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## ISRAEL: Researchers see Tunisia as a textbook revolution

February 2, 2011 | 8:45 am

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Revolutions seem to take place all of a sudden, but usually they don't really come out of the blue. Whether religious, political or economic reasons are behind upheaval, it often reflects a long process that reached a tipping point and a window of opportunity.

The time must be right but the ground must be ripe, too. In this context, an Israeli research group suggests Tunisia's was a textbook revolution. Not in the sense that it was a perfect storm or that it followed a certain formula -- no two revolutions are the same -- but in the sense that it may actually have begun in school textbooks.

The [Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education \(IMPACT-SE\)](#) is a group that conducts in-depth studies of school curriculum throughout the Middle East, checking hundreds of books per country and they way they teach about tolerance and peace.

A [comprehensive study of the Tunisian curriculum](#), completed in 2009 and presented before the European parliament, found that education in Tunisia cultivates equality and is much more progressive in teaching tolerance than any other Arab country.

But it wasn't always so, says Yohanan Manor, a retired Jewish Agency official and political scientist who established the research group a decade ago. According to Manor, Tunisia began instituting educational reform in the mid-1990s, when Zine el Abidine ben Ali (who was overthrown last month) appointed a political opponent as minister of education. Mohamed Charfi, who died a few years ago, was a lawyer and longtime human rights leader in Tunisia and a fierce critic of Ben Ali, in particular concerning human rights issues.

The now-deposed president had placed Charfi in charge of the education ministry, maybe so that he could keep an eye on him but also because Ben Ali was interested in letting the rights leader implement his agenda, which was separating religion and state, Manor said, noting that the issue is a longstanding one in Tunisian history.

The first phase was to extricate the school curriculum from the influence of the clerics -- not in an action against religion, but rather from the position that democracy and Islam can work together so long as "church" and state were separated. A second phase followed later on, geared to prepare for globalization rather than resist it.

The material still takes the Palestinian side in their conflict with Israel, researchers found, but not in a way that negates Jews or Israel. Above all, the study found the educational system to have a "profound understanding of equality and democracy."

Charfi's reforms shaped the younger generation in Tunisia that ultimately rebelled. "Mohamed Charfi is the true champion of Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution," Manor said.

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