Peace, Tolerance and the Palestinian “Other” in Israeli Textbooks

Executive Summary

Yael Teff-Seker

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The following is a brief summary of a study conducted by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se), based on an examination of the Israeli formal education system’s attitudes toward Palestinians, the Palestinian nationality and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The study focused on the textbooks studied in the Israeli state and state-religious education systems, approved and recommended by the Israeli Ministry of Education for 2009–2012.¹

**Sample**

The study sample includes 149 textbooks approved by the Israeli Ministry of Education for the Jewish state and state-religious sectors, for grades 1–12 for 2009–2012 (5770–5772 according to the Jewish calendar), as shown in the following chart:

The textbooks chosen for analysis belong to six major academic subjects or disciplines: Hebrew language and literature, history, geography, civics, Jewish and Bible studies and Arabic language (for the Jewish sector), as shown in the following chart:

1 This includes books that were published prior to 2009 but appeared on the list of recommended textbooks for the years 2009–2012.
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Method
The study’s aim is to examine whether the Israeli education program measures up with international standards in the field of peace education and the establishment of a culture of peace, and in particular: what contents and messages regarding peace with the Palestinian people and tolerance towards the Palestinian “Other” does the Israeli educational program teach Israeli children in the Jewish state and state-religious sectors. For this purpose, IMPACT-se has adopted criteria developed according to UNESCO resolutions and recommendations regarding peace and tolerance education.

Background
Several researchers in this field have previously described Israeli textbooks as a tool to advance a collective ethnocentric Zionist narrative while promoting hostility, stereotypes and prejudice toward Palestinians, stating that the Israeli educational curriculum has damaged students’ attitudes toward Palestinians and any Israeli-Palestinian peace agreements. However, almost all of these researchers have also noted that since the 1990s, Israeli textbooks have improved their messages regarding the Arab, Palestinian and Muslim “Other,” and that there had been progress toward more balanced and objective descriptions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially in history and civics textbooks.

In the past, IMPACT-SE performed a large-scale comprehensive study of 565 (2000–2002) Israeli textbooks for grades 1–12. The findings showed that in regard to Palestinians, the state and state-religious Israeli education has shown efforts to remove stereotypes, advance the values of peace and tolerance, improve the understanding of the national (Arab/Palestinian) “Other” and nurture mutual respect and non-violent conflict resolution between the two sides.

Results
The results of the (2009–2012) study show that despite the deterioration of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in the past decade, Israeli textbooks continue to foster the idea that peace with Palestinians is both desirable and possible—though also complicated and difficult to achieve. Additionally, textbooks and segments containing material that could damage peace and tolerance education were removed from the curricula, and the Israeli educational program continues to support and improve this type of education.

The major findings are:

1. Israeli textbooks do not contain any call for violence against Palestinians, demonization of Palestinians, glorification of war or justification of violence as a means for Arab-Israeli conflict resolution;
2. Books contain ample representation of the Palestinian point of view, their history, their positions and their rationale, without prejudice;
3. Textbooks describe and acknowledge (conflict-caused) Palestinian suffering;
4. There is a clear attempt to describe the Arab-Israeli conflict in a (less ethnocentric) balanced and objective manner;
5. There is recognition of Palestinians as a people and of the Palestinian national identity as such;

6. Textbooks feature maps and texts recognizing the Palestinian Authority’s borders according to the Oslo Accords;

7. Textbooks recognize the religious (Muslim and Christian) Palestinian affinity to places and areas that are holy to Palestinians, both in Israel and the Territories (including Jerusalem);

8. Textbooks acknowledge a Palestinian presence in the Land of Israel prior to the first waves of Jewish immigration to Israel, through 1948;

9. Peace agreements, including the Oslo Accords, are portrayed as a positive step toward peaceful conflict resolution;

10. The ideal and final goal in Israeli textbooks with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is peace;

11. However: from time to time Palestinians are portrayed in Israeli textbooks as the instigators of Arab-Jewish violence or as a people who do not wish to have peace with Israel; therefore they bear the major responsibility for the failure of peace between the two nations.

If divided according to academic subject, findings show:

a. **History Textbooks** portray historic events that relate to Palestinians in a factual manner and without showing overt preferences toward one side or the other—even though they show the Arab and Palestinian side as responsible for the conflict (especially with regard to the 1948 War). Additionally, these books display exact numbers of Palestinian vs. Jewish residents in the Land of Israel prior to the first waves of Jewish immigration through 1948.

b. Textbooks also describe the establishment and activity of the Palestinian national movement (through 1948), as well as the rationale, formal positions and feelings of the Palestinian people. They reveal Palestinian suffering following the flight and eviction of Palestinians from their homes, as well as the refugee situation that resulted from the 1948 War. Furthermore, history books describe the development of Islam and the Arab and Muslim historic occupation of the Land of Israel in a broad, in-depth and respectful manner.

c. **Geography textbooks** include maps that feature the territories under the Palestinian Authority’s rule and define them according to the Oslo Accords (the amount of detail usually depends on the subject of each specific chapter). Additionally, they mention the Israeli-Palestinian peace process often and promote the message that a final and comprehensive peace agreement with the Palestinians (as well as Arab countries in general, such as Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon) is close, possible and advantageous to all sides. These books also present the situations and narratives of the Arab-speaking citizens of Israel, including Palestinians, Bedouins and Druze, in a comprehensive, respectful and non-judgmental manner and also display the problems and complexities of living as citizens in a Jewish state.
d. **Civics textbooks** demonstrate the need to prevent violence and resolve conflicts peacefully, though they also show the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as complex and as one that creates major difficulties for all involved. There is an attempt to factually and objectively portray peace agreements and diverse political views regarding the peace process in Israeli society and promote the values of tolerance and equality (for all Israeli citizens). The Arab-Israeli narrative is presented in a manner which allows students to form and express their own opinions regarding the complex issues surrounding the conflict, such as social and institutional discrimination against Arab-Israelis.

e. **Hebrew literature and grammar textbooks** include many positive references to peace with Arab nations and Palestinians and as the (obvious) aspiration of all Israelis. Many poems feature themes with the hope for peace and an end to war, and fictional stories and other texts show Arab/Palestinian/Jewish coexistence positively.

f. **Jewish and Bible studies textbooks** feature quotes from the Bible and other Jewish religious writings supporting peace and non-violent conflict resolution; students are encouraged to discuss events such as the Oslo Accords within such contexts.

g. **Arabic Language textbooks** describe the history, rules and precepts of Islam in an accurate and respectful manner, quoting from different suras in the Qur’an and include pictures and descriptions of places holy to Islam (including those located in Israel, the Territories and Jerusalem). These books also offer individual Palestinian narratives and other texts that show Arab-Jewish coexistence as both positive and practical.

**Examples:**

Caption reads:

Arab citizens demonstrating outside the Supreme Court during the convening of the Or Committee, September 3, 2000. [The Or Committee was established to investigate the clashes between Israeli law enforcement forces and Palestinian-Israeli citizens in October 2000, and was finally formed on November 8, 2000. The caption is therefore incorrect].

(In: The Challenge of Welfare in the Democratic State: Social-Economic Policy in Israel, 2011, p. 188.)

Participants include Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, US President Bill Clinton. Clinton prevented Arafat from kissing him and Rabin, a habit to which he was accustomed.

Question:

Compare this photograph with that of the three leaders in the peace treaty with Egypt in Camp David (p. 198). Are there differences between them? Explain.

[The photograph on page 198 shows a warm three-way handshake between Begin, Carter and Sadat, with all three smiling wholeheartedly].

(In: Nationality: Building a State in the Middle East, 2009, p. 208.)
Title:
The Declaration of Independence: Historical and Geopolitical Background

The Borders of the State of Israel:
[Legend: Purple: Israel; Orange: Areas A + B ; White: Area C]

Caption at the bottom of the map:
Area A: Complete control by PA; Area B: Civil control by PA; Area C: Complete control by Israel

(In: To Be Citizens in Israel, a Jewish and Democratic State, p. 13.)