

Report on PALESTINIAN TEXTBOOKS

Executive Summary



REPORT ON PALESTINIAN TEXTBOOKS – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Report encompasses an analysis of a sample of 156 textbooks and 16 teacher guides published between 2017 and 2019 by the Palestinian Ministry of Education (MoE) for use in general education schools in the subjects: Arabic language, social studies and social upbringing, history and geography, religious education, mathematics, natural sciences and life sciences.

The curriculum reform initiated by the Palestinian Authority in the 2016/2017 academic year remains an ongoing process with textbook revisions being carried out frequently. After the initial completion of this Report therefore 18 textbooks released in 2020 by the Palestinian Ministry of Education have been additionally reviewed.

Palestinian textbooks are produced and located within an environment saturated with ongoing occupation, conflict, and violence, which they in turn reflect. The analysis revealed a complex picture: 1) the textbooks adhere to UNESCO standards and adopt criteria that are prominent in international education discourse, including a strong focus on human rights, 2) they express a narrative of resistance within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and 3) they display an antagonism towards Israel.

Compliance with the principles of global citizenship education

The textbooks extensively address central issues of global citizenship education. In numerous instances the textbooks call for tolerance, mercy, forgiveness and justice. They convey the concept of civil rights and the relationship between citizens and the state. Textbooks for social studies, in particular, also confirm pluralism as a feature of the Palestinian political system and promote political participation in the context of citizenship education. The 2019 editions contain several additional chapters that discuss the meaning of active citizenship and the relationship between the citizen and public spaces, as well as that between the citizen and government. Issues of citizenship are thus allocated more space and further content is dedicated to

them. In all subject areas, the textbooks provide images of society that encompass respectful representations of different social, cultural and religious groups including diversity of skin colour, gender and physical abilities. The textbooks emphasise the primary objective of equal access to facilities and services and equal opportunities for participation in public life, as well as cultural, social and religious values that support various forms of coexistence and dialogue. Religious coexistence between Christians and Muslims is the dominant form presented in the textbooks; other religions are rarely addressed. (For 2020 textbook versions see below.)

Awareness of human rights

The analysis of human rights representations in Palestinian textbooks published between 2017 and 2019 shows an increased focus on the topic and a process of reframing national issues within a global political context. The textbooks affirm the importance of human rights in general and in several places explicitly highlight a universal notion of these rights: emphasising their interdependence and inalienability and referring repeatedly to international documents on human rights. This universal notion is, however, not carried through to a discussion of the rights of Israelis. Group-specific rights, in particular the rights of women, children and persons with disabilities are also discussed extensively. The diversity-embracing approach indicates an increased awareness of and response to international agreements and commitments regarding human rights.

Addressing conflict in human rights discourse

References to human rights serve as a framework through which the textbooks address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the perspective of human rights violations in the context of international law. When the textbooks mention human rights violations, in most cases these are carried out by Israeli protagonists and affect the rights of Palestinians. The textbooks support these assertions by reference to international conventions.

Antagonistic narratives and one-sided representations of the Israeli ‘other’

While the analysis identifies an increased focus on Global Citizenship Education and human rights discourse, it also finds antagonistic narratives and one-sided representations of the Israeli ‘other’ in textbook portrayals of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This primarily applies to the terminology used to refer to the adversary. The term ‘Israel’ occurs relatively seldom, while the term ‘(Zionist) occupation’ dominates in the books. The cartographic representations of All-Palestine, as a political entity, a geographical region or an imagined homeland, generally do not include the State of Israel or cities founded by Jewish immigrants. A few maps show the borders of the West Bank and the settlements within it, thus visualising the disconnected territorial space administered by the Palestinian Authority.

Recognition of Israel and renunciation of terror in source material

The peace process in the Middle East is discussed in a history textbook for year 10, which quotes the speech given by the Egyptian president Anwar El-Sadat in front of the Israeli parliament in 1977 and the letters of mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO from September 1993. These sources document different steps taken towards the recognition of Israel and the renunciation of violence and terrorism by the PLO. The recognition of Israel’s right to exist in peace and security documented in the letters by Yasser Arafat to Yitzhak Rabin stands in contrast to the questioning of the legitimacy of the State of Israel expressed in other passages and textbooks.

Ambivalent representation of Jews in religious education textbooks

When representing Jews collectively as an ethnic and religious group, Palestinian Christian education textbooks acknowledge them as representatives of a further monotheistic faith and largely refrain from reproducing prejudices from the New Testament. Three Islamic education textbooks address Jews and Judaism mainly in the context of early Islam. While two of them deal ambivalently with the motifs of loyalty and treason in reference to some Jewish tribes, one textbook provides a learning context that displays anti-Semitic motifs and links

characteristics and actions attributed to Jews at the dawn of Islam to the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. [For 2020 textbook versions see below.]

The use of the terms *jihād* and *shahīd*

Christian and Islamic religious education textbooks introduce the concept of *jihād* as a spiritual struggle and process of self-reform, but also as engagement in combat. Islamic religious education textbooks explain the rules and conditions of *jihād* and the laws forbidding bloodshed and the killing of innocent people. Especially when taken up in subjects other than religious education, the combat-infused meaning of *jihād* tends to prevail. The term is rarely connected to the current conflict; however, in the few cases where such links are drawn the passages tend to harbour escalatory potential. The term *shahīd* is a key term that is almost exclusively used in the context of the conflict and refers both to individuals killed while committing violent attacks against Israel and to Palestinian victims of violence who were themselves not actively involved.

Representations of violence differ according to subjects

Across the school subjects, the analysis reveals significant differences in the nature and quantity of portrayals of violence. Textbooks for Arabic language contain emotionally laden depictions of Israeli violence that tend to dehumanise the Israeli adversary, occasionally accusing the latter of malice and deceitful behaviour. They depict past acts of violence committed by Palestinians against Jewish paramilitary groups during the British Mandate and subsequently against Israel as part of a heroic struggle against a colonizing oppressor.

Textbooks for history, geography and social studies take a more conceptual approach, consistently placing the facts within the narrative of national resistance. The Israeli opponent is portrayed as aggressive and hostile. The language is however, for the most part, objective in tone and avoids inflammatory expressions. Violence perpetrated by Palestinians, including violence against civilians, is presented as a legitimate means of resistance in certain periods of Palestinian history, alongside peaceful and diplomatic ways of confronting Israel. Especially in higher school years, students are asked to reflect on the use of different means of resistance and to evaluate them.

References to violence in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can also be found in Real Life Connections (RLC) in mathematics and natural science textbooks. Of all the RLC in the textbooks, only a small minority (5 %) are directly related to the conflict. The conflict-related Real Life Connections carry non-escalatory and escalatory potential. (For 2020 textbook versions see below.)

Textbooks for the academic year 2020/2021 reduce escalatory potential

An overview conducted after the initial completion of this Report compared 18 textbooks released online in 2020 by the Palestinian Ministry of Education with earlier versions, and found significant differences. In addition to the increased representation of female and Christian positions there is a reduction in the text and images that have escalatory potential: including the alteration of a specific teaching unit that included anti-Semitic content by several significant changes of the narrative. Some references to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in mathematics and natural science textbooks have been erased completely. References to protagonists of armed Palestinian resistance have in some places been altered or removed.

Palestinian textbooks amended by Israeli authorities

As Israel has annexed East Jerusalem and controls the education sector in this part of the city, Israeli authorities approve and amend textbooks for use in East-Jerusalem schools. A review of 7 amended textbooks has shown, that in spite of significant changes being made to their content, these textbooks do not contain any reference to the amendments made by Israeli authorities nor to the authors of the changed texts. Changes occur on two levels and predominantly concern material that refers to conflict and occupation: the first is the removal of depictions of violence by Palestinians or Israelis, the charting of Israel in maps and the removal of symbolic maps of All-Palestine; on the second level there is an idealisation of the coexistence of Israelis and Palestinians in the amended passages, with no mention of existing tensions. References to Palestinian identity or national symbols are removed, as are passages detailing cultural commemorations and remembrance. The removal of entire chapters on regional and Palestinian history fundamentally changes the national narrative.