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'Egyptian curricula states Jews, Christians are infidels'

By OREN KESSLER
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Israeli think tank says drastic reforms are needed in Egyptian schools in order to comply with UNESCO standards.

Egypt's school curriculum, laden with anti-Semitic and anti-Christian sentiment, must undergo drastic reform to comply with international standards, according to a new report to be presented this week at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

"Egypt has to conduct fundamental reforms in its curricula, which present a national identity based solely on the Islamic religion," said Yohanan Manor, chairman and co-founder of the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-SE), the Jerusalem-based think-tank that compiled the report.

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"Egypt's schools present Islam as the 'only true faith,' and believers in other religions – including Coptic Christians – as infidels," he said.

Manor and his colleagues will present the report at the conference, "School Textbooks in the Greater Middle East: National Identity and Images of Self and Other," to be held Tuesday and Wednesday at the Hebrew University's Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace.

A year before the ousting of president Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's government announced plans for comprehensive reforms to "purge school curricula of erroneous views and material that incites extreme violence."

The government's first step was to remove references to "jihad in God's name." These changes, the report found, have fallen far short of the comprehensive reform Cairo had pledged.

Anti-Coptic violence in Egypt reached a crescendo over the past six months. A bomb in an Alexandria church on Christmas Day last year killed 21 people, and anti-Christian attacks have grown in scope and frequency since Mubarak's resignation in February. The new report by IMPACT-SE, formerly the Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace, found that internecine violence is fueled largely by education.

But contradictory messages also run deeply through Egypt's education system. In many textbooks Copts

are denigrated as infidels, yet in those same works are praised for participating in Egypt's independence campaigns throughout history. Students are taught that the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament are holy books, but also taught that those same texts were "forgeries" penned by non-Muslims.

"Egyptian textbooks define Christians and Jews as infidels," Manor said. "A year ago, Egyptian authorities admitted as much in a joint conference by Education Minister Dr. Ahmed Zaki Badreldin and the grand mufti of Egypt, Dr. Ali Gomaa."

In April of last year, he said, the two officials announced reforms to purge the curricula of Quranic verses "encouraging jihad and the murder of polytheists and infidels."

The press conference sparked an uproar in Egypt.

The Muslim Brotherhood flatly rejected any talk of education reform, while several news outlets took positions in favor.

The state-owned *Al-Ahram* daily called for an end to "teaching our children to denigrate the Christian religion and even Judaism..."

They must stop describing believers in other religions as infidels, as that is a dangerous designation that effectively grants permission to kill."

IMPACT-SE is an independent, non-partisan and nonprofit think tank founded in 1998 that seeks to examine school curricula worldwide, with a focus on the Middle East. Its methodology is based on the international standards determined by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

The institute is based at Hebrew University's Givat Ram campus.

This week's conference brings leading scholars from Israel, the US and Europe to examine prevailing trends in international education. On Wednesday, IMPACT-SE researchers will present country-specific research on school curricula in five Middle Eastern states – Israel, Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey and Iran.



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