

Between Sharia and Democracy: Islamic Education in North America – Brief IMPACT SE, March 15, 2016

Impact SE

Founded in 1998, The Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-SE) is the only interdisciplinary research organization that monitors and analyzes schoolbooks and curricula across the world with an eye to determining their compliance with UNESCO-defined standards on peace and tolerance. Based in Israel, IMPACT-SE draws on the research and guidance of leading scholars from the Middle East, Europe and North America. Previously, IMPACT-SE has conducted similar reviews of curricula materials in Egypt, Iran, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Tunisia

Scope of Report

IMPACT-SE first embarked on the study of Islamic and Arabic textbooks in Islamic schools in North America in 2009. At that time, 272 Muslim schools were identified in the United States and Canada. Among those, 168 taught pre-school through eighth grade, while eighty-four were high schools. Eleven of the 272 schools were exclusively weekend schools (usually operating at mosques and community centers on Sundays and Saturdays). Four of the 272 were Shiite-affiliated. Five schools offered both a regular and weekend school. The majority of schools stated that they taught their official state curricula and that Islamic studies and Arabic language studies were supplementary.¹ Since then, IMPACT-SE has obtained a sample of 152 textbooks and teacher's guides for these two subjects for the 2007–2011 academic years. After a preliminary study of textbooks of both Arabic language and Islamic studies, in order to discern attitudes toward the "Other" and toward peace and conflict,² it was decided to concentrate on Islamic studies.

¹ IMPACT-SE, *Report on the Mapping Phase of North American Muslim Schools*, July 2009.

² IMPACT-SE, *Islamic and Arabic Textbooks in North America: Preliminary Report*, December 2012.

Publishers

This report focuses on Islamic textbooks from five publishers, including the International Educational Foundation, Chicago and Skokie, Illinois (IQRA');³ the Islamic Services Foundation, Dallas, Texas (ISF); the Bureau of Islamic and Arabic Education of the Islamic Center of Southern California (hereafter, ICSC); Yahiya Emerick's *Student Textbook, Nooart, Inc. Richardson, Texas*; and the International Islamic Publishing House in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, written by Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips (henceforth, Bilal Philips or BP). Guidelines for this current study were initially based on IMPACT-SE's standards regarding the promotion of peace and tolerance in education,⁴ but progressed over time to include other issues dealing with Muslim education in the West.

Some General Findings

- All five curricula are based on orthodox sharia Islam.
- Attitudes in Islamic textbooks vary according to publisher. The most popular textbooks, published by IQRA' and ISF and those published by ICSC and Emerick, demonstrate much more tolerance (as defined by the UNESCO Declaration of Principles on Tolerance),⁵ than Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips' textbook series, which we estimate are taught in about half a dozen schools.⁶
- ICSC and Emerick are more political, the latter in its vision of a future global Islamic state and the former in encouraging political activism now.
- The Bilal Philips curriculum does not comply with UNESCO standards of peace and tolerance. It teaches that Islam should be imposed by bringing the full force of the (Muslim) state into play. Textbooks published in America are generally freer of wording, imagery, and ideologies that would likely create prejudices and misconceptions, stereotypes, misunderstandings, mistrust, racial hatred, religious bigotry, as well as any sort of hatred or contempt for others.

³ See IQRA' website: <http://iqrafoundation.com/>

⁴ See: <http://www.impact-se.org/research/methodology.html>

⁵ http://www.unesco.org/webworld/peace_library/UNESCO/HRIGHTS/124-129.HTM.

⁶ Another text series, *Learning and Living Islam* by the Islamic Center of Southern California (ICSC), Bureau of Islamic and Arabic Education (BIAE), where Bilal Philips serves in an advisory capacity, was later added to this survey.

- Textbooks, with the exception of Bilal Philips' *Islamic Studies*, are generally respectful toward the "Other" culture and ways of life, particularly monotheistic religions.
- The textbooks do not glorify war or promote violence as a means of resolving conflicts. They do however teach about military *jihad* and episodes of past acts of Islamic heroism amid sophisticated politico-military strategies. Historical theological disputes, mainly with Christianity, and early conflicts, mainly with Jewish tribes, are included.
- While Israel is presented at times as a usurper or referred to as "Palestine," no options are presented to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. (The historical roots of Jews, Israelites, Jerusalem and the Holy Land are taught, but not in the context of modern Israel.)
- All books are race-sensitive and with the exception of the Bilal Philips books, also gender-sensitive, presupposing separate roles and ignoring sexual orientation.
- The IQRA' curriculum encourages teachers to present the notion of competing narratives among nations, national groups and monotheistic religions and to cultivate awareness of them as well as the ability to understand and explain their origins

Executive Summary

Four out of the five curricula are published in the United States; one is published in Saudi Arabia for teaching in North America.

The US-published curricula, in many ways, encourage good citizenship and partnership in American economic and public life. Within this context, loyalty to sharia Islam translates into the inculcation of discipline, brotherhood and support for Muslims and, at times, "Muslim causes."

The five Islamic curricula examined in this research are based on orthodox sharia (Islamic law) and encourage brotherhood and commitment to the worldwide Muslim *Ummah* (community/nation).

Despite the acceptance of life in Western society, all of the curricula delineate a clear—some Muslims would say healthy—"us versus them" paradigm rejecting secular or liberal Islam, and the materialism often prevalent throughout North American culture.

More overt criticism toward America is found in the two least popular curricula.

All five share particular biases against Israel. There are lost opportunities to advance the huge potential of Islam for peace and reconciliation.

Nevertheless, those curricula published in America generally remain friendly to Judaism and Christianity as monotheistic faiths, though some suspicion exists toward theological aspects of the latter—and ancient antipathies toward the former.

Attitudes toward other religions or atheism are less favorable.

All-in-all, these curricula teach respect toward non-Muslim neighbors, emphasizing Islamic principles that basically correspond with the shared American and Canadian values of family, business, hard work, sharing, justice and collaboration.

Conclusions

Education is one of the most effective means of promoting tolerance. Education programs, according to the UNESCO Declaration of Principles on Tolerance, should contribute to the development of understanding and tolerance among individuals as well as among ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups and nations.⁷ The curricula and textbooks for Islamic studies surveyed in this report, with the noted exceptions of the Bilal Philips textbooks, generally subscribe to this notion.

The most widespread textbooks and curricula published in the United States (IQRA' and ISF) are, for the most part, free of imagery and ideologies that would likely generate prejudice or contempt for others.

- Muslims in America are not characterized as being in cultural conflict with American or Western society. The Islamic way of life is generally defined in terms of its inherent value rather than through a negation of the American way of life. Students are taught that Islam permits having non-Muslim friends, business partners and wives, as long as they are not hostile to Islam and share similar values. They are encouraged to maintain good relationships and to be respectful, pleasant, and kind toward non-Muslims. Students are

⁷ http://www.unesco.org/webworld/peace_library/UNESCO/HRIGHTS/124-129.HTM, article 4.

taught that they are a part of the Muslim *Ummah*, a transnational worldwide Muslim community (or nation); however, they are not called upon to support any Islamic political cause except occasionally and indirectly, the Palestinian cause.

- Textbooks do not glorify or promote violent action, but rather emphasize that Islam is a path of peace. It is explained that *jihad* has many meanings (of which military action is only one, although central and binding). Students are not called upon to join such actions. Textbooks promote non-violent conflict resolution and students are repeatedly instructed to control their anger and avoid conflict.
- The ICSC and Emerick texts are more political, the latter in its vision of a future global Islamic state and the former in encouraging political activism now.
- Israel is presented at times as a usurper (or alternately referred to as Palestine); however, violence is not suggested as an option to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. While textbooks do not deal with peace processes, the IQRA' curriculum encourages the notion of competing narratives among conflicting national groups (including Muslim), nations and other religious groups, to cultivate awareness of them as well as the ability to understand and explain their origins.
- Textbooks are generally respectful toward other religions. Similarities with Christianity and Judaism are noted and historical conflicts are downplayed, but nevertheless recounted. (Theological differences and ancient antipathies are recalled). Differences with other religions (e.g., Hinduism) are also noted, at times respectfully but more often disapprovingly.
- Textbooks are generally gender-sensitive. They express the notion that women and men are equal in their humanity, but with different and complementary roles. The issue of sexual orientation is ignored.
- The *hijab* is not imposed on women but donned as the result of free choice to follow God's law. It does not hinder a woman's personal growth but rather facilitates it as it requires men to relate to a woman's mind and not her body.
- Women are indeed portrayed as educated and working as businesswomen and professionals; however, having a career is not their most important contribution to society, as compared to motherhood.

The Bilal Philips Curriculum

Unlike the IQRA', ISF, ICSC and Emerick curricula, Bilal Philips' *Islamic Studies* textbooks are *not* in line with the UNESCO Declaration of Principles on Tolerance.

- Islam and the West are presented as binary opposites. The West is associated with a variety of social ills and immorality. Western attitudes toward personal freedom and modern child-rearing methods that encourage free will and expression are denounced.
- Islam and Muslims are portrayed as being under constant threat and thus forced to fight, through *jihad*. *Jihad* fighting in the path of Allah is the highest sacrifice for the sake of one's belief in God. However, Philips does not specifically call for *jihad* and rejects all forms of suicide.
- Judaism and Christianity are viewed antagonistically. They are not truly monotheistic and their scriptures are distorted. But Philips also sees "others" among Muslims; as to that, the curriculum mainly denounces Sufi beliefs and practices. It not only rejects the worshiping of saints but also favors the demolition of tombs and mausoleums like the Taj Mahal.
- The Bilal Philips curriculum teaches that Islam should be imposed by bringing the full force of the (Muslim) state into play. Likewise, males of the household should wield similar power over a woman as a mother over her children. The *hijab* is Allah's law and must also be imposed. Islam prescribes that a thief's hand should be cut off and this holds true even for the minimum amount of a (stolen) quarter dinar (app. 25–35 cents)
- Men and women are of intrinsically different worth (men are superior to women).

There remain unanswered questions that are beyond the scope of this study. What impact will the curriculum have on the large majority of future generations of American Muslims? Is the teaching of sharia Islam compatible with constitutional democracies, given that it is political and includes *jihad*, rejection of liberal and secular Muslims, and solidarity with the worldwide *ummah*?

As noted, IQRA' and ISF textbooks were found to be the most popular in North American Muslim schools. Second, the attitudes expressed by these two publishers are almost identical to those expressed by the majority of American Muslims surveyed by the Pew Research Center in 2007, 2011 and 2015. Finally, as we explain in our policy recommendations, we believe that the overall

tone of the curricula warrants an openhearted conversation on the role of Islam in North America. This conversation should include the potential of Muslim Americans and Canadians to contribute to the people and culture of their respective countries; but also to ask substantive questions.

Policy Recommendations

Other than the Bilal Philips curriculum, our main conclusion overall is that Muslim education in North America includes many positive elements, is flexible and *generally* tolerant. The openness toward Judaism (but not Israel) and Christianity as well as certain American values are encouraging and justify conversation and dialogue.

The following topics may form part of that conversation, with a view toward inclusion in the curricula:

- * The contribution of Islamic civilization to the US and Canada.
- * A deeper discussion of the meaning of *ummah*; North America and the *ummah*.
- * Sharia law and secular constitutional governments.
- * The extent of commitment to democratic values and the spirit of democracy.
- * Should *jihad*—including military (violent) *jihad*—be part of any curriculum in North America?
- * Should not the curricula unconditionally reject violent *jihad* and work more emphatically to discourage participation in *jihadi* activities around the world?
- * How all of these curricula can expand their teachings to include more discussion and empathy for "others," such as secular and Sufi Muslims, non-Muslims, non-monotheists, LGTB and other minorities?
- * Should a more balanced view of Islam in history be included in the curriculum?
- * Applying the teachings of Islam to enhance—rather than oppose—reconciliation and the acceptance of the Jewish state in the Holy Land.
- * Can the curricula promote tolerance and mutual respect among the various branches, interpretations and worldviews within Islam?