

Preface to report, credits and methodology

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Preface

It is gratifying to present this pioneering research on religious textbooks being used in Islamic parochial schools in North America. The Islam taught in these schools is orthodox Sunni and strictly adheres to sharia (religious law). While these represent mainstream orthodox Islam, one should take note that there exist many dimensions of Islam (e.g., liberal-secular, Sufi, Shiite, Alawi, Ahmadi) throughout the world. Our researchers studied these textbooks against the background of IMPACT-SE's UNESCO-derived standards for peace and tolerance in school education. The main findings suggest that the curricula and textbooks for Islamic studies surveyed in this report, with the exception of one curriculum, generally abide by these standards. Still, methodological issues linger on and we recommend further research—and public debate—on the role of Islamic education in North America. Certainly such a debate should include the contributions of the various forms of Islam to the cultures in which they exist. At the time of this research, there were approximately 244 Islamic schools in the US compared to twenty-eight in Canada. Since the Canadian schools essentially mimic the Islamic educational curricula found in US schools, this report will focus mainly on Islamic education as practiced in the US.

Main Findings

The most widespread Islamic textbooks published in the United States are generally free of imagery and ideologies that would likely generate prejudice or contempt for others. Muslims in America are not specifically shown to be in cultural conflict with American or Western society. The Islamic way of life is generally defined in terms of its inherent value rather than by negating American lifestyles. Students are taught that Islam permits having non-Muslim friends, business partners and wives (albeit no husbands), 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.

As for *jihad*, while teaching that this principle often means military action, i.e., "fighting hostile and 'evil' enemies" for the sake of Islam, it is also explained that *jihad* has many other meanings as well. Students are not called upon to join any *jihad* war, but they learn that one possible expression of *jihad* is utilizing finances—among other things—"to support the 'Muslim army'." Textbooks promote non-violent conflict resolution and students are repeatedly instructed to control their anger and avoid conflict.

Not that any of the US-published curricula avoid the various political dimensions of Islam. Students are taught that they are proud members of a transnational Muslim community (the Muslim *Ummah*) and are expected to show solidarity and brotherhood with other Muslims. The Islamic Center of Southern California (ICSC) educates for political and social activism (including the demonization of Israel) while Yahiya Emerick's *Student Textbook* (in association with the Islamic Foundation of North America, IFNA) passionately expresses views on various political issues affecting Islam. This includes a step-by-step vision of a future Islamic state led by a male *Khalifa* (Caliph), "in charge of establishing Islam and justice in the Earth." The two most popular curricula, Islamic Services Foundation (ISF) and the International Education Foundation (IQRA') do not call upon students to support any particular Islamic political cause except, indirectly, that of the Palestinians. As such, Israel is depicted at times as a usurper or referred to as "Palestine"; yet, neither peace nor violence is presented as a solution to the long-standing conflict. And though the historical ties of the Israelites or Jews to the Holy Land, Jerusalem and the Temple are acknowledged, there is no context of the modern Israel.

These curricula do not glorify or promote violent action, but rather emphasize that Islam is a path of peace. The IQRA' curriculum encourages teachers to present the notion of competing narratives among conflicting nations and national and religious groups, to cultivate awareness of them as well as the ability to understand and explain their origins. These Muslim-American textbooks are generally respectful toward Christianity and Judaism. Historical conflicts are downplayed, although the theological differences with Islam are fully explained—with Islam depicted as the only genuine religion. Still, differences with other religions are treated in a mostly respectful manner. These textbooks teach that men and women are equal in their humanity, but with different and complementary roles. Students are taught that Islamic dress for

women is voluntary and does not hinder personal growth but rather facilitates it. Women are indeed portrayed as educated and working as businesswomen and professionals. Nevertheless, motherhood, rather than having a career, is considered a woman's most important contribution to society.

Unlike the American-published textbooks, Bilal Philips' *Islamic Studies* textbooks are *not* in line with the UNESCO Declaration of Principles on Tolerance. These books are published in Saudi Arabia but are taught in North America.

In the Bilal Philips textbooks, **Islam** and the **West** are presented as **binary opposites**. Here, 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 individual expression are denounced. Islam and Muslims are portrayed as being under constant threat and thus forced to fight. *Jihad* is understood as fighting along the path of Allah, and is the highest sacrifice one can make. However, the Bilal Philips curriculum does not specifically call for action through violent *jihad*.

This curriculum presents Judaism and Christianity as antagonistic "others." The two religions are depicted as not truly monotheistic since their scriptures are believed to be distorted. But Philips also sees such "others" among *Muslims*. The textbooks denounce Sufi beliefs and practices, reject saint worship and favor the destruction of tombs and mausoleums (such as India's Taj Mahal).

The Bilal-Philips curriculum clearly promotes imposing Islam on others; one's personal choice is considered immaterial. Islamic authorities must bring the full force of the state into play. Students are instructed that males of the household should wield similar power over a woman as a mother over her children; that the *hijab* (veil/cover) is Allah's law and must be imposed; that men and women have intrinsically different value (with men seen as superior to women). Children are taught that Islam requires a thief's hand to be cut off for stealing.

In short, the IQRA' and ISF textbooks were found to be the most popular in North American Muslim schools. The *generally* tolerant 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 and again, in 2011.

Methodological Dilemmas, Credits and Preliminary Thoughts

The *Islamic Textbooks in North America* research project began in a straightforward manner. We assumed it would progress as another typical IMPACT-SE curriculum-monitoring enterprise for which the institute has gained much expertise. A brief look at IMPACT-SE's former research projects will show one common denominator: that they cover the curricula of Middle Eastern nation states (e. g., Iran, Israel, Saudi-Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia), or semi-independent regimes, such as the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. All of these countries and entities feature one curriculum published (or supervised) by their corresponding ministries of education. Over the past two decades, IMPACT-SE research projects have exposed, with a few exceptions, the systematic hate education prevalent across the Middle East. This violence, while orchestrated by various states and groups throughout the region and beyond, draws on years of hate education against minority groups (such as Christians, Bahai'is and Jews) and the West. The all-too-often result is indiscriminate killing, including genocide or ethnic cleansing against secular and religious peoples such as the Yazidis, Shiites, Christians and even Sunnis.

Once seen only as a minority perspective on the gravity of the situation, some recognition of the importance of proper education has now gained more traction in the region. Since the 2009 crushing of the peaceful protests in Iran and the post-2011 uprisings and wars in the region, more and more Middle-Easterners understand that negligence of appropriate education has been one of the chief causes of the widespread violence and misery conducted in the name of Islam. Indeed, there is little doubt that we are experiencing an all-out *educational emergency* in the Middle East.

In addition to curricula, IMPACT-SE also reviews semi-official children's magazines, such as those of Hamas and the Palestinian Authority; while belonging to school activities *outside* the

written curricula, such materials often convey even more pernicious content than found in the more structured curricula textbooks.

All of these projects eventually led to the development of a unique groundbreaking methodology: the IMPACT-SE-UNESCO-Derived Standards. This methodology attempts to provide an objective measure for monitoring how a given national educational system handles "others," with which the country or the semi-independent regime have conflict—be it historical or current.

However, the present research was not focused on the Middle East but on North America. The report does not cover a country-*versus*-country conflict; rather it monitors the education of a minority living in the democratic West. Likewise, the educational systems monitored are not part of the public school system. These differences proved to be methodologically challenging.

Since the launch of the project, it was clear that *Islamic Textbooks in North America* faced a difficult challenge in locating Islamic schools and identifying the textbooks being used. Three curricula were initially examined: ISF, IQRA' and Bilal Philips. After the preparatory research, initiated by Dr. Yohanan Manor and conducted by Dr. Sarel Birnbaum, the books were monitored separately by two teams of researchers. The first team, supervised by Dr. Shelley Elkayam (Goettingen University), included visiting graduate students from American universities, including Adam Zeidan (University of Chicago's Center for Middle Eastern Studies), monitoring Arabic; and Mingyan Ophelia Ma (Harvard University, School of Education) who reviewed the English texts. Chris Khoury (Michigan State University) also contributed to this team's findings.

The second team consisted of Prof. Emmanuel Sivan (Hebrew University) as supervisor and Dr. Noga Efrati (Hebrew University) as a researcher covering both English and Arabic. Dr. Efrati wrote one of the final versions of the present report using our IMPACT-SE standards. She also compared the accuracy of the first team's findings with her research and found that both teams reached similar conclusions.

Two additional publishers were later added to the project. One curriculum, *Learning and Living Islam*, published by the Islamic Center of Southern California (ICSC), was researched by Mr. Felix Konovich (IMPACT-SE). Additionally, Prof. Hatice Dogan from Selcuk University in Konya, Turkey, provided commentary on parts of that curriculum. The final curriculum was based on Yahiya Emerick's *Student Textbook*, published by Noorart, Inc. (Richardson, Texas), in association with the Islamic Foundation of North America (IFNA), (Flushing NY) and was researched by Dr. Eldad J. Pardo (Hebrew University and IMPACT-SE). Finally, David Byer contributed to the process of assembling these diversified materials and copy-edited this report.

Apart from the complexity of researching five distinct curricula used within North America, we were left with a methodological problem relating to the application of our IMPACT-SE approach. As mentioned, these standards were developed for the study of national curricula in a conflict environment and not for parochial schools within large democracies. The challenge for us in studying Islamic education in North America pertains to Islam being a system of faith that includes a political dimension. Orthodox Islam, by definition, aspires to establish an Islamic political system and has no commitment to constitutional democracy, nation states or separation of religion. In truth, Islam as portrayed within the curricula, defines itself as an *ummah*, often translated as nation. Our dilemma as a monitoring institute then, is in attempting to reconcile this paradox.

The IMPACT-SE methodology has, to date, purposefully not covered the question of democracy in the Middle East; our goal has been to enhance education leading to peace and friendship between nations without dealing with their respective political systems. Therefore, our current research standards, while covering a plethora of important and relevant issues such as attitudes toward the religious "other" or the status of women and behavior in a multi-ethnic society, has not addressed what may be considered the main question for North Americans: Is the Islamic education taught within the examined curricula *compatible* with the constitutional frameworks espoused within the United States and Canada.

These IMPACT-SE standards may well help in identifying the extent to which a curriculum immunizes students from radicalization. And, there is the question of allegiance to the country in

which one is a citizen. While this domain is not covered directly by our UNESCO-derived standards, the following excerpt taken from an ISF textbook illustrates our predicament:

Sometimes, struggling on God's path requires fighting hostile and evil enemies. This military *jihad* or struggle must be always done under the official leadership of the Muslim society. *Jihad* or struggle on Allah's path must only be done to keep peace and justice on earth.

Learning Islam, Level One [Sixth Grade], Textbook, p. D51.

The text explains that a military *jihad* "must be always done under the official leadership of the Muslim society" and that a *jihad* war can be launched against "hostile and evil enemies." Yet, while many current *jihad* wars throughout the world are directed against the United States and its allies, the American-published Islamic textbooks do not explain whether the US is included among these "evil enemies"—or not. What a dilemma for North-American sixth graders learning under this system! Should they join *jihad* wars abroad or even at home? Does the obligation to bear arms on behalf of one's country supersede the religious duty to launch a *jihad* war against, say, America or Canada? And by the way, who forms the official leadership of the Muslim society? Moreover, students learn that "Obedience to Allah should be our primary goal, even if it means disobeying our parents." (*Elementary Curriculum for Grades 1–6, 1996, p. 200.*)

So what if someone tells them that Allah wants *jihad* now?

It seems appropriate here to quote another excerpt, this time from the Oath of Allegiance taken by all immigrants who wish to become US citizens:

I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law.¹

¹ Official Website of the Department of Homeland Security, <http://www.uscis.gov/us-citizenship/naturalization-test/naturalization-oath-allegiance-united-states-america>. Accessed June 20, 2015.

(It should be noted that there have been recent controversial changes of wording and requirements in the US Oath of Allegiance for new immigrants based on religious exemption, expected to benefit Muslims, predominantly.)²

American Muslim children are also taught that "financial *jihad*" includes giving money to support the "Muslim army." Historically, the wars of the Prophet against the Jewish tribes (of Medina) also raise some concern, as do numerous depictions of the military history of the Islamic *Ummah*. While these certainly comprise a valid part of the Islamic narrative, one may question whether from the entire history of a rich Islamic heritage, there are no better choices for North American fifth graders than presenting Islam as a warring religion (and the various stratagems that entails).

Perhaps the most important question to be asked is whether these curricula foster a large community that might become susceptible to future indoctrination and recruitment by radical and imperialist Islamism. Does and should the North American curricula feature sufficient antidotes against the dangerous wave of Islamism currently emanating from the Middle East?

For this project we must leave these questions largely unanswered. However, we invited two guests, David Byer of the US and Aharon Mayne from Canada, to write short personal comments on the report reflecting their views and experience in education and minority education within their respective countries.

IMPACT-SE is currently developing a new set of standards aimed at evaluating educational curricula in settings of religious and ethnic minorities. These standards will provide peace and tolerance guidelines that will allow us to monitor educational curricula with respect to the rights and obligations of both majority populations and minorities within any given location or region.

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² <http://www.uscis.gov/news/alerts/uscis-clarifies-eligibility-requirements-modifications-oath-allegiance>