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Executive Summary

This interim report on Saudi Arabia's national curriculum covers 2016–19 textbooks, reviewed according to UNESCO-derived standards of peace and tolerance. Saudi textbooks have been exported internationally, including to countries in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe and North America.

Some Main Findings:

- Extremism persists but most changes demonstrate moderation.
- The textbooks do not teach equality between women and men. Women must obey husbands.
- Nevertheless, women's empowerment is also evident and modern norms advanced.
- Non-Muslims still considered infidels, but the new curriculum shows more openness to the West and Christians.
- Harsh anti-Jewish and anti-gay expressions remain. Sufi and Shiite practices are criticized.
- Israel is not shown on maps. The 2019 curriculum offers an unbalanced view of Israel compared with previous editions.
- The attitude toward Iran and Turkey is blurred with contradictions but are mostly not treated harshly.
- Jihad war is thoroughly discussed but it is mostly taught as an aspect of national defense.
- Numerous limitations regarding the application of jihad—the king has sole authority to declare jihad war. Living for Allah is more important than dying for Allah, but martyrdom for the sake of Allah remains a "godly gift, a divine dignity."
- There is praise for those who sacrifice their lives as martyrs (shahid, shuhada) for Allah, namely in battle for the faith.
- The curriculum sharply criticizes and takes responsibility for terrorism committed by Muslims.
- Focus of students is on prosperity through hard work and cooperation, not on incitement or preparation for war.

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All Muslims in Saudi Arabia must go through nine years of compulsory education (ages 6–14).¹ The curriculum examined in this report covers primary (grades 1–6), intermediate (grades 7–9) and secondary (grades 10–12) schools. The study of Islam is central among the subjects taught

in the curriculum.\textsuperscript{2} (Of more than thirty-thousand schools, 90 percent are public; the rest are private.) Schools are required to use the Islamic textbooks issued by the Ministry of Education.\textsuperscript{3}

Historically, the alliance between the Al-Saud family and the Wahhabi religious establishment created a curriculum that was highly suspicious of foreigners, other religions and sects within Islam.

Following the September 11 attacks, the United States and its allies demanded educational reform by the Saudis. Examinations of the curriculum in recent years have found less anti-Jewish and anti-Christian material. There was also less anti-Shite and anti-Sufi content taught in elementary schools. Other intolerant content remained, particularly at the high school level, including the social exclusion of non-Muslims.\textsuperscript{4}

In April 2016, Vision 2030 was introduced as a new national Saudi strategy, including a focus on educational reform. As this report confirms, changes have taken place at an evolutionary rather than revolutionary pace, predicated on long-standing conservative tradition.

IMPACT-se's review of Saudi textbooks has detected subtle, yet substantive changes in the language, tone, narrative and outlook of the curriculum; efforts are made to describe, analyze and portray the Other with less hostile and destructive rhetoric. Yet, there has not been a wholesale elimination of problematic content\textsuperscript{5} or language.

The Wahhabi view of Islam is evident throughout the school textbooks. The principle of \textit{tawhid} (oneness [of Allah], monotheism—a pillar of Islam particularly central to Wahhabism) constitutes a central theme of the curriculum. Islam is seen as the innate or true religion. Other monotheistic faiths—Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism—feature distortions. Some moderation is apparent.

**Islamic Studies**

Preserving Wahhabi-Islamic culture and its distinct features is a focal point of the curriculum. The curriculum warns against close attachments and friendship with non-Muslims and participation in religious festivals together. Within the Islamic textbooks, Western culture is


\textsuperscript{5} Problematic content includes violence or incitement to violence; hatred of the Other; and radical, inappropriate or disturbing material.
considered to be dangerous to traditional values. Harsh anti-Jewish sentiment remains. Nevertheless, working with non-Muslims is commonplace. Even food may be prepared by non-Muslims as long as it is within Islamic strictures.

While *jihad* war is thoroughly discussed, it is taught as an aspect of national defense rather than fighting infidels. The concept of *wasatiyyah* may be explained to mean "moderation," accompanied by harsh criticism of Islamist terrorism and extremism. Muslims are expected to serve as role models for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The curriculum sharply criticizes terrorism committed by Muslims. There are no calls for proselytizing, but the historical spread of Islam is taught.

Textbooks teach that "Life for the sake of Allah is greater than death in His way." At the same time, martyrdom for the sake of Allah remains a "godly gift, a divine dignity."

**Saudi Nationalism**

Saudi students are introduced to illustrations of pre-Islamic art—formerly an unthinkable proposition. Pre-Islamic Arabs serve as inspiration for patriotism and role-models for women. "The Arabs had commendable moral values. For example: heroism, generosity, keeping promises and protecting one's neighbor. Women gained high status in Arab society." The Arabic language courses play an "essential role in asserting Islamic-Arab cultural identity and in strengthening the Saudi national character."

While the Islamic sections warn against Western culture, the curriculum as a whole looks to modern ideas and openness. An art book for high school focuses on Western painting techniques and images while also featuring Islamic abstract and Saudi modern art.

The textbook does not discuss what non-Muslims living in Saudi Arabia do in the privacy of their homes. While the curriculum is intensely religious and strict, there is no particular animosity toward foreigners and non-Muslims; employment preferences are given to Muslims.

Descriptions of tribal affiliations appear to be minimal, but local clothing is noted. Students are warned against tribal doctors and "sorcerers," categorically prohibited by Islam, but seemingly having much influence.

**Family and Gender**

The curriculum focuses on the male-female family unit, largely ignores polygamy and tribal affiliations, and categorically rejects non-traditional gender roles (including actors playing roles), as well as homosexual behavior. Within the textbooks, the conservative fabric of Saudi society remains intact, with an emphasis on the family as the center of a strong moral Saudi

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6 *Hadith and Islamic Culture 3*, Grades 10–12, Level 5 (Literature and Qur'an), 2019, p. 183.
8 *Social Studies and Civics*, Grade 4, Vol. 2, 2019, p. 45.
9 *My Language*, Grade 1, Vol. 1, 2019, p. 4.
state. Morality, respect for authority, and a pious and traditional outlook all serve as important points of reference for the textbooks to dictate proscribed behavior. Lessons are interspersed with more traditional instruction on the virtues of the Saudi family and the woman’s role in caring for children in the home and managing family affairs and budgets; men are heads of the family and providers but female entrepreneurship is encouraged and women are generally respected.

As recently as a 2018 Qur'anic commentary textbook,\textsuperscript{10} men were in some cases still allowed to beat their wives and children, although this verse ([Nisa', Women, Sura 4:34] "men are in charge of women") was removed in 2019. Nevertheless, the curriculum appears to have begun the process of change; the door has been opened, however slightly, and will in all likelihood be put to good use by entrepreneurial female students as they become young adults. Once a woman is married, the husband’s permission should still be sought for many things. But, interestingly, the curriculum charts an environment where it is almost impossible for him to refuse. Khadija, the Prophet's first wife and a successful businesswoman, serves as a role model demonstrating women's empowerment in Arabia before and during the Islamic period.

**Peace and the Region**

Muslim infighting (fitna) and Islamist terrorism are represented as great dangers for the world; the kingdom's security is a priority. The attitude toward Iran, Turkey and Israel is blurred with contradictions. Historical animus toward Iran and Zoroastrians persists. War against the Ottomans is a feature. Regarding Israel, a 2017 textbook featured surprising moderation in the form of a flattering painting of Zionist founder, Theodore Herzl; the 2019 version appears to have retracted much of that, and reintroduced some of the anti-Zionist language. Israel remains out of the maps, and is still seen as conspiring and striving to control the Middle East. But the myth of Jewish plans for world domination have been removed. Anti-Jewish content remains in the form of stories of Jewish assassins and "treachery"; but there is reduced attention on early Islam-Jewish conflicts. The hadith on fighting the Jews in the day of resurrection, however, is still being taught.\textsuperscript{11} The curriculum alludes, albeit hesitantly, to the Holocaust: "Some minorities are exposed to deportation and extermination from the[J] countries such as the expulsion of the Jews from Europe and the Indians from Uganda."\textsuperscript{12}

Some cautious respect is exhibited to Judaism and Christianity, showing the region to be the "cradle of the three heavenly religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam." Yet, there are no images of churches or synagogues—only of mosques; Christians and Jews are "infidels" for corrupting their scriptures and for rejecting Muhammad.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} *Tafsir* 2, Grades 10–12 (Humanities), 2018, p. 173.

\textsuperscript{11} *Tafsir* 2, Grades 10–12 (Humanities), 2019, p. 86.

\textsuperscript{12} *Geography and National Education* 2, Grades 10–12, Level 5 (Literature, Admin. and Qur'an), 2019, p. 120.

\textsuperscript{13} *Tawhid* 5, Grades 10–12, Level 5 (Science and Administration), 2019, pp. 151–52; *Tawhid 1*, Grades 10–12 (Joint Track), 2019, p. 165.
Saudi Vision 2030, the central pillar of this curriculum, describes a future of peace and trade. Free trade and foreign economic investment in a safe environment are central elements of this vision; phrases like: "animated society," "thriving economy," and "lucrative opportunities" punctuate this strategic plan throughout, with traditional culture and Islam as its counterbalances.

While Saudi Arabia's curriculum does not yet meet international standards of peace and tolerance, its focus is not on incitement or preparation for war. An image showing a small private home on "Peace Street" in a community named "Prosperity" seems an apt representation of what the kingdom hopes to achieve. The textbooks envision a future of prosperity through hard work by a new generation of Saudis who will embrace their traditional values and culture even as the kingdom prepares to welcome international trade, investment and visitors.

It should be noted that Saudi Arabia is in the process of transformation from an exclusively traditionalist Islamic society to one that incorporates more Western economic values, in addition to a rediscovery of its pre-Islamic heritage. However, the kingdom remains an Islamic society at its base. Despite the animation of Vision 2030 seen throughout, sharia remains the underlying principle applied to virtually everything students learn.

Looking at four years of curriculum changes, with steps forward and some back across a spectrum of issues—gender, Western values, Christians, Iran, Jews and Israel—to name a few, leaves us wondering if the Saudi authorities know exactly how to navigate the uneasy waters of their traditional religious orthodoxy and the new economic and cultural world. Events both within the kingdom—and without—appear largely not within their control.

Where other curricula often represent the underlying values that a society wants to teach (or impose) on its progeny, the Saudi curriculum, at this stage, can only be seen as a reflection of the efforts being made to find the path leading to something more stable, secure and yes, new.

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14 Family Culture, Grade 1, Vol.1 2019, p. 64.
15 Family Education, Grade 1, Vol. 1 (for Girls), 2019, p. 64.
Girl: I am Saudi: I will be, Inshallah, an outstanding physician, and I will discover more medical inventions because my homeland is great.

Boy: I am Saudi. I love my homeland and I work diligently and faithfully; I observe Allah's commands and I respect others.

_Social Studies and Civics, Grade 6, Vol. 2, 2019, p. 77._

The Saudi curriculum retains unacceptable and intolerant material, especially in religious textbooks for higher grades. Happily, gradual improvements have appeared in recent years, in secular and lower grades. There is a long way to go to meet international standards.

In the conclusion of this report we present a methodological dilemma: does the positive and gradual evolutionary change justify the radical elements that linger on? The assumption behind this dilemma is that change is difficult since curricula more often than not represent deep seated needs of powerful groups in society. An abrupt change may lead to unexpected consequences if it threatens worldviews and destroys the perceived legitimacy of the institutions that hold society together. All things being equal, a long and slow process seems preferable to a fast-paced one.

The alliance of the Al-Saud family and the Wahhabi clerics held society together, resisting change for many years; ultimately they weakened society due to their rigid ideology. With foreign enemies and allies alike challenging the kingdom, and oil wealth becoming less dependable, a new direction became necessary if Saudi society was to thrive. Despite resistance, more attention was eventually given to the needs and aspirations of women, the youth, various tribal voices and pro-Western-minded citizens to express their talents and to become prosperous and happy.

Rigidity and hate for others cannot unlock the potential of a nation, while respect for others is a key to prosperity and security. It opens doors of trade and cooperation and the free flow of ideas and resources.
As the new curriculum demonstrates, the Saudis seem determined to solve their economic problems; for this they have created Vision 2030. What remains worrisome to many of those who control the kingdom is the effect of external secular forces on their traditionalist religious society. This perhaps explains the pendulum that is so apparent in this report. Four years of back-and-forth changes in the curriculum covering a full spectrum of issues—from radicalization and moderation; the harshness of punishments and threats; women's empowerment; attitudes toward Israel and Zionism and Turkey and Iran; Western culture; minorities and various religious and sexual Others; martyrdom and jihad versus life as central values; Islam and nationalism; families, tribes and the nation, to openness and consultation versus authoritarianism and obedience.

Based on the research for this report, a reasonable conclusion is that most changes have led toward moderation, despite the addition of new extremist material. It is particularly encouraging that the focus of students is on "prosperity through hard work," rather than incitement or preparation for war."

In other words, Saudi Arabia is seeking a place in the region which represents more than just a defensive posture against foreign threats. Such a process is part of the maturation of a long and arduous internal discourse now being imparted to the new generation. Whether such changes will be permanent and long standing is unclear. But change is usually the last choice of individuals, groups and nations. Given the demands of society, it will be much harder to turn back from positive steps forward.

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Research for this report began more than a year ago. The interim nature of the findings represents a new beginning for IMPACT-se's continued analysis of the Saudi education system. We encourage the curriculum's continued development in more positive directions to meet international standards of peace and tolerance benefitting the Saudi people and the Middle East region.

Our appreciation to IMPACT-se team members, including Asher Spekterman and Jordan Kastrinski for their Arabic translations and research and Julia Cole for her proofing; to Saudi researchers: Liran Ofek, Nadav Israeli, Evyatar Abergel, Eyal Poliansky, Eitan Ishai, Inbal Baron, Hagal Yehoshafat, Amos Taron and Elan David; to the Tel Aviv University team led by Prof. Uzi Rabi with Dr. Nachum Shiloh and Saeed Abu Mach for their initial research into past Saudi curricula. Finally, but certainly not last: to IMPACT-se CEO Marcus Sheff for his inspiration and insightful reviews of the drafts and to COO Arik Agassi, who facilitated the research through the intricate swings of the pendulum that is the current Saudi curriculum.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has undergone a period of substantial internal political change. The ascendency of Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS), the son of King Salman, and his successful consolidation of power, has nudged the kingdom through a new period of domestic reform and modernization. Some analysts have seen the rise of MBS as a harbinger for greater political freedoms, religious moderation and a decline of Wahhabism and its clerical class.16

Under MBS, "Saudization" [al-su'uda] has found its way into civic culture, with its influence on Saudi identity and nationalism.17 Such changes are most prominently seen in the Saudi education system. The textbooks used by the curriculum emphasize three significant areas promoted by the Saudi state: a new Saudi civic culture; the importance of family as the backbone of the Saudi social order; and the emergence of a new Saudi expression of Islam which recognizes its geographic and cultural identity as it links with its pre-Islamic past.

In fact, actual reform in politics and society appears to be more complex. Ultimately this represents the evolution of a Muslim-driven society as it merges with a modern Saudi Arabia searching for its national identity. At its core, the political changes in the kingdom are aimed at creating and molding a new Saudi citizen—at once more nationalistic, but with greater awareness of the broader world and able to successfully interact with Other cultures. This includes the crafting of new ideas of what it means to be a Saudi citizen along with the development of a wider civic ethos.18 At the same time, the curriculum demonstrates that strict orthodox values remain intact, even as new identities emerge.

MBS’s influence appears to be behind many of the current societal changes, but the policies linked to su'uda began during the reign of King Abdullah [2005–15] and were aimed at increasing local employment in domestic industries, while lessening dependence on foreign workers.19

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19 Steffen Hertog, Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 185–221; Françoise De Bel-Air. "The Socio-Political Background and Stakes of
Background of Saudi Education

Saudi Arabia's power is invested not so much in an individual but in the authority of one family: the Al-Sauds. While the monarchy functions as the state’s ruling institution, the legitimacy of the Saudi state is grounded in the alliance between the Al-Saud family and the Wahhabi religious establishment. The symbiotic relationship between the Al-Sauds and the leading families of the clerical elite such as the Al-Shaikh family, allowed for the integration of Wahhabi ideology into the framework of the Saudi state. Modernization under King Faisal (1964–75) allowed the kingdom to retain a connection to its tribal culture while formalizing links with the Wahhabi clerical elite (‘ulama).

The Saudi education system was therefore founded on the alliance between the Al-Saud family and the influential Wahhabist clerics. This substantively impacted the initial curriculum and textbooks provided to Saudi schoolchildren, proliferating an intolerant and reactionary expression of Islam. When applied to the Saudi curriculum, it taught students to be highly suspicious of foreigners and other religions.

After the September 11 attacks by terrorists, the United States and its allies demanded educational reform. But the alliance between the Saudi family and the Wahhabis remained strong, having endured on and off since the mid-eighteenth century. The Saudi family provided leadership, a military force and Arab-Bedouin heritage, while the Wahhabis offered a convenient belief system that gave discipline and unity for the various tribes who were encouraged—by choice or by force—to participate in the Saudi state. This unity of previously disparate elements was, for a time, able to safeguard Saudi Arabia from secular ideologies ranging from radical pan-Arabism to democracy. A third element supporting the Saudi rule was economic, initially from Western support (Britain, the United States) and then the huge bonanza of oil, discovered and developed by the West.

Bolstered by oil revenues and the subjugation of other tribes, Saudi Arabia achieved regional success—and to the extent of control it held over OPEC decisions—became an international force. An orthodox and often radical education prepared the Saudi population to internalize this version of Saudi identity.

But there were drawbacks. The narrowness of education allowed social tensions to linger. The inherent extremism of the Wahhabi-centered worldview, together with seemingly endless


https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ852310.pdf;
resources likely accelerated the radicalization of segments of the Saudi population. Internal tensions and the fear of pan-Arabism led the Saudis to export their education to the Arab and Muslim worlds.

With the 9/11 attacks, the flaws of Saudi education were conspicuously exposed. Osama bin Laden and the majority of Al Qaeda terrorists were Saudi citizens. Saudi Arabia's religious education system and its underlying extremist Wahhabism were accused of contributing to anti-Western values and for providing fertile ground for Islamist extremism. Research into the problem exposed the gravity of the situation. US President George W. Bush designated Saudi Arabia as a "country of particular concern" in 2004, pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

For more than fifteen years Saudi Arabia made limited progress toward removing intolerant content in state-published textbooks, particularly in elementary education. Examinations of the curriculum found less anti-Jewish and anti-Christian material. There was also less anti-Shiite and anti-Sufi content taught in elementary schools. However, problematic content remained.

According to the Department of State’s August 2017 International Religious Freedom Report, "[t]he government continued to distribute revised textbooks, although some intolerant material remained in circulation, particularly at the high school level, including content justifying the execution of ‘sorcerers’ and the social exclusion of non-Muslims.

Saudi textbooks have been exported internationally, including to countries in the Middle East, Africa, South, Central, and South East Asia, and parts of Europe and North America.\(^2^8\)

While American pressure has been important, other factors have contributed toward the reduction of incitement in Saudi Arabia's educational system. Beyond endangering others, the radical education that was once acceptable now threatens the new Saudi educational system itself. Changes in energy markets, the region's instability, the rise of radical enemies such as Iran, the prospects of America gradually leaving the Middle East and internal social and economic challenges have convinced the Saudi leadership that reform across all sectors of society is necessary for the kingdom's survival.

In April 2016, a new plan was finally announced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to reduce the economy's dependence on oil by boosting private sector investment.\(^2^9\) From the perspective of the Saudi curriculum, Saudi Vision 2030 is meant to galvanize the kingdom by opening up society and redefining the concept of citizenship in the Saudi homeland.\(^3^0\) Although Vision 2030 is designed to modernize Saudi Arabia, it should be seen more as an evolutionary step in a conservative context, rather than as a revolutionary leap. Classic Saudi reference points such as Wahhabi Islam and rule by the royal family remain.

The program has three main pillars: the status of the kingdom as the "heart of the Arab and Islamic world"; the determination to become a global investment powerhouse; and to transform the country's location into a hub connecting the three old-world continents: Africa, Asia and Europe. As described across the curriculum, the plan provides renewed ideological infrastructure for the country, with its openness to foreign investment with a flexible view as to how things should unfold. Students are taught to cherish both national and individual identities, but learn to work with foreigners, welcome tourism, be involved in the workforce, and display entrepreneurship.\(^3^1\)

\(^2^7\) Problematic content includes violence or incitement to violence; hatred of the Other; and radical, inappropriate or disturbing content.


\(^3^0\) "Full Text of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030." Saudi Gazette, April 26, 2016.

\(^3^1\) History, Grades 10–12, 2019, p. 7.
This IMPACT-se interim research is based on a thorough inquiry into 209 Saudi Arabian primary and secondary school textbooks from the years 2016–19, and the insights they offer into the wider goals of the kingdom to remake, transform and modernize its culture for the changing realities of the twenty-first century. Our textbook study has detected subtle, yet substantive changes in the language, tone, narrative and outlook of the curriculum. There are clearly efforts made to describe, analyze and portray the Other with less hostile and destructive rhetoric than in previous curricula. Yet, there has not been a wholesale elimination of problematic content or language.

Five categories will be examined in this report: Islamic studies; the Saudi family and the changing role of Saudi women; national identity, particularly through history, language, geography and art; exploring Saudi Arabia and the Middle East in terms of moderation and radicalism; and the crafting of a new Saudi civic ethos. Each of these particular topics will be analyzed through a review of examples from the curriculum and will conclude with an analysis of the new shift in the kingdom's educational strategy.

32 Problematic content includes violence or incitement to violence; hatred of the Other; and radical, inappropriate or disturbing material.
Conclusion: Crafting a New Saudi Civic Ethos

The challenges of the twenty-first century have forced the Saudi monarchy to reassess its position in both the Middle East region and the international community. Events have impelled Saudi Arabia’s greater integration into the world economy; the rise of economic (oil) and political challenges (Arab Spring, Iran, Yemen), and a rapidly expanding young population with digital literacy and access to the internet has fostered increased expectations for personal freedom, expression, and more open social interactions.

Increased digital literacy, the ability of Saudis to travel abroad, as well as the rising youth population, has led to the realization by the Saudi state that the status quo cannot continue. The emphasis on Saudi citizenship and on Saudi Arabia’s pre-Islamic past, points to the evolution of a distinct Saudi identity, one that remains Islamic and traditional, but also takes on greater nationalistic significance.

For these substantial changes to take hold, Saudi citizens will need to adapt to the changing norms of both behavior and self-identification; the new curriculum from the Saudi Ministry of Education is a fundamental tool for observers to analyze these political and social developments. The new textbooks emphasize the role of a Saudi citizen who is loyal to the Saudi state and plays an active part in the future development of Saudi society. Additionally, textbooks focus on the centrality of Saudi Arabia as a regional actor, while underscoring the importance of national development and the kingdom’s Islamic heritage as custodian of the two holy mosques. The Vision 2030 project which threads through the curriculum accentuates the responsibility of the state to provide social and economic stability, diversify the economy and provide adequate services to its citizens.

The significance of the new curriculum cannot be understated in the effort to change the outlook of Saudis from a nation of subjects to a nation of citizens having a stake in the Saudi national project.

The larger questions of how the Al-Sauds cope with the new Saudi generation in the twenty-first century, maintain their hold on power, and safeguard Saudi traditionalist identity is evident in the textbooks. The emphasis on morality and the traditional family represents a balancing act with the Vision 2030 efforts to promote transformation—however gradual—in Saudi society. Such changes become most apparent for students since the interaction necessary with the world beyond the kingdom is an integral part of the curriculum; students are taught accordingly.

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Modern ideas and terminology are an important part of the curriculum which seeks to engage the current generation with their new cultural framework. To facilitate this, Saudi children focus on Arabic as an important tenant of Saudi national and cultural identity. Saudi citizens, the textbooks argue, should support and encourage all national cultural activities.

The active participation of women in the labor market is a top priority of the Vision 2030 national development plan and is prominent in the Saudi textbooks. Teenage girls are called upon to create and take part in many national and private business initiatives. The textbooks serve as the key venue to educate future adults about economic initiatives. This includes the kingdom's transformation from the traditional reliance on oil, to the creation of a dynamic private sector, inducement of foreign investment, and a stress on home businesses focused on women.

Overall, the 2019 curriculum, with its emphasis on the Saudi Vision 2030 economic and cultural plan, is forward-looking with respect to its citizens as well as most of its neighbors. And although many positive elements of past curricula have been removed from the current one, a path forward may be perceived in the movement of events inherent in the region—and the economic and cultural momentum of Vision 2030 fully embraced by the curriculum. Although many positive steps have been taken in the 2019 curriculum compared to the four years of previous textbooks researched, generations of students who began their education in 2016 remain in school; entire classes have already studied the previous books.

Thus, the Saudi curriculum poses a methodological dilemma: Does whatever good comes from the slow pace of gradual change represented by this new curriculum justify the lingering radical elements from previous curricula? Although this issue will not be resolved here, we can report on actual changes that have been made—and some that have not. A good place to start is with the Saudi Vision 2030 worldview, central to the curriculum, and a reason to highlight the final IMPACT-se standard: SOUND PROSPERITY and COOPERATION. The focus of students is on prosperity through hard work and cooperation, not on incitement or preparation for war.

The more orthodox and rigid aspects of the curriculum also teach students to avoid accusations of others as well as self-victimization. Responsibility for one's actions is placed on individuals and society, not on others (friends or foes). The standard of cooperation is manifested through the preparation of students to work with foreigners. Granted, religious instruction requires assimilation and friendliness to be strictly checked; but the success of the economically focused Vision 2030 depends on establishing Saudi Arabia as an intercontinental hub to attract foreign investors and tourists—necessitating an environment of peace and security. The curriculum firmly lays out the kingdom's policy of non-interference in other countries' affairs, while reinforcing the commitment to friendship treaties and good-neighborly relations.
The curriculum's inherent contradictions are strongly evidenced in the standard regarding GENDER. The textbooks do not "foster equality" between women and men. Neither do they "refrain from stereotyped gender roles," stressing the opposite, with the male as head of the family; the woman must obey her husband, or male guardian. As concerns "mutual respect," what is demanded by the curriculum is respect of gender based on differences of respective roles, rather than absolute equality.

Almost paradoxically, the curriculum expects young women to represent the kingdom's future success. They are thoroughly educated in a spectrum of practical areas including running a business. In this sense, women's empowerment is evident throughout the curriculum.

Similarly, the curriculum does not fully meet the international standard of presenting UNBIASED INFORMATION to students. Educational materials are not up-to-date, accurate, complete, balanced and unprejudiced; they do not use equal standards to promote mutual knowledge and understanding between different peoples. Still, we detected gradual change toward presenting different perspectives on a range of topics. Examples include removing an argument from the 2019 edition that the Crusades were driven by hate toward Islam.

The attitude toward Christians and the West is multifaceted. While the curriculum is intensely religious and strict, there is no particular animosity toward foreigners and non-Muslims. Regardless of theological differences and historical conflicts, students learn to appreciate the need for cooperation with the West despite concern over global cultural influences. They are taught to welcome Others to their home. "Non-Muslims in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia form part of the people of the Islamic society."34 Muslim minorities in the West, for their part, should engage and integrate while preserving their unique culture.

As for Israel, students learned in 2017 textbooks that Zionists tried to build their national home with Ottoman consent, established "the State of Israel" in 1948, and were attacked by a host of Arab armies. The reasons given for the 1967 War are attacks by Arab Fedayeen and the Egyptian blockade of the Straits of Tiran.

The curriculum alludes to the Holocaust: "Some minorities are exposed to deportation and extermination from the countries such as the expulsion of the Jews from Europe and the Indians from Uganda." However, Israel is still not included on maps. Zionism was reintroduced in 2019 social studies textbooks as a racist movement. A further demonstration of the curriculum's state of flux is seen in two similar ideas: a sentence arguing that Jews wish to control the world was removed but another arguing that they want to control the Middle East remains in the current curriculum.

34 Arabic Language 4, Language Competencies, Grades 10–12 (Joint Track), 2019, p. 159.
As for PEACEMAKING, the textbooks invest much on dialogue skills and a plan that entails peace and stability in the region. While jihad war is thoroughly discussed, it is taught as an aspect of national defense rather than fighting infidels. At times, the Saudi curriculum takes a direct stance against Islamism and terrorism, at home and abroad. Security—as the opposite of fanaticism and terrorism—is important for all. Saudi Arabia is lauded for helping Arab causes in international circles and as the author of two peace plans. Peace with Israel is not discussed. Treaties with infidels must be respected unless the treaty is breached (as compared with Muhammad's conquest of Mecca).

There is INCITEMENT against gays (they should be killed); Western culture is denigrated and blamed for conspiring against Islam (see HATE below).\(^{35}\) The rote accusation that Israel is trying to conquer the region and destroy Al-Aqsa Mosque persists.

The standard of NO HATE is not fully met. Gays are hated directly and should be punished.\(^{36}\) Some extreme Christian hate expressions have been removed but hate against "enemies of Islam" continues. Global (Western) culture is reviled and presented as corrupt and rife with plans to destroy Islam intentionally.\(^{37}\) Anti-Jewish hatred is still widespread. Jews are blamed as assassins, described as monkeys and will be fought and killed in the day of resurrection.\(^{38}\) In religious textbooks, those who do not follow Tawhid (Allah's oneness) are considered infidels including: Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews, gays, tribal herbalists, "sorcerers" and all other polytheists, hypocrites and enemies of Islam.\(^{39}\)

Our research on the INDIVIDUAL OTHER stands out in one particular way: There is no fostering or encouragement of friendship with non-Muslim Others. However, with the advent of Vision 2030, personal relationships with Other foreign visitors and investors seem inevitable.

The curriculum has shown RESPECT toward a number of Western individuals over the four years reviewed by IMPACT-se. Notable Western scientists such as Thomas Edison, Rudolf Diesel and James Watts are included in the 2019 curriculum but without any images or useful insights. Abraham Maslow's image along with his Hierarchy of Human Needs is discussed in depth. But the full biographies and images on such figures as Marie Curie, Alexander Graham Bell and Johannes Gutenberg were removed. A 2017 textbook portrayed a surprising picture of Theodore Herzl, the founder of the Zionist Movement; the picture was removed from social studies texts in 2019, where Zionism is now described as racist. An example about the Ottoman Empire shows (grudging) respect toward the Saudi's traditional enemy. Yet, there is no respect for Shiites, Sufis, Zoroastrians, Christians or Jews (or any other infidels). The failures and

\(^{35}\) *Hadith 1*, Grades 10–12 (Joint Track), 2019, p. 214.

\(^{36}\) *Fiqh 1*, Grades 10–12 (Joint Track), 2019, p. 255.

\(^{37}\) *Hadith 1*, 2019, p. 214.

\(^{38}\) *Tawhid 2*, Grades 10–12 (Humanities), 2019, p. 86.

\(^{39}\) *Tawhid 5*, Grades 10–12, Level 5 (Science and Administration), 2019, p. 151–52; *Tawhid 1*, Grades 10–12 (Joint Track), 2019, p. 165.
successes within this standard represent as much as any the changes faced by an education system trying to find its way by trial and error.

Within the textbooks, the conservative fabric of Saudi society remains intact, with an emphasis on the family as the center of a strong moral Saudi state. Morality, respect for authority, and a pious and traditional outlook all serve as important points of reference for the textbooks to dictate proscribed behavior. Lessons are interspersed with more traditional instruction on the virtues of the Saudi family and the woman’s role in caring for children in the home; the man’s proper place remains outside. Nevertheless, the curriculum appears to have begun the process of change; the door has been opened, however slightly, and will in all likelihood be put to a good use by entrepreneurial female students as they become young adults.

The attitude toward Iran and Turkey is blurred with contradictions. Portrayal of Iran appears more radicalized in recent editions. While the 2017 Social and National Studies textbook points to Persian influence in the Arabian Peninsula, the 2019 edition speaks about Persian occupation. Turkey-Saudi relations through the centuries are taught pragmatically. The early Turkish Classical Age is described in positive terms while the late Ottoman Empire, which pitted the Turks against the Saudis is strongly criticized.

Finally, it is hard to establish the curriculum’s outlook on certain issues. For example, the concept of wasatiyyah may be explained to mean ”moderation,” accompanied by harsh criticism of Islamist terrorism and extremism. At other times wasatiyyah is a tool to demonstrate Islam’s superiority to Others, including “non-moderate” Christians and Jews. While the curriculum tries to evolve with such inherent contradictory elements, the radical orthodoxy of the Wahhabis remains dominant.

IMPACT-se’s review of Saudi textbooks has detected subtle, yet substantive changes in the language, tone, narrative and outlook of the curriculum; efforts are made to describe, analyze and portray the Other with less hostile and destructive rhetoric. Yet, there has not been a wholesale elimination of problematic content or language.

While Saudi Arabia’s curriculum still does not meet international standards of peace and tolerance, the focus is not on incitement or preparation for war. The textbooks envision a future of prosperity through hard work by a new generation of Saudis who will embrace their traditional values and culture even as the kingdom prepares to welcome international trade, investment and visitors.

Our goal has been to analyze the Saudi textbooks based on accepted international standards of peace and tolerance. Since the 2030 Vision worldview has been infused throughout the

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40 Problematic content includes violence or incitement to violence; hatred of the Other; and radical, inappropriate or disturbing material.
curriculum, we had to consider every aspect through that lens as well as our own monitoring standards. Vision 2030 represents a laudable goal; but goals are just that. When those goals contradict other aspects of the curriculum, an inevitable dichotomy emerges. The gap between such goals and their practical application—both in the curriculum and practice throughout Saudi society, is what needs to be narrowed; IMPACT-se will be monitoring each step along the path.
Methodology

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

1. **RESPECT**: The curriculum should promote tolerance, understanding and respect toward the "Other," his or her culture, achievements, values and way of life.\(^{41}\)

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.\(^{42}\)

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.\(^{43}\)

4. **NO INCITEMENT**: The curriculum should be free of language, content, and imagery that disseminate ideas or theories which justify or promote acts and expressions of violence, incitement to violence, hostility, harm and hatred toward other national, ethnic, racial or religious groups.\(^{44}\)

5. **PEACEMAKING**: The curriculum should develop capabilities for non-violent conflict resolution and promote peace.\(^{45}\)

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\(^{41}\) 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.

\(^{42}\) 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.


\(^{44}\) As defined in Article 4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2106 (XX) on December 21, 1965. See also Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2200A (XXI) on December 16, 1966.

6. **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.\(^{46}\)

7. **GENDER**: The curriculum should foster equality and mutual respect between women and men. It should refrain from stereotyped gender roles.\(^{47}\)

8. **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.\(^{48}\)

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\(^{46}\) 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.

\(^{47}\) 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.

\(^{48}\) 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.
List of Textbooks

The following Saudi Arabian curriculum textbooks were analyzed for the research in this study. The titles both here and referenced in the text have been translated into English to aid the reader. IMPACT-se typically researches all available textbooks used in a curriculum. If new textbooks or previously unavailable books become available after a report’s publication, every effort will be made to update reports to include any relevant material. We welcome any comments related to the acquisition of any omitted materials.

Grade 1

Grade 2

Grade 3
Grade 4
34. *Hadith and Sira* [Islamic Traditions and Prophetic Biography], Grade 4, Vol. 1, 2017.

Grade 5

Grade 6

**Grade 7**

**Grade 8**

**Grade 9**

**High School Level 1**
123. **Arabic Language 1**, Grades 10–12, Level 1, 2017.
125. **Fiqh 1**, Grades 10–12, Level 1, 2017.

**High School Level 2**
129. **Hadith and Islamic Culture 1**, Grades 10–12, Level 2, 2017.

**High School Level 3**
131. **Arabic Language 3**, Grades 10–12, Level 3 (for Saudi schools outside the county), 2017.
133. **Family and Health Education 3**, Grades 10–12, Level 3 (for Girls), 2017.
135. **Fiqh 6**, Grades 10–12, Level 3 (Science and Administration), 2017.
136. **History and National Education 1**, Grades 10–12, Level 3 (Administration, Literature and Qur'an), 2017.
137. **Islamic Studies—Tafsir 4 + Fiqh 6**, Grades 10–12, Level 3 (for Saudi schools outside the country), 2017.
139. **Tafsir 4**, Grades 10–12, Level 3 (Science and Administration), 2017.

**High School Level 4**
140. **Arabic Language 4**, Grades 10–12, Level 4 (Science and Administration), 2016.
143. *Geography and National Education* 1, Grades 10–12, Level 4 (Administration, Literature and Qur’an), 2017.
144. *Hadith and Islamic Culture* 2, Grades 10–12, Level 4 (Literature and Qur’an), 2017.

**High School—Humanities Track**

**High School—Joint Track**
166. *Fiqh 1*, Grades 10–12 (Joint Track), 2019.

**High School—Optional Track**
High School—Level 5
179. Arabic Language 5, Grades 10–12, Level 5 (Science and Administration), 2017.
182. Family and Health Education 5, Grades 10–12, Level 5 (for girls), 2017.
185. Geography and National Education 2, Grades 10–12, Level 5 (Literature, Administration and Qur'an), 2019.
186. Hadith and Islamic Culture 3, Grades 10–12, Level 5 (Literature and Qur'an), 2017.
188. Hadith and Islamic Culture 3, Grades 10–12, Level 5 (Science and Administration), 2019.
189. Hadith and Islamic Culture 5, Grades 10–12, Level 5 (Science and Administration), 2017.
190. Hadith and Islamic Culture 5, Grades 10–12, Level 5 (Science and Administration), 2019.
194. Tawhid 5, Grades 10–12, Level 5 (Science and Administration), 2017.
195. Tawhid 5, Grades 10–12, Level 5 (Science and Administration), 2018.
196. Tawhid 5, Grades 10–12, Level 5 (Science and Administration), 2019.

High School—Level 6
197. Arabic Language 6, Grades 10–12, Level 6 (Science and Administration), 2019.
199. Arabic Literature 2, Grades 10–12, Level 6 (Literature and Qur'an), 2019.
200. Family and Health Education 6, Grades 10–12, Level 6 (for girls), 2019.
201. Fiqh 5, Grades 10–12, Level 6 (Literature and Qur'an), 2017.
203. Fiqh 7, Grades 10–12, Level 6 (Science and Administration), 2017.
204. Fiqh 7, Grades 10–12, Level 6 (Science and Administration), 2019.
205. History and National Education 2, Grades 10–12, Level 6 (Administration, Literature and Qur'an), 2019.
206. Social and National Studies 6, Grades 10–12, Level 6 (Literature and Qur'an), 2016.
207. Tafsir 3, Grades 10–12, Level 6 (Literature and Qur'an), 2017.
209. Tafsir 5, Grades 10–12, Level 6 (Science and Administration), 2017.