



Executive Summary:

Palestinian Textbooks: From Arafat to Abbas and Hamas

**By
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For many years Palestinian schools in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip used textbooks published by the Jordanian and Egyptian authorities, respectively. Even under Israeli rule, between the years 1967-1994, those same books remained in use after having been "cleansed" of anti-Semitic and belligerent expressions. Following the transfer of power in the field of education in 1994 to the newly established Palestinian Authority (PA), it reintroduced the old, unrevised Jordanian and Egyptian books, stating at the same time – in response to Israeli complaints – that it would soon publish its own textbooks. Indeed, following the publishing of few experimental books during the 1990s, the PA in 2000 launched a schoolbook publication process that provided new books to two grades every year. With the publishing of the books for grades 11 and 12 in 2005 and 2006, the process was completed.

In the meantime, some political changes took place within the PA. In November 2004, PA founder and Chairman, Yasir Arafat, died and Mahmoud Abbas was elected in his stead. In early 2006, free parliamentary elections brought to power a new government led by Hamas, which had been an opposition movement until that time. As it happened, the books for grades 1-10 were all prepared and published under Yasir Arafat, while the books for grade 11 were written under his successor, Abbas, and the books for grade 12, under the Hamas government.

The PA schoolbooks for grades 11 and 12 were studied in the light of the educational fundamentals regarding the "other" and peace that existed in the PA textbooks for grades 1-10 published under the late Yasser Arafat. As shown in this study, these fundamentals deny the Jewish and Israeli "others" any legitimacy, demonize them, assign them exclusive responsibility for the Mideast conflict, avoid any expression that would openly advocate peace, and encourage instead violent struggle against them. These fundamentals, in their various manifestations, are spread throughout the Palestinian curriculum and are found in books for all grades, as is easily discernable in the quoted source material within this study.

The change in the PA leadership following the ascendancy of Mahmoud Abbas in late 2004 brought some change, not in the fundamentals themselves, but in some of their manifestations, implying a certain degree of readiness on the part of the new leadership to ease somewhat the rigid guidelines dictating non-recognition, demonization and violence. In themselves, these changes did not depart from the said fundamentals, but they provided some hope for further improvement in the future.

However, the formation of the Hamas-led government in early 2006 had a frustrating impact on these changes. If there were in 2005 glimpses of hope for a gradual improvement in the PA curriculum as far as attitudes to the "other" and to peace were concerned, they were nipped in the bud by the new government, as is reflected in the textbooks for grade 12 published under its control. The rigid and uncompromising approach toward Israel and the Jews on the one hand and the emphasis on a violent liberation struggle at the expense of peace advocacy on the other hand – both advocated by the PA founder, the late Yasir Arafat – hold firm. Thus, a unique historical opportunity for change within an ongoing project has been lost.

But there is still hope. First, the grade 11 books are still being used in the PA schools. Secondly, the PA can utilize the book reprint mechanism in order to introduce changes, though on a far smaller scale. In 2007 the PA conducted a reprint operation for most school textbooks, which was done mostly under the newly established authority of President Mahmoud Abbas following the governmental crisis with Hamas. Several changes have been discerned, most of which were minor, but there were some significant ones. For example, the 2007 edition of one of the books does not include a text that urged the students – in the 2000 edition – to glorify "the concept of martyrdom and martyrs." To be sure, there were other changes for worse, and the overall picture presented above still remains intact. But the PA has thus shown that improvement of its school curriculum is definitely possible.

It is the task of all peace-loving parties in the world to encourage the PA to pursue this course so that the Palestinian younger generation will have a better future.