



Common Ground News Service - Middle East

The Palestinian-Israeli Textbook War

by **Gershon Baskin**

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JERUSALEM - Over the years, significant criticisms have been levelled at Palestinian textbooks for carrying messages that are not conducive to creating a culture of peace. Much less attention has been paid to Jewish-Israeli textbooks but they too deserve in-depth analysis and criticism.

In both Palestinian and Jewish-Israeli textbooks, the historical narratives presented contain strong elements of mutual non-recognition. The problem is compounded by the fact that officials from both sides, sensing that the "textbook war" is just another means for demonising the other, refuse to accept the criticism and tend to respond defensively rather than substantively.

Palestinian textbooks do not explicitly incite against Israel or Jews, just as Israeli textbooks do not explicitly incite against Palestinians or Islam. But both contain confused messages. It is easy to infer implied assumptions on both sides that the other nation should not exist and that this is essentially the political goal of the governments of the Palestinian Authority and the State of Israel. Assuming that this is not the case, the textbooks need to be revised.

Israel frequently calls upon the Palestinians to revise and reform their textbooks in the spirit of making peace. But shouldn't Israel look inside its own classrooms and do the same? Many Israeli textbooks include stereotypes against Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular. Maps in Israeli textbooks do not designate the Palestinian Authority areas or even the "Green Line". Moreover, history books in Israel do not cover the past 15 years, so Israeli students do not learn about the Israeli government's decision under former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to recognise the political rights of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

Israeli civics books provide some insights into the Palestinian citizens of Israel but almost nothing is taught about their history and even less about their national connection to their brothers and sisters in the Occupied Territories. Why shouldn't Israeli students read some modern Palestinian literature? Why don't Israeli textbooks teach anything about the Palestinian connection to the land?

In Palestinian textbooks, the collective historical narrative represents the creation of the State of Israel as a non-legitimate act of the international community. Zionism is understood as an extension of international imperialism and colonialism, and the State of Israel is viewed as having been born in "sin". Although this is a legitimate view of history from the Palestinian standpoint, it is also important to refer within the textbooks to the strategic decision by Palestinian leaders to make peace with Israel.

Palestine is embroiled in a struggle for national existence. But teaching students about the need to struggle for their just rights does not have to contradict the desire to live in peace with the people with whom they are fighting, a desire which should be encouraged and articulated. When showing a map of Palestine from the sea to the Jordan River without any indication of the State of Israel, what should the reader understand? Are these the desired and planned borders of the State of Palestine? Is the goal to eradicate Israel? Failing to answer these questions in a definitive way places doubt on the Palestinian Authority's intentions.

Teaching religion is another sensitive issue. Virtually all religions contain universal messages regarding love, dignity, honour, family, respect, the sanctity of life and other human values. All religions also contain aspects that are narrower in their outlook and generally pertain to the superiority of the particular faith above others. Islam is no different.

Concepts such as Jihad and martyrdom can be taught from different legitimate perspectives in full accordance with Islamic teachings. By necessity, Palestinian textbooks include the concept of Jihad as one of the foundations of Islamic belief. But the way it is expressed, in light of the political context in which we are living, forces the reader to relate to the violent connotations of the concept. By not placing Jihad in the broader context, one is led to conclude that the Palestinian Authority is encouraging Jihad in the narrow sense of a Holy War against Israel and the Jews as well as Christians.

The same is true for the concept of martyrdom. Palestinian textbooks do not clearly reject suicide bombing. In fact, some texts could lead the reader to admire suicide bombers who kill Israelis. Judging by the ambiguous messages found in its textbooks, it is not clear whether the Palestinian Authority has made a decision on this issue. Praise of martyrdom, without being specifically placed in a historical-religious context outside of the current conflict, transmits extremely problematic messages.

Islam is a religion of tolerance and acceptance and should not be construed as the opposite. It accepts Jews and Christians as "Peoples of the Book". These positive elements should be strengthened in the teaching of Islam in Palestinian schools.

There is little chance that Israelis and Palestinians will share the same interpretation of the history of the land and the conflict between its peoples and both have a right to impart their version of history through their textbooks. But if both sides are truly interested in building partners for peace, it is time for them to work together to address the absence of positive content about the other side in both curricula. The time for building a culture of peace is now, and education is the primary arena for doing so.

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* Gershon Baskin is co-CEO of the Israel Palestine Center for Research and Information (www.ipcri.org). This article was written for the Common Ground News Service (CGNews).

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