

## THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT’s AEMS Podcast

**Transcript for Episode 14:  
Well-being in the War Zone**

**Guest: Dr. Maryam Sharifian from James Madison University (JMU)**

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**Host: Amina Derbi**

**Amina:** Welcome everyone, you are listening to Third Space Thoughts to Policy, the official podcast of AEMS, the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program at IIIT, the International Institute of Islamic Thought.

You can listen to this podcast on Stitcher, Google Play, Spotify, iTunes or Apple podcasts, CastBox and Messy.FM as well as Podcast Mirror. The observations and conclusions featured in this podcast represent the speakers’ own personal views not the organization’s. The theme for this season is wellbeing.

We’re very excited to have Dr. Maryam Sharifian on the show with us today!

Maryam Sharifian is an Assistant Professor at James Madison University, College of Education. Dr. Sharifian received her undergraduate and graduate degree in School Counseling from Tehran University in Iran. After completing her PhD in Early Childhood Education from SUNY at Buffalo, she started her position at JMU to teach undergraduate and graduate courses in Early Childhood Education. Dr. Sharifian serves as country liaison at Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) as a National Representative (representing Iran/Middle East). She also served as Board of Directors of ACEI for three years. She is an active member in several international Early Childhood Organizations such as the World Organization for Early Childhood Education, Cooperative and International Education Society and American Education Research Association to advocate for children and teachers' right. Dr. Sharifian addresses educational issues relating to children and teachers in the area of armed conflict (their wellbeing and resilience strategies). In addition, she has worked with children of undocumented Afghan immigrants, schoolgirls in rural Tanzania and street children in Iran. She has several book chapters and article publications related to teacher training and children education.

Hello and welcome Dr. Sharifian, how are you doing today?

**Dr. Sharifian:** Hi, I’m very well, thank you for having me.

**Amina:** Thank you so much for joining us on the program, we are thrilled to have you with us today.

**Dr. Sharifian:** Me too, thank you.

**Amina:** Wonderful! I’m going to go ahead and dive into the questions that we have for you.

**Dr. Sharifian:** Sure.

**Amina:** At IIT's Summer Institute for Scholars, you presented your findings from your study "Trauma, Burnout, and Resilience of Syrian Primary Teachers Working Inside the War Zone". It was very well-received and impactful on our audience members. What led you to choose this particular subject?

**Dr. Sharifian:** First of all, I should say that was an amazing experience for me to be in the environment that I saw such passionate teachers and wonderful scholars and colleagues. It was a great experience and I am glad that it was well received. As you explained in my background, I did my undergrad and my Master's in school counselling and I have sort of a psychology background. When I came to the United States—to Buffalo, New York—for my PhD, I started to work with Dr. Jim Hoot, who is a retired professor from that university. His expertise is working with refugees and education in conflict areas. So, working with such an amazing mentor helped me to find my passion, which already related to my work with street children in Tehran, under-privileged families, and my little work with Afghan refugees in Iran. I knew that I wanted to do something related to all these experiences: which is helping children to have access to education. This has always been my passion and working with Dr. Hoot helped me find exactly what I needed to know. One of the committee members in my dissertation, Dr. Othman Shibley, originally from Syria, is a professor in the dental school, but he and his colleagues are working collaboratively in funding schools in Syria in the basements of buildings, which are completely in an environment that is very different from what we know and from what classrooms look like.

These are all environments that count as sort of a safe environment, any place that feels like it is not under attack. Getting to know Dr. Shibley helped me get connected with these phenomenal teachers inside the warzone and I got to learn a little bit about what they do and the first question that popped up in my mind was "How is it even possible that somebody in the active warzone is still passionate to go to the classroom and be a teacher?" Being a teacher is hard, it's not an easy job. Everyday there are struggles and you don't get paid enough and now, in addition to all these struggles and challenges, you must put your life in danger. So, this question came to my mind, "What is the reason to be a teacher?" and hearing and looking at the literature reviews and looking at different research, the paramount of the teacher is very high in Western society and all around the world. So, I wanted to know what about them: are they going to the school for a few years or even a few months because of all these challenges and struggles, they dropout and find something else and just save their life? So, these all came to my mind and Dr. Shibley and Dr. Hoot helped me to structure my mind and do the research and a fantastic, eye-opening result came out of it.

**Amina:** Okay, thank you so much for sharing that with us. We really appreciate you walking us through your journey of how you chose that particular subject and the people along the way who were able to facilitate the process to get you to where you needed to go and the access as well and, of course, all your hard work that went into it to be able to conduct the research. I am very glad that you highlighted how phenomenal the teachers that you worked with are, very inspirational. So, you recruited seventy primary teachers working and living inside Syria for this project. I'm sure this was challenging for a variety of reasons, especially the ongoing, tragic conflict. How did you go around these hurdles in order to gather this vital information?

**Dr. Sharifian:** Oh, yeah, absolutely it was very difficult for sure, due to different reasons, but I would say that getting to know Dr. Shibley and the support that I received from him, was a major help to

make sure that we can. From the first step, he was like, “we can do this, because these people are dedicated and will help you,” and it was nothing but true. Dr. Shibley introduced me to these phenomenal teachers. I had a chance to have phone conversations with them a few times and build up my own relationship. I think being a Muslim female from the Middle East was a great advantage for me because knowing the culture helped me to be counted, sort of, as an insider during this process. During my conversations with the phenomenal teachers and all the school principals, I learned about a number of teachers and students and who they are. I started to get to know them a little better. When you do research in a conflict area, you must be very careful because of the confidentiality and all the sensitive issues about their identity and how sensitive it is to just talk to you.

One of the things that Goodhand says in the research of working in warzone areas and conflict areas is the concept of culture of silence, which means that communities often avoid sharing information or participating in research because of their safety and fear that they have for their own life. I think having this background and getting connected with them and counting as an insider helped me to find my own place. Before all of this happened, I did the IRB through my institute, which was hard. I would say that was the hardest part. But, after getting the IRB, I started to send my surveys to the teachers and all the information was collected via the internet, so it was online. One of the interesting facts about the warzone is that they had access to internet but did not have enough computers. There was one computer and the teachers had to stay in lines and wait for their turn for a long time and they did it. I sent 70 surveys and, believe it, I received 70 back, which was phenomenal.

If you look at any Western research standard, it is miraculous that you get 100% of responses back from the given sample, but since these female teachers were so dedicated and they all wanted their voices to be heard, they did their best, despite their environment. They have so many different priorities, for example their safety, but their moral responsibility—and one of the things I think may have had an effect on that is they receive a compensation of \$10, which we do in any kind of research: you pay a compensation for the time and I gave \$10, which is nothing. But we have the concept of Halal money in Islam and I think one of the things that made them complete the surveys is that if you want to earn money, you must work for it. There was no string attached to my research—you can choose not to participate, but I received all the surveys back and all of them really helped me and all had one message: to let the world know they are alive and are doing their best to save their country.

**Amina:** That is truly remarkable and shows the dedication of those teachers and their willingness to put aside their own personal needs and safety in order to fulfill the commitment they made and to fulfill the promise that they made. It’s great that you highlighted the role of the Halal money concept within Islam and how that potentially influenced their behavior. It’s also fascinating to me how you highlighted your role for your identity as a Muslim female and how that was helpful in working with the teachers and being someone who came from a similar background, so it allowed you greater access. I think at IIT, part of what’s been so helpful and beneficial to the institute when conducting its research is, because it’s an International Institute of Islamic Thought, it is easier to work with our partners and affiliates globally to gather the information needed because there is a level of understanding there because it is not information imposed from above or someone who is studying you completely from the outside. There is a certain level of authenticity there, so that is very interesting as well. Something fascinating you say in your abstract is that the only sustainable solution to war is education. Can you please elaborate on what you mean by this and why you think this is the case?

**Dr. Sharifian:** Absolutely. Well, doing a lot of research regarding finding the background of the importance of education. First, we must look at the Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC, which Article 28 and 29 states clearly that education is an essential right for all children, even during the times of emergency. Does it happen? Well, it says that, and we see that what happens is according to all of the international rules, hospitals and schools are safe. But the reality is that the first thing that would be attacked are hospitals and schools because the army use them, because of the safety, they use it as a shelter. That deprives children from having safe schools and the schools are ruined and destroyed. Every 10 schools, 7 of them in Syria are ruined and there is no real school—that's why they are going to the basements. It still does not prevent them from going and getting an education. So, education has a direct relationship with improving the quality of life for all the people around the world. Education can lead to poverty reduction, holding promise of the stability and economic growth, better life for the children, families, and communities. This is something that has been proved by many researchers during the years. But the problem is postponing and neglecting the education for the children during the crisis. It's a very challenging thing and is likely to delay the achievement of sustainability.

During the war, education is not a priority and the reason is safety. Parents, when they know they are in an active warzone, they prefer to keep their children alive. So, they keep them in the houses and keep them from going outside to make sure that the child is alive. This is what parents do. But seeing these phenomenal teachers, I'm watching with them, so parents are still willing to send their children because the teachers have this phenomenal passion that education is the only way that we can help our community to stay together and get back on our feet and build up our future. This is the clear message I heard from all the teachers. By seeing these children coming to the basement schools, I had teachers from these schools, I've never been there but I have the pictures from them, and I shared it during my presentations to the audience and they were very impressed with that emotionally and just seeing them made all the audience to see why I call these teachers phenomenal. Because these basement schools or any place you wouldn't call a classroom are all covered with dark curtains and there is no light or very little light so they can see what is in front of them, there is not enough air and, sometimes, the children are coming hungry and they don't have enough food, they faint, but still they are coming and these teachers are still going there. So, education is belief that this is what we do to save ourselves and research backs this up as well. I think that is the reason that this segment is very important, and I can go on and on about it, but this is what we need, not only for children in the safe area, but for all the children around the world.

**Amina:** I agree with you. Education is extremely important. It also matters a lot to IIT, which is why the institution launched its Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program and, as you know, the AEMS research initiative is really interested in holistic approaches to education and setting well-being as a long-term goal, which aligns with this approach. It's very vital for us to look at the role of teachers and that's why, for our next annual survey that is going on for 2019, we will be collecting data from teachers, students and parents. I think what is so particularly special about your research and your study is that the teachers that you worked with were living and working inside of a warzone and the type of external factors that would impact their sense of well-being and social-emotional functioning I think are very important to study. I think it is excellent that you were able to give them a voice and I'm sure that anyone listening to our podcast would want to connect to those teachers or

offer them some training and assistance, they could definitely reach out to you and you'd be able to connect them, so that's another great outcome of this.

**Dr. Sharifian:** Absolutely. That would be good, for sure.

**Amina:** Wonderful. Your study primarily focuses on teachers, but to what extent do you think teachers' wellbeing, and maintenance of their wellbeing, plays a role in influencing or impacting that of their students?

**Dr. Sharifian:** That's a very good question. Sometimes we forget about the teachers and about who they are, what they do, and how they are maintaining. That was the purpose of this research. I wanted to make sure that if we have a good quality of education, it means we have good quality of teachers. Research states that, in addition to families and communities, teachers play a critical role in children's mental health following war trauma. There are many researchers talking about the lack of adequate support systems for addressing the mental health of children. Teachers may have the greatest potential to improve the mental health of the disaster-affected community. As I said there are many researchers where we see that the school interventions following natural disasters can help children get back on their feet and find their healthy lifestyle. Again, teachers have a critical role in these interventions. So, this is important, when we look at the different countries, especially after the war, for example Sierra Leone or Ethiopia, you see the role of teachers in getting back the community to during the peace time after the crisis, to get back on their feet.

The role of the teachers is highlighted during this time and they have always been an important factor for the society. And, after mom and dad, when children go to the schools, the teacher is their caretaker. Especially during the warzone, these teachers, when I was talking to them, they emphasized that they weren't just teachers. They also must be psychologists, provide emotional support, play the role of the mom, play the role of the dad, and play the role of the counsellors or social workers because the children need it. The goal is not just to teach them how to read or write. It is a lot more than writing and reading and just counting that as education. Looking at this important role and all these duties that the teachers have, we must look and see what are their supports? Where are they understanding psychology in the mental health area? Do they have enough support? What happens to the teachers when they get overwhelmed? My teachers are saying that, every day, when they go to the school, they must deal with all the children that are coming with the baggage, but at the same time, they are dealing with their own problems. They lost family members, or their children are suffering from some sort of illnesses or the lack of money or food. These are the things that they must deal with.

So, these teachers are ready to help children, but they need support too. So, the role of mental health for teachers is very important. Looking at the Western culture and looking at the burnout level of the teachers around the world, we see that, if we don't provide enough support for the teachers, we can't keep them in their job. Then the job would be just the job. But teaching is not a job, if you are looking at it as a duty that you have, you go 8 in the morning, you get back 3 or 5 PM at home, that's not what teachers do. They provide peace and help for children to get to know themselves and become the future of the society. This is very important, as I said. I have all the research that supports these claims and it is not coming out of my mouth or anyone else. These are completely research-based area and that's why we look at the teacher's trauma level in the study and the role of the

resilience: how much resilience would help the teachers for healthy relation with children and themselves.

**Amina:** Thank you very much for explaining that for us. The relationship between teachers while being in that with their students is very interesting and it is something that we are looking at at AEMS as well. Your findings allow readers to better understand teachers' resilience and coping strategies in relation to teaching in a warzone and suggest coping strategies for difficult school environments that others can learn from. Can you please tell our listeners a bit more about what those are?

**Dr. Sharifian:** Absolutely. This is actually a very exciting part of the study. Themes came out of this mixed-method study (which means I collected quantitative and qualitative data). One of these was teachers' perceptions of living in a warzone. Most of the participants had a peaceful, satisfying life prior to the war. The teachers, who in the qualitative part of the study, had the highest resilience score, they all had jobs relating to education, such as administration or teaching, something related to their current role prior to the job. Having the teaching background helped them a lot to have a higher resilience during the war. These teachers never imagined having a life in the warzone conditions, including the daily struggles they had to adjust to such as bombing, military attacks, and loss of family, friends, and loved ones as well as the lack of basic needs, such as water and food. In spite of all these major challenges, it seemed teachers loved the job. For example, majority of my teachers all said that it wasn't hard for them to see what came out of it. One of my teachers was saying that it's the code of a teacher, her house was close to the line of attack and transportation to and from the school was dangerous. Every day, she risked getting killed going to the school. However, she went on to say that her passion for doing her duty as a teacher and seeing the students gives her the courage to be at school every day. This is so strong.

**Amina:** Definitely, it is absolutely amazing

**Dr. Sharifian:** This continued when we got to the second theme, which is that teaching is a duty during the wartime. One comment I heard several times during the study was that it was their spiritual duty to serve as a teacher during the war and educate and prepare children to support their country. This is what I heard a lot. It is a clear message that the teachers with the highest resilience and medium resilience all said. Some said they are proud to be at their school as the principal or teacher and that it was an exceptional opportunity to serve their country. They also said that they work very hard to educate their next generation and keep them safe. They are confident that this is their duty that God Almighty gave them and they believe they must do it as fully as they can until the last day of their life. When you hear that, you know that these are not ordinary people. These people have beliefs in what they do and their job and role.

So, the next one is religion and faith. Because it is a Muslim society, it is their Islamic beliefs when they are practicing Islam and their faith had a huge impact on their communication with their students. They believe in God and derive their power to endure struggles from the warzone and being a teacher from this. A direct quote I like to use is "I believe education is a message from God to whoever needs it. My effort and intention are for the sake of God". They are all constantly talking about how their daily prayers helped them to stay strong. Whenever they felt weakness or that they couldn't continue, praying together and reading the Quran and the stories in it helped them to become stronger, strengthen their community, and know there is hope. You can't lose this hope when you know there

is something stronger, it helps you to continue. So, I think this was one of the strongest themes and I definitely want to look more into religion and teachers' resilience. The last theme that was definitely one of the most important was self-accomplishment.

My teachers reportedly pointed out that their passion to develop their personality skills and future through their job was important. Some of them believed that their life was aimless prior to the war and the daily routine had limited their capacity to grow. It is interesting when you look at it this way. I don't know if I would look at it this way, but this is what came out. They believed that being in the hardship made them stronger and that they wouldn't be this strong without being in this situation. For example, one of them said "Our current living condition is very bad. However, I do not care. My aim is to pursue my goal in life, to continue learning, even during the war. Education is like a seed, if you plant it and take care of it, you will have a healthy and fruitful tree. Similar to education, if you keep practicing, you will have a more successful and satisfying life." Well, whenever I read this, I still get emotional and think "wow, this is important" and this self-accomplishment perspective comes during the hardship. It gives you a new perspective to life. This is definitely an important part that I think a lot of research should focus on and my future research definitely will look at this part, you know the personality of people in hardship and the lessons we can learn from them.

**Amina:** That was very powerful, thank you very much for reading what those teachers said to you. I myself am getting emotional listening to it because its very inspirational: their resilience and strength in a time of hardship. I appreciate that you shared with us the passion, spiritual duty, faith, and the sense of self-accomplishment. These were all concepts and ideals that were able to help them through this difficult time, to cope, and to continue doing the very important work they do of educating the next generation and not just teaching them academic material, which of course is very important, but also providing them with a sense of belonging and inspiring them to continue to go to school, to be that hope and inspiration for them. Its interesting that you talk about accomplishment and the sense of fulfillment because that's definitely very much a part of well-being. Our definition of well-being is having a social and emotional functioning, positive affect, and the perceived ability to self-regulate and feel a sense of fulfillment; it is to pursue virtue, meaning, purpose, and doing good and making a difference. Clearly, these teachers, in spite of their challenges and being in the warzone, found coping strategies to be able to hold on to portions of well-being in a situation where there is very little of it. So that's very inspirational I think its very important for people to study that. I'm sure there is a lot that we can learn from your study. What do you think is the biggest take away from your study and what are you currently working on now that our listeners can be on the lookout for in the future?

**Dr. Sharifian:** Absolutely, well getting emotional is something my audience always highlights and its good that we let our emotions get involved. At the same time, as educators, we have the power to make a change. We feel it and make some changes to help not only these teachers, but all teachers around the world who deserve the best support. So, the biggest takeaway is definitely focusing on this sense of personal accomplishment for teachers and looking at the teachers who are making a change in the world of the children and education and the critical role teachers have and the role of resilience and, as you mentioned, the well-being of the teacher and how we can highlight it and focus on it more instead of getting distracted with policies and the games that happen around the education system. We must focus on how we can provide support to the teachers. Something I mentioned a few times

during my study and highlighted is when you look at the teachers with the highest resilience, in the results of my study, I found they had teaching backgrounds and so they had the highest resiliency.

So, it helps when you have training and training has an important role. This is one of the things we must focus on: how we can provide this training and systemic interventions that not only targets individual teachers, but also the school environment. People like us in the education system, in higher education and in the school system will have to focus on this part and provide this opportunity for the teachers to get training and support. Trauma informed care, as we can see in the U.S. right now, would be one of the stars. Not only providing it for children but making sure the teachers receive the support as well and providing them these opportunities to increase their coping strategies and resilience during the hardship. Hardship is not only bombing, but it can be not having enough community support in your society, not having enough systematic support in the school, not having enough training to know what to do when you have novice teachers coming to the classroom and they feel overwhelmed—is there enough support for them or are they just judged for not being good enough? Especially now, when teachers are not paid enough, but still want to be teachers, that means you have the passion.

We must provide all these opportunities for our teachers to make sure they have enough support from us and everybody around them. This is definitely one of the goals of my study and future research. Another thing with the research that is going on now, my colleagues and I are looking to see if we have these opportunities to collect data from teachers in refugee camps in Lebanon and other countries. There is going to be a comparative research to look at the teachers who are currently in the warzone and the teachers who are teaching in refugee camps. The purpose would be to see how safety would impact the coping and resilience level of teachers and looking at how we can improve the self-accomplishment for the teachers. Many more studies are coming up, but I can go on and on, so I am going to stop here.

**Amina:** That's all very fascinating and I'm grateful that you also spoke about how it's good to feel and react to things with emotion, but of course, to also make decisions rationally and take action. There is an interesting piece by Kit Collingwood-Richardson, Deputy Director of Universal Credit Department for Work and Pensions, where she wrote on "empathy and the future of policy making" in *Medium* that is from about a year ago. Something interesting that she highlights is that Higher-empathy policymaking practice leads to better policy, which leads to better services, which leads to efficiency and cost savings, as well as happier people" overall. It's interesting how it all fits together.

**Dr. Sharifian:** Absolutely, I agree.

**Amina:** We thank you so much again for your time Dr. Sharifian. It is always a delight to speak with you and hear from your insights. You always provide great value and we look forward to keeping in touch and follow your future updates and endeavors. We wish you all the best!

**Dr. Sharifian:** Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity. I am happy to stay in touch and if anyone in the audience has questions, I would be happy to answer any questions, send you the study if you may want to read it, and thanks again for having me.

**Amina:** As mentioned last season, IIIT is currently accepted applications for its Advancing Education in Muslim Societies Master's degree program in partnership with American University.



The International Training and Education Program – Advancing Education in Muslim Societies – also known as IITEP–AEMS – is a unique opportunity to earn a Master’s degree in international education and training with focus on Muslim societies from a reputable university like American University. This program can be completed in one year and it is thirty credits!

For more information or if you are interested in applying, please visit [www.iit.org](http://www.iit.org), then you can scroll to the bottom and you’ll find the announcement.

Thank you all for listening. To stay up-to-date on everything happening with the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program, otherwise known as AEMS, please follow IIT on Twitter (@IITfriends) and Instagram (@iit\_insta). You won’t want to miss our next episode. If you have any questions for us, or would like to join the conversation, please reach out to me! My email is [amina@iit.org](mailto:amina@iit.org). As always, we look forward to working together towards transformative education advancing holistic human development. Salaam!