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The Future of Peace in the Light of School Textbooks

Lecture delivered by Dr Yohanan Manor, 7 March 2002, Nice, France

School curricula and textbooks reveal what societies wish to instill in the young generations. They are a major factor in contributing to the future opinions of those being educated today. A comparison of Palestinian and Israeli school textbooks¹ has shown that in the last decade there has been a serious effort on the part of the Israelis to educate the youth to accept the implications of the peace process, whereas the Palestinian school textbooks reveal a considerable regression from their mid-1990s position.

The Israeli school textbooks introduced into the curriculum during the 1990s are clearly oriented towards tolerance and peace, which can be illustrated by five main traits:

1. The Palestinians are accepted as Palestinians, and not simply as Arabs or Moslems. Islam and the Arab culture are referred to with respect and esteem.
2. The Arab-Israeli conflict is factually described as an on-going dispute between two national entities over the same territory, whilst sharing responsibility for the consequences (destruction, refugees, etc.). The Arab and Palestinian cause is presented from both the Israeli and Palestinian sides. There is empathy towards the fate of the Palestinian refugees.
3. The content of the peace treaties between Egypt and Jordan as well as the Oslo Accords are detailed, including their implications with regard to borders. The "Prawer" Atlas used in all Israeli schools clearly shows the Palestinian Autonomy and its territorial contours.
4. There is an absence of stereotypes and a clear effort is made to educate against prejudice. Jewish holy places are also portrayed as being holy to Islam.
5. Humane gestures manifested by the Arabs towards the Jews and vice-versa are portrayed.

¹ The textbooks under discussion are those that are approved by the Palestinian and Israeli Ministries of Education. They were examined according to internationally accepted criteria as laid down by UNESCO (i.e. accurate, objective, honest presentation of fact and political dispute; advancement of the cause of peace, etc.) as well as CMIP criteria (i.e. image of the other, stereotyping and prejudices, is there room for improvement etc.)

Egyptian and Jordanian school textbooks, despite the Peace Accords, continue to contest the legitimacy of the State of Israel. Israel does not appear on any of their maps. Furthermore, several textbooks still contain anti-Semitic remarks and negative stereotypes. The sixty or so textbooks produced by the Palestinian National Authority in the last two years, with the support of the international community, contain the following features:

1. Remarks about the Jews are rare, but always hostile and offensive.
2. Jews are not included in chapters on tolerance. There is no recognition of Jewish holy places in Palestine, but allegations of "judaization" of Moslem holy places.
3. There is no legitimacy to the State of Israel. It is presented as a usurper and an occupier since its establishment in 1948.
4. Israel is presented as the only source of all the ills affecting the Palestinians (identity and national culture, refugees, economy, tourism, ecology, women's rights).
5. The Oslo Accords are mentioned only to emphasize the entry into Palestine of the PLO armed forces. Their content with regard to mutual recognition and renouncing of violence to settle the conflict is passed over in silence.
6. Jihad and Martyrdom are glorified in the context of the liberation all of Palestine.

The implication of these findings is compounded by the fact that the international community has neither reacted to, nor protested their content. A case in point is the "Donors Forum" comprised of 38 states and 8 international organizations, established in 1993 to help the Palestinian National Authority to implement the Oslo Accords. Within this framework, particular attention should be paid to the European Union, UNESCO, Belgium, Holland, Ireland, Italy and Finland, have taken upon themselves to support the formation and functioning of a Palestinian system of education, including the development and application of its new curriculum.

However, these countries and institutions have neglected to make a serious effort to follow at close hand and to carefully evaluate both the content of the curricula and school textbooks prepared and issued by the Palestinian National Authority. The PNA's refusal to communicate the content of the first textbooks when requested to do so several months before they were introduced into the official school system in September 2000, was accepted by the Donors Forum and the wisdom of this decision must be seriously questioned.

As the textbooks has since been criticized by various bodies as being contrary to the letter and the spirit of the Oslo Agreements, those involved in their funding, justify their content in several ways:

1. The "Heads of Mission" of the European Union in Ramallah and Jerusalem termed the conclusions of CMIP's last report on the Palestinian textbooks (November 2001) as "allegations", without substantiating their claim. Not one of the 250 quotations listed in CMIP's report as being contrary to international criteria and the spirit of the Oslo Accords, was contested as incorrect, inexact or incomplete. CMIP's letter of 11 February 2002 to European Commissioner Christopher Patten on this subject has to date received no response (see CMIP website www.edume.org)
2. The "harsh reality of daily contact with the Israelis" is invoked by the Palestinian Authority – and adopted by Christopher Patten – as a justification for the teaching of hate for Israel and the glorification of the martyr. It should be remembered that the first Palestinian textbooks were introduced into the schools at the beginning of September 2000, before the outbreak of the second Intifada and that they had been prepared during the period when there was still some faith in the Oslo Accords. But the main focus has to be, whether education should reanimate grievances and resentment and kindle hate, or should it rather address a different perspective in order to escape the infernal cycle of violence? The adoption of this justification by an eminent representative of the EU does not uphold the values to which the EU is bound in its role in bringing about a reconciliation between the Palestinians and the Israelis.
3. While patting themselves on the back for supporting the introduction of extra-curricular programs advocating tolerance and cooperation, the EU and particularly UNRWA do not accept responsibility for the content of the PNA textbooks. But how can one seriously believe that these extra-curricular programs can be beneficial and credible, while daily instruction inculcates the opposite?

In view of the content of the Palestinian school textbooks and Europe's disregard of the importance of assuring their peace-oriented content, the future of peace appears to be extremely dismal. Should we then conclude that there is no more hope and that nothing can be done to stop the teaching of hate and the glorification of martyrdom?

Certainly not. We must continue to reveal the teaching of mistrust, hate and violence wherever it appears, to enable the far-sighted to take initiatives in achieving the acceptance of the values of tolerance, reconciliation and peace. This was the case in December 2001 when a handful of MEPs succeeded in convincing their colleagues to amend the EU budget, so that aid to the PNA would be conditional upon the promotion of reconciliation and peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

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