

IMPACT-se

In Conjunction with:



The Erdoğan Revolution in the Turkish Curriculum Textbooks

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



First in a Series

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Executive Summary

IMPACT-se's past reports on the Turkish curriculum have stressed its tolerant dimensions, which included the introduction of a Kurdish language elective program, the teaching of evolution, expressions of cultural openness, and displays of tolerance toward minorities.

In recent years such tolerance has dwindled as the curriculum has been radicalized. *Jihad* war has been introduced into textbooks and turned into the "new normal," with martyrdom in battle glorified. Ethno-nationalist religious objectives, manifested in neo-Ottomanism and pan-Turkism are taught. Thus, Islam is depicted as a political matter, with science and technology used to advance its goals. No caveats are apparently offered regarding the inherent radicalism to such a historical resurgence.

The textbooks appear to offer no caveats to their support for the radicalism inherent within these interpretations of historical resurgence. There is an emphasis on concepts such as "Turkish World Domination" and Turkish or Ottoman "Ideal of the World Order." According to the curriculum, the "Turkish Basin" stretches from the Adriatic Sea to Central Asia. Both Ottoman-Turkish and Arabic language studies are offered.

The curriculum adopts an anti-American stance, displaying sympathy for the motivations of ISIS and Al-Qaeda, while remaining staunchly anti-PKK (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan—Kurdistan Workers' Party). Turkey assumes anti-Armenian and pro-Azerbaijani stances. The Kurdish minority's identity and cultural needs continue to be largely neglected. The Alevi tradition is acknowledged, but religious studies encompass Sunni teachings only; the 1955 pogroms against Istanbul's Greek community are ignored. Elective programs such as Kurdish have been neglected and largely replaced by religious "elective" courses, which are often mandatory in practice. The theory of evolution has been removed.

The curriculum conveys subtle anti-democratic messaging, describing former political allies as terrorists, and suggesting that civil activism—such as the Gezi Park protests—is manipulated by suspect capitalist and foreign powers.

Some anti-Christian and anti-Jewish sentiment has been introduced; in both cases the pejorative *infidels* is used, rather than the traditional term, "People of the Book." The curriculum demonizes Zionism and verges on antisemitic messaging by describing some Jewish schools in post-WWI Turkey as hostile to the country's independence. Conversely, respect is shown for the Jewish civilization and the Hebrew language. For the first time, there is mention, albeit brief, of the Holocaust, including Auschwitz, the gas chambers, death squads, as well as the widespread killing of Jews, Roma and others (six million "victims").

Islamic education had been present in Turkish curricula since the 1980s and 1990s, when secular governments were in control; this contributed to the ascendance of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's

Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002. Once in power, the AKP moved cautiously to further Islamize the curriculum with cover from the ultimately unsuccessful European Union accession process while at the same time weakening the secular-leaning army. Many resources were channeled to the Imam Hatip vocational-religious schools; their curriculum spread to other schools through the system of "mandatory elective" courses. Radicalization accelerated rapidly in the aftermath of the 2015 failed coup.

Main Findings:

- The Turkish curriculum has been significantly radicalized in recent years.
- *Jihad* war is introduced as a central value; martyrdom in battle is glorified.
- Islam is depicted as political, using science and technology to advance its goals.
- An ethno-nationalist religious vision combining neo-Ottomanism and pan-Turkism is taught.
- Concepts such as "Turkish World Domination" and Turkish or Ottoman "Ideal of the World Order" are emphasized.
- The curriculum adopts an anti-American stance and displays sympathy toward the motivations of ISIS and Al-Qaeda.
- There are anti-Armenian and pro-Azerbaijani stances. The Kurdish minority's identity and cultural needs are largely neglected. The 1955 pogrom against the Greeks is ignored.
- Religious studies are dramatically enhanced via the Imam Hatip vocational-religious schools and system of "mandatory elective" courses. The theory of evolution has been removed.
- Subtle anti-democratic messaging is conveyed (e.g., Gezi Park protests).
- Christians and Jews are characterized as *infidels* instead of People of the Book.
- The curriculum demonizes Zionism and verges on antisemitic messaging by describing some post-WWI Jewish schools as hostile to Turkey's independence. Conversely, the curriculum continues to show respect for the Jewish civilization and the Hebrew language.
- For the first time, the Holocaust is specifically mentioned (briefly).



Foreword

I grew up in Turkey and went to public schools there in the 1980s; studying the IMPACT-se report on the curriculum currently offered in Turkey's public schools has shocked me, to say the least.

Certainly, Turkey's twentieth century social science and history curriculum left much to be desired, from its frequent depiction of women primarily as mothers in society, to the omission of post-WWII history from textbooks. However, even by the standards of Turkey's past curricula, the new textbooks still leave much to be desired, while also raising alarm bells.

From introducing the concept of "*jihad* war," to glorifying Islamic martyrdom, to using the pejorative term "gavur" [infidel] to refer to Jews and Christians (including Turkish citizens), the new curriculum raises concerns on many levels.

In the United States and Europe, Sharia law is often associated with corporal punishment, such as beheadings carried out by political Islamist extremists and the likes of the Islamic State. But in fact, only a few countries, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, enact Sharia in this form.

Most Muslim countries have a mix of religious and secular laws, which invite other, and less draconian forms of Sharia. In these instances, Sharia law feeds into a complex web of legal, political and administrative policies, including education policy and curricula. Blending with state power, it imposes perceived conservative Islamic practices and values on the public. It also demonizes those who do not practice and punishes speech or acts deemed offensive to Islam.

Therefore, in its widely seen practice, Sharia is not a black cloak or the ax of the executioner, but rather an impermeable veil that envelops the entire society. Many pious Muslims individually choose to abide by some or all tenets of Sharia law, which guides their religiosity. But, as a political force, Sharia draws its power from governmental and societal pressure mechanisms. Together, they coerce citizens to adhere to the conservative spectrum of Islam.

Turkey, established as a secularist republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk at the end of World War I, long managed to hold Sharia out of the official sphere, making it an outlier among Muslim-majority countries. Although the secular constitutional system remains, my own research, polls and recent developments in Turkey together demonstrate a dangerous shift.

In recent years, the government led by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been limiting individual freedoms, as well as sanctioning individuals who "insult Islam" or neglect Islamic practices. Since November 2017, the national police—controlled by the central government—have been monitoring online commentary on religion and suppressing freedom of expression when they find such commentary "offensive to Islam."¹

¹ "Emniyet özel birim kurdu ... ve devlete hakaret' edenleri izleyecek," (The [General Directorate of] Security Established a Special Unit ... to Monitor Those Who 'Insult Religion and the State'), *Cumhuriyet*, December 4, 2017, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/emniyet-ozel-birim-kurdu-dine-ve-devlete-hakaret-edenleri-izleyecek-879206>.

Off-screen, it has become commonplace for the police to arrest those who speak critically of Islam in public. For example, world-renowned Turkish pianist Fazil Say has been prosecuted twice for "provocative commentary" on Islam.² His crime was to gently mock the Muslim call for prayer on Twitter.³

Education is a prime pillar in Erdoğan's efforts to drape the country in the cloak of Sharia. Turkey's education system, like the police, falls under control of the central government, and the Ministry of Education has been pressuring citizens to conform to conservative Islamic practices in public schools.

The government is formally inserting⁴ religious practices into the public education system by requiring all newly built schools⁵ in Turkey to house Islamic prayer rooms. Recently, for instance, a local education official in Istanbul demanded that teachers bring pupils to attend morning prayers⁶ at local mosques.

More specifically, the new Turkish curriculum as taught in official textbooks, such as the 2019 *Fundamental Religious Knowledge*, stresses the importance of "fighting and struggle," sometimes through violence, as a fundamental pillar of Islam, and by extension of the Turkish nation. In this textbook and others, *all* non-Muslims are described as "infidels." This also applies to Christians and Jews, including some of Turkey's own citizens, who were previously introduced in textbooks as "People of the Book," using an Islamic reference underlining that Muslims, Jews, and Christians believe in the same God.

With such bad news, those who expect Erdoğan to formally declare Islamic law in Turkey will have to wait for quite some time. The change will not happen overnight. It is taking place gradually, as pointed out by IMPACT-se's report, with the diaphanous veil of Sharia descending over citizens, especially younger ones, through education policy.

The sadder point, of course, is that this curriculum is not preparing Turkey's citizens to be competitive globally in the twenty-first century. Erdoğan's dream of "Making Turkey Great Again" may have to wait for many more decades after him.

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² "Piyaniist Fazil Say'ın yeniden yargılanmasına başlandı," [Pianist Fazil Say's Trial Has Started Again], *Milliyet*, May 24, 2016, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/yerel-haberler/istanbul/piyanist-fazil-say-in-yeniden-yargilanmasina-baslandi-11388518>.

³ Constanze Letsch, "Turkish Composer and Pianist Convicted of Blasphemy on Twitter," *The Guardian*, April 16, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/15/turkish-composer-fazil-say-convicted-blasphemhy>.

⁴ Zia Weise, "Turkey's New Curriculum: More Erdoğan, More Islam," *Politico*, February 13, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/erdogan-turkey-education-news-coup-analysis-curriculum-history-istanbul/>.

⁵ "Yeni okullarda mescit zorunlu," [A Mosque is Mandatory in New Schools.] A Haber [TV], June 25, 2017, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/egitim/ogrencilere-sabah-namazi-cagrisi-4069899>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Series Preface

The present report on the Turkish curriculum is the first in a series of publications aimed at better understanding the relationship of curricula with domestic and foreign policy priorities.

To date, **IMPACT-se** has focused mainly on assessing curricula and their correspondence with international standards of peace and tolerance. This type of research aims at contributing to peace education by providing much needed information to help effect change.

Our findings have shown that curricula reflect deep trends within governments and societies. We believe that the study of peace and tolerance in curricula can serve as a powerful tool for strategic assessment and prediction. In fact, the very question we ask—whether a curriculum teaches peace and tolerance—immediately raises other questions.

Here are a few:

- What are the consequences for students being taught an education that ignores values of peace and tolerance? What are the consequences for Other neighbors?
- What is the likelihood that a country implementing this type of curriculum will remain peaceful and/or flourish?
- What particular worldview is provided by a given curriculum with reference to a society's culture, origins and future? Does it have any particular objectives? Which ones?
- Which domestic and foreign policies are derived from, or conversely, reflected in, a particular curriculum.

We consider this series a first step on the road toward developing the necessary tools for curriculum-informed strategic assessment. The case studies in the series will try to present possible connections between the curricula and the world around them. The structure of each project has been largely left to the discretion of the authors in the hope of fostering creativity and identifying new possibilities for curriculum-derived insights.

The current report concludes that Turkey's curriculum is radicalizing and asks whether it acts as a blueprint for the worldview of Turkish decision makers. We invite our readers to judge for themselves.

Eldad J. Pardo, PhD
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Series Editor

Methodology

IMPACT-se utilizes a content analysis research method to examine textbooks according to the following condensed criteria 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.⁷
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.⁸
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.⁹
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.¹⁰
5. **PEACEMAKING:** The curriculum should develop capabilities for non-violent conflict resolution and promote peace.¹¹

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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. **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.¹²

7. **GENDER:** The curriculum should foster equality and mutual respect between women and men. It should refrain from stereotyped gender roles.¹³

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.¹⁴

¹² 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.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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 Turkish 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.

1. Akın Sever et al., *İslam Bilim Tarihi* (Islam Science History), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.
2. Emrullah Alemdar and Savaş Keleş, *Çağdaş Türk ve Dünya Tarihi* (Contemporary Turkish and World History), Devlet Kitapları, 2019.
3. Ramazan Altıntaş and Vehbi Dereli, *Temel Dini Bilgiler - İslam 1: Öğretim Materyali* (Fundamental Religious Knowledge—Islam 1: Learning Material), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2014.
4. Sabahattin Nayir et al., *Temel Dini Bilgiler - İslam 1: Ders Kirabı* (Fundamental Religious Knowledge—Islam 1: Learning Material), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.
5. Ahmet Ekşi et al., *Fıkıh* (Islamic Law), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2013.
6. Bekir Pınarbaşı and Fikri Özdemir, *Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi 11* (Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge 11), Ankara: SDR Dikey Yayıncılık, 2019.
7. Abdullah Açık et al., *Temel Dini Bilgiler İslam 2* (Fundamental Religious Knowledge 2), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.
8. Hadi Gündür, *Peygamberimizin Hayatı 10* (Our Prophet's Life 10), Ankara: Ata, 2019.
9. Abdullah Açık et al., *Temel Dini Bilgiler* (Fundamental Religious Knowledge), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.
10. Bahattin Demirtaş, *T.C İnkılap Tarihi ve Atatürkçülük 12* (History of the Republic of Turkey's Revolution and Atatürkism 12), Ankara: Mevsim, , 2019.
11. Komisyon, *Coğrafya -11. Sınıf Ders Kitabı*, (Geography 11), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2013.
12. Demirhan Yılmaz et al., *Türk Kültür ve Medeniyet Tarihi* (The History of the Turkish Culture and Civilization), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.
13. Yasemin Okur et al., *Çağdaş Türk ve Dünya Tarihi*, (Contemporary Turkish and World History), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2017.
14. Cem Erdebil et al., *Coğrafya 12* (Geography 12), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı 2019.
15. Işıl Şahin et al., *Uluslararası İlişkiler* (International Relations), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.
16. Günsü Tüzün, *Demokrasi ve İnsan Hakları* (Democracy and Human Rights), Ankara, Ada, 2015.
17. Feramuz Yılmaz et al., *Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi 12* (Religious Knowledge and Moral Culture 12), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.

18. Ali Kuzudişli, *Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi 12* (Religious Knowledge and Moral Culture 12), İstanbul: Eksen, 2018.
19. Ali Osman Kurt and Dursun Ali Aykıt, *Dinler Tarihi* (History of Religions), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.
20. Numan Konaklı et al., *Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi 10* (Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge 10), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.
21. Faruk Salman et al., *Kuran-ı Kerim*, (Holy Qur'an), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.
22. Erkan Taşdelen et al., *Osmanlı Türkçesi* (Ottoman Turkish), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.
23. Mustafa Koçak et al., *Peygamberimizin Hayatı* (Life of Our Prophet), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.
24. Murat Yurtseven, *Sosyoloji* (Sociology), Ankara: Tuna, 2019.
25. Akif Çevik et al., *T.C İnkılap Tarihi ve Atatürkçülük* (History of the Republic of Turkey's Revolution and Atatürkism), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.
26. Ahmet Yılmaz, *Tarih 10* (History 10), Ankara: İlke, 2018.
27. Erol Yüksel et al., *Tarih 10* (History 10), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.
28. Ayşe Pınar Şahintürk et al., *Biyoloji 12* (Biology 12), Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2019.