

Study says Iran textbooks urge martyrdom

By Thomas Wagner
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Textbooks used in Iran's schools are instilling students with hatred toward the West, especially the United States, and urging them to become "martyrs" in a global holy war against countries perceived to be enemies of Islam, a new study says.

An Iranian human rights activist, Ghazal Omid, praised the findings, saying they prove hard-liners in Iran are using the books to turn children into "ticking bombs."

However, a U.S. academic who specializes in Iran and Islam, and a former Iranian teacher said they believe the textbooks are a reflection of Iran's history and its deep suspicions of the West, not an effort to turn students into terrorists.

The books emphasize the teachings of the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and repeatedly refer to the United States as the "Great Satan" and to Israel as "the regime that occupies Jerusalem," said the study by the Israel-based Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace.

Omid, who fled Iran and wrote "Living in Hell," an autobiography about her experiences there, urged changes to textbooks in Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East.

"I am an Iranian, a practicing Muslim woman, who sees it as her responsibility to stand up to hard-line Muslims who use Islam to brainwash children of that faith, in particular Iranian children, who the Iranian government is turning into ticking bombs," she said.

Omid, who lives in Canada, spoke at a news conference in London on Wednesday with study author Aron Groiss, director of research at the Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace.

Calls to Iranian officials for comment were not immediately answered.

The study analyzed 95 textbooks and 20 teacher's guides used at Iran's state-run schools. Groiss said the curriculum "reflects Iran's belligerent intentions which should sound the alarm to anyone who is committed to peace and stability in the world."

The study noted, however, that Western culture "is not rejected in principle" in the books and that the attitude to other religions is generally "not hostile." The books include discussion sections on respecting other religions and don't say people should be forced to convert to Islam.

Shireen T. Hunter, a specialist on Islam and Iran at the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University in Washington, said it was a mistake to portray Iranian textbooks as manuals for creating terrorists.

"In some ways, they simply reflect the deep distrust of Third World countries about the policies and motivations of the great powers, which they see as neocolonialist," she said.

"When such textbooks promote martyrdom they are referring to the sacrifices needed to defend Iran against foreign enemies as Iraq during the Iraq-Iran war."

In Tehran, Mostafa Mirzaian, an Iranian freelance political researcher who worked as a high school teacher in Iran in the 1980s, agreed.

"It is natural that a government, formed after an anti-West revolution and an eight-year war with Iraq, inserts such items in school textbooks," he said.

"But it has no remarkable effect. You saw when American wrestlers came to Iran for a competition in January; Iranian teenagers warmly welcomed them. Also, you don't see any attacks on the 25,000-member Jewish community in Iran."

Textbooks used in Iranian elementary schools included stories and poems that hailed martyrs such as those who died in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, Groiss said. Another picture book for 10-year-olds provides a basic acquaintance with weaponry, explosives and military tactics, he said.

The study quotes one passage from a book for 10th graders as saying: "During the eight years of Holy Defense (the Iran-Iraq war), more than 500,000 school students were sent to the fronts. 36,000 martyrs, thousands of missing-in-action, invalids and liberated (prisoners of war) of this sacrificing section were offered to the Islamic Revolution."

A passage from a book for eighth graders says God gives "eternal Paradise to anyone who becomes a martyr in the cause of God. He considers martyrdom a great victory."

The United States is referred to as the "Great Satan," the "World Devourer" and the "Arrogant One" in the books, and Israel is shown on maps as "Occupied Palestine."

The study is the latest to call for textbook reform in the Islamic world. Such efforts are under way or planned in Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait to remove slurs against non-Muslims or promotions of extremism and terrorism. Israeli textbooks have undergone revisions since the 1990s to remove anti-Arab bias and present a more balanced account of Palestinian views and aspirations.

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