

DEMOCRACY, HISTORY, AND THE CONTEST OVER THE PALESTINIAN CURRICULUM

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Almost any discussion of education in the Middle East posits it as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Those who seek peace, democracy, or economic development generally claim that existing educational institutions and practices stand in their way. Palestinian education is particularly notable for the number and variety of its detractors. Outside the country, critics charge that it incites rather than educates; Palestinian critics claim that education does little to foster democratic and productive citizens.

The external and internal critics may be placing an unrealistic burden on what any curriculum and cadre of teachers can accomplish. Palestinian political and economic realities are often grim, and schools hardly have a monopoly on communicating ways to interpret such realities, especially in matters that are so deeply felt and encountered on a daily basis. Still, the critics charge, the Palestinian educational system, and especially the curriculum, exacerbates existing problems.

This paper is devoted to an examination of the Palestinian curriculum, especially as it approaches issues of history and identity. More specifically, the paper is broken into four sections:

- First, it will be necessary to clear up some misconceptions prevalent about the curriculum and the textbooks: the Palestinian curriculum is not a war curriculum; while highly nationalistic, it does not incite hatred, violence, and anti-Semitism. It cannot be described as a “peace curriculum” either, but the charges against it are often wildly exaggerated or inaccurate.
- Second, the treatment of history in the Palestinian curriculum will be examined in some detail. The purpose will be to present patterns both in what it covers and what it declines to cover.
- Third, the goals that motivate this coverage of history will be examined. Two primary goals—inculcation of identity and respect for authority—will receive special attention. While the curriculum can thus be presented as authoritarian in some respects, it will also be observed that it is simultaneously democratic in its determination to reflect the national consensus rather than develop an elitist approach.
- Fourth and finally, the paper will examine an alternative educational vision that has been crystallizing among Palestinian educators and the effect of that alternative on the existing curriculum. That alternative vision—that the educational system should promote the development of active learners, critical thinkers, and democratic citizens—has yet to

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approach issues of identity directly. Yet it is increasingly influential and has had some impact on the current curriculum.

Before turning to these four sections, a brief overview of the history of the Palestinian curriculum is necessary in order to clarify the context in which current efforts are occurring.

INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF PALESTINIAN EDUCATION

After 1948, the West Bank was annexed to Jordan and Gaza was administered by Egypt. Accordingly, West Bank schools followed the Jordanian curriculum, while Gazan schools adopted the Egyptian. In 1967, Israel occupied both areas and maintained the existing curricula for Palestinian schools. It did attempt unsuccessfully to bring its own curriculum into Jerusalem, and it also reviewed Jordanian and Egyptian books, censoring material that it found objectionable. In 1994, Palestinian education in the West Bank (including, to a limited and unacknowledged extent, Jerusalem) and Gaza was transferred to the new Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The PNA immediately established a "Curriculum Development Center" to formulate its own approach. While the Center was working, two interim measures were taken. First, the Jordanian and Egyptian curricula were restored temporarily in their entirety. Second, a supplementary series of texts covering *National Education* was hastily written for grades one through six to compensate for the non-Palestinian nature of the temporary curriculum.

The Curriculum Development Center completed its work in 1996 and presented a 600-page report that amounted to a stinging indictment of current educational institutions, practices, and pedagogy. The Ministry of Education drew back from some of the radical proposals of the report in developing its own plan, which it presented in 1997 to the cabinet and the Palestinian Legislative Council. After receiving approval from both bodies, the Ministry established a new Curriculum Development Center to write new books, which were to be introduced two grades at a time, beginning with the 2000/2001 school year. As of this writing, the plan has proceeded on schedule, with the new curriculum and textbooks in effect in grades one, two, six, and seven. The other grades will shift over to the new curriculum and books over the next three years.

THE INCITEMENT CHARGE

Any treatment of Palestinian education must confront at the outset the oft-repeated claims that Palestinian textbooks instill hatred of Israel and Jews. In a sense, this issue is at most tangential to this paper, which focuses on internal Palestinian politics and portrays textbooks as outcomes of domestic struggle more than producers of international conflict. But virtually every discussion in English on Palestinian education repeats the charge that Palestinian textbooks incite students against Jews and Israel. It may therefore come as a surprise to readers that the books authored under the PNA are largely innocent of these charges. What is more remarkable than any statements they make on the subject is their silence—the PNA-authored books often stubbornly avoid treating anything controversial regarding current Palestinian national identity, forcing them into awkward omissions and gaps. The first generation of Palestinian textbooks written in 1994, the *National Education* series, make no mention of any location as Palestinian outside of the territories occupied by Israel in 1967; those books go to some lengths to avoid saying anything about Israel at all and the few exceptions are hardly pejorative. The second generation of books—issued beginning in 2000—breaks some of that silence but with neither the consistency nor the stridency that critics of the textbooks allege.

Then where do persistent reports of incitement in Palestinian textbooks come from? Virtually all

can be traced back to the work of a single organization, the “Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace.” The Center claims that its purpose is “to encourage the development and fostering of peaceful relations between peoples and nations, by establishing a climate of tolerance and mutual respect founded on the rejection of violence as a means to resolving conflicts.”² Critics charge that the Center’s real purpose is to launch attacks on the Palestinian National Authority, and it would be difficult to contest such a conclusion. They point to the identity of the Center’s first director, Itamar Marcus, to support their suspicions.³

The Center’s own reports suggest such suspicions are well-founded. The Center began operation by issuing its first report in 1998 on Palestinian textbooks that might best be described as tendentious and highly misleading. When the PNA issued a new series of books for grades one and six in 2000, the Center rushed out its second report that passed over significant changes quite quickly before presenting its allegations of “delegitimization of Israel’s existence,” implicit “seeking of Israel’s destruction,” “defamation of Israel,” and “encouraging militarism and violence.” However, in contrast to the alarm and alacrity with which it studied Palestinian textbooks, the Center’s work on Israeli textbooks showed a far more generous spirit and proceeded at a far more leisurely pace, taking years rather than months. The report on Israeli books followed a very different method: rather than quoting example after example of offending passages with little historical context or explanation (a method that would have produced a very damning report indeed), the report on Israeli textbooks is nuanced and far more careful. Incendiary quotations are explained, analyzed and contextualized in the report on Israeli books; they are listed with only brief and sensationalist explanations in the reports on Palestinian books. In short, the Center is fair, balanced, and understanding for Israeli textbooks but tendentious on Palestinian books.

The Center’s work has been widely circulated: its reports are the source for virtually any quotation in English from the Palestinian curriculum. Indeed, its influence has begun to be felt in policy circles, and has informed congressional and presidential statements in the United States, numerous newspaper columns, and—more recently—a decision by some external donors to cut off funds for Palestinian education. Recently some European parliamentarians have begun to press their governments and the European Union as a whole, and an Israeli cabinet minister has spoken of taking the issue to the United Nations. Since the Center’s reports have dominated the public debate with considerable effect and little contestation, it makes some sense to examine them.

While often highly misleading and always unreliable, most of the contents of the Center’s reports are not fabricated. Clearly false statements are rare, though when they do occur they are far from minor. For instance, the Center’s first report on Palestinian textbooks, issued in 1998, included the statement that: “PA TV is a division of the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Education,” which allowed the report to saddle the Palestinian educational establishment with any statement broadcast on Palestinian television. The statement was false, however. In its second comprehensive report on Palestinian textbooks, issued in 2000 on the new books for the first and sixth grades, the Center claims that “the PA has rejected international calls” to modify books for the other grades. In fact, as will become clear, the plan to replace the textbooks in question was as old as the PNA itself and was

² See the Center’s website, www.edume.org

³ An Israeli resident of the West Bank settlement of Efrat, Marcus previously lobbied to keep West Bank aquifers under Israeli control. His work on textbooks led Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to appoint him to a joint committee with the Palestinians on incitement. He then went on to found an organization that searches Palestinian media for anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish statements, following a similar method to that followed for textbooks.

For an example of a criticism of the Center’s work that focuses on Marcus personally, see the document submitted by the PLO to the Mitchell Commission, “Third Submission of the Palestine Liberation Organization to the Sharm El-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee,” 3 April 2001, www.nad-plo.org/eye/Response%20to%20Israeli%20Submission.5.pdf, p. 22.

proceeding according to a well-published schedule when the Center's report was issued. Several lesser errors occur throughout the Center's work.

But the real problems with the Center's reports lie elsewhere. In particular, three sets of flaws characterize its work (and much of the public debate about Palestinian textbooks more generally). First, the Center generally ignores any historical context in a way that renders some of its claims sharply misleading. In its 1998 report, the Center adduced numerous incendiary statements about Israel and Jews from books in use in Palestinian schools. The statements quoted were accurate. Some indeed were highly offensive to Jews and sharply anti-Israeli.⁴ Yet they came not from books authored by Palestinians but from Egyptian and Jordanian books used in Gaza and the West Bank, respectively.⁵ The books were distributed by the PNA, to be sure, but they antedated its establishment. (The Center's report does hold the PNA responsible for distributing the Egyptian and Jordanian books and therefore holds Palestinians responsible for the content. Here it displays an odd double standard: it does not note that Israel has distributed the exact same books in East Jerusalem, removing only the cover. The only books that the Israelis refused to distribute after 1994 were those authored by the PNA—the *National Education* series—even though those books were free of the content that Israel objected to. The likely reason for this odd policy is that Palestinian sovereignty in Jerusalem—implied by using PNA-authored books—was far more problematic for Israel than anti-Semitism.)

By sharp contrast to the Egyptian and Jordanian books, the 1994 *National Education* series, actually authored by the PNA, verged on blandness. The first generation of books made no mention of any Palestinian area within the 1967 borders (the second generation of books—written after the Center's first report—reversed this policy). Indeed, the 1994 books went to some length to avoid any controversial matter whatsoever. An organization claiming to “monitor the impact of peace” might be expected to compare the older, non-Palestinian books with the newer, Palestinian ones. Indeed, such a task would seem basic to its mission. The Center goes beyond failing to live up to its name; its reports are written to obfuscate the distinction between the old and new books. It does not simply fail to note the change, but, in one of its rare falsehoods, the Center claims that in the 1994 series, Israel does not exist.⁶ (The treatment of Palestinian history in the 1994 books is extremely brief, but Israel is indeed referred to; remarkably, the 1994 texts resorts to awkward phrasing to avoid citing Israel in some negative contexts.) It is difficult escape the conclusion that the Center was far more interested in criticizing the PNA than in an honest assessment of the changes produced in Palestinian education by the Oslo Accords.

The second problem with the Center's work is its prosecutorial style. Its reports offer little more than brief themes and then list statement after statement purporting to prove the point. Any evidence that contradicts the Center's harsh message is ignored, obscured, or dismissed, such as maps that clearly draw Palestinian governorates as covering only the West Bank and Gaza, an extended and laudatory treatment of Gandhi's nonviolence, or a tour of Palestinian cities that includes only those under PNA rule. Other evidence is interpreted inaccurately. For instance, a

⁴ The report's method of listing large number of statements from the books led it to include all sorts of material under the anti-Israel rubric. For instance, any mention of a Palestinian character to Jerusalem was listed as questioning the Israeli nature of the city. Since Jerusalem was designated as a matter for final status negotiations, the idea that the Palestinians questioned Israeli annexation should have been unsurprising. What is more surprising—and unremarked in the report—is that all mentions of locations in Jerusalem in the Palestinian-authored books refer only to the Old City and a few Arab neighborhoods. If textbooks are taken as indications of negotiating positions—an implicit assumption of the report—then the Palestinians showed far more willingness to compromise on Jerusalem than Israel.

⁵ The Center's report does include some excerpts from the 1994 Palestinian-authored books but none can fairly be viewed as hostile to Israel or to Jews. The texts are examined in more detail below.

⁶ <http://www.edume.org/news/news1.htm>

topographical map of Palestine (inserted most likely to avoid drawing any sensitive political issues regarding borders) is presented as a denial of Israel's existence. Many of the selections included are presented in a highly tendentious manner: a unit on tolerance is criticized for omitting Jews, while a reading of the entire unit makes perfectly clear that its topic is tolerance within Palestinian society.⁷ 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam is mentioned in texts as a Palestinian national hero; the Center's 2000 report explains:

The primary terrorist organization operating against Israel since the signing of the Oslo Accords is the Hamas, whose members terrorized Israeli citizens with suicide attacks, primarily on buses. The terror wing of the group is called the "Az Aldin Al Kassam" squad, named after the terrorist who fought the British and Jews before the establishment of the State of Israel. The new PA schoolbook glorifies Kassam...

In essence, the Center provides a context for the mention of al-Qassam that, while accurate, is irrelevant to the text: it deliberately obscures how the text itself presents al-Qassam or how Palestinians would understand a reference to him. Al-Qassam was killed at the beginning of his attempt to organize a rebellion against the British mandate. Subsequent generations of Palestinians have been able to read various dimensions into his short career: for mainstream nationalists, he is a rebel against the British, for Islamists, a warrior for Islam, and for leftists, he is a mobilizer of the popular classes. To imply that mentioning al-Qassam is an implicit endorsement of suicide attacks and bus bombings is thus based on a hostile, inaccurate, and even dishonest reading—what matters is not whether the textbooks cite him but how they present him. Palestinian texts mention him only as a martyr in the struggle against British imperialism.⁸

⁷ My son attended a Tel Aviv school which celebrated "tolerance day," assuring all students that Israelis can be religious or secular, light-skinned or dark-skinned, and Jewish or Arab. Following the Center's methodology, such a unit might be lambasted for failing to include Palestinians who do not hold Israeli citizenship and for denying Palestinian identity (by not mentioning it).

⁸ To follow the Center's methodology, an American textbook from the late 1930s mentioning Abraham Lincoln might be seen as carrying a pro-Communist message because of the role of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War. Certainly the Center's logic could be used to cite any Israeli textbook mentioning Yitzhak Shamir as encouraging massacres of Palestinians and political assassinations of British and UN officials.

In short, the purpose is clearly to indict the textbooks and the PNA rather than analyze and understand the content of the books. Were the Center to take a similar approach in other countries, including Israel, it could easily find comparable material.⁹

The final and perhaps the largest problem with the Center's work lies not simply with the reports themselves but in how they have been read. The Center's conclusions may be unsupported by the evidence it presents and undermined by the evidence it overlooks. But it does include some qualifications and elliptical wording that usually prevent its reports from outright falsehood. When its reports gain wider circulation, however, the buried qualifications get lost. The Center's 2000 report actually admitted that changes had occurred in the Palestinian-authored books but then attempted to undermine its own admission:

A few changes were noted in the new PA books. The open calls for Israel's destruction found in the previous books are no longer present. However, given the de-legitimization of Israel's existence, together with teachings such as the obligation to defend Islamic land, the seeking of Israel's destruction has merely been shifted from the explicit to the implicit.

Another change is that certain overtly anti-Semitic references defining Jews and Israelis as "treacherous" or 'the evil enemy', common in the previous books, are likewise not present. However, given the books' portrayal of Israel as a foreign colony that massacred and expelled Palestinians, the defamation of Israel continues even if the word "enemy" has been removed.

In short, the new books removed the earlier offensive material, but the Center acknowledged the change only by denying its significance. Thus it is not surprising when public references to the textbooks based on the Center's report lose any subtlety and make erroneous claims about the new books. Charles Krauthammer claimed that since the signing of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinians had "intensified the propaganda, the antisemitism, in their pedagogy and in their media" and that while Israel had "assiduously" changed its textbooks to prepare for peace, "on the Palestinian side, the opposite was happening."¹⁰ Rather than lauded for having removed offensive material, the

⁹ The Center eschews such a prosecutorial approach in its treatment of Israeli textbooks. Were it to be more consistent in its approach, it could easily (and, to some extent, unfairly) smear the efforts of Israeli educators. My own son's experience in a fourth-grade class in Tel Aviv can bear this out. He was given maps that included all the PNA territories in Israel and none that excluded them. (With Israel not having determined its borders or recognized Palestinian sovereignty, this is understandable, but the Center hardly approaches Palestinian textbooks with such sympathetic understanding). A unit on the history of the land included no significant material on the Palestinian population and the only treatment of Muslims (the Ottomans) was negative. A biblical text (Joshua) was presented that defined the borders promised to the Jews ambitiously covering much of Jordan and Syria. While the text itself could not be changed, the edition given to my son included notes designed to ensure the students understood the nature of these borders (the same book was reticent only when dealing with an incident involving a prostitute: the commentary indicated that the word "prostitute"--an unfortunately common playground epithet at my son's school--really meant "vegetable seller." In short, the edition showed embarrassment when the text mentioned sex, but not when it dealt with borders.) Perhaps most shocking, my son was given a song sheet during a unit on the history of the city of Tel Aviv that advocated beating and even the death of Arabs (the song lauded a guard for beating up Arabs and quoted him saying, "Get out of here, `Abd Allah, you should die, God willing, but just not in Tel Aviv.") My point here is not that Israeli textbooks are racist (my vague impression is that the secular educational establishment is to be commended for steadily growing sensitivity over how such matters are to be taught). I only wish to observe that a report using the same selective techniques as the Center could easily portray them extremely negatively. (A completely fair account here should mention that the offensive verse in the song was not taught to the students in my son's class after my wife and I complained to the teacher, who apologized profusely and expressed extreme embarrassment that she had circulated a song with such words.) A full and fair-minded treatment of Israeli textbooks is forthcoming from Elie Podeh, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict in Israeli History Textbooks* (Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 2001).

¹⁰ Without a hint of irony, Krauthammer simultaneously denounced the Israeli changes, favorably citing a book that covered the issue "in rather great and shocking details." See the transcript of remarks delivered at the American Enterprise Institute, "Is the Israeli/Palestinian Peace Process Dead, and if so, What's Next," 6 November 2000, www.aei.org/past_event/conf001106.htm.

Palestinians were criticized for introducing it. A *Jerusalem Post* columnist falsely claimed “The incitement to hatred of Jews and the destruction of Israel, which has always been part of the Palestinian school curriculum, was intensified.”¹¹ A spokesperson for Israeli settlers in the West Bank introduced the puzzling charge which would probably have made even the Center’s staff blush: “We teach our children to respect life, while they teach that if you die with Jewish blood on your hands you go to heaven and are fed with grapes by 15 virgins.”¹² The European Commission came under fire in the press for supporting the books (it did not, though some member states did support the Palestinian Curriculum Development Center), leading an exasperated spokesman to declare: “The Commission utterly rejects the promotion of intolerance or hatred, as it rejects poor journalism...”¹³

The Palestinian textbooks were such a politically attractive target that even those who were better informed as to their content criticized them. Hillary Clinton, running for the U.S. Senate, criticized Palestinian textbooks in a way that buried her acknowledgement that the new first and sixth grade books, authored by the PNA itself, were different: “All future aid to the Palestinian Authority must be contingent on strict compliance with their obligation to change all the textbooks in all grades—not just two at a time.”¹⁴ After her election, her comments lost even this subtlety: in June 2001 she joined with her fellow senator from New York, Charles Schumer, in a letter to President George Bush, introducing the false charge (clearly based on a Center report): “A book that is required reading for Palestinian six graders actually starts off stating, ‘There is no alternative to destroying Israel.’”¹⁵ As the second intifada took on diplomatic as well as violent dimensions, the Israeli government cited textbooks as evidence of Palestinian bad faith and hostile intentions. Others held international donors responsible for not forcing changes or even for funding new sources of incitement.¹⁶

The Center’s reports were the clear source for most of these charges, whether cited or not. A member of the United States Congress wrote to *The New York Times*:

According to the Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace, today’s sixth-grade Palestinian students are required to read the textbook “Our Country Palestine,” which has a banner on the title page of Volume I that reads, “There is no alternative to destroying Israel.”¹⁷

The charge was false, though it was widely repeated and even displayed in an advertising campaign by an organization calling itself (with unintended irony) “Jews for Truth Now.” No textbook included such a phrase. The member of Congress and others had read the Center’s carelessly-written report in a careless manner. The original report had actually claimed: “An old book introduced into the PA curriculum is filled with virulent anti-Semitism.” It then claimed that there is a banner on the title page stating “There is no alternative to destroying Israel.” The Center’s claim was misread and may have been inaccurate. The book “Our Country Palestine” was an old geographical guide to Palestine

¹¹ Berl Wein, “Illusions,” *Jerusalem Post*, 26 October 2000.

¹² Christina Lamb, “Intifada: The Next Generation,” *Sunday Telegraph*, 15 October 2000, p. 26

¹³ Commission of the European Communities, “Statement on behalf of Commissioner Patten on press reports regarding alleged EC funding for text books used by the Palestinian Authority,” press release, 27 April 2001. The statement came after a story in the *European Voice* on the textbook controversy.

¹⁴ “Hillary Clinton: Link PA Aid to End to Antisemitism,” *Jerusalem Post* 26 September 2000.

¹⁵ The text of the letter can be found at <http://www.senate.gov/~clinton/news/2001/06/2001614111.html>.

¹⁶ Gerald Steinberg criticized European assistance and diplomacy for ineffectiveness in 1999, writing that “new Palestinian textbooks dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict contain the same myths and hostility.” (See “The European Union and the Middle East Peace Process” Gerald M. Steinberg, *Jerusalem Letter*, No. 418, 15 November 1999. Steinberg’s description of the books published by 1999 is unsupportable even by the tendentious standards of the Center.

¹⁷ Steve Israel, letter to *The New York Times*, 10 June 2001, Section 4, p. 14.

begun in the 1940s and published in some subsequent editions. Those looking for the supposed banner could not find it (nor could I). Certainly the edition available to the textbook authors did not include the phrase.¹⁸ Further, the claim that the book was introduced into the curriculum is highly misleading. Its author's evacuation from Jaffa in 1948 was described, and, at the end of the unit, students are given a suggested activity of looking up the name of their town or village in the book. To leap from this suggested activity to a charge of inculcating virulent anti-Semitism seems—to put it politely—curious indeed.

It was not merely members of Congress who were misled by careless reading of the Center's reports. Even sloppy academics were led astray. One analysis of Palestinian textbooks reproduced quotations from the Center's reports (without attribution), mistakenly claiming that all the texts came from Palestinian-authored books (whereas most came from the Egyptian and Jordanian books being phased out).¹⁹ An equally groundless, though far more bizarre analysis of Palestinian textbooks begins with wholesale (though unattributed) borrowings from the Center's reports and then adds:

Public acclaim, a non-ending orgy of sex and all the booze you can drink, constitute a powerful combination of incentives for igniting the imagination and motivation of pubescent youth, aged 12 and up. Along with the emotionally charged scenes of actually stoning Jews and Jewish property, what more is needed to convince them that killing Jews is a worthy and honorable vocation? The PA is certainly preparing a huge army for the future that, socially and psychologically, will be trained to commit unmitigated violence against Israel and the Jewish People on behalf of Islam, the Arabs and Palestine.²⁰

The vitriolic and often inaccurate criticisms of Palestinian textbooks should not obscure that those books do treat Israel with a remarkable awkwardness, reticence, and inconsistency. Exploring the relationship between Palestinians on the one hand and Israel, Zionism, and Jews on the other might logically be seen as central to any attempt to educate Palestinians about their past, their present, and even their geography. But such topics are treated only at the margins.

Indeed, the textbooks often take on the same kind of awkwardness adults often assume when addressing subjects they would prefer to avoid. In explaining the concept of species, one of the new books explains that animals that are not alike cannot "marry" and have children—a rather Victorian presentation. Discussions of sensitive political topics often show a similar reticence to sensitive topics.

This is most marked in the matter of the borders and geographical nature of the state of Palestine and perhaps especially notable in the case of maps. If there is any issue that has attracted more international attention, it is the presence of maps in Palestinian textbooks that do not indicate the existence of Israel. But the 1994 *National Education* series worked to avoid maps altogether, instructing the students to draw their own. The newer books break some of the silence of the 1994

¹⁸ Two Palestinians (Khalil Mahshi and Fouad Moughrabi) looked for editions in the public library and the Ministry of Education in Ramallah and found the editions there—the ones that would have been available to the textbook authors—did not contain the banner. I located an edition published in 1991 that also lacked the banner (Mustafa Murad Dabbagh, *Biladuna Filastin*, Kafr Qara': Dar al-Huda, 1991). In short, while it may or may not be true that one edition of the book contained the banner, most editions—including the one authors relied on—do not. And the Center makes other mistakes: it claims the book is dedicated to "those who are battling for the expulsion of the enemy from our land!" In fact, the dedication is to "those who strove for maintaining the Arabness of Palestine."

¹⁹ Raphael Israeli, "Education, Identity, State Building and the Peace Process: Educating Palestinian Children in the Post-Oslo Era," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 12 (1, Spring 2000), pp. 79-94.

²⁰ Shlomo Sharan, "Israel and the Jews in the Schoolbooks of the Palestinian Authority," in Arie Shihv, *Israel and a Palestinian State: Zero-Sum Game* (Shaarei Tikva: Ariel Center for Policy Research, 2001), available at <http://www.acpr.org.il/publications/pa/pp58.doc>, p. 57.

series. But those books omit much more than Israel; they also omit the borders of the Palestinian state. The books include many maps; all present the ambiguity of the borders of Palestine without addressing the subject directly in the text. Absent any authoritative borders, the books dodge the issue: maps of the entire area of mandatory Palestine (including Israel) are sometimes historical or topographical in order to avoid drawing political boundaries. Israel is thus not indicated (nor are Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt). Other maps clearly delineate the West Bank and Gaza with different colors or dotted lines but do not explain what these indications signify. Sometimes Palestine's provinces are drawn (including only the West Bank and Gaza). On one occasion, Palestinian telephone area codes are indicated on a map that covers only the West Bank and Gaza—no mention is made that these area codes straddle the 1967 borders and are thus shared with Israel. Maps of cities indicate the existence of those within the 1967 borders of Israel with a significant Palestinian population before and after 1948 (Jaffa, Nazareth, Beersheva, Akka, and Haifa), but the significance of these cities is not explained: are they included because they are the birthplace of many schoolchildren's grandparents or because they still contain Palestinians? No explanation is ever given.

And the texts do not help sort out the ambiguous geography of the maps. Pre-1948 cities are mentioned as Palestinian cities, but often in connection with the past (a large picture of Jaffa accompanies a unit devoted to an author from the city of Jaffa who writes of his leaving the city in 1948; in the background of the picture most of Tel Aviv looms unexplained in the background). Perhaps the most puzzling map is one of the province of Jenin.²¹ It would be difficult to find an area more devoid of Israeli settlements, but there is one and it is omitted from the map. The area is largely surrounded by the 1967 border of Israel, but neither a border nor anything on the far side of the border is indicated—pre-1967 Israel is simply terra incognita. The books bear the marks of unresolved controversies both among Palestinians and with the neighbors of the emerging Palestinian state.

In short, far from inciting schoolchildren, the books generally treat sensitive political questions as tangential. There are some exceptions to this rule, but not in any sustained way. Palestinian educators have decided not to supply either a coherent narrative or a set of conceptual tools for understanding such issues. History is presented with very different ends in mind.

HISTORY IN THE PALESTINIAN CURRICULUM

The sensationalist charges against the Palestinian curriculum are based more on hostility than analysis. But the curriculum that has been written might trouble more progressive educators in far more subtle ways. To date, the Palestinian National Authority has produced interim textbooks for “national education” and comprehensive textbooks for four grades (first, second, sixth, and seventh). The need to develop a new curriculum provoked extremely active and fundamental debates among Palestinian educators that occasionally spilled over into public view. Yet despite those debates (to be discussed in more detail below), a fairly coherent view of the past has emerged in the textbooks produced thus far. As they move to very recent history, some signs of controversy and debate appear, and much of the coherence is lost. But for the most part, the Palestinian curriculum has produced a vision of history that makes sense of the present by concentrating on three different periods: the ancient history of the land of Palestine and its inhabitants; early Islamic history (the beginning of Islam and the Crusades); and the very recent past of the Palestinian people.

²¹ *Principles of Human Geography* (2000), Grade 6, p. 48.

THE ANCIENT PAST: THE CANANNITE HERITAGE

Palestine is, according to a second grade text, the “land of fathers and grandfathers.” Its first inhabitants were the “Arab Canaanites” who “built a number of cities, including the city of Jerusalem, which they named Yabus.”²² In short, the Arab and Palestinian nations are timeless entities, stretching back to the beginning of history.

And the timelessness is not merely ethnic but also territorial: a sixth-grade unit on “The Arabs before Islam” includes a map of the Arab world that follows the current borders of Syria and Iraq even while the lessons speak of Nabatean and other ancient civilizations.²³ Pre-Islamic civilizations in these areas are treated as Arab; students learn that Mesopotamian, Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Amorite, Assyrian, Chaldean, and Canaanite art are forms of Arab art. Palestinian students are introduced on a couple occasions to a timeline which seems designed to make clear the continuous Arab presence in the land.

The timelessness takes on unintended ironies when dealing with Jerusalem. These textbooks, of course, did not originate an anachronistic and often exclusivist nationalism in dealing with Jerusalem; it is a very strong element in constant references by Israeli politicians since 1967 to Jerusalem as Israel’s “eternal and undivided capital.”²⁴ In the Palestinian case, the art text lauds Nebuchadnezzar for ending “the Hebrew occupation of Urusalim.”²⁵ A unit on Jerusalem describes it as an Arab city since its founding by the “Arab Canaanites,” and claims that Ibrahim [Abraham] paid the *jizya* [a tax paid by non-Muslims under Muslim rule] to the local king. This text unwittingly undermines its own message however: descriptions of the walls of Jerusalem measure them in feet and miles, units rarely used by Palestinians, thus suggesting that the authors have relied fairly mechanically on English-language texts in their effort to affirm Jerusalem’s Arab nature.²⁶ And there is a more subtle way the text undermines its own message: no part of Jewish west Jerusalem is mentioned, indicating that the textbook authors are fully aware of (but unable to address) the fact that the Palestinian nature of the city is neither total nor timeless.

The focus on the eternal nature of Arab and Palestinian identity, in both ethnic and geographic terms, is generally not based on any active or hostile denial of other versions of history. Alternative versions are not refuted but merely ignored; non-Arab populations generally receive almost no attention. Because Jews and Muslims lay common claim to some figures (Abraham, David, and Solomon), the texts show some awkwardness in dealing with such figures. David and Solomon in particular receive only passing mention. The history of Jews (either inside or outside of Palestine) is simply passed over in silence.

THE ISLAMIC PAST: CONFLATING NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Palestinian textbooks show little interest in history after the time of the Canaanites until the dawn of Islam. At

²² *National Education* (2001), Grade 2, Part I, pp. 4-5.

²³ *Arab and Islamic History* (2000), Grade 6, Unit I. North African areas are not included. All of mandatory Palestine is included as is Alexandretta, a district transferred from Syria to Turkey under the French mandate, a move still regarded as illegitimate by Syria.

²⁴ Lest an unsympathetic reader misinterpret my words, I should explain that I do not question the depth or the passion of the Jewish connection to Jerusalem; indeed, I share it. I seek only to observe that strongly nationalistic feelings have led some--on both sides--to erase significant portions of the city’s history and population, either through disinterest or denial.

²⁵ *Arts and Crafts* (2000), Grade 6, pp. 37-45. The reference to ending the Hebrew occupation of Jerusalem is striking because it pits the pre-Islamic Arabs against those mentioned in the Qur’an as prophets, undermining (almost certainly unconsciously) the close identification between Arabs and Islam that pervade other textbooks.

²⁶ There is the additional irony, similar to that of the reference to Nebuchadnezzar, of using the word “*jizya*”: it places Ibrahim, a Muslim prophet, in the position of a non-Muslim and the idol-worshipper (as the pre-Muslim Arabs are described) in the position of a Muslim ruler. See *Our Beautiful Language* (2000), Grade 6, Part II, pp. 20-23.

that point the focus shifts from national to religious identity, though the Islam presented to students has an Arab nationalist coloration at points.

Islamic religious education often is centered around the origins of the religion and the life of the prophet, and Palestinian educators have therefore followed a standard pedagogical technique by beginning their religious instruction in such a way. The authors rely heavily on the life of the prophet and the history of the early Muslims to explain Islamic history, doctrine, and creed. And that leads them to include the relations of the Jews of Medina with the prophet and the early Muslims. The 2000 texts are less timid than their 1994 predecessors in this regard but they are no less ambiguous. Both books mention conflicts between the early Muslims and the Jews. But the implications for contemporary Palestinian-Israeli relations are less clear: students are instructed that Jews broke early agreements with Muslims but that Muslims are bound to keep agreements as long as the other side observes them as well. The analogy between Islam in the seventh century and the current conflict is made more directly at one point: students are instructed to mention incidents of violence that “our people” have been exposed to from enemies and then asked how the enemies and occupiers have dealt with the inhabitants of occupied countries. The following question asks how Muslims dealt with those countries that they won control of—implicitly condemning Israeli and European imperial practices but still holding up tolerance and coexistence as an Islamic norm.²⁷ The authors of the books on Islamic education are far less reticent than their colleagues writing on history, national education, civic education, and geography to address sensitive issues, but they still seem to find ambiguity useful.

Seventh grade Palestinian history students are exposed to the “middle ages” which is almost entirely encompassed by the Crusades and the Muslim states that defeated them. Medieval Europe is explored briefly, but largely as a backdrop to the Crusades. The term “Crusades,” however is rarely used; instead the invading armies are simply identified as “Franks” (most likely this is based not only on contemporaneous Muslim descriptions of their adversaries as Franks, but also because use of the term “Crusaders” might be seen to implicate Palestinian Christians by framing the conflict in religious rather than national terms). The strong emphasis on the Crusades would seem to communicate the message that Palestinians and Arabs have been exposed to external invasions and foreign oppression; analogies with recent history (European imperialism and Zionism) are sometimes obliquely suggested. Yet as with the history of the early Islamic community, the textbooks draw back from some contemporary implications. The conduct of Salah al-Din—generosity toward those defeated, willingness to negotiate, insistence on equal access of all to Jerusalem—is held up as a model and as a stark contrast to the brutality of the invading Franks.

Most notable perhaps in both these periods is the insistence of the books on conflating Arab and Muslim identity. This is part of a broader pattern in the books. Sixth grade students are explicitly instructed that love of the homeland is a duty of all Muslims and that various loyalties—family, town, province, state, and Islamic world—are best understood as a series of concentric circles rather than competing in any way. Students are taught to say: “I am a Palestinian Muslim. I love my country Palestine and at the same time I consider all Arab land part of my great country, to which I give all love and respect. I strive for its unity.”²⁸ The seventh-grade history of the middle ages elides effortlessly and sometimes imperceptibly from Arab to Islamic identity.

RECENT HISTORY: TEACHING AND AVOIDING PALESTINE

More recent history is far more treacherous ground for Palestinian textbook authors. How can the recent history of Palestine and Palestinians be explained—especially when interpretations of that past are so immediately and

²⁷ *Islamic Education* (2000), Grade 6, Part II, p. 84.

²⁸ *Islamic Education* (2000), Grade 6, Part I, pp. 66-69.

painfully connected to current political controversies? How are Palestinians to understand the British mandate—which fixed Palestine’s borders but also saw Zionist immigration? How can the Oslo Accords be explained when they both helped create Palestinian institutions but also compromised Palestinian nationalist aspirations? Almost any sustained and coherent account of twentieth century Palestinian history would touch off intense domestic and international controversy.

Accordingly the textbook authors avoid such a sustained account. In the first set of texts issued in 1994, the formative political events in twentieth-century Palestinian history—the British mandate, 1948 and 1967 wars, the intifada, and the Oslo Agreements—received only passing mention. For instance, only 68 words were devoted to the 1967 war in all six books of the series.²⁹ The first mention comes in the fourth grade in the midst of a discussion of historical places in Palestine. ‘Imwas is described as a village at a crossroads 35 kilometers southwest of Ramallah; after mentioning that the Caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab and Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi [Saladin] visited ‘Imwas, the text laconically notes, “In the war of 1967 AD [otherwise undefined] the village of ‘Imwas was completely destroyed. Its people were driven out of their village along with the people of the neighboring villages: Yalu and Bayt Nuba.”³⁰ Only by the fifth grade did the 1994 texts give a sustained historical account of Palestinian history. And the recent past received very little mention. The texts were silent on Balfour Declaration and the Zionist movement; indeed, the mandate was presented only in the form of a list of its effects: instability, economic decline because of popular preoccupation with resisting “the English,” war between Arabs and Jews, and the increase of Jewish immigration.³¹ The final two sections of this 1994 fifth-grade survey covered “Palestine after 1948 AD” and “Palestinian Society under Israeli Occupation.” The first section consisted of a list of developments after 1948 (such as “the expulsion of many Palestinians and the flight of many to Arab states;” “the concern of Palestinians to preserve their civilization’s existence through building Palestinian national, popular, and social institutions;” and “the spread of education.”³² The second section was similarly telegraphic in style, listing seven developments without elaboration: the Karama battle [between Palestinians and Israeli forces] in 1968, the 1973 war; Arab recognition of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people; the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979; the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and war between the PLO and Israel in 1982; the intifada; and the “signing of a peace agreement between the PLO and Israel, which resulted in the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority and the entry of the Palestinian leadership and forces to the areas of the Palestinian Authority.”³³ Most remarkable, the 1994 books made no mention of any area as Palestinian outside of those occupied by Israeli in 1967. This geographical limitation was never explained, but it was extremely consistent. For instance, a discussion of the Palestinian economy included the following passage on fishing: “Palestine looks out over the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Among its coastal cities are: the city of Gaza, Dayr Balah, Khan Yunis, and Rafah.”³⁴ All locations fall within the Gaza strip. And the texts avoided presenting the students with any maps.

²⁹ Dr. Sami Adwan, "Analysis of the 1967 War Narrative in Palestinian History and Civic Education School Textbooks," Tonsberg: Vestfold College, 1998; <http://www.bib.hive.no/tekster/hveskrift/rapport/1998-4/index.html>.

³⁰ *National Education* (1994), Grade 4, p. 42. ‘Imwas fell in a strategic region near the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem highway. In 1948 the area saw intense combat as part of the battle over Jerusalem. Having occupied the area in 1967, Israel evicted the inhabitants on the grounds of protecting the highway that ran nearby. The area has been turned into a large park (“Canada Park”) and treated by Israel as part of its territory. For many Palestinians, destroyed villages remain some of the most poignant symbols of their conflicts with the Zionist movement and the state of Israel. This makes the brevity of the text and its use of the passive voice especially striking.

³¹ *National Education* (1994), Grade 5, p. 34.

³² *National Education* (1994), Grade 5, p. 36.

³³ *National Education* (1994), Grade 5, p. 37.

³⁴ *National Education* (1994), Grade 3, p. 31.

The 1994 books—and especially the description of the Palestinian coast—were often lampooned by Palestinians who noted that those who came from towns including Jaffa, Haifa, and Acre were not Palestinian according to the geographical vision implicit in the books. The silence of the 1994 books extended beyond matters of history and geography: the Palestine described in the series was devoid of any political problems—there were no settlements or checkpoints, and refugee camps were simply described along with cities and villages as normal places Palestinians might live—the origin of the camps or the existence of a refugee problem were not mentioned.

The more recent textbooks—those for grades one, two, six, and seven, issued in 2000 and 2001—break some of the silences of the earlier books, but they still fail to develop any sustained or coherent explanation of the Palestinian present. The issue of borders is not even raised, and the books give no clear message on the subject. Almost all in-depth descriptions of Palestine focus on the West Bank and Gaza, described in every book as “the two parts of the homeland.”³⁵ Yet other locations do receive passing mention, generally with no explanation. Palestine as a geographical (as opposed to a political) entity clearly includes areas such as the Negev in the books. Some cities are mentioned as Palestinian (chiefly Jaffa, Beersheva, and Acre) that fall within the pre-1967 borders of Israel, but these descriptions lack depth or context, and often have an anachronistic quality about them. For instance, in a second grade text, a family takes a trip to Jaffa, smelling lemons and oranges along the way.³⁶ This, of course, is the Jaffa of the past; current Palestinian drivers entering the city will pass through densely populated suburbs and traffic and are more likely to smell diesel fumes than oranges. And the books still maintain some of the awkward silences of the 1994 books. Most striking is an illustrated story for second-grade students on a school trip from Gaza to Jerusalem:

The trip from Gaza to Jerusalem began. The teacher said, “This is bab al-‘amud” [Damascus Gate]. The pupils toured the markets of Jerusalem. The pupils prayed at the al-Aqsa Mosque. The pupils saw the Dome of the Rock. The pupils visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The teacher said “Jerusalem is the capital of our state.”³⁷

The trip the book describes—a bus excursion for students from Gaza to Jerusalem—has not been possible during the lifetime of the children taught from these books. The textbook authors simply fail to explain the Oslo Accords, Palestinian borders, checkpoints, or many other sensitive issues. Some textbook teams (especially those working on Arabic language) have been far more willing to confront sensitive issues than others, but none has found a way to present an authoritative and comprehensive explanation of the recent past or the present of Palestine.

Some elements of an explanation are beginning to emerge, to be sure, but they are notable for their gaps. On areas where a clear national consensus exists among Palestinians, or where the Palestinian leadership has given clear and authoritative declarations of a position, the textbook authors lose all bashfulness. Jerusalem, for instance, is repeatedly described as the capital of Palestine (though its precise borders are not mentioned, nor are any locations in West Jerusalem). The responsibility for the refugee problem is squarely placed on Israeli shoulders and the right of return is unambiguously affirmed. Indeed, the books issued for the second and seventh grades in 2001 are far stronger in this regard than the first and sixth grade books, authored before the September 2000 intifada. Authoritative Palestinian documents (especially the Declaration of Independence of 1988) are quoted wherever possible, demonstrating the authors’ inclination to rely on authoritative texts on sensitive issues wherever possible. The structure of the PLO and the PNA are covered in some

³⁵ The phrase is used in the preface of each book issued in 2000 and 2001.

³⁶ *Our Beautiful Language* (2001), Grade 2, pp. 60-61.

³⁷ *Our Beautiful Language* (2000), Grade 1, part II, Unit Seven.

detail. There are references to Palestinian prisoners held by Israel and pictures of Israeli bulldozers destroying houses and uprooting olive trees.

But those issues that remain ambiguous or hotly contested among Palestinians—such as borders, the nature of a final settlement with Israel, and even methods of resistance against the Israeli occupation—receive elliptical treatment when they are dealt with at all. A poem referring indirectly to stones in the intifada is couched within a sixth-grade Arabic lesson on Gandhi and nonviolence.

THE ENDS OF HISTORY

In many ways, the Palestinian curriculum is based on an unexceptional view of history. The distant past is harnessed to serve current national needs; religious and national identities are consciously and carefully merged; and the recent past is approached gingerly with several divisive and sensitive topics avoided altogether. In this respect, Palestinian education follows patterns that are common both among the PNA's Arab and non-Arab neighbors. It stands out only because it stakes out such positions in a sharply contested international context.

IDENTITY [Indeed, it is that international context that explains the special emphasis on national identity. The official curriculum plan, submitted by the Ministry of Education to the PNA cabinet and approved by the Palestinian Legislative Council, explains the importance of national identity in precisely such terms: “Never has the identity of a people been exposed to dangers of vanquish or demolition as the Palestinian one has. The preservation of this identity from dissolution remains the basic indication of the existence of this people and a guarantee for its survival at the present and in the future.” Accordingly, the Ministry proclaimed,

[T]he Palestinian curriculum must reflect the dimensions of the Palestinian identity and its special features. It should also reflect the Islamic affiliation, endeavor to achieve the unity of the Arab and Islamic worlds, work for its freedom, realize its independence, act constructively with other nations, and participate in the development of human ideas, and in humanitarian, political, economic, and cognitive issues.³⁸

The Ministry approach is that the best way to protect the Palestinian national identity is to constantly affirm it without even acknowledging any possible challenge or alternative.

The earlier *National Education* series focused exclusively on “national education” by teaching students that the role of the individual citizen was to identify with and contribute to Palestinian society. Indeed, the fifth grade student was told, upon opening the book, that this is the essential purpose of national education: “Dear male/female student; the chief goal of learning *National Education* is to work to prepare and raise an upright citizen and to strengthen his sense of belonging to his *umma* and his homeland.”³⁹

The new 2000 and 2001 books have actually increased the emphasis on nationalism. Given the opportunity to write a comprehensive curriculum for the first time, the authors inserted nationalist symbols in every conceivable location and illustration. Every school is pictured flying a Palestinian flag, homes have pictures of the Dome of the Rock, classrooms have nationalist slogans on their blackboards, computers display Palestinian flags, a school bus carries the name “Palestine School,”

³⁸ Ministry of Education, General Administration of Curricula (Palestinian Curriculum Development Center), **First Palestinian Curriculum Plan** (Jerusalem: al-Ma`arif, 1998), p. 7.

³⁹ *National Education* (1994), Grade 5, p. 2.

Jerusalem is mentioned in any possible context, and even children playing soccer wear the jerseys of the Palestinian national team. Students do not merely study English; they do so using books titled “English for Palestine.” The various textbooks do not merely deliver the message subliminally: they ask children to color the flag, describe their duties toward Jerusalem, and repeat “I am from Palestine” and “My nationality is Palestinian.” The students read nationalist writings when studying Arabic, copy nationalist slogans while practicing calligraphy, and count Palestinian flags while learning arithmetic.

Oddly, it is precisely such unswerving nationalism that leads to the only appearance of Hebrew in the Palestinian textbooks. Under the Oslo Accords, the PNA may not issue its own currency. In seeking to show a coin with the word “Palestine” on it, the textbook authors are therefore forced to use a coin from the era of the British Mandate, when “Palestine” was written on coins in both Hebrew and Arabic.⁴⁰ Perhaps the bitterness of the second intifada led to a retreat from this generosity in the 2001 textbooks: this time a Mandate-era stamp is illustrated, bearing the word “Palestine” in both English and Arabic, but the Hebrew has been erased.⁴¹ (Indeed, the 2001 books are probably the least bashful politically in terms of their willingness to picture home demolitions and other aspects of the conflict.)

AUTHORITY The purpose of history in the Palestinian curriculum goes beyond inculcating a sense of Palestinian identity to supporting the authoritative structures in Palestinian society. God, government, school, and parents are all to receive respect and obedience from children. The 1994 series included a passage in which a father quotes from the Qur’an so that God, Palestine, official radio, and parent all speak with one voice to support education:

‘Abir said to her father: I heard the announcer say that the Palestinian people are distinguished by education and elevated culture. What does that mean, father?

The father said, “Yes, this statement is true. Our people love education because God commanded reading and writing. The Exalted said, ‘Read in the name of your Lord who created, He created humanity from a blood clot, read by your Lord the most noble, who taught with the pen, He taught humanity what it did not know.’ Our first ancestors strove in their love of learning in order to preserve heritage and transmit it to the generations after them.”⁴²

The purpose of the new Palestinian curriculum is unabashedly supportive of existing authority. But it is not merely that religion, state, school, and family are authoritative structures; beyond this, the authority of one of these is virtually indistinguishable from the authority of the others. The texts work to create a seamless web of authoritative structures and often elide effortlessly among these: parental authority affirms and is based on religious truth; good family life is necessary to cultivate wider social virtues. As finally approved, the “intellectual basis” of the entire curriculum is said to be faith in God.⁴³ Other sources of authority are joined to this religious faith. First grade students are taught in Islamic Education:

I love my mother who bore me, and I obey her/I love my mother who nursed me, and I obey her/I love my mother who teaches me, and I obey her

⁴⁰ The coin is illustrated in *Mathematics* (2000), Grade 6, Part II.

⁴¹ The stamp is on the cover of *National Education* (2001), Grade 2.

⁴² *National Education* (1994), Grade 4, p. 40.

⁴³ *First Palestinian Curriculum Plan*, p. 7.

I love my father who provides for me, and I obey him/I love my father who teaches me, and I obey him,

I love my mother and my father, and I obey them.⁴⁴

Duty to God and to parents are specifically linked.⁴⁵ Sixth graders are taught that a “society free from crime” depends on family, school, and other institutions.⁴⁶ The books betray a clear mission of instilling loyalty to God, homeland, school, and family. Moral lessons intrude on virtually every subject, sometimes supported by a Qur’anic verse. First graders studying Arabic language are taught a story of an honest boy who returns some money dropped by a vendor at school; the story is followed with a Qur’anic verse to memorize and further lessons on the value of cleanliness.⁴⁷ Sixth-grade Arabic education begins by warning students that the best gift bestowed by God is the mind, but that those who do not use it will turn toward evil and destruction.⁴⁸ A sixth grade science book uses verses from the Qur’an to buttress its teachings on human races and natural forces (such as wind); it adduces a scientific justification for neat and proper behavior (such as sitting up straight).⁴⁹ Religion, school, science, and parents all stand in positions of overlapping authority.

To be fair, the message is sometimes qualified. There are several concessions to a less authority-centered approach currently developing among Palestinian educators (to be discussed more fully below). Occasionally the texts address the tension between “imitation” and “creativity” directly: sixth-grades are taught as part of their “national education” that imitating a teacher is good but imitating youth in things “not appropriate for our genuine Arab culture and our traditions and customs” can be bad. Creativity is good when it leads to innovation and progress.⁵⁰ And sixth graders are also asked to confront the situation in which parents instruct their children to do something wrong. (The problem is addressed in a book by Salih, a righteous Muslim who instructs his family on religious matters each day after evening prayers. He explains that children are required to obey their parents except in such circumstances.) This lesson is followed by a discussion of the rights of children in Islam and an invitation for students to give their opinions on some difficult situations (in which a father forbids his son from continuing his studies or his daughter from playing sports because she is a girl).⁵¹

A DEMOCRATIC VISION The stress on identity and authority may seem completely contrary to any democratic ideas of education. Such a critique has indeed been launched by Palestinian educators, as will be discussed more fully in the following section. But before that critique is presented, it is important to note that there is something profoundly democratic about the current Palestinian curriculum: it is based on a clear national and popular consensus. In other words, the existing textbooks are very much products of prevailing values in Palestinian society. It is not imposed by a patronizing leadership but developed by those who have worked to translate national consensus into an educational program.

⁴⁴ *Islamic Education*, Grade 1, Part I, p. 39.

⁴⁵ See, for example, *Our Beautiful Language*, Grade 6, Part I, p. 19.

⁴⁶ *Civic Education*, Grade 6, Unit IV.

⁴⁷ *Our Beautiful Language*, Grade 1, Part II, Unit VI.

⁴⁸ *Our Beautiful Language*, Grade 6, Part I, p. 4.

⁴⁹ *General Science*, Grade 6, Part I, pp. 10-11.

⁵⁰ *National Education*, Grade 6, Unit III, section on “Imitation and Creativity.”

⁵¹ *Islamic Education*, Grade 6, pp. 45-61.

It is precisely because the curriculum is responsive to popular values and pressure that it emphasizes national identity and various forms of authority so consistently. And the same responsiveness explains the awkward silences, gaps, and inconsistencies in matters connected with recent history and current realities. Palestinians are united on the centrality of Jerusalem, but there is no consensus on the meaning of the Oslo Accords. Few Palestinians would deny that Jaffa and Haifa are part of historic and geographical Palestine, but they remain divided on their meaning for current Palestinian politics. Israeli settlements are roundly denounced in Palestinian society, but Palestinians differ on how to view Israel within its 1967 borders. In all these circumstances, the textbooks follow the clear national consensus or the authoritative statements of Palestinian institutions (making Jerusalem the capital, mentioning Jaffa and Haifa, generally in passing, and denouncing settlements). And they fall silent or resort to artful dodges when there is no consensus or authoritative statement to guide them (the Oslo Accords are therefore referred to in passing, the current status of Jaffa and Haifa receive no attention, and Israeli society and politics inside the 1967 borders receive no mention whatsoever). The texts do not incite hatred; their silence is much more embarrassed than hostile.

THE PROGRESSIVE ALTERNATIVE AND ITS LIMITS

While the goals of the existing curriculum focus on national identity and authority, a very different set of goals has been advanced by a group of leading Palestinian educators. This section will present this progressive alternative to the officially-sanctioned approach. First, the progressive alternative itself will be described. Second, the impact that the progressives have had on the new curriculum will be presented. Third, the limitations of the progressive approach—especially in areas such as history, national identity, and religion will be considered. In short, the progressive alternative has achieved some influence, but it is likely that the last area it will seek to address will be the tremendously sensitive issues of the meaning of the past, the meaning of Palestine, and the role for religion.

A DIFFERENT IMAGE OF DEMOCRACY In the 1990s, even before the construction of the PNA, an alternative education vision, concentrating on ideal citizenship and democratic practice, arose within the Palestinian educational community. Deeply critical of existing educational practices, advocates of the new vision have provoked surprisingly little opposition and increasingly dominate public discussions of education. The core of the alternative vision is to recast the question around which the educational system—especially pedagogy but also the curriculum—is based. Rather than ask, “What body of knowledge should students be taught?” newer approaches ask, “What kind of citizen do we want?” The effect of posing this question is to justify a profound critique not merely of the substance of the existing curriculum but even more of prevailing educational methods.

The new educational vision emerged among three distinct (and hardly coordinated) groups. First, some Palestinian intellectuals, generally secular and often on the left, were attracted to educational issues because of their desire to build a more participatory and democratic national culture. Such intellectuals often had a strong interest in educational issues but were not academic specialists in education—nor did all speak respectfully of educational specialists, especially those employed in the Ministry of Education. While nationalism was often their point of entry to educational issues, their focus broadened to democracy, especially after the creation of the Palestinian National Authority. This was the case with Ibrahim Abu Lughod, a Palestinian political scientist with an American Ph.D., who taught for many years at Northwestern University. In the 1970s he, Nabil Sha’th (later a leading Palestinian negotiator), and some other intellectuals called for a greater interest

in education and publishing for children.⁵² Abu Lughod participated in some discussions of education sponsored by UNESCO. With the founding of the PNA, Abu Lughod became one of the few diaspora intellectuals to return, taking an administrative position at Bir Zeit University. Another political scientist at Bir Zeit with a special interest in human rights and democracy, 'Ali Jarbawi, began to share Abu Lughod's educational interests. Other Palestinian intellectuals brought in different disciplinary perspectives. A group of archaeologists, for instance, has worked to train teachers in integrating visits to archaeological sites with their classroom instruction.⁵³

A second group of Palestinian educational reformers consisted of educational specialists. While most shared general Palestinian nationalist aspirations, it was not the nationalist cause alone that motivated them. Many received graduate training overseas, especially in American schools of education, and had a strong professional and international orientation. The idea of a Palestinian-designed curriculum had strong attraction, of course, but their major focus was educational: to turn Palestinians into a community of active and critical learners, based on the most recent developments in educational theory.⁵⁴ In developing their ideas, these educators not only shared a highly critical view of existing educational practices but also often extended this to a broader and quite trenchant social critique. Already in the intifada, some educators had begun a reading campaign to compensate for the extended school closings. Munir Fasheh, a specialist in mathematics and science education involved in the reading campaign, expressed an emerging consensus among education specialists:

In my thirty years of experience in various Palestinian educational settings, I have often seen superficial and symbolic improvement that disguises real deterioration underneath: Palestinian students acquire diplomas but no learning abilities; they learn textbook theories but not the ability to construct their own explanations of experiences and phenomena. Schools encourage ready-made solutions and discourage experimentation and innovative ideas. Palestinians build universities that lack good libraries and that impede students' development of the abilities to express, organize, and produce knowledge; and they build structures and organizations that lack community bonding and community spirit. Enacting visible, but often merely symbolic, improvement without deeper and longer lasting change deceives people and blinds them from seeing the opportunities that are being lost, as well as what could and should be done instead. Palestinians need to create alternatives in their minds and in their practice to deal with current challenges and the increasing demands on formal education.⁵⁵

Maher Hashweh, a specialist in science education at Bir Zeit University, developed a similar but more specific critique after studying the attitudes and practices of science teachers in Palestinian schools. Convinced that a constructivist approach not only more accurately reflects scientific development but also can be a basis for science instruction by encouraging active learning and critical thinking, Hashweh found existing practices wanting:

Firstly, in Palestinian schools knowledge explained by the teacher and found in one official textbook is unquestionable and is to be remembered for future use only. Secondly, the school examination system focuses on the memorisation of information. Thirdly, there is high esteem

⁵² Denis As'ad, "The Arab Youth [Publishing] House...A Significant Educational Experiment," (Arabic), *Al-multaqa al-tarbawi* Issue 10, December 1999.

⁵³ "Ramallah: Tourism and Archaeology Opens a Workshop about the Special Touring Guide for Schools," *Al-ayyam* 8 September 1999. The same archaeologists produced the first Palestinian-authored English-language travel guide, the *PACE Tour guide of the West Bank and Gaza Strip "Palestine"* (Ramallah: Palestinian Association for Cultural Exchange, 1999).

⁵⁴ For one expression of this orientation, see Zaynab Habash, *Tarshid al-manahij al-madrasiyya fi al-daffa al-gharbiyya wa-qita' ghazza* [Guiding the School Curricula in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip] (Jerusalem: n.p., 1996).

⁵⁵ Munir Jamil Fasheh, "The Reading Campaign Experience within Palestinian Society: Innovative Strategies for Learning and Building Community," *Harvard Educational Review* 65 (1, Spring 1995), p. 68.

in the Palestinian society for Western scientific knowledge. This might cause the Palestinian teachers to accept both the scientific knowledge and the empiricist beliefs about its nature which come with it in the same package. Finally, mostly male school teachers are usually unchallenged; although the Palestinian society is probably not as patriarchal as some other Eastern societies, knowledge is still legitimised by the status of the person who has that knowledge.⁵⁶

Even seemingly technical subjects—like mathematics—were not exempt from this critique. Fasheh denounced existing education for treating mathematics as a dead subject, divorced from social reality; he wrote, “this reflects the extent to which we have been conditioned to be passive participants in the teaching process.”⁵⁷

The third group developing a vision of educational reform consisted of teachers. The reforming teachers echoed rather than repudiated the dim view of existing pedagogy taken by the first two groups. Complaints about the curriculum and the physical resources made available for education are fairly common among teachers. In the 1980s, often during the extended school closures occasioned by the intifada, some groups of teachers began to meet to discuss techniques and pedagogy. Ramallah proved an active area in this regard, and some schools (such as the Friends School) began to earn reputations as institutions friendly to innovation and reform. While much organization concentrated on political issues (and was connected to political parties), some teachers worked to separate their efforts from broader partisan and political attempts to mobilize the population, feeling that such politicization would distract them from issues related to education. In the early 1990s, some groups took the step of formalizing their activities by founding nongovernmental organizations. In 1989, the Tamer Institute was founded in Ramallah; in 1991, Al-Mawrid Teacher Development Center was established in the same city.⁵⁸ The new organizations took on ambitious projects. For instance, Al-Mawrid produced a guide for teaching democracy in the classroom not through abstract political instruction but through the case method, focusing on contexts the students could find immediately applicable to their own lives.⁵⁹ The organization also produced a series of guides for teaching local history in various West Bank cities, attempting to help educators integrate the students’ immediate environment into the curriculum.

The availability of international funding, especially after 1994, led to new organizations being founded (and some members of existing ones splitting off to form their own organizations). In 1995, some of those involved in Al-Mawrid formed a new NGO, the Teacher Creativity Center (TCC), that managed to pursue a critique of current practices and build links to external donors and to the Ministry of Education. Its director criticizes existing pedagogy in the Arab world as designed only to transmit information from one generation to the next; such an approach is no longer appropriate. Instead, students must be taught to become critical and active thinkers. The group

⁵⁶ Maher Z. Hashweh, "Palestinian Science Teachers' Epistemological Beliefs: A Preliminary Survey," *Research in Science Education* 26 (1, 1996), p. 97.

⁵⁷ Munir Fasheh, "Is Math in the Classroom Neutral--Or Dead," *For the Learning of Mathematics* 17 (2, June 1997), p. 24.

⁵⁸ Isma`il Nujum, director, Al-Mawrid, personal interview, Ramallah, July 2000; see also *Palestine and Education: The "Teaching Palestine Project"* (Ramallah: Al-Mawrid, 1997).

⁵⁹ The Al-Mawrid guide included a case in which a student acts aggressively toward a teacher; the student is expelled after the teacher threatens to resign but relatives of the students attempt to mediate the dispute. See Maher Hashweh, *Al-Tarbiyya al-dimuqratiyya: Ta'allum wa-ta'lim al-dimuqratiyya min ajl istikhdamih* (Ramallah: Al-Mawrid, 1999). The unit was used in some local schools, though one school administration found the material too sensitive and pulled out of the project. For an English-language description of the Center's work (including the democracy project), see Maher Hashweh and Ismail Njoun, "A Case-Based Approach to Education in Palestine: A Case Study of an Innovative Strategy," paper presented at the Selmun Seminar, "Innovative Strategies in Meeting Educational Challenges in the Mediterranean," Malta, 13-19 June 1999.

began to print a magazine on education; sponsored by local businesses, it was distributed to local teachers. A pamphlet on "The Importance of Dialogue in the Classroom" was also distributed.

Six NGOs active in the educational field (including Tamer, Al-Mawrid, and the TCC) formed and began publishing a bimonthly newsletter on educational issues, *Al-multaqa al-tarbawi*, distributed as an insert in the daily *Al-ayyam*.⁶⁰ Authors in the newsletter, many of them teachers, contribute articles on topics like role of the teacher, gender in the curriculum, teaching nonviolence, Christian education, summer camps, and education for children with special needs. The tone of the articles varies but all express an enthusiasm for change and reform. An article in December 1999 on education in the coming millennium issued a harsh and sweeping judgment: the twentieth century was "a lost century for Arab education."⁶¹

Those who viewed the twentieth century as a lost century were given their opportunity to ensure that the next one would be different almost as soon as the PNA assumed responsibility for education. In 1995, at the beginning of the second school year under its auspices, the PNA established a "Curriculum Development Center" under the leadership of Ibrahim Abu Lughod, a leading advocate of fundamental educational reform; he was joined by his Bir Zeit colleague, 'Ali Jarbawi. They assembled a committee to evaluate the existing curriculum and propose a new one. The committee consisted not only of specialists in education but also intellectuals with an interest in educational issues. About half of the experts consulted had studied in the United States. The resulting report constitutes perhaps the most stinging and detailed indictment of existing education in Arab countries and the most radical reform proposed by an official body since universal education was introduced.

The final report of the Abu Lughod committee took one year to produce.⁶² A thick volume (over 600 pages in length), the report is often unsettling reading. It is merciless in some of its prose; it also replete with terminology far more common in conversations about education in the United States than in the Arab world. Abu Lughod himself claims credit for introducing the term "empowerment" [*tamkin*] into Arabic;⁶³ the report also refers repeatedly to "critical" and "creative" thought, denounces "memorization" and treating students as "empty vessels."

The Abu Lughod report proposed a comprehensive reformulation of the Palestinian educational system, covering every aspect of classroom education. Perhaps the most daring ideas centered on secondary education: the report advocated the complete abolition of the *tawjihi* examination in order to free teachers and students from emphasizing memorization and standardization. The longstanding enforced tracking of secondary students into literary and scientific tracks (based on examination) would be eliminated as well. Instead, students would be free to choose between an academic and technical track (with considerable overlap between the two). Secondary school students would be allowed an increasing amount of choice among courses as they progressed in their studies.

⁶⁰ The other NGOs were the Early Childhood Resource Center (Jerusalem), the Educational Information and Coordination Project (Ramallah), the Young Scientists Club (Ramallah), the Tamir Social Education Foundation (Ramallah), and the Consciousness and Participation Foundation (Bethlehem).

⁶¹ Salah al-Subani, "The Problems of Arab Education and the Conditions of Maintenance and Progress in the Third Millennium," *Al-multaqa al-tarbawi*, Issue 10, December 1999.

⁶² *Al-manhaj al-filastini al-awwal li-l-ta'lim al-'amm: al-khitta al-shamila* [officially translated as A Comprehensive Plan for the Development of the First Palestinian Curriculum for General Education] (Ramallah: Curriculum Development Center, 1996). I have referred to the group as the Abu Lughod committee rather than its formal name (despite his objection to me, expressed in a personal communication) to distinguish it from the permanent Curriculum Development Center that was established after the first body of that name had completed its work.

⁶³ Personal interview with Ibrahim Abu Lughod, Ramallah, October 1999.

Even in areas where they settled on recommending only mild reform, the committee showed a willingness to rethink established procedures in fundamental ways. For instance, elimination of the summer vacation was seriously considered though ultimately rejected. The committee did advocate a new school schedule, however. The school day was to begin earlier and periods were to be shortened for the lower grades (based on the shorter attention span of younger students) and lengthened for the upper ones. Primary schooling was to start one year earlier, at age five. Some subjects were to be introduced earlier (English, as an international language, was to begin at the first grade). The committee even considered some radical reform of religious education—such as greatly reducing it or switching to an emphasis on comparative religion or ethics rather than religious knowledge. Ultimately religion proved to be too controversial a subject for even the daring Abu Lughod committee to resolve within its year of operation; the committee reported the various ideas but did not propose its own. The report did emphasize a more complex national identity than was traditional by including not only specifically Palestinian and broader Arab and Islamic dimensions, but also international elements. With a large and diverse diaspora, and with ambitions to participate in global economic and political affairs, Palestinian children were to learn that their identity encompassed a cosmopolitan, global dimension. As if to underscore this international dimension, the committee studied a large variety of other curricula (including some from the United States, Europe, and even Israel).

Yet for all its willingness to rethink all aspects of education, the most radical aspects of the committee's work lay in two other areas. First, it established a far more open and participatory method for designing the curriculum than had existed in the past. The committee jealously guarded its autonomy from the Ministry of Education and other structures of the PNA. In consulting with teachers, for instance, the committee reached out directly to teachers themselves rather than going through the Ministry or school bureaucracy.⁶⁴ The committee conducted comprehensive surveys of teachers and studied the results, citing them in support of its arguments for radical reform. It also scheduled a series of meetings with teachers. 'Ali Jarbawi goes so far as to claim that most of the committee's ideas came from teachers themselves.⁶⁵ The committee sought out other audiences—students, recent graduates, and religious figures—to discuss their impressions and present initial ideas. As it began to draw up its proposals, the committee held a series of "town meetings" (Abu Lughod claims to have introduced the concept to Palestinians) in the West Bank and Gaza.⁶⁶ The work—and the prospect of a Palestinian-authored curriculum—generated considerable public interest and excitement.

Second, the committee's report focused far more attention on pedagogy than on curricular content. Implicitly the committee argued that the realization of Palestinian aspirations depended far more on how students were taught than what they were taught. In this respect, for instance, the report denounced two aspects of the current curriculum. First, it treated its subjects as discrete, paying little attention to connections among various fields of knowledge. In their proposal, members of the committee focused on the integration of the curriculum. For instance, the proposal at the primary level suggests:

Teaching these subjects will be organized in an integrated way so that the teacher will connect the subjects studied during the instructional process. For instance, the teacher of the class should connect mathematics during instruction with the other subjects, like science, history, etc. This will help the students achieve an integrated, unified, and coordinated view toward the curriculum and toward the experiences of life as a whole. Arithmetic skills, for example, will

⁶⁴ 'Ali Jarbawi, personal interview, Ramallah, January 2000.

⁶⁵ 'Ali Jarbawi, personal interview, Ramallah, January 2000.

⁶⁶ Personal interview with Ibrahim Abu Lughod, Ramallah, October 1999.

develop as if they are skills connected with the comprehensive ability of the student to use them in all subjects and real-life situations, and not as if they are isolated behaviors used only in mathematics.⁶⁷

A similar sensibility leads to a second major theme in the report: the need to make education practical and connected to Palestinian reality. The existing curriculum is criticized mercilessly as arid, abstract, and impractical. After presenting the results of a survey of social studies teachers, for instance, the report charges that instruction is “without meaning because it appears as if it is separate from the external world and unconnected to reality.”⁶⁸ To repair this, the very basis of instruction must change: teachers must lecture far less and engage students in exercises and applications far more.

In their emphasis on practicality and integration, the authors of the report present their argument primarily in terms of rendering Palestinian education useful and accessible for the students. When they add broader social usefulness to this concern for the student, their vision presents an even greater challenge to existing education. Two elements of this new pedagogy appear consistently throughout the Abu Lughod report: first, education must be democratic; second it must foster independent, critical thought. The (largely unspoken) purpose of this revolution in pedagogy goes beyond the needs of individual students to the perceived exigencies of a thoroughly democratic society.

The first innovation, a democratic classroom, is based on a conception of democracy (to be examined more fully below) that is related less to majoritarian governance and more to a model of proper social interaction and decision-making. For the reformers, a democratic classroom does not mean that students are to elect their teachers or textbooks, but they are to discuss in an atmosphere of freedom and mutual respect. Teachers should transform themselves from classroom authorities to guides who help students teach themselves and each other. They are encouraged to use a variety of instructional techniques (group works, experimentation, case studies, field trips) that encourage interaction among the students and between the students and the teacher. Teachers are also enjoined to arrange their classrooms to foster the same kind of interaction.⁶⁹ Such an atmosphere is to prevail in all areas of the curriculum—even, for instance, in science and language instruction.

The second of these pedagogical innovations—the emphasis on critical thought—grows similarly out of a harsh view of the current instructional approach in which “the teacher views the learning student as a ‘container to be filled’.”⁷⁰ The existing curriculum places the teacher at the center of the educational process; its philosophy “relies on the storage of information.” This fails to lead to the development of “creative, critical thought;” indeed, the goal of the current curriculum is “not to change but to imitate.”⁷¹ In opposition to this “traditional” curriculum, the report focuses its proposed methods “on considering the student the center of the instructional process and on creating students who are lifelong learners.”⁷² The new curriculum was to:

...make manifest **that truth is not absolute or final and that definitive canons do not exist.** Learning cannot take place by giving the students **information** as if it is a collection of **facts** that must be memorized. The curriculum must develop the critical, analytical sense among the

⁶⁷ *Al-manhaj al-filastini al-awwal*, p. 90.

⁶⁸ *Al-manhaj al-filastini al-awwal*, p. 449.

⁶⁹ *Al-manhaj al-filastini al-awwal*, pp. 105-106.

⁷⁰ *Al-manhaj al-filastini al-awwal*, p. 35.

⁷¹ *Al-manhaj al-filastini al-awwal*, pp. 53-54.

⁷² *Al-manhaj al-filastini al-awwal*, p. 104.

students by concentrating on following the scientific method, which focuses fundamentally on **the importance of verification by the accuracy of information and the credibility of sources**. Free, open, unshackled inquiry must take the place of receipt of what the curriculum sets out and arranges. The curriculum must therefore encourage the process of understanding to take the place of **the development of the ability to memorize**...What is important is not obtaining information but how to use it.

The curriculum must focus as well **as developing independence of thought among the students**. This is what makes the individual able to interact with his environment and surroundings. The individual is the basis of society, and the independence of the individual is the basis of the existence of a vital, active society.⁷³

This is the essence of the new curriculum—the shift from teacher’s authority to student’s individuality, from absolute to relative truth, from receiving knowledge to discovering it, from uniformity to pluralism, from constituting a dutiful member of society to fostering an active and freethinking citizen.

PROGRESSIVE FOOTPRINTS IN THE NEW CURRICULUM The Abu Lughod committee’s merciless approach to the existing educational system offended some education officials; its willingness to make radical proposals led some to view it as a utopian or overly aspirational approach. Yet the Ministry of Education was forced to translate the recommendations of the report into a concrete proposal for a new curriculum. In 1997, it presented a formal report, which received official approval and became the basis for the new curriculum, to be developed by a new, reconstituted Curriculum Development Center. Abu Lughod, Jarbawi, and other members of the progressive camp found the proposal excessively timid.

Still, the curriculum and textbooks produced by the new Center, beginning with the first and sixth grades in September 2000, show some unmistakable influence of the progressives. New subjects (such as civic education) have been introduced. The curriculum now includes material on human rights and democracy. New exercises and assignments were added that conformed to the pedagogical vision of the groups pressing for innovation and reform.

Much of the curriculum showed the signs of unresolved debates or uneasy compromises. For instance, some Palestinian educators had criticized older educational material for reinforcing traditional gender roles. Others insisted that proper Islamic behavior—deemed to include modesty in dress—be inculcated in students. While the two viewpoints were not mutually contradictory, their proponents often regarded each other as adversaries. The outcome in the textbooks is an uneasy compromise with something for everyone. A striking number of Palestinian men are shown preparing food and working in the kitchen. The texts explicitly endorse women’s sporting activity on Islamic grounds (provided they are properly clothed and men are not spectators). Women veiled (in the *hijab*, which covers the hair but not the face) coexist happily in illustrations with those unveiled. In illustrations of religious life, however, even young girls and women at home wear the hijab. And a husband instructs not only his children but also his wife on the duty of prayer.⁷⁴

Perhaps most hopefully for the progressives, the books make concessions to a far more active pedagogy that qualifies much of the stress on authority. Most often, the new attitude is expressed indirectly: the texts make a tremendous effort to engage the student actively, encourage consideration of practical applications, and provoke further thought. The authors of the books pepper their

⁷³ *Al-manhaj al-filastini al-awwal*, pp. 455-56 [emphasis original].

⁷⁴ *Islamic Education*, Grade 6, Part I, p. 49.

lessons with outside activities, essays, questions for reflection and study, and encouragement of critical thinking. Most lessons begin by explaining their purpose to the student. The books make strong efforts to link to local and concrete applications and examples or make the information more accessible. In order to make the lesson on the prophet Muhammad's life more interactive, for instance, students are asked to fill in a modern-day identity card for him.⁷⁵ Most lessons in all subjects start with the local and the familiar and build outwards (first grade national education, for instance, progresses in the following order: family and house, I and my school, the neighborhood, my town, my homeland). Far more daringly, the books even push the students to engage in critical thought when dealing with difficult and sensitive topics. Sixth-grade students are asked to evaluate the policies used by Mu'awiyya (the fifth caliph and founder of the Umayyad dynasty) in solidifying his authority and building his state; they are then asked to consider the hereditary method for selecting rulers—an assignment that is likely to lead some to question early Muslims and current Arab political practice in some countries.⁷⁶ And sixth graders are also asked to confront the situation in which parents instruct their children to do something wrong.

The concessions to the progressives are real. Science books claim to take a constructivist approach, for instance, implicitly undermining the idea that science is a set of fixed and discovered truths to be taught. Yet despite the attempt to build a more interactive pedagogy, ultimately the new set of texts do not meet the central mission of the progressive educational vision: the books are still generally based on the idea that they impart knowledge from a position of authority; they may encourage more active learning but their encouragement of critical, creative, and independent thought is limited.

HISTORY AND RELIGION AS THE LAST FRONTIERS In sum, the progressives have had real influence on some areas of the new curriculum. In the areas of history, religion, and identity, however, they have had little impact at all. This is not accidental: even the progressives tread carefully in such areas. Indeed, it is often precisely their boldness in other areas that lead them to reticence on history, faith, and nationalism. The Abu Lughod committee deliberately avoided the two most controversial subjects they had to consider: religion and the history and geography of Palestine. On both subjects, consistency in demanding critical thought and democracy in the classroom would have endangered the proposed reform.

With regard to religion, an emphasis on democratic interaction and critical thought led some committee members in directions that others did not wish to follow. Certainly, changing the emphasis on teaching religious texts as divine revelation would have provoked strong opposition. And the Ministry of Education made clear it would not be receptive to such a recommendation, fearful of the public response.⁷⁷ One Ministry official explains: "Of course, there was no question that the curriculum had to include religion. This is wanted by all Palestinians—Muslims and Christians."⁷⁸ Thus, for the committee to pursue a change in religious education would have divided the members, embroiled it in more controversy than it wished to stir up, and ultimately failed. Yet the secularist bias of the committee came through in a subtle manner: the report called for separating religion from history and civics and criticized the overlap between the subjects in the existing curriculum. This approach stood at odds with the same committee's constant call for integration among various parts of the curriculum.

⁷⁵ *Islamic Education*, Grade 1, Part I, p. 57.

⁷⁶ *Arab and Islamic History*, Grade 6, unit on "The Umayyad Caliphate."

⁷⁷ Ali Jarbawi, personal interview, Ramallah, January 2000.

⁷⁸ Khalil Mahshi, Director General, International and Public Relations, Ministry of Education, personal interview, Ramallah, August 1999.

Palestinian history and geography proved a difficult subject for the same reason. Both Abu Lughod and Jarbawi recalled that they were asked time and again how they were to approach issues such as borders, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the refugee issue, and so on.⁷⁹ Once again, they largely avoided such topics; Jarbawi recalls that they were concerned that any extended treatment would quickly become the object of debate, obstructing a broader consideration of their proposal.⁸⁰ And as with religion, their brief consideration of such issues seemed to be at odds with their general approach. The emphasis on critical thought, free discussion, and the absence of fixed truths gave way to a recommendation that the curriculum simply stick to the facts. The report acknowledges the importance and sensitivity of the issue that it summarizes in the form of the question “What Palestine do we teach?”

Is it the historical Palestine with all its total geography or the Palestine which is a product of the signed political agreements with Israel? And how should Israel be dealt with? Is it merely a neighbor or a state that is founded on the destruction of most of Palestine?

This might be the most difficult question but the answer need not be so difficult. The new curriculum must be a Palestinian creation. It must acknowledge the realities of the situation without falsifying historical truths and their repercussions in various dimensions in the context of social science instruction.⁸¹

This vague emphasis on “realities” left little to contest—or to guide a textbook writer. In a public discussion in 1996, Abu Lughod similarly made the issue of teaching Palestine deceptively simple: “Our approach must be to tell the truth. Everything else follows.” Yet in the same meeting, he later added an observation more in keeping with the general ethos of the report—though without abandoning the emphasis on “the facts:”

...the history of the Arabs has not really been written. There is no Palestinian history. This is the job of Palestinian academic institutions. Having one book is not enough. We don't want one interpretation—let us rather get the facts at least. Once students are armed with the basic facts, our teaching of how to think will take over.⁸²

The unspoken argument is that Palestinians must write their own history, but they cannot unless they are willing to do so in the same spirit of open debate and critical inquiry that will guide the curriculum as a whole. Because that effort has at best only begun, and because it would be too controversial to allow students such total freedom in debating such sensitive national issues, the authors of the Abu Lughod report fall back on the “realities” and “facts” that they tried to evict from other parts of the curriculum—hoping that a generation of students trained to engage in critical inquiry rather than uncritical absorption will allow a future reform based not simply on dry presentation of the facts but also on attempts to foster democratic and critical debate.

The irony is that the advocates of democracy in education lost their boldness not so much in the face of such difficult topics but because of fear of public opinion. Those who wished to build a democratic educational system were willing to take up God and Palestine, but they lost their boldness because of their unwillingness to take on the people.

⁷⁹ Interviews with Ibrahim Abu Lughod, Ramallah, October 1999 and `Ali Jarbawi, Ramallah, January 2000.

⁸⁰ `Ali Jarbawi, personal interview, Ramallah, January 2000.

⁸¹ *Al-manhaj al-filastini al-awwal*, pp. 454-55 [emphasis original].

⁸² "Education Strategies and the Future Needs of a Palestinian Curriculum. Roundtable with a Presentation by Dr. Ibrahim Abu Lughod, Head of the Palestinian Curriculum Development Center" 15 August 1996, Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, Jerusalem, <http://www.passia.org/meetings/96/meet28.htm>.

CONCLUSION

Harsh external critics of the PNA curriculum and textbooks have had to rely on misleading and tendentious reports to support their claim of incitement. But a far milder version of such criticisms—that the curriculum does little to support peace—would be accurate. The Palestinian educational system is designed to serve other goals, most prominently the inculcation of identity and legitimation of authority—largely ignoring the sensitive issues connected with peace. This leads internal critics to launch a second set of criticisms against the curriculum—that its subject matter and pedagogy are stale and authoritarian. Such critics have had some impact and achieved a modest level of reform, but their fundamental charges against the educational system have not been answered.

Is there any hope that the internal, progressive critique will begin to transform the Palestinian educational system in areas such as history and national identity? Can Palestinian students be taught not simply who they are but how to think critically about their past and present? Might this help foster a Palestinian identity—or set of identities—willing to reinterpret the past with an eye not only to violated rights and injustice but also toward peace and reconciliation?

Any hope for such movement in current political circumstances is probably unrealistic. With the effects of conflict felt on a daily basis, what textbooks and teachers say is probably irrelevant in any case. But in the longer term, the progressive alternative does offer an attractive vision. The progressive educators argue for an educational system that does not simply inculcate the values of the past but prepares citizens to think independently and critically. Students emerging from such a system would, if the vision is successful, show far greater ability to confront their past critically, and, more important, interact constructively with those who did not share their values and identities.

In the long term, then, the specific content of textbooks on issues of Israel, Jews, and war probably matter far less than external critics claim. The set of “facts” that students will retain will come from parents, colleagues, and the immediate environment more than textbooks in any case. But students equipped with the skills of democratic citizenship—the very skills the progressives wish to develop—will be far more likely to adjust to world in which national narratives may be questioned and to have constructive relations with those who subscribe to very different narratives. What matters for the future, then, is less what subject matter is taught than how it is taught and what skills are fostered and rewarded.