

VISIONS OF SOCIETY AND PEACE EDUCATION IN PALESTINIAN TEXTBOOKS

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"VISIONS OF SOCIETY AND PEACE EDUCATION IN PALESTINIAN TEXTBOOKS"

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen,

the development of a national Palestinian curriculum by the Palestinian Authority – which Dr. Salah Yassin exposed in detail right before me - received from its very beginning harsh internal and external criticism. Since an American-Israeli NGO, the so called "Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace" (CMIP), issued in 1998 a blistering report on the Egyptian and Jordanian reprints, which were still in use in Gaza and the West Bank, the international controversy on the Palestinian curriculum has not come to an end.

The entire Palestinian curriculum was called in the media a "war curriculum". It was claimed that the textbooks are full of harsh political messages and anti-Semitism. It was claimed that they do not educate for democracy and human rights, but for intolerance and for jihad against Israel and the "infidels". Other studies on Palestinian textbooks followed and denied the results. Prof. Sami Adwan and Ruth Firer, Prof. Nathan Brown, the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), the Georg-Eckert-Institute for International Textbook Research, Fouad Mughrabi, the Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI), and others have investigated on Palestinian textbooks.

In my paper I do not want to enter in this debate, but I would like to give you a short insight view in only one series of textbooks, which were produced by the Palestinian Authority: the Civics Education textbooks for the grades 1-4 and 6-9 of Elementary School. My central question was, which visions of society and education for religious tolerance these textbooks convey.

In the first part I will start with the education for religious tolerance. In the second I will focus on the visions of society. In the third part I will evaluate the results.

- I. Education for Religious Tolerance and Peace in Civics Education Textbooks
- II. Views of Society in Civics Education Textbooks
- III. Evaluation

I. Tolerance and Peace Education in Civic Education Textbooks



Church of the Sepulcher and the Dome of the Rock¹

Whenever the Civics Education textbooks mention religion, they stress the equality between Christianity and Islam. In the lesson “*Our beautiful country*” not only is the Dome of the Rock portrayed, which is the usual symbol of Jerusalem in most publications, but also the Church of the Sepulcher - in the same size and on the same page, despite the fact that it is not at all a picturesque eye-catcher. This is evidence that the civic education textbooks are trying to express the equality of Christianity and Islam, although Christianity is a small minority in the Palestinian society.²

¹ Civics Education, grade 1, vol. 1, p. 12; cf. Civics Education, grade 4, part 1, p. 9.

² 1-2 % of the Palestinian population in Jerusalem, Gaza and the Westbank, 10% of the Palestinian population in the state of Israel). Cf. Tsimhoni, Daphne: *The Christians in Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip Since 1948. An Historical, Social and Political Study*, London 1993; Bechmann, Ulrike/Raheb, Mitri (Ed.): *Verwurzelt im Heiligen Land. Einführung in das palästinensische Christentum*, Frankfurt 1995; Röhlting, Markus: *Die christlichen Kirchen des Heiligen Landes und ihre Rolle in Israel und Palästina*, Jerusalem 2000.



The global community of all the people in the World³

The second folio shows representatives of the global community of all the people in the world. In the subtext, there is an explanation that the peoples of the world differ in color, in origin, in traditions, costumes and habits. Then there follows a sentence which states:

“We have to respect all religions of the people, their costumes and habits and when they differ in color. And we have to judge humans according to their deeds and how they treat others.”⁴

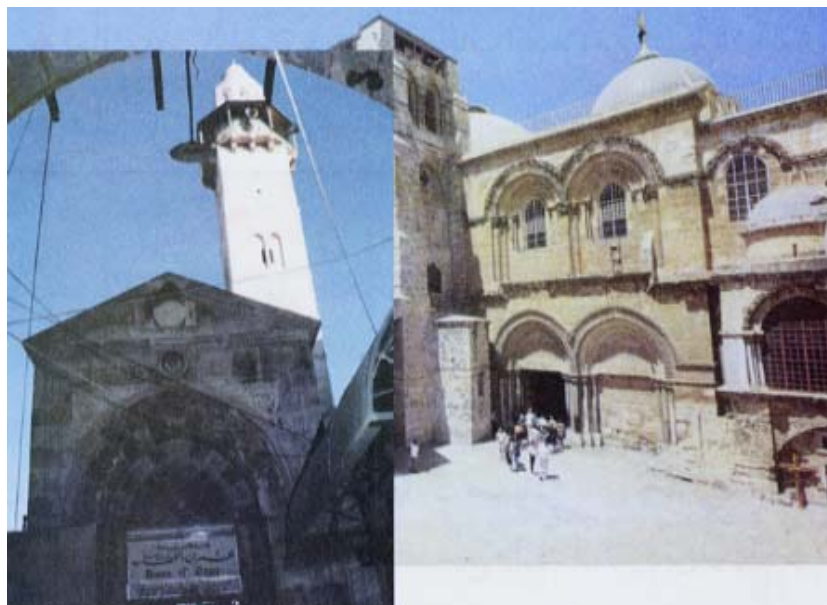
This is a remarkable sentence, as it expresses a general religious tolerance which is different from the traditional Islamic tolerance. Islam has always conceded tolerance only to the “People of the Holy Scriptures”, not to *all* religions. In most of the constitutions of the states of the Middle East, there are still lists of the recognized religious communities. Polytheistic religions, new religions and atheism are generally excluded.⁵ So this general respect of all religions is an expression aimed at fostering

³ Civics Education, grade 3, vol. 1, p. 22.

⁴ Civic Education, grade 3, vol. 1, p. 23.

⁵ Cf. FORSTNER, Martin: Das Menschenrecht der Religionsfreiheit und des Religionswechsels als Problem der islamischen Staaten in: Kanon. Kirche und Staat im christlichen Osten X, Wien 1991, 105-186; Al-Deeb, Sami: Les musulmans face aux droits de l'homme, Bochum 1994; AL-DEEB, Sami: Déclarations islamiques des droits de l'homme comparées à la déclaration universelle, Bologna 2001.

an education for the respect of the general human rights, as stated in the human rights declaration of 1948.



Omar Ibn al-Khattab Mosque and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher⁶

This folio conveys again the attempt, to show the equality of the religions. It shows the Omar Ibn al-Khattab Mosque and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the same size. In the text the children are informed about a story from the Islamic tradition:

When Omar Ibn al-Khattab conquered Jerusalem, he visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The guiding monk (according to some traditions it was the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Saphronios himself) invited the conqueror to pray in the church, when the time for the Muslim prayer came. But Omar Ibn al-Khattab refused this invitation, stating that this could be dangerous for the Christians. It was probable that the Muslims would establish mosques at the places where he prayed, after him. So the church could be converted into a Mosque. To avoid this, he preferred to pray at a place nearby, and there indeed the Muslims founded a mosque, which still exists.⁷

With categorical questions, the children are asked to analyze, from this text, what does religious tolerance mean. The intended answers should point out that religious tolerance means

⁶ Civics Education, grade 3, part 1, p. 25.

⁷ Ibidem.

- mutual tolerance to practice one's religion
- not to exploit the weakness of a religious minority
- to be careful, polite and to feel empathy in the mutual relations with religions
- that mosques and churches, Christians and Muslims can exist together in history and in today's world (The co-existence of the Omar Ibn al-Khattab Mosque and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is the best evidence of that)



Religious tolerance practice today

In the next lesson this inter-religious aspect is transported to the daily life of the children. There is a picture showing a Muslim and a Christian reading the Holy Scriptures of Koran and the Bible. They stand before a mosque and a church. The caption states: “We do the same in different ways”, and the children are asked to describe the pictures.⁸

This is very noticeable, because in the previously used Egyptian textbooks, there was a similar lesson and picture. But there the mosque was bigger than the church and the Muslim boy embraces the Christian boy with one arm. The Palestinian textbooks, however, express the equality of the religions despite the fact that there are only about 50,000 Christians in Palestinian society, while the Egyptian textbooks express an unbalanced relationship, in which the more powerful Muslims protect the

⁸ Civics Education, grade 3, part 1, p. 23.

weaker and smaller Christians, although the Coptic Christians are still the biggest Christian community in the Middle East with about 4-6 Million believers.

The next picture shows a letter template with season compliments.⁹ The children are asked to use it for the next time when their friends celebrate a Muslim or Christian feast. Before, they were instructed on which words are usual for congratulations on the different feasts. So there is not only a theoretical attempt at educating for tolerance of other religions, but also an attempt to practicing it in daily life.

II. Visions of Society in Civic Education Textbooks

1. The Education for a Western Secular Society

There are a lot of pictures and texts that convey that Civic Educations Textbooks propose a society which is similar to Western secular societies.



⁹ Civics Education, grade 3, part 1, p. 27.



The Father and his daughter are preparing the meal¹⁰

- Almost all women and girls do not cover their hair. They wear very short skirts. Only women from the countryside or older people wear the traditional clothing and the hijâb.
- Often the traditional roles of women and men are inverted: Fathers are cooking and playing with babies, while the mothers help their children with the computer.¹¹ Women are often portrayed in professions with higher education, while men are often portrayed as craftsmen.¹²



Coeducation

¹⁰ Civics Education, grade 6, p. 8; cf. Civics Education, grade 6, p. 17.

¹¹ Civics Education, grade 6, p. 10 and 12.

¹² Cf. Civics Education, grade 7, p. 19.

- There is no segregation in the school between boys and girls, but rather co-education in school and all activities, including physical education.¹³ Pictures show boys and girls always together.
- All lessons use inclusive language. In most of the dialogues and lessons boys and girls are communicating on different issues.
- Even the surrounding seems to be westernized: There seem to be only single family-homes in Palestine with green gardens and red roofs.

Here are some examples:



a) Boy: “I am better than you” – Girl: “I am equal to you and I have the same rights and obligations”¹⁴

b) A woman as a dentist, a highly qualified profession and a craftsman¹⁵

¹³ Cf. Civics Education, grade 1, vol. 2, p.14; Civics Education, grade 3, part 1, frontpage.

¹⁴ Civics Education, grade 8, p. 48.

¹⁵ Civics Education, grade 7, p. 19.



a) *Democracy in the family: The daughter has the right to express her opinions*¹⁶

b) *"It is my right to study"*¹⁷

In the 8th grade this change in the Palestinian society is explicitly picked up. The text reads:

*"The roles and the responsibilities in the family and the society are not fixed, but a product of the economical situations and the cultural characteristics of a society. The role of the woman in modern society is not limited to be 'only mother and spouse', although she is still responsible for the work in the house, but she is equal to the man. She participates in the productive work and in the most important developments of the society. Thus the family and the society have to face also the responsibilities of maternity ..."*¹⁸

2. The individual rights in society

The individual rights are, again and again, topics in the lessons. One of the first things the children learn in elementary school is that they have a right to education,

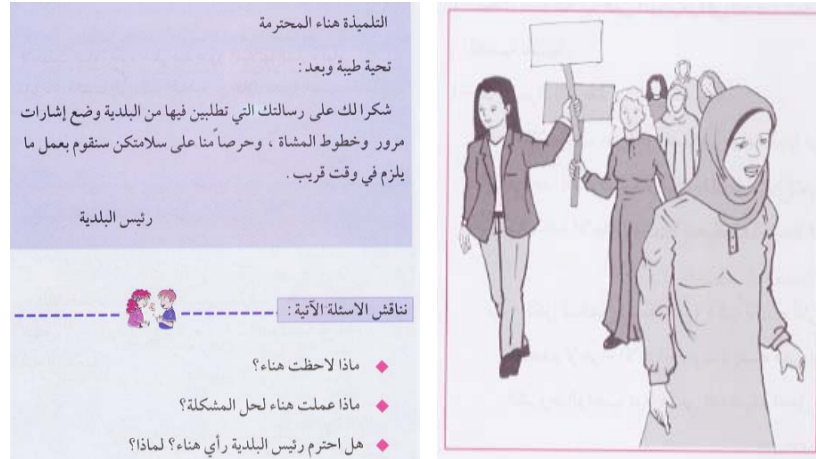
¹⁶ Civics Education, grade 7, p. 39.

¹⁷ Civics Education, grade 8, p. 50.

¹⁸ Civics Education, grade 8, p. 6.

medical treatment, food and recreation.¹⁹ The rights of the children, the rights of the girls and the women, the right to express one's opinion are topics in many lessons.

As an example I will show you two pictures:



Letter of the mayor/Demonstration

There is a letter of a mayor to a girl in the 3rd grade, responding to a letter from the girl. She had asked the mayor to set up a zebra crossing and some additional signs, as she had noticed that the road to school was very dangerous for many of the students. The mayor thanks her for her advice and promises to immediately inform the responsible persons for further considerations.²⁰

In another picture, some women are shown in a demonstration. The lesson is titled with the headline "The right to express one's opinion". (By the way it is one of the rare photos showing young women wearing the hijâb).²¹

3. The Education for Peace and Democracy

The education for peace and democracy is one of the main topics of the civics education textbooks from the first grade, up to the last grades in elementary school.²²

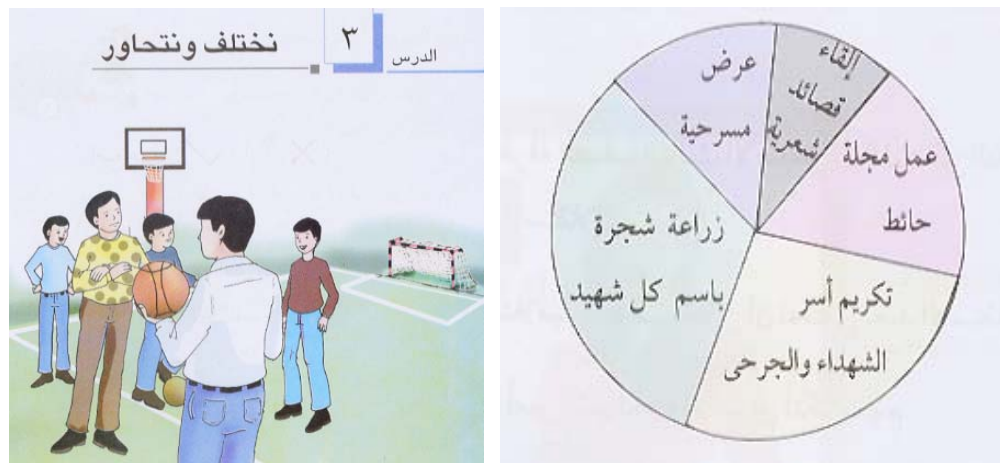
¹⁹ Civic Education, grade 1, vol. 1, p. 15.

²⁰ Civic Education, grade 3, vol. 1, p. 15-16.

²¹ Civic Education, grade 8, p. 27.

The main intention was to show that democracy is not a political item of the state only, but a principle that must start with individuals and families, and in the small communities of neighborhood, quarters, villages and schools.

The children are taught that there are different possibilities to solve disagreements in society. Using examples of the daily life of the children at school, on the playgrounds and with their families, the textbooks present the possibilities of votes,²³ in which the minorities have to respect the decisions of the majority. They introduce how to negotiate and convince others with good arguments. They portray the compromise as a way of satisfying the different opinions. Sometimes this has also an inter-religious perception:



*Soccer or basketball?*²⁴

In this lesson, there is the problem that some of the boys want to play soccer, the others want to play basketball. The name of one of the children is a typical Christian name (Hannâ = John), the others have typical Muslim names. As the votes are tied, they finally agree to compromise, playing first basketball and then soccer. Because of the characteristic Christian and Muslim names this simple story conveys also an inter-religious message: The children get acquainted with the fact that Christians and

²² Civics Education, grade 8, p. 17-29.

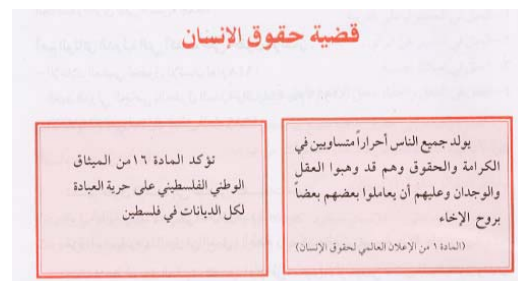
²³ Civic Education, grade 3, vol. 1, p. 8.

²⁴ Civic Education, grade 3, vol. 1, p. 12.

Muslims are friends and play together. And the example of “John” and his Muslim friends also shows that Christians and Muslims can find compromises.²⁵

4. The education for the human rights

Apart from democracy, the education for tolerance and fostering the individual human rights are one of the main issues in the Civics Education textbooks. There are two lessons, in which the pluralism of Palestine is explicitly dealt with.²⁶ Several times the first article of the general human rights declaration of 1948 is quoted.²⁷ It is considered as a “right which is not open for discussions or interpretations”. The human rights are not considered as rights which were founded by Muhammad in Medina, but some of these ideas already existed in the Grec pagan philosophy.²⁸



²⁵ Civics Education, grade 3, vol. 1, 12-13.

²⁶ Civics Education, grade 8, p. 40-41; Civics Education, grade 9, p. 6-7.

²⁷ Civics Education, grade 7, p. 43-47.

Human rights education

In the lessons there is always the attempt to show how different Palestinian declarations and the draft of the Palestinian constitution agree with the human rights declarations.²⁹ Several lessons focus on special human rights: the right to have and express one's opinion,³⁰ the right of free information and communication,³¹ the rights of the women, the rights of the children. Even the violence in the family, which is also a very sensitive in Western countries, is topic in several parts of a unit.³² In grade 9 the different kinds of the human rights are explained in detail and the full texts of the human rights declaration from 1948, the declaration against the discrimination of women from 1979, and the declaration on the childrens' rights from 1989 are added in an appendix.³³

III. Evaluation

1. Despite the necessary statements of criticism which have to be included, as a natural result of a scholarly comment, it must be said first that, in general, the Palestinian textbooks *cannot* be considered a "war curriculum". At least these textbooks of Civics Education convey visions of society, in which tolerance to other religions, human rights, peace, pluralism, democracy and other values are encouraged and fostered much.
2. There is no hatred or incitement against Israel, the Israeli people or Judaism. The textbooks do not contain anti-Semitic language. (While in Egyptian textbooks - which were previously used in Gaza and which are still in use in Egypt – all Jews in the world and Israel are still called the "enemies of the Muslims and of God" and the children have to learn in several lessons that the "Jews are the people of treachery and betrayal" it is impossible to find any of such general anti-Jewish

²⁸ Civics Education, grade 7, p. 10.

²⁹ Civics Education, grade 7, p. 43-44.

³⁰ Civics Education, grade 8, p. 35-39.

³¹ Civics Education, grade 7, p. 32-38.

³² Civics Education, grade 8, p. 42-59.

³³ Civics Education, grade 9, p. 49-66.

and anti-Israeli prejudices and stereotypes in the new Palestinian textbooks.) This is an important first step for an education for peace and tolerance.

3. The problem is that Jews are nowhere explicitly mentioned. In the picture of the global community there is no Jew. In the description of the holy sites there is no hint that Jerusalem and Palestine has ever had historical or present relevance to Jews. The question is: Couldn't it be possible that a Palestinian state is proud of the Jewish heritage in *Palestine* as well? Isn't it a challenge for Palestinian educators to foster explicitly the tolerance between Christians and Jews, Muslims and Jews as well? In the Islamic tradition, anyhow, there is no reason of discrimination between tolerance to Jews or to Christians, because they were all treated as "Ahl adh-Dhimma".
4. However it is not possible to conclude from this "strategy of avoidance" of Jewish religion, history and heritage in Palestine, that Jews are totally excluded from the tolerance. It is true that the textbooks concentrate on the relation between Christians and Muslims, but all texts have not exclusive phrases. They include *all* religions, even polytheistic religions. This is an extraordinary approach, because in most of the Middle Eastern states there is only a tolerance of the *monotheistic* religions. Article 5 of the constitution of Palestine also reads that "Islam is the official Palestinian religion and that Christianity and the other *monotheistic* religions shall be equally revered and respected." (Al-Islam huwa dîn ar-rasmi fi filastîn wa-lil-masihîya wa-li-sâ'ir ar-risâlât as-samâwiya qadasiyatitîha wa-ihîrâmiha). There is no word on other religions. So the tolerance perception conveyed in the Civics education textbooks is wider than in the Palestinian constitution.
5. Palestinian Christianity is not portrayed as a small minority under the protection of Muslims, but as a religion which has exactly the same rights. Whenever the textbooks speak about religion or show religious sites they mention both religions and the textbooks encourage the practical inter-religious exchange, tolerance and compromises in the daily life of the children. This sets an example for other textbooks in the Middle East.

6. The civics education textbooks do not only avoid hatred and incitement against the West, but foster very much Western values: democracy, human rights, the individual rights, the education for peace and tolerance of all religions, the rights of women and children, the civil society and the protection of the nature. If everything what is taught in these textbooks would become reality in Palestine this would push the society to the status of a Western secular society, in which similar values and problems exist. From a Western perspective the civics education textbooks therefore have to be highly praised indeed.

The problem is that such a vision can probably not be adopted by many Palestinians. The Palestinians which lived and studied in the West and were influenced by Western views represent only a part of the Palestinians. Many of the Palestinians do not want to imitate Western secular societies, but try to keep their strong religious identity, their close family connections, their paternalism and their special traditions and customs. If the publisher of the textbooks would really intend such a Western secular society, it would be necessary to show how these values can be founded on the special Palestinian traditions and habits and on the religions of Islam and Oriental Christianity itself.

7. Another problem lies in the fact that the Islamic education textbooks convey a competing vision of society: It is a traditional Islamic society. Democracy, the individual, human rights are not main topics. The vision of women and family relations is an Islamic traditional one as well as the concept of tolerance to non-Muslims. All girls and women are veiled, they stay at home. Palestine seems to be a conservative monolithic Islamic society, in which the tolerance seems to reiterate the tolerance of the dhimma-system. Modern questions of changing roles in the family, the questions of coexistence with other religions in a global world is not a main topic. There are well intended dispositions for an education for peace and tolerance, but in many passages the individual teacher's interpretation can paramount for how these texts will be understood.

So it could be taken into consideration that the different national committees for the textbook series discuss and share their visions of society to convey a common vision of the Palestinian society to the children, which integrates both visions and

can be accepted by both parties: The Islamic education committee should concern more about the questions of a modern society, of tolerance to all religions and the values of democracy, human rights and other issues, the committee for the civics education textbooks series could learn not to imitate Western secular views, but to develop an own concept of a modern society which is founded on the values of the Arabic-Islamic and the Oriental-Christian culture.