

Press Release

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Israel and Tunisia rank highest in education for tolerance and peace in the Middle East. This is the finding of pioneering survey conducted by *IMPACT-SE*, which shows that Tunisia has instituted educational reforms and is no less tolerant than Israel. On the other hand, the curriculum of the Egyptian school system, still in grip of the al-Azhar clerics, does not teach democratic values, lowering the chances for the emergence of a liberal democratic government in Egypt.

In a survey of education for tolerance and peace in the Middle East conducted by *IMPACT-SE*, Israel and Tunisia ranked highest, with a very small margin between them. Lagging considerably behind was the Palestinian Authority, with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria at the bottom of the scale. Iran ranked lowest. A study carried out by *IMPACT-SE* which focuses on education for tolerance and peace in Arab countries found that Egyptian school curriculum, largely shaped by al-Azhar, does not promote democratic values or positive attitudes toward the “Other.” A comparative report shows that the Egyptian people have not been taught the importance of democracy and accepting others, in contrast to Tunisia which has introduced educational reforms. While school textbooks in Egypt urge tolerance toward Copts and call for religious moderation and peace, they deny the existence of the State of Israel and contain anti-Jewish material. Egyptian textbooks do not encourage independent thinking or cooperation with the “Other.” The Egyptian curriculum emphasizes self-sacrifice for sake of the homeland and war narratives, rather than peace. Comparing the findings of this study, **Shelley Elkayam, CEO of *IMPACT-SE***, assumes that the chances for the emergence of a liberal democratic regime in Egypt are low.

The *IMPACT-SE* study on education for tolerance and peace in Tunisia found that attitudes toward the “Other” are much more progressive than in most Arab countries and Iran. An almost total separation exists between religion and state, and since the mid-1990s, Islam has not been a dominant force in shaping the country’s educational curricula and the mindset of its young people. *IMPACT-SE* research has shown that Tunisian education cultivates equality and respect for others, avoids demonizing others, and portrays the “Other” as vital for defining and enhancing one’s own identity.

The *IMPACT-SE* report, using international standards and *UNESCO* principles of education, tolerance and peace as its basis for comparison, shows that Tunisian textbooks side with the Palestinian Arabs in the Middle East conflict. At the same time, they are much more progressive and open to the peace process and the existence of the State of Israel (which appears on maps) than any other Arab entity, including the Palestinian Authority. While Palestinian Authority textbooks, for example, make no mention of Yasser Arafat’s appeal in 1988 for peace that includes “the future Palestinian state and the State of Israel,” Arafat’s appeal is studied in Tunisian schools.

According to Prof. **Yohanan Manor, chair of *IMPACT-SE***, the great hero of the Tunisian revolution is Mohamed Charfi, Tunisia’s minister of education in the 1990s, who introduced sweeping reforms in the country’s educational system. Charfi, who died two and a half years ago, was a fierce opponent of the deposed president, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and a long-time leader of the League of Human Rights in Tunisia. Ben Ali, fearing his growing influence, appointed him minister of education. Charfi, loyal to his beliefs, dramatically reduced the authority of the clerics over public education, steering the younger generation toward standards of tolerance previously uncharted in the Arab world. Charfi’s educational reforms thus make him the true champion of Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution and the man who shaped the younger generation. Critical thinking in one’s approach to the “Other,” educating for peace, embracing globalism, and above all, a profound understanding of equality and democracy – these are the defining characteristics that *IMPACT-SE* found in its comprehensive study of the curricula and educational system of Tunisia.

Manor points out that unlike textbooks in other Arab countries, Tunisian textbooks are critical of the misuse of the Koran and extremist interpretations of it. They even mention the Holocaust. Manor quotes from a 9th grade Tunisian textbook that calls upon students to “break the cycle of hostility and reckless tendency to plunge into violence and counter-violence... and try to hear the other voice, even if it comes from a minority, because this is the voice of dialogue that will one day allow us to replace conflict with mutual understanding and respect.”

These educational reforms also explain the reasons for the Jasmine Revolution, with its rebellion against authority and corruption, and why it was relatively bloodless, says Manor. The report cites instances of a humane approach to perceived enemies, such as colonialist France and Israel. A 12th grade literature textbook, for example, includes a poem by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish in which he writes of his love for an Israeli girl.

Dr. **Eldad Pardo**, head of the **IMPACT-SE's Iranian research group**, emphasizes that the Tunisian curriculum contrasts sharply with the curricula in Iran and Arab countries that glorify shahid culture and pressure students to personally adopt that ideal of martyrdom. By contrast, the Islamic textbooks in Tunisia preach the importance of negotiating, and of peace and respect for others. Racism, which is usually part and parcel of Islamic education in Iran, is criticized without hesitation. A 9th grade Tunisian textbook states that “tolerance is a fundamental principle in the Koran.” “So how is it that some people have used Allah’s book as an instrument of extremism and narrow-mindedness?” the students are asked.

“The move towards moderation in Tunisia reflects a pedagogic approach geared to preparing the child for living in a global village in a culture of tolerance,” says Poetess Shelley Elkayam. “The challenge facing Tunisian liberalism is to protect the buds that have sprouted among the thorns. The difference between Egypt, Iran and Tunisia is deep and profound. Not all revolutions are the same.”

IMPACT-SE Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education is an independent, apolitical research institute that has developed a set of unique measurement tools compliant with international standards. The institute, founded by Dr. Yohanan Manor in 1998, is headed by a board of directors from Israel, a CEO and an international board of world-renowned experts and scientists. The institute employs twelve researchers who work in groups in collaboration with experts in the field. **IMPACT-SE**, headquartered at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem’s Givat Ram campus, publishes several reports a year, as well as reviews on the state of education and curricula in various countries and sectors.