

Study: Tunisian curriculum is most progressive in Arab world

School books include criticism of extremist interpretations of the Koran, they make reference to the Holocaust, and they educate about the importance of negotiations, peace and respect for the other.

By Or Kashti

School textbooks used in Tunisia teach tolerance and peace to a far greater extent than in other Muslim countries, according to a report by IMPACT-SE - The Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education, based in Jerusalem.

Referring to the report, Dr. Yohanan Manor, the director of the institute, said that credit for this lies with Mohamed Charfi, who served as Tunisia's education minister in the 1990s. Charfi, he said, "dramatically curtailed the influence of religious figures on public education and led public education in his country to new levels of educating toward tolerance unsurpassed in the Middle East."

Manor noted that Tunisian school books include criticism of extremist interpretations of the Koran, they make reference to the Holocaust, and they educate about the importance of negotiations, peace and respect for the other.

The report, published in November 2009, notes that "following reforms of revolutionary proportions carried out by the Ministry of Education, the Tunisian schoolbooks, in stark contrast with most Middle Eastern curricula, emphasize the importance of tolerance, peace and dialogue with the 'other,' equality between all human groups, openness toward the 'other'; and its culture (that is, the West), use of religion for universal rapprochement, and restriction of the ideals of (militant) jihad and martyrdom to historical events."

Assuming that these principles are applied within the context of the Middle East conflict, the report notes, "the Tunisian schoolbooks may serve as a model for Arab and Muslim countries regarding the attitude toward the 'other' and to peace." The report was based on an examination of 64 Tunisian textbooks.

Using standards established by UNESCO for evaluating levels of tolerance reflected in school textbooks, IMPACT- SE created a ranking of countries in the Middle East. Topping the list are Israel and Tunisia, followed by the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria. Iran places at the bottom of the list.

The international standards include, among other criteria, the degree to which the official curriculum promotes tolerance, understanding and respect for 'the other,' advances the resolution of conflict in non-violent ways, and supports peace.

"In Tunisia the regime educated the people to democracy and tolerance at such a level that there are researchers who believe that the situation there is advanced, even in relation to Israel," said Dr. Eldad Pardo, a member of the board of the research institute who teaches at the Hebrew University. According to the report, "There is no attempt in the schoolbooks to 'Arabize' historical 'others' in Tunisia (such as Carthaginians), historical conflicts with the Christian West are not utilized to demonize it and globalization is portrayed as both a threat and an opportunity which should be seized by under-developed countries."

The only "deficiency" found in the Tunisian schoolbooks, according to the report, "is that their attitude to the 'other' in the context of the Middle East conflict deviates from what is taught with regard to the 'other' in general, and a clearly biased, one-sided narrative of the conflict (slanted toward the Arab/Palestinian view) is presented without the viewpoint and narrative of the 'other' on the conflict, and demonization of Israel can be found."

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