, curriculum reform has become part of wider state transformation under Vision 2030. Earlier work on religious textbooks in the Middle East shows how school texts reflect state interpretations of religion and public identity (Doumato & Starrett, 2007).

In the United Arab Emirates, the curriculum places greater emphasis on tolerance, moral education, and civic values. UAE Islamic education textbooks teach tolerance through justice, compassion, moderation, civic engagement, and protection from extremism (Alhashmi et al., 2020). The UAE is, therefore, an important case of state-led tolerance education, although the model remains top-down.

Across the nine countries, the curriculum is never just the curriculum. It carries memory, power, fear, identity, and hope. In the Middle East, these meanings are also shaped by colonial borders, mandate histories, and later nation-building projects. Peace education through textbooks, therefore, needs more than words such as tolerance or coexistence. It also needs honest history, attention to colonial legacies and contested memories, recognition of the other side's humanity, and classroom freedom to discuss difficult questions responsibly (Hajir & Kester, 2020).

4.2 The Teacher in the Middle: Between State Policy and Human Values

Teachers are the main link between the curriculum and classroom life. Textbooks may show what a state wants children to learn, but teachers decide how that content is explained, questioned, softened, or avoided. In conflict and displacement settings, teacher wellbeing, agency, and professional support are central to the quality of education and learner protection (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies [INEE], 2022; Mendenhall et al., 2018).

In Lebanon, teachers work in a system shaped by sectarian division, economic crisis, and weak public trust. The absence of a shared national history curriculum places them in a sensitive position. Shuayb (2016) shows that Lebanese reforms have tried to promote social cohesion, but political and sectarian realities have limited these efforts.

In Palestine, teachers work under occupation, displacement, and, in Gaza, the destruction of normal schooling. Since October 2023, many children have lost regular access to school, and teachers have had to respond to insecurity, loss, and trauma (UNICEF State of Palestine, 2024).

In Syria, the teaching profession has been deeply damaged by war, migration, and displacement. Many teachers have left schools, moved to other areas, or left the profession, creating teacher shortages and weakening the continuity of schooling. At the same time, many school buildings have been damaged or destroyed, and large numbers of children remain outside regular schooling (UNICEF Syrian Arab Republic, 2023). In such conditions, peace education often depends on emergency programmes, community educators, and temporary learning spaces.

In Iraq, teachers work in a society still dealing with dictatorship, war, sectarian conflict, and ISIS violence. Peace education must help teachers build trust across religious and ethnic lines, especially in communities where schooling has been affected by fear, displacement, and social division.

In Jordan, teachers face pressure linked to refugee education. Jordan has had to educate Syrian refugee children along with Jordanian learners, increasing classroom pressure and teacher workload. Teachers in crisis contexts need professional development, psychosocial support, and clear management systems (Mendenhall et al., 2018).

In Saudi Arabia, teachers work within a highly centralised system. Vision 2030 has created more room for moderation and tolerance, but teachers still operate within clear state boundaries. Religious education in the region often works within state-approved interpretations of religion and national identity (Doumato & Starrett, 2007).

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In Israel, teachers work in a divided education system where Jewish and Arab students often attend separate schools. Coexistence initiatives and bilingual schools exist, but they operate within continuing conflict. Bekerman and Zembylas (2012) show that teachers working with contested narratives must deal carefully with identity, memory, and reconciliation.

In Iran, teachers work under a centrally controlled system linked with religion, national identity, and state ideology, amidst tension between tradition and modernity (Mehran, 2003). Teachers may have limited space for open dialogue, though some create small spaces for empathy and respect.

In the United Arab Emirates, teachers work in a more policy-supported environment. Moral education, tolerance, and civic values are formally promoted, and tolerance is present in Islamic education textbooks (Alhashmi et al., 2020). Many UAE teachers are expatriates who teach in culturally mixed classrooms, a context that requires intercultural sensitivity.

Across the region, teachers are central but often under-supported. Peace education cannot succeed only through textbooks or policy documents. It depends on teachers who are trained, trusted, emotionally supported, and given sufficient professional space to address classroom realities honestly.

In many Muslim-majority countries of the region, Islamic religious education also provides a route through which peace-related values are taught. Ideas such as compassion, justice, moderation, respect, and social responsibility are central to Islamic moral teaching and can support peace education when presented inclusively and reflectively. However, the role of religious education depends on how it is interpreted, taught, and connected with wider civic life. For this reason, Islamic education can contribute to peace education, but it should also encourage respect for diversity, dialogue, and the dignity of all communities (Doumato & Starrett, 2007; Alhashmi et al., 2020).

4.3 Youth Voices and Non-Formal Peace Education

When formal schooling is disrupted, communities often create other ways to keep children and young people connected to learning. Non-formal peace education refers to organised learning outside the regular school system through NGOs, community centres, youth clubs, religious institutions, refugee programmes, sports, arts, dialogue groups, and digital spaces. Its purpose is to support not only academic learning, but also social trust, human rights, dialogue, psychosocial support, and coexistence (Salomon & Cairns, 2010).

In Syria, non-formal education has become important because war has damaged regular schooling. Emergency education programmes often combine basic learning with psychosocial support, structured play, and life skills. Such education depends heavily on trained and supported teachers, including refugee and community teachers (Mendenhall et al., 2018).

In Lebanon, non-formal peace education is linked with social cohesion and refugee education. The country hosts Syrian and Palestinian refugees while its own education system remains affected by sectarian division and economic crisis. Akar (2016) shows the value of dialogic pedagogy for active citizenship, social cohesion, and peacebuilding.

In Palestine, non-formal peace education includes community learning, youth dialogue, psychosocial support, and cross-community encounter programmes. UNRWA education has remained important for Palestinian refugees under difficult conditions (Abdul-Hamid et al., 2016). Salomon (2004) notes that peace education in an intractable conflict can produce positive changes, but effects remain limited when the surrounding conflict continues.

In Jordan, non-formal education is connected with refugee inclusion and host-community relations. Syrian refugee children and youth may need catch-up learning, life skills, psychosocial care, and safe spaces for interaction with Jordanian peers.

In Iraq, non-formal peacebuilding has special importance after ISIS. Communities around Mosul and other affected areas have had to rebuild trust across religious and ethnic lines. Sport, arts, and youth activities can support contact across divided communities, but their effects are usually strongest when they are sustained and linked with wider community trust-building.

In Israel, non-formal peace education includes Jewish-Arab dialogue groups, bilingual initiatives, youth encounters, and coexistence programmes. Maoz (2004) warns that encounter programmes must be studied carefully because equality in the room does not always mean equality in real social and political life. Levy et al. (2022) provide evidence that well-designed youth dialogue can have lasting effects.

In Iran, non-formal peace education works within a restricted political space. Independent civil society activity is limited, but peace-related learning may still appear through cultural work, environmental cooperation, interfaith discussion, university spaces, literature, and the arts.

In Saudi Arabia, non-formal peace education has grown through state-supported programmes linked with moderation, interfaith dialogue, youth development, and Vision 2030. These initiatives can expose young people to tolerance and global engagement, but most remain state-led.

In the United Arab Emirates, non-formal peace and tolerance initiatives are visible through museums, interfaith events, youth leadership programmes, cultural festivals, and official tolerance initiatives. The UAE also promotes tolerance in formal textbooks (Alhashmi et al., 2020). These efforts are well-resourced but mostly designed from above.

Across the nine countries, non-formal peace education is hopeful but limited. It shows that communities, youth groups, NGOs, religious institutions, and teachers continue to create spaces for learning and trust even when formal schooling is weak. However, it is often underfunded, politically constrained, and too small to address the broader causes of conflict. It can support healing and coexistence, but it cannot replace fair institutions, safe schools, honest curricula, and political conditions that support peace.

5. The War and the Limits of Peace Education

Peace education becomes most difficult when it is most needed. In an active war, children and teachers do not experience conflict as an abstract topic. They experience it through school closures, displacement, fear, loss, interrupted learning, and the breakdown of normal community life. In the Middle East, the war in Gaza, the wider regional confrontation involving Iran, Israel, and the United States, the Israel-Hezbollah conflict affecting Lebanon, and continuing instability in Syria and Iraq have created a harsh environment for peace education. The most severe recent example is Gaza. After the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and Israel's military campaign in Gaza, the education system was deeply disrupted. UNICEF reported in April 2024 that all schools in Gaza had been closed for 625,000 students for six months, over 87 per cent of school buildings had been damaged or destroyed, and every university in Gaza had been destroyed (UNICEF State of Palestine, 2024). UNRWA schools, which have long been central to Palestinian refugee education, were also affected, as many buildings were used as shelters and regular learning was interrupted (UNRWA, 2024). These conditions disrupt lessons and damage children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, all of which are foundations of peace education.

The war has also affected Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Israel, and Iran in different ways. In Lebanon, exchanges between Israel and Hezbollah disrupted schooling, displaced families, and increased fear among children and teachers. Reuters reported in November 2024 that 505 of Lebanon's 1,250 public schools had become temporary shelters and that public schools were reopening only gradually during war and displacement (Reuters, 2024). Jordan has had to manage public anger, refugee pressures, and its sensitive diplomatic position while trying to maintain educational stability. Iraq remains affected by regional tensions and by the long effects of ISIS and sectarian violence. Iran and Israel have also used recent conflict events to reinforce national security narratives, although the classroom-level impact still needs further study.

From a peace education perspective, the harm is not only physical. War affects trust, empathy, and the ability to imagine a shared future. Elbedour et al. (2007) found high levels of post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety among adolescents in Gaza after earlier conflict exposure. Such findings remain important because trauma can reduce children's sense of safety and their readiness for dialogue, cooperation, and reconciliation. Peace education in such a setting must begin with safety, psychosocial support, and the rebuilding of trust.

Media and digital spaces also shape how young people understand conflict. When formal schooling is interrupted, many young people receive information through social media, family networks, religious spaces, and political messaging. Paluck and Green (2009) warn that prejudice-reduction interventions need careful design and measurement. This is relevant because online content can intensify anger and fear when it repeatedly portrays the other side solely as an enemy. Peace education must therefore include media literacy, critical thinking, and the ability to recognise propaganda, misinformation, and dehumanising language.

The current conflict also highlights the importance of collective narratives. Bar-Tal (1998) explains that societies engaged in prolonged conflicts often develop shared beliefs about victimhood, security, unity, and the delegitimisation of the other. These beliefs may enter textbooks, speeches, media, and family conversations. As discussed earlier, Bar-Tal and Rosen's (2009) direct and indirect models are useful here because open discussion of conflict is not equally possible across the region. In some contexts, peace education can address conflict directly, while in others it may need to work indirectly through empathy, tolerance, critical thinking, and respect.

The implications differ across the region. In Israel, the 7 October 2023 attacks and the war that followed are likely to shape classroom discussion, national memory, and citizenship education for years. In Palestine, the immediate priority is educational survival, safe spaces, basic learning, psychosocial support, and school reconstruction. In Iran, state narratives about resistance and regional power continue to shape public discussion of conflict. In Jordan and Lebanon, teachers must manage classrooms where children receive different messages from school, family, media, and community. In Iraq and Syria, the long effects of war continue to influence trust, identity, and youth attitudes.

The evidence shows that peace education cannot be treated as a normal classroom subject during active war. It must be linked with protection, trauma support, school reconstruction, teacher wellbeing, media literacy, and honest work on conflict narratives. Ceasefires and political agreements may reduce direct violence, but they do not automatically rebuild trust. For peace education to matter in the Middle East today, it must begin from the real conditions of children and teachers and move slowly toward dialogue, dignity, and social repair.

6. Comparative Lessons: What Can These Countries Learn from Each Other?

Comparative education is useful when it helps us see patterns across different systems without forcing one country's model onto another. The nine countries in this study show that peace education depends on more than good intentions. It needs political support, honest curriculum work, trained teachers,

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safe schools, space for youth voice, and institutions that do not run counter to the values taught in classrooms.

The United Arab Emirates shows the value of clear policy support. Its focus on moral education, tolerance, and civic values shows how a state can place peace-related ideas inside the formal curriculum and public culture. Research on UAE education reform also shows that schooling has been closely connected with national development and social modernisation (Litz & Scott, 2017). At the same time, the UAE also shows the limits of top-down peace education, as state-defined tolerance may not fully allow critical debate or disagreement.

Jordan offers a practical lesson in managed inclusion. It has had to educate large numbers of Syrian refugee children along with Jordanian learners. This has placed pressure on classrooms, teachers, and public resources, but it has also created experience in refugee education, double-shift schooling, and donor-supported inclusion. Jordan's lesson is that peace education can be linked with daily classroom management of diversity, not only with formal lessons on conflict.

Lebanon issues a warning about a divided education system. After the civil war, education was seen as a means of rebuilding social cohesion, but reform efforts faced serious limits due to political and sectarian divisions. Shuayb (2016) shows that Lebanon's education reforms aimed to promote unity, but the wider system remained affected by inequality and fragmentation. Peace education cannot grow strongly where schooling itself is divided by community identity and where teachers lack institutional support.

Palestine teaches the importance of educational survival under extreme pressure. In Gaza, the destruction and closure of schools since October 2023 have made ordinary schooling almost impossible, while movement restrictions and insecurity continue to affect learning in the West Bank. Peace education cannot begin with abstract messages of coexistence when children first need safety, schooling, psychosocial support, and protection of educational rights. Palestinian refugee education also shows that schooling can remain a source of identity and hope under long-term adversity (Abdul-Hamid et al., 2016).

Iraq shows that rebuilding trust after violence requires more than textbook reform. The country has experienced dictatorship, invasion, sectarian violence, and ISIS. Mousa's (2020) study, mentioned earlier, is relevant here. Iraq's lesson is that non-formal peacebuilding can help, but it must be sustained and connected to wider social repair.

Syria offers the hardest lesson on the collapse of the education system. More than a decade of war has damaged schools, displaced teachers, and interrupted learning for millions of children. Education in emergencies must begin early because treating schooling as secondary during war creates long-term damage to children, teachers, social trust, and future citizenship. Peace education in Syria cannot be separated from school reconstruction, teacher support, and safe learning spaces.

Israel shows both the possibility and the limits of peace education in a society living with long-term conflict. Dialogue programmes, bilingual initiatives, and coexistence education have shown that contact can support better understanding. However, research on contested narratives also shows that memory, identity, and national stories remain powerful in schools and communities (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2012). Peace education can exist amid conflict, but its impact is limited when broader political realities continue to sustain separation, fear, and security-based thinking.

Saudi Arabia illustrates the possibilities and limits of top-down reform. Vision 2030 has encouraged changes linked with moderation, openness, and social reform. Al-Rasheed's edited volume on Saudi Arabia shows that these changes must be understood within the state's broader political structure (Al-Rasheed, 2018).

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Iran shows that peace education can also take indirect forms. Religious ideology, state narratives, and regional conflict positions shape formal schooling. However, peace-related learning may survive through culture, literature, interfaith understanding, environmental concern, and academic spaces, even when formal civic language is restricted.

The comparative analysis shows that peace education in the Middle East cannot be reduced to one model. The UAE shows policy commitment; Jordan shows managed inclusion; Lebanon shows divided schooling; Palestine shows educational survival; Iraq shows community repair; Syria shows system collapse; Israel shows contested narratives; Saudi Arabia shows controlled reform; and Iran shows indirect civic and cultural spaces. The larger lesson is that peace education needs both classroom work and supportive political conditions. Without safe schools, honest curricula, trained teachers, and space for dialogue, peace education remains weak.

7. Conclusion: Teaching Hope in Hard Times

This paper examined peace education across nine Middle Eastern countries: Lebanon, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, Palestine, Syria, and Iraq. These countries differ in their political systems, conflict histories, education structures, and social conditions. However, they show one common point: peace education cannot be separated from the real life of the classroom. It is shaped by war, displacement, state ideology, curriculum control, teacher capacity, community memory, and the wider political environment. The main argument is that peace education in the Middle East is not weak because people do not value peace. It is limited by the conditions surrounding schools. In Palestine and Syria, the first need is often educational survival, safe spaces, and psychosocial support. In Lebanon and Iraq, peace education is linked with social trust, shared citizenship, and recovery from sectarian or armed conflict. In Israel and Iran, teachers and learners work within strong national and ideological narratives. In Jordan, peace education is connected with refugee inclusion and classroom diversity. In Saudi Arabia and the UAE, state-led reforms have created visible space for tolerance and civic values, but this space remains shaped by political control.

Galtung's (1969) distinction between negative and positive peace remains central to this discussion. The absence of open fighting does not automatically create justice, trust, equality, or dignity. Positive peace has to be built through institutions, relationships, curriculum, and daily educational practice. Peace education, therefore, cannot be reduced to slogans, moral lessons, or textbook chapters. It must help learners understand conflict, respect human dignity, think critically, and live with difference. The analysis also shows that teachers are central to peace education. Policies and textbooks matter, but teachers bring them to life. Where teachers are unsupported, afraid, overworked, or politically restricted, peace education remains limited. Where teachers are trained, trusted, and emotionally supported, even small classroom practices can create space for dialogue and care. Non-formal education also has an important role, especially where formal schooling is disrupted. Youth dialogue, community learning, sports, arts, refugee education, and psychosocial programmes can help rebuild trust, but they cannot replace safe schools and fair institutions.

For comparative education researchers, the Middle East requires sustained and careful attention. The region should not be studied only during moments of crisis. It needs long-term research that listens to teachers, students, families, and local educators. Existing work on critical peace education, intractable conflict, and peace education theory provides a useful foundation (Bajaj, 2008; Hajir & Kester, 2020; Salomon & Cairns, 2010). More empirical work is now needed on how peace education functions in classrooms, refugee settings, divided communities, and emergency education spaces. The classroom is not separate from conflict. It carries the effects of conflict every day. However, it can also become a place where young people learn to see beyond fear, anger, and inherited hatred. This possibility is fragile, but important. Peace education in the Middle East will not succeed through curriculum reform

alone. It requires safe schools, honest history teaching, supported teachers, active youth participation, and political conditions that do not contradict the values of peace taught in the classroom.

Disclosure of Delegation to Generative AI

The author declares the use of generative AI in the research and writing process. According to the GAIDeT taxonomy (2025), the following tasks were delegated to GAI tools under full human supervision:

- Proofreading and editing
- Adapting and adjusting emotional tone
- Reformatting

The GAI tools used were: Grammarly, Google Gemini 2.5 Flash, Hemingway Editor, and DeepL Write. Responsibility for the final manuscript lies entirely with the author. GAI tools are not listed as authors and do not bear responsibility for the outcomes. Declaration submitted by: Ramesh Chander Sharma

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