



Egypt Enhances its Peace Education, One Step at a Time

An IMPACT Brief



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It is well known that textbooks revision is generally regarded as a hot-button issue, one liable to spark widespread discord over competing historical narratives and over the norms that define a given society's identity, goals and values. Yet Israeli army radio news item of February 16, 2016, noting that the Egyptian government had altered the way in which the peace with Israel is presented in a geography and history textbook, attracted little attention in Egypt. The country's major newspapers downplayed the item, and government officials refrained from commenting on it.

To compare: when reports surfaced in the Jordanian press, a year and a half ago, about changing portrayals of Israel in local textbooks, the news generated fiery debate, rife with criticism and denial, in the political and media arenas. The reason behind the apparent lack of public interest in the case of Egypt is probably a dual one: Firstly, we can assume that the Egyptian regime preferred to maintain a low profile on the issue, particularly in the media outlets subject to its control, so as to avoid unnecessary embarrassment. Beyond that, the change of tack in the new textbook's presentation of the peace with Israel, compared with textbooks from the Mubarak era, consists mainly of semantic nuances – though some of these are of great importance.

The new textbook is entitled *The Geography of the Arab World and the History of Modern Egypt*. The book was published by the Egyptian Education Ministry, and is intended for ninth graders in Semester II of the 2015-2016 school year. Before Egyptian pupils get to the unit on the peace with Israel, they first study two units that provide them with a conceptual framework centered around “Egypt and the Palestinian Problem” and “The October 1973 War.”

Based on these sections, it is clear that the book remains largely true to the narratives taught to Egyptian pupils under Mubarak. The land of Israel is conceptualized, historically and morally, as a land that was stolen from the original Arab inhabitants of Palestine, while the State of Israel is depicted as a country born in sin, not as the realization of a legitimate national movement. According to the historical narrative presented, the Arab armies' invasion of the Land of Israel in 1948 was meant to “deliver the Palestinian Arabs from the Jews' aggression,” while the Arabs' defeat in that war is attributed to Jewish disregard of a truce in the fighting. The 1956 and 1967 wars with Israel, for their part, revealed the colonialist nature of Zionism and its plot to spread “from the Nile to the Euphrates” and wrest control over the Arab world.

The 1973 war serves the new textbook as a kind of historical – and conceptual – bridge to understanding Egypt's move from conflict to peace with its longtime Israeli enemy. In the unit devoted to it, the war is understood to have erupted due to Israel's rejection of all of Egypt's peace overtures, and to have brought about a “turning point in the Arab-Israeli conflict once it was demonstrated [to Israel] that the logic of power would not bring [it] peace.” The war shattered the myth of the IDF as an undefeatable army and made a mockery of the IDF combat doctrine. The Israeli Minister of Defense, who goes unnamed, is quoted in the unit as conceding

the war's lesson, namely that "We Israelis have to accept that we are not the sole military power in the Middle East and that there are new facts with which we have to live." In this representation, Israel was forced, in the wake of the 1973 war, to give up its original regional aspirations – a development that paved the way for Sadat's peace initiative.

In addition to these basic ideas, the textbook includes a number of new adjustments and emphases, of both content and form, that accord with Egypt's agenda in the el-Sisi era. First, the book more resolutely and explicitly endorses the peace treaty with Israel than did earlier texts; preserving the treaty is presented as a necessary prerequisite to Egypt's economic revitalization. The advantages of the peace with Israel that the new book enumerates include: "maintaining the Arab countries' internal stability," "advancing economic and social development and upgrading the state's infrastructures;" "encouraging Arab and foreign capital investment in Egypt and in the other Arab states;" and "increasing tourism movement that will boost the national income and supply foreign currency needed for existing needs and for construction of national projects that will foster the development of Egypt and of the Arab region as a whole."

Secondly, Israel appears in the new book as a legitimate peace partner. Prime Minister Begin's face, in an unprecedented move, is shown alongside that of President Sadat in a photograph of the White House treaty-signing ceremony. The treaty provisions that Egyptian pupils are expected to learn include calling for the establishment of "friendly relations – political, economic and cultural – between the two states," in contrast to the "normal-relations" locution that had been employed in earlier textbooks. Thirdly, the Palestinian problem is less prominently addressed than in the past. While a history textbook published in 2002 devoted 32 pages to the conflict with Israel and only three pages to the ensuing peace, the current book significantly alters the ratio: the conflict is accorded 12 pages, while the peace gets four.

These changes seem to be aligned with broader curricular reforms that the el-Sisi administration has been advancing in recent years. These include the removal of religious texts liable to encourage extremism, violence or racism, and the teaching of tolerance in their stead. One controversial decision taken by the Egyptian government in 2015 was that of omitting the biography of Saladin, liberator of Jerusalem from the Crusaders, out of concern that it would encourage violence. In February 2016 the Egyptian president instructed the Education Ministry to establish a new committee to re-examine the country's humanities curricula, including those for Arabic language, history, geography, philosophy, heritage and psychology.

In addition to these general trends, the changes are likely an outcome of the reinforced status of the peace with Israel, as a strategic national asset for Egypt whose cultivation and deepening are consistent with the government's current economic-security agenda. The regime's focus on such urgent domestic threats as poverty, unemployment and jihadist terrorism on the Sinai Peninsula

is reflected in its relegation of foreign affairs, including the conflict with Israel, to the margins of the public agenda.

To conclude, a look at the new history and geography textbook indicates the presence of some positive changes regarding the peace with Israel, compared to comparable texts from the Mubarak era. However, we must qualify this by noting that so far only one book has been changed, in one particular year; it is too early to announce a major turning-point in the Egyptian educational ethos. In a hegemonic educational culture characterized by deeply-rooted outlooks and widely-assimilated historical narratives, change is slow and naturally requires persistence over many years. Small, measured steps in this direction can accumulate over time to form a new and better reality by shaping more peaceful attitudes among the young generations in Egypt. However, these changes are not taking place in a vacuum, and the internal developments going on within Egypt, as well as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict outside it, may be expected to exert a positive or negative impact in terms of furthering or halting current trends. In the meantime, while these developments are highly important, it's only one step forward on a long road.

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The IMPACT-se Methodology

IMPACT-se's research utilizes a content analysis research method to examine textbooks according to the following criteria (a condensed version of UNESCO's standards for peace and tolerance in school education):¹

1. **RESPECT:** The curriculum should promote tolerance, understanding and respect toward the "Other," his or her culture, achievements, values and way of life.²
2. **INDIVIDUAL OTHER:** The curriculum should foster personal attachment toward the "Other" as an individual, his or her desire to be familiar, loved and appreciated.³
3. **NO HATE:** The curriculum should be free of wording, imagery and ideologies likely to create prejudices, misconceptions, stereotypes, misunderstandings, mistrust, racial hatred, religious bigotry and national hatred, as well as any other form of hatred or contempt for other groups or peoples.⁴
4. **PEACEMAKING:** The curriculum should develop capabilities for non-violent conflict resolution and promote peace.⁵
5. **UNBIASED INFORMATION:** Educational materials (textbooks, workbooks, teachers' guides, maps, illustrations, aids) should be up-to-date, accurate, complete, balanced and unprejudiced, and use equal standards to promote mutual knowledge and understanding between different peoples.⁶

¹ The methodology was initiated by Yohanan Manor. This is an updated version of the standards prepared by Eldad J. Pardo, Jean-Claude Nidam and Shimon Shetreet (May 2014). <http://www.impact-se.org/methodology/>

² As defined in the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance Proclaimed and signed by Member States of UNESCO on November 16, 1995, Articles 1, 4.2. See also the UN Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding Between Peoples (1965), Principles I, III. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial and religious groups and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

³ The goal of education for peace is the development of universally recognized values in an individual, regardless of different socio-cultural contexts. See Ibid., Article 6. See also, on exchanges between youth, the UN Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples (1965), Principles IV, V.

⁴ Based on Ibid., Articles III.6, IV.7 and VII.39; and on the Integrated Framework for Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy, approved by the General Conference of UNESCO at its twenty-eighth session, Paris, November 1995, Article 18.2.

⁵ Based on the Integrated Framework for Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy, approved by the General Conference of UNESCO at its twenty-eighth session, Paris, November 1995, Article 9; and on the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance proclaimed and signed by member states of UNESCO on November 16, 1995, Article 5.

⁶ Based on UNESCO recommendation concerning education for international understanding, cooperation and peace and education relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms, adopted by the General Conference at its eighteenth session, Paris, November 19, 1974, Article V.14.

6. **GENDER:** The curriculum should foster equality and mutual respect between women and men. It should refrain from stereotyped gender roles.⁷

7. **SOUND PROSPERITY and COOPERATION:** The curriculum should educate for sound and sustainable economic conduct and preservation of the environment for future generations. It should encourage regional and local cooperation to that effect.⁸

⁷ The preamble to the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance proclaimed and signed by member states of UNESCO on November 16, 1995, notes the Convention on the Elimination of Any Form of Discrimination against Women and emphasizes respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to gender.

⁸ Based on UNESCO recommendation concerning education for international understanding, cooperation and peace and education relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms, adopted by the General Conference at its eighteenth session, Paris, November 19, 1974, Articles III.6, and IV.7. On the imperative for developing “systematic and rational tolerance teaching methods that will address the cultural, social, economic, political and religious sources of intolerance,” see the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance proclaimed and signed by member states of UNESCO on November 16, 1995, Article 4.2. On education for international cooperation, see also the UN Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples (1965), Principle II.