

Chapter II: The Essence of the Conflict - Israel's Existence

1. Overview

The Arab-Israeli conflict is not regarded by the Syrian textbooks as a struggle over territory between two legitimate parties. Nor is it considered a local conflict between two rival nations, Jews and Palestinian Arabs that could be solved through political and territorial compromises.

Rather, the conflict is seen as a fateful struggle for existence between the entire Arab nation and a Jewish-Zionist entity that has established itself in the heart of the Arab homeland - at the expense of the Palestinian people - and has threatened the entire Arab nation ever since.

The Arab-Israeli conflict, or the Palestinian problem - as it is often referred to, is thus depicted as the most serious challenge facing the Arab nation in modern times. To this, the Syrian textbooks add the religious element which presents the conflict as a struggle between Jews and Muslims over Palestine and Muslim holy places therein.

Furthermore, the Syrian textbooks emphasize that the loss of Palestine in 1948 brought humiliation and disgrace upon all Arabs and Muslims, who experienced another similar blow in 1967. Such an unbearable situation of shame could and should be rectified only by war and revenge. The struggle against Israel is, then, a matter of honor.

Finally, the reference to the Arab-Israeli conflict in Syrian textbooks is not occasional or marginal, but rather extensive and central, and at times even obsessive. Instilling this issue into the minds of young Syrians appears to be a major objective of the textbooks.

2. The Essence of the Conflict is Israel's Very Existence, not Its Borders

"The Muslims in the countries of the world are struggling to evict the Jews from Palestine in defense of al-Aqsa Mosque." (Islamic Education, Grade 6, p. 57)

"The Zionist imperialist-colonial existence in the occupied part of Palestine is the extreme opposite to the existence of the Arab nation on its land." (National Socialist Education, Grade 8, p. 96)

"The Arab-Zionist struggle is a fateful national struggle, a struggle for existence [sira' wujud], and not a struggle over borders." (National-Socialist Education, Grade 10, p. 133)

"Our struggle with the enemy is a struggle for existence [sira' wujud] and not a struggle over borders." (Islamic Education, Grade 9, p. 67)

"Gangs of oppressive Zionism have occupied parts of our land and they threaten our existence." (Islamic Education, Grade 9, p. 166)

"...the Zionist invasion still threatens their [the Arabs'] existence... [Question:] What is the Arabs' duty in order to confront the dangers that threaten their existence?" (Grammar, Dictation and Script, Grade 7, pp. 160, 161)

"In fact, the Arab countries did not face during their long history a danger greater than the one they are exposed to today. We are struggling first and foremost in order to ward off a treacherous aggression against us and in order to safeguard our existence." (Reader and Literary Texts, Grade 9, p. 96)

3. The Primacy of the Conflict

The conflict with Israel, often referred to as "the Palestinian problem", should be considered the number-one priority issue for the Arabs. The importance of Palestine is outlined by describing it as the heart of the Arab homeland, and is stressed over that of the Golan, Syria's own territory that was occupied by Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967.

"The priority [issue] in our Arab and international policy is confronting Israel and, accordingly, giving the national aspect of the Arab-Israeli struggle priority over all [other] national matters." (President Hafez Assad, National-Socialist Education, Grade 8, p. 130)

"The Arab-Zionist struggle emanated originally from the Palestinian problem, which will remain the essence of the struggle. It is impossible for any solution to take place but through the elimination of injustice and the return of the rights of the Palestinian Arab people." (National-Socialist Education, Grade 10, p. 114)

"After the catastrophe [nakbah] of the year 1948 the Palestinian problem has become the primary problem of the Arabs." (National-Socialist Education, Grade 8, p. 132)

"The Palestinian problem is the greatest challenge our Arab nation has faced in the modern era." (Modern Arab Literature, Grade 12, p. 101)

"The Palestinian problem is the Arabs' fundamental problem. Priority is given to the struggle for the recovery of the legitimate national rights of the Palestinian Arab people in its land and homeland." (National-Socialist Education, Grade 12, p. 49)

"The Palestinian problem is the Arabs' primary problem and the liberation of Palestine is a primary necessity like the liberation of the Golan." (National-Socialist Education, Grade 12, p. 66)

"The Palestinian problem is the Arabs' primary problem" (National-Socialist Education, Grade 9, p. 73)

In order to make this point more concrete, Palestine itself is described as the heart of the Arab homeland:

"Palestine's place among the Arab countries is like the heart's place within the body." (Reader, Grade 6, Pt. 2, p. 94)

"...the land of Palestine, the heart of the Arab homeland." (President Hafez Assad, National-Socialist Education, Grade 8, p. 18)

"The establishment of Israel in the heart of the Arab homeland." (National-Socialist Education, Grade 8, p. 87)

"The establishment of the state of Israel in the heart of the Arab homeland, the expulsion of its people and the attempt to exterminate them." (National-Socialist Education, Grade 10, p. 60)

"The Zionists proceeded to realize the second step of their plan... and they ousted the Arabs of Palestine from their homes and established in the heart of the Arab homeland a state they named Israel." (Reader and Literary Texts, Grade 8, p. 131)

The discussion of the Golan issue in Syrian textbooks is far less intensive than the one concerning Palestine. A revealing statement by President Hafez Assad, in a speech to the Arab inhabitants of the Israeli-held Golan makes this point clear:

"Let your hands be clasped together, O our sons in the Golan, with the hands of your brethren, the Arabs of Palestine, because the enemy is one, because the road is one, because the goal is one, because [our] destiny is one, because [our] history is one. I salute you, O sons in the Golan, and salute your brethren, the Arabs of Palestine. Let it be known to you that Syria is for Palestine as much as Palestine is for Palestine." (National-Socialist Education, Grade 12, p. 54)

This speech indicates very clearly that the real issue between Syria and Israel is, after all, not the Golan Heights but rather Palestine or, in other words, Israel's very existence.

4. A Matter of Honor

Fighting Israel and taking revenge for the humiliating defeats is a matter of honor.

"The question, as it is being asked, bleeds with shame:
How Haifa or the Negev disappeared." (Grammar, Dictation and Script,
Grade 7, p. 199)

"Yearning for the land, homeland and kinsfolk, repentance for having left the homes, holding on to hope, and determination upon revenge became prominent [motifs] in the literature of the sons of Palestine at that stage [after 1948]." (Modern Arab Literature, Grade 12, p. 101)

"We, Muslims, should... sacrifice our souls and property... until we recover our holy places and return to our nation its glory and dignity." (Islamic Education, Grade 4, p. 106)

"The Palestinian Arab generation that was born and grew up in tents and knew Palestine through the mothers' tears and the fathers' determination to recover the land, has sworn to liberate its land and restore the dignity of its [Palestinian] people and [Arab] nation." (Civics, Grade 6, p. 129)

"Our Palestinian brethren sacrificed their blood until the whole world heard their voice and became acquainted with their cause. They are still dying on the field of honor." (Reader, Grade 6, pt. 2, p. 95)

"Let us continue our struggle and then we shall liberate our Arab land and assert our dignity." (Grammar, Grade 9, p. 55)

"We should continue the stubborn struggle in order to protect Arab dignity." (Grammar, Grade 10, p. 64)

"The setback of the fifth of June 1967 left in the souls of the Arab citizens a painful impression mixed with a real desire for revenge, rehabilitation and for washing the disgrace with blood." (Civics, Grade 5, p. 100)

"The glorious October War was an important link within the [overall] struggle against Imperialism and its ally Israel. Its most important causes were... the Arabs' desire to take revenge for the defeat of June 1967." (Modern History of the Arabs, Grade 9, p. 159)

5. Obsessive Treatment of the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Of the 68 books examined in this survey, 52 contained material directly related to the conflict in varying degrees of intensiveness, in the forms of lectures and discussion, short stories, poems, slogans, quotes from President Hafez Assad's speeches, language exercises, homework of various sorts, photographs, drawings, diagrams and maps. In some of the books the Arab-Israeli conflict stretches over

whole chapters dedicated to various aspects thereof. Four more books contained negative remarks about Jews in ancient and medieval times, though without reference to the present conflict.

Among the general issues discussed within this context one can find Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa Mosque, the War of 1973, the loss of Palestine, the Palestinian armed struggle against Israel, Zionism, the ancient Hebrews as enemies of the ancient "Arabs" (i.e., Canaanites, Arameans, Chaldeans, etc.), Palestinians fighting the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the Jews' hostility to Muhammad and the early Muslims, the Baath Party resolutions regarding Palestine and Israel, militarism, Jihad and martyrdom, the occupied Golan Heights, Israel's collaboration with Imperialism, Israel's oppression of the Palestinians, the peace process, etc.

These issues are dealt with repeatedly and they are often subdivided. The first mention of the conflict appears in Grade 2 (Jerusalem) and 3 (the 1973 war, Jerusalem). In Grade 4 the issue of Palestine as a whole appears for the first time, and from Grades 5 and 6 onwards the student is exposed to the other elements of the conflict with constant elaboration.