Syrian National Identity
REFORMULATING SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS DURING THE CIVIL WAR

IMPACT BRIEF

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Executive Summary

This study of the Syrian curriculum examines the updated 2017–18 education contents in the areas controlled by the Assad regime while the civil war continues to rage. It offers a unique look at a people in the midst of a mortal crisis.

The most surprising findings lie within the realm of international relations.

International and Regional Positioning

**Russia, Iran, Turkey**

The Russian Federation and the Soviet Union that came before, are viewed approvingly, especially in relation to modernity and technology.


Russia is presented positively in the curriculum—there are no territorial or other disputes with Syria. The textbooks advance a Syrian political culture of modern authoritarian ethno-linguistic nationalism that is fully compatible with that of the Russian Federation. Syria’s ambitions of creating an "Arab Homeland" stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf and covering large swaths of Asia and Africa do not culturally contradict a Russia playing the role of a world power. Unlike Islamism, pan-Arabism has no global ambitions.

**Iran:** The historical presentation of Iran and the ancient Persian Empire is mostly negative. Though the "Arab Homeland" and Iran share a long history, it has not always been smooth. One issue involves the Iranian province of Khuzestan which the curriculum maintains belongs to Arabs. Yet, the Khomeini revolution itself is presented as positive because of its revolutionary and militant nature toward Israel and the West. The Persian, Greek and Roman empires, on the other hand, are depicted as greedy foreign "occupiers." There is no acknowledgement of Iranian cultural heritage and contributions over millennia. No Persian language courses are offered.

Iran is shown to be advanced technologically and economically (automobiles, ships, armament, space and the nuclear realm). The main common denominator is the revolutionary dimension and the struggle against Israel and the West. Reviewing IMPACT-se's Iranian textbook research reveals two ideological fault lines between the two countries:¹

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• Pan-Arab and Syrian nationalism reject Persian-Iranian hegemony and any leadership role in Greater Syria and the "Arab Homeland."

• Espousing ethnically centered Arabism and secularism, the worldview taught in Syrian textbooks is incompatible with the regional ambitions of Iran's Supreme Leader. Iran's Islamist-Khomeinist political culture and way of life, as presented in the Iranian curriculum, is flatly rejected by the Syrian curriculum (excepting mutual antagonism toward Israel and the West).

Strategic interests and pragmatic considerations may lead to a continuation of the decades-long Iranian-Syrian alliance. On the national and cultural levels, however, there is no genuine synergy between the two countries.

Turkey: The potential friction with Turkey is even greater than that with Iran. The Syrian curriculum continues to showcase Syrian-Turkish territorial disputes centered on Alexandretta and beyond. Turkey's Ottomanism and pan-Turkic imperial drive directly threatens Syrian pan-Arab ideology. Turkey's approach to Islamism and the Islamic way of life is incompatible with the Syrian worldview as presented in the curriculum. No Turkish language courses are offered.

Syria and the "Arab Homeland"

Syria's pan-Arabism questions the independence and separate existence of any Arab country. The Syrian ideology opposes the status quo and considers all borders in the region to be artificial.

The textbooks still present an implicit recognition of other Arab countries, but only as part of the "Arab Homeland." Strong Syrian national foundations are cherished.

Somewhat ominous is the perception of dividing the entire Arab world into "regions," one of which is "Greater Syria" [Bilad al-Sham]: replacing current-day Syria, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Lebanon.

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Eldad Pardo and Marcus Sheff, "Turkey’s School Curriculum Crossroads," IMPACT-se, Jan 29, 2017.
http://www.impact-se.org/turkeys-school-curriculum-crossroads/;

**Egypt:** Ancient empires within the "Arab Homeland"—particularly Egyptian-Syrian and Syrian-Egyptian—are presented in a positive light. Ancient Egyptian culture is stressed (as is Mesopotamian). The spirit of Arab unity, especially with Egypt, is paramount. The ancient cultures of Iran, Turkey and Israel are disregarded.

While such unity remains in the realm of nostalgic imagination and the "Arab Homeland" is yet to appear, it makes territorial demands on non-Arab countries and may lead to the emergence of new axes in the region, just beyond the horizon.

**Israel and the West**

**Israel:** Syrian education presents a pan-Arab revolutionary-imperialist worldview. There is no room for Israel—dubbed the "Racist/Terrorist/Zionist Entity." Anti-Semitic motifs such as stereotypical references to the character of Shylock from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* are to be found. The Holocaust is ignored.

The textbooks teach that Israel is a terrorist state and therefore all means are legitimate in the war against it, including terrorism and suicide attacks. Syria is proud of its support of terrorism in Lebanon, Iraq and Israel, described by the curriculum as armed struggle or "resistance."

Still, the option of land for peace within the framework of a comprehensive agreement is preserved, but hidden. The Agreement on Disengagement (1974) between Israel and Syria is portrayed as valid to this day.³

In addition to Israel, which has no right to exist, the textbooks feature territorial demands Syria holds on other countries: Iran (Khuzestan province and the Gulf islands); Turkey (mainly Alexandretta but also Cilicia); and Spain (areas outside the Iberian Peninsula). The memory of the Arab conquest of Spain is cherished.

**The West:** The attitude toward the West is largely negative, with stress on the evils of colonialism and imperialism.

**The Home Front**

**Civil War, Minorities, Gender**

The curriculum's attitude toward the traumatic civil war in Syria ranges from denial of its existence to encouragement of volunteering and assistance to victims of the disaster. There are references to the destruction, poverty, sexual and economic harm to women, as well as to issues of emigration and displacement, but mostly these subjects are glossed over or referred to indirectly.

³ *History of the Modern and Contemporary Arab Homeland*, Grade 12, 2017–18, p. 56.
The textbooks disregard and deny the complex ethno-religious makeup in Syria. There are no Kurdish language studies or references to the heritage and identity of the Kurdish, Alawite, Druze, Shiite and various Sunni groups. The collective identity presented is monolithic, combining the pan-Arab and Arab-Syrian.

An exception is the presentation of the small Christian minority, for whom special textbooks are published. Religious tolerance exists, yet we found hints of suspicion toward Christians.

The army is prominent throughout the curriculum, with motifs emphasizing loyalty and commitment.

Gender equality is featured, while a rigid modernism, expressed in family planning, seems somewhat outdated. There is sensitivity to traditional values. LGBTQ education does not exist.

**Political Culture**

The textbooks promote respect and total commitment to Bashar Al-Assad and his father Hafez. There is no excessive personality cult as compared with Iranian education, but despite talk of elections and democracy, the curriculum remains indoctrinating and authoritarian. The army plays a central role in the national identity.

The curriculum is secular, encourages independent thinking and a spirit of problem solving, volunteerism and religious openness.

While religious tolerance is a general principle, only one government-chartered form of Sunni-Islam is taught. Other religions or religious streams—except for Christianity—are ignored. State-approved Islam forms part of the pan-Arab cultural identity.

**Worldview, Identity and Ideology**

The Syrian curriculum bases Syrian national identity on the principles of a continued struggle to realize one Arab Nation that includes all Arab states, constituting one country, the "Arab Homeland."

The textbooks present the borders dividing the Arab states as artificial, having been imposed by European colonialism.

**International Norms**

**Warfare, Genocide and International Norms**

The curriculum features ambiguous criticism of the use of nuclear and chemical weapons. It openly and fully supports "resistance" (guerilla-terrorism) and applying "all available means" to destroy the Other. There is an assumption that international organizations such as the UN are
supportive of such actions. Expressions such as "the Zionist presence in Palestine is a momentary presence," "insistence on purifying the land and all of humanity from the Zionists," and "Zionist Entity" are used in concert with anti-Semitic messages.

**International Standards on Peace and Tolerance**

The Syrian curriculum does not meet IMPACT-se's UNESCO-derived standards on Peace and Tolerance, with the exception of gender equality and tolerance toward the Christian minority.

It professes an ideology that is exclusionary, militaristic, narrow-minded and authoritarian. It does, however, encourage free thinking and ingenuity within proscribed boundaries.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

This IMPACT-se report further supports the assumption that there is a direct connection between violence and the lack of peace and tolerance education within a given society.

We demonstrate that at least part of the motivation and explanation of the civil war in Syria may be attributed to a faulty curriculum. Hate and militarism ultimately cannot be controlled. A culture of peace and tolerance must be taught and fostered.

The curriculum encourages and teaches dialogue, while ignoring the 2011 uprising and dreams for democracy and freedom—which ultimately led to civil war. Rather, it ignores atrocities committed by the regime and denies any non-Arab national aspirations or group identities in the region.

While alternatives for policy changes are briefly mentioned, the Assad curriculum does not engage in self-doubt, let alone self-reflection on such topics as peace at home or in the region. The curriculum teaches students that all means are justified to destroy the Other (as exhibited in reality by the use of WMDs).

Looking forward, we see a continued alliance with Russia, at the expense of other allies and partners, with gradual but sustained efforts to rebuild bridges toward the Arab world, mainly through Egypt.

If there is any policy recommendation from this research, it is that the international community should not compromise on meaningful peace education in Syria. The ruthless and rampant violence is the result of a faulty worldview which cannot be resolved without tackling the issue of education.
Introduction

For seven consecutive years a ferocious civil war has been raging in Syria. From a comparatively stable, secular and authoritarian Arab country, Syria has turned into one of the cruelest and most violent flashpoints on earth. The majority of the atrocities and destruction have been perpetrated by the Assad regime. Hundreds of thousands are dead, with many more injured, maimed and traumatized; millions are displaced from their homes in Syria or are in exile in the region and around the world.

This project is the first research that examines the curriculum of Bashar Al-Assad's Syria. In 2001, IMPACT-se first published a report on Syrian textbooks. While the question of education in Syria during the civil war has been addressed, no research, before now, has been conducted on the contents of the current curriculum.

Considering the exceptional circumstances of the situation in Syria, our efforts revolve around three axes. The first is to examine the curriculum against the background of IMPACT-se's standards for peace and tolerance. More specifically, and for future reference, the project examines the textbook contents while trying to speculate what, if anything within the texts, contributed toward the perpetuation of such horror.

Secondly is to examine through education a society in major crisis as it tries to hold on to its basic beliefs—ideological and otherwise.

The final part of our investigation looks at the region and the world at large, together with Syria's young generation, and efforts to grapple with the results of the civil war.

To accomplish this we have looked closely at the curriculum and endeavored to gauge where the Assad regime is heading. The questions are many: How are Syria's youth being educated to participate in possible future political scenarios? Who will ultimately be its friends—and enemies? What hope for peace is envisioned in Syria by the curriculum? Is stability even in Syria's future?

The first section: "Syrian Civil War: Normalcy Amid Catastrophe" asks how a people strives to find balance from a structured evolutionary education system, while struggling with continuous tragic circumstances. Although much that relates to the war is ignored, images of horror inevitably find their way into the curriculum. The ethos is of natural disaster that demands mobilization and individual contribution. Sensitive issues as regards displaced families and emigrants are dealt with in an indirect manner, as is the unspeakable destruction which is everywhere apparent.

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"Syrian Identity: Radical Arabism" describes the Syrian collective worldview and national identity. Assad's Syria remains committed to its pan-Arab ideology, which places secular nationalism and devotion to a radical struggle at the forefront of an agenda to unite the Arab world—to the exclusion of non-Arab actors in the Arab domain. Syria proper—and the Assad father-son dynasty—remain at the center of the collective's identity. The army continues to have a special role while a new constitution and belief in dialogue are also featured.

Sections three and four are an overview of how this authoritarian and monochromatic identity charts an imaginary wish list of Syria's friends, its natural competitors, and those allotted the role of sworn enemies. Educationally and culturally, the Assad regime is more comfortable with Russia and Egypt, while non-Arab partners—mainly Iran and Turkey—are not trusted. The US and Israel are unquestionably in the category of enemy. "Freedom: Islam, Christianity, Gender" reexamines Syrian identity more deeply, as it explores the limits of collective identity and freedom in the secular authoritarian state, granting many rights to some groups, excluding others, while maintaining tight controls.

The research exposes what is typically obscured. While the Assad regime and Iran's "Holy Regime" are allies, their worldviews and ambitions stand in sharp opposition. Syrian Arabism aims at uniting the "Arab Homeland" within a secular ethno-linguistic republican framework. No non-Arab should rule the Arab, especially not an Islamist of the Khomeinist-Shiite Persian variety. The name "Hezbollah" is not in textbooks.

The Syrian curriculum praises some previous empires, such as the Egyptian or Mesopotamian but not others, including the Persian. (When the Persian empire stretched over Syria, it was considered a "Persian Occupation." ) Furthermore, modern Iran—according to the Syrian curriculum—still "occupies" Arab lands such as Khuzestan in mainland Iran as well as the Gulf islands.

There is a dramatic distinction drawn between the antagonism exhibited toward Iran and the extreme friendliness toward the Russian Federation. "The largest country in the world," is openly a close ideological and cultural friend. Russian language is taught. All things Russian are imitated. As such, Russia is perhaps Syria's quintessential role model. Iran and its revolution are acknowledged but Syria's attitude toward them, as expressed in its curriculum, is lukewarm at best. The Persian language is not taught. Iran's export of its Islamist-Khomeinist revolution is an embarrassment that the curriculum ignores.

Finally, we explore the dichotomy of how a regime that practices and preaches radical violence also educates to cherish international organizations promoting peace (albeit as an abstract idea). The curriculum sheds some light on how organizations like the UN are perceived by an educational system that remains single-minded in its determination to continue along its current trajectory.
It demonstrates to us that the civil war—with all its horrors—has not softened Syria's radical national identity, which the authors of this curriculum seem to view as commensurate with international norms.

Exhibition of Drawings by Syrian Students

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Conclusion

The Syrian curriculum offers a unique look at a people in the midst of a battle for life and death, trying to create a semblance of normalcy and coherence on the edge of the abyss. At first look, there is much to admire about the modern secular dimensions of the curriculum which highlights women’s and Christian rights and genuine encouragement of creative thinking and commitment to scientific research and hard work.

An examination utilizing IMPACT’s UNESCO-derived standards for peace and tolerance (see Methodology, p. 101) brings unsettling currents to the fore. On all accounts except gender and tolerance toward the Christian minority, the Syrian curriculum does not meet these standards. Despite abstract sentiments about peace and love, the curriculum focuses on indoctrination; does not provide a balanced worldview; avoids human and personal presentation or even respect of the Other; does not provide serious environmental and economic education; and professes an ideology that is exclusionary, militaristic and authoritarian.

To what extent did the curriculum contribute to the start and ruthless continuation of the Syrian Civil War? The textbooks bear strong similarities to what was earlier detected in our 2001 report, entitled "Peace and the 'Other' in Syrian School Textbooks." There remains an atmosphere of intolerance and a stress on radical martial heroism, conjoined with pan-Arab nationalistic ambitions. There is a conscious directing of hatred toward the Israeli Other. The curriculum uses Islam to foster a *jihadist* military spirit, rife with reverence to martyrs and heroes, both secular and religious. The environment created by the curriculum supports an attitude of self-righteousness that justifies "resistance" (guerilla-terrorism) while using "all available means" to destroy the Other, under the assumption that international organizations such as the UN are supportive of such actions. Expressions such as "the Zionist presence in Palestine is a momentary presence," "insistence on purifying the land and all of humanity from the Zionists," or "Zionist Entity," are used in concert with other anti-Semitic messages.

The Syrian tragedy is evidence that the dichotomous choices offered by the curriculum to students—that of love, progressive thinking, and a volunteer spirit vs hatred and a martial attitude toward the Other—may only be contributing to the tumult that is modern Syria. Syria and its people can no longer afford such dual existence. Relative tolerance toward some aspects of national life, while ruthlessly oppressing or ignoring important ethnic and collective identities within Syria for the sake of monochromatic radical pan-Arab indoctrination, comes with a hefty price tag.

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One particular topic of interest is that Syrian authoritarian pan-Arabism and secularism bring it culturally closer to Russia than to any other major actor. Iran and its proxies are not viewed positively in the curriculum. This may point to another kind of dissimulation (taqiya)—so often used by minorities in the Middle East. Given the ideological differences between Iran and Syria, alliances of convenience are possible but if the curriculum is to be taken on its face, there can never be a true friendship with this Iranian regime. Russia, however, is a different case altogether. The Syrian relationship with Russia—demonstrated eagerly in the textbooks—comprises what is akin to a mutual admiration society.

The curriculum's duality is nowhere exhibited more than in discussions of competitors—and even foes. Thus, while Iran is typically described as an occupier and land usurper, its revolution is praised for its popular anti-Western dimension. While the curriculum is emphatically secular, Islamic studies allow for other views. While Syria claims much Turkish land, typically only Alexandretta is shown on the maps. And while Israel is demonized throughout the curriculum and is fated to disappear, the disengagement agreement and Syrian conditions for peace (in general terms) are also mentioned. Moreover, while all Arab states are destined to melt into one pan-Arab entity, even the presence of their "artificial" borders is acknowledged. Finally, while Arabism (unlike Islamism) does not claim European territory, heroic stories of the conquest of Al-Andalus (the Iberian Peninsula) are featured.7

The civil war is treated in the textbooks as a catastrophe that occurred for no apparent reason; certainly not as a result of social issues. The curriculum ignores the 2011 uprising and efforts for democracy and freedom—which ultimately led to the war. It does evoke Assad's answer: the regime still has a strong enough balance between hatred for Syria's enemies and love of the nation, which manages to create a large enough consensus for the Assad regime to survive.

Ultimately hate and militarism cannot be controlled. A culture of peace and tolerance must be taught and fostered. Despite the urgent priorities weighted toward survival from the Syrian disaster, the international community should not compromise on meaningful peace education, vital to bring the internal changes among the hearts and minds of students that can later translate into real peace.

7 Arabic, Grade 9, Vol 1, 2017–18, p. 11.
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.  
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. **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. **PEACEMAKING**: The curriculum should develop capabilities for non-violent conflict resolution and promote peace.  
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.

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8 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/
9 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.
10 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.
6. **GENDER**: The curriculum should foster equality and mutual respect between women and men. It should refrain from stereotyped gender roles.\(^{14}\)

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.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{14}\) 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.

\(^{15}\) 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 Arabic language textbooks have been monitored for the research in this study. Please feel free to contact IMPACT-se for access to textbooks contained in our research (http://www.impact-se.org/about-us/contact-us/). The titles both here and referenced in the text have been translated into English to aid the reader.

*Arabic is My Language*, Grade 1, Vol. 2, 2017–18.
*Christian Education*, Grade 1, 2017–18.
*Islamic Education*, Grade 1, 2017–18.
*Social Studies*, Grade 1, Vol. 1, 2017–18.

*Arabic is My Language*, Grade 2, Vol. 1, 2017–18.

*Islamic Education*, Grade 3, 2017–18.

*Islamic Education*, Grade 4, 2017–18.

*Arabic is My Language*, Grade 5, Vol. 1, 2017–18.
*Islamic Education*, Grade 5, 2017–18.

*Arabic is My Language*, Grade 6, Vol. 1, 2017–18.
*Islamic Education*, Grade 6, 2017–18.
Social Studies, Grade 6, Vol. 2, 2017–18. *
Arabic Language, Grade 7, Vol. 1, 2017–18. *
Geography, Grade 7, 2017–18. *
History, Grade 7, 2017–18. *
Islamic Education, Grade 7, 2017–18. *
National Education, Grade 7, 2017–18. *
Russian Language, Grade 7, 2017–18. *

Arabic Language, Grade 8, Vol. 1, 2017–18. *
History, Grade 8, 2017–18. *
Islamic Education, Grade 8, 2017–18.
National Education, Grade 8, 2017–18. *
Russian Language, Grade 8, 2017–18. *

Arabic Language, Grade 9, Vol. 1, 2017–18. *
Arabic Language, Grade 9, Vol. 2, 2017-18. *
Geography, Grade 9, 2017–18. *
History, Grade 9, 2017–18..
Islamic Education, Grade 9, 2017–18.
National Education, Grade 9, 2017–18. *
Russian Language, Grade 9, 2017–18. *

Arabic Language and Literature, Grade 10, 2017–18.
Geography, Grade 10, 2017–18. *
History, Grade 10 (Literary Branch), 2017–18. *
History, Grade 10 (Scientific Branch), 2017–18. *

History of the Modern and Contemporary World, Grade 11, 2017–18. *
National Education, Grade 11, 2017–18. *

Christian Education, Grade 12, 2017–18. *
Geography, Grade 12, 2017–18.
History, Grade 12, 2017–18. *
Islamic Education, Grade 12, 2017–18. *
National Education, Grade 12, 2017–18. *

* Quoted Textbooks