

IMPACT-se

IMPACT-se Review of Georg Eckert Institute (GEI) Report on Palestinian Authority (PA) Textbooks



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Executive Summary

The 2021 Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research (GEI) report into Palestinian Authority (PA) textbooks is a welcome addition to the corpus of knowledge about the most recent iteration of the Palestinian national curriculum. Commissioned by the European Union, this report identifies many of the same systemic problems that other research institutes have brought to light over the past several years: Palestinian textbooks feature content that promotes the glorification of terrorism and martyrdom, violence, antisemitism and hate.

The report, however, fails to provide a complete and accurate picture of the state of the PA curriculum. It exaggerates positive features, minimizes negative aspects, and refrains from drawing meaningful conclusions about self-evident problematic findings. It examines minor aspects of the textbooks without attempting to describe how they fit into the greater narrative of the PA curriculum. Overall, the report does not discuss the likely effect of the curriculum on Palestinian students, nor what type of Palestinian national civil society may emerge as a result. These errors and omissions will leave an unwitting reader with an unrealistic understanding of the PA textbooks, which is unfortunate given the time and effort that went into preparing the report.

Key Points

- The report details numerous examples taken from PA textbooks containing violence, antisemitism, hatred, politicization and dehumanization, largely corroborating previous research into the same curriculum.
- The report states that these lessons are designed to promote feelings of hatred, mistrust and a violent view of reality in Palestinian schoolchildren.
- The report concludes that “the [PA] textbooks adhere to UNESCO standards”, despite providing plentiful evidence to the contrary.
- The report consistently minimizes the harmful content in PA textbooks, variously arguing that it is relatively harmless, numerically insignificant, pedagogically useful, indispensable, difficult to interpret, an accurate representation of reality, or a combination of the above.
- The report praises the PA curriculum as a “human rights curriculum” but does not note that it teaches human rights in a purely instrumental capacity as a tool of waging conflict, and not as a universal principle to be extended to the “Enemy”.
- The report deals with culture-specific concepts such as “martyrdom”, “*jihad*”, “revolution” and “(historic) Palestine” without communicating to readers how these concepts may be exploited to propagate violence and reject peace.
- The report does not attempt to explore what content the PA curriculum deliberately omits, how it should be improved, what narrative it outlines regarding the Palestinian and Jewish collectives, what sort of vision it paints for Palestinian civil society and how that may affect Palestinian students.

Peace and Non-Violence

A central goal of the report is to assess the PA curriculum's compliance with UNESCO standards of peace, tolerance, and non-violence. In this vein, the report recognizes and details numerous hateful, violent, incendiary, militaristic, and antisemitic examples found in the textbooks. Yet, the report simultaneously argues that because of the violent nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is only natural for the PA curriculum to express violence. This premise effectively nullifies the point of examining the curriculum according to international standards: given the nature of the conflict, one should not expect PA textbooks to abide by them. Under this rationale, the report thus undermines the purpose for which it was written.

The report employs a variety of methods to minimize harmful content in the PA textbooks. Some categories of violent content are dismissed because they are quantitatively fewer compared to others, assuming this somehow determines their destructive impact. Others are defended as indispensable for containing some pedagogical utility—as if all other possible methods for teaching Palestinian students have been exhausted. In some cases the report argues for a specific context with which to interpret a text, often with little basis in the text itself, such as the idea that terrorism is relegated to a bygone historic era; or, for unusual, opaque parameters under which a text should be examined, such as whether or not it is “escalatory”, so as to allow for charitable conclusions regarding the text's nature. A single, outlying case, where Israel is supposedly recognized and terrorism rejected, is highlighted by the report under a specially-titled segment. When all other options fail, the report simply feigns inability to decipher the supposedly ambiguous violent depiction; such is the case with many violent literary texts in the Arabic language PA textbooks. These methods allow the report to ultimately conclude that the PA textbooks align with UNESCO standards, despite clear evidence to the contrary.

Human Rights Education

The GEI report praises the PA curriculum for its strong focus on human rights, listing the rights alluded to within lessons and how they are taught. However, these human rights are not taught to be universal, but rather, they serve a purely instrumental purpose: as a tool with which the PA seeks to delegitimize the “Enemy.” In fact, the report finds that human rights are almost never shown in any real-life situation outside the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and within that context it is exclusive to Palestinians. Also lacking is any mention of Palestinians violating rights, or of Israeli rights being violated. The report fails to note that the PA textbooks consistently ignore violations of Palestinian rights at the hands of *non*-Israelis, or indeed, any discussion of human rights which might challenge the PA's nationalist narrative; and that human rights are frequently conflated with the PA's claimed national rights, such as a “right of resistance.” Finally, on the topic of human rights, the report critically fails to note that the curriculum is prepared by a non-democratic regime under which human and civil rights are not a feature of governance.

Culture-Specific Issues

The GEI report finds it impossible to judge or interpret concepts which relate to Palestinian culture and identity, Arabic language, and Islamic faith—treating them as exotic objects of

interest—rather than viewing them as active components of the curriculum’s confrontational nationalist narrative. Ideas such as *jihad*, martyrdom (*šahādah*), Greater (or “Historic”) Palestine, “occupation” [*iḥtilāl*] and “revolution” [*ṭawrah*] are given positive, ambivalent or agnostic interpretations, and not examined in the wider context of the curriculum or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The report fails to reflect how such concepts are used by the PA curriculum to promote violence and reject peacemaking. This does a disservice to readers who are not acquainted with these concepts and what they convey to Palestinians.

Absent Material

The report exhibits shortcomings in the form of unanswered questions and unchallenged assumptions. It fails to take the PA curriculum to task for refusing to teach any historical fact which challenges the nationalist Palestinian narrative, even if that means leaving Palestinian students with a distorted view of the region in which they live. The report does not examine the PA curriculum’s grand narrative about Jewish people as a group, or how it negates their identity and self-determination.

The report also fails to ask the question about what the curriculum *should* teach: in an environment of conflict, it would be desirable for a national school curriculum to give students the tools necessary to end that conflict—certainly not to perpetuate it. This means imparting values such as cooperation, coexistence, tolerance, forgiveness and understanding of the “Other,” *within* the context of the conflict. The PA curriculum does none of this and the report does not view this as a cause for concern.

Finally, the report does not ask what sort of vision the PA curriculum paints for the future. It fails to notice the lack of any peaceful national vision of two states existing side by side; the lack of any discussion of real solutions for the outstanding issues important to the Palestinians, such as Jerusalem or the Palestinian refugees; and the lack of any constructive vision for the future of the Palestinian nation itself. Only a bleak prospect of “Resistance” against the Israeli “Enemy” is depicted; the report, for its part, opts not to discuss what this implies for future generations of Palestinian students.

Overall, the GEI report fails to see the forest for the trees: it does not connect its troubling findings regarding the harmful elements of the PA curriculum to their logical conclusions. Instead, it operates under two major assumptions, both flawed. First, it assumes that because the curriculum was created in conflict, it must be viewed as a “conflict curriculum,” meaning that textbooks must invoke the conflict in order to be relevant and useful to Palestinian students; and perhaps more concerning, the report assumes that the curriculum teaches hate and violence as a reflection of the reality in which it was created, rather than a driving force behind that reality. In other words, it mistakes cause for effect and minimizes the very real possibility that the PA curriculum serves to exacerbate the conflict in direct and powerful ways.

Introduction

In June 2021, the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research (GEI), based in Braunschweig, Germany, released its report reviewing textbooks published by the Palestinian Authority (PA) as part of the Palestinian national school curriculum. The GEI report (hereafter “the report”) was commissioned by the European Union (EU) after a significant rise in public interest in the contents of the PA education program, for which the EU provides considerable financial aid. This was catalyzed in no small part by the work of **IMPACT-se** and others over the years, to the fact that the new 2016 PA curriculum showed a dramatic and worrying deterioration and escalation in its violent themes, motifs and messaging, contrary to international standards of tolerance and peace.

The report was originally commissioned to cover PA textbooks published between 2017 and 2019. The goals of the report were stated as follows:

This Report examines how textbooks address central issues of **Global Citizenship Education** [*Bold=IMPACT-se*]¹ whether and how **peace and tolerance** are incorporated into Palestinian textbooks, **to what extent they contain incitement to violence and hatred, and, if so, in what ways**. It also seeks to **provide a factual basis for a constructive discussion** between the relevant stakeholders concerning the content of current textbooks and teacher guides, as well as their **further improvement**.²

It is noteworthy that the first two self-stated goals of the report were to show how the PA textbooks positively display Global Citizenship Education (GCED), as well as peace and tolerance. These represent a noticeable expansion on the EU’s original objectives for the report, which were stated as “identifying possible incitement to hatred and violence and any possible lack of compliance with [UNESCO] standards of peace and tolerance.”³

A sample of 156 textbooks for grades 1–12 were examined by the report’s authors, taken from major subjects such as Arabic language, Islamic and Christian education, social studies, mathematics, and natural sciences. In 2020 the report’s purview was expanded to cover a small sample of PA textbooks released that same year, and those were handled in a separate section of the report. Also examined in the report were PA textbooks adapted, edited, printed and distributed by Israeli authorities for use in Israeli-run Jerusalem schools, even though those textbooks are not recipients of EU funding, nor are they under the responsibility or control of the PA. It is noteworthy that the EU’s mandate for the report made no mention of studying Israeli

¹ Certain quoted passages from the GEI Report have been bolded for emphasis throughout this Review.

² Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research (GEI), “Report on Palestinian Textbooks,” 2021, p. 8.

³ Answer to Question No. E-000906/2019, European Parliament, April 24, 2019, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2019-000906-ASW_EN.html.

textbooks, nor to conduct a comparative analysis of any kind. Indeed, it has been reported in German media that the Jerusalem textbooks were erroneously incorporated into the report.⁴

The report's subject matter, its aims and methodology closely mirror those used by **IMPACT-se** (the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education) in its annual reports of the PA curriculum throughout various historic iterations. As a research institute, **IMPACT-se** has placed Middle Eastern education and textbook analysis as the focal point of its attention—this is particularly true of the Palestinian sphere, for which it has produced a considerable body of research over the years, beginning with the development of the Palestinian education system and the establishment of the PA in 1994. The moderation in content after Mahmoud Abbas succeeded Yasser Arafat as leader of the PA in 2004 was duly noted, as was the resurgence of violent material after the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2006.⁵ **IMPACT-se** was the first to review the PA curriculum after the 2016 overhaul, which saw the replacement of nearly all school textbooks.⁶ In 2018, **IMPACT-se** contributed two chapters in GEI's book series *Palgrave Studies in Educational Media* (PSEM), where the institute's methodology was described.

The overall 2000–2010 research was based on page-by-page scrutiny of the books under study singling out each reference to the Other and to peace, be it in a form of text, photograph, illustration, map, chart or graph. Special attention was given to cases of non-reference, which are no less important in textbooks research. The evaluation of the specific method of messages of each reference (or non-reference) was made according to UNESCO recommendations and principals. This way a clear picture had been drawn of the general attitude to the Other and to peace in this region.⁷

As such, **IMPACT-se** took a particular interest in GEI's report of PA textbooks, examining it closely and comparing the report's findings with those produced by its own research. Much like **IMPACT-se**, GEI identified what it considers to be the main themes of the curriculum, presented textual and visual examples in their original Arabic form as well as English translations, and offered an analysis. The report itself cites **IMPACT-se's** work and acknowledges its contributions to the field. Yet, it also offers some words of criticism (emphasis added):

[**IMPACT-se's**] reports' characterisation of Palestinian textbooks is, however, marked by **generalising and exaggerated conclusions** based on methodological shortcomings.

⁴ Muhamad Abdi and Sebastian Leber, "Wie Deutschland Antisemitismus Mitfinanziert," *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 10, 2020.

⁵ Arnon Groiss, "Palestinian Textbooks: From Arafat to Abbas and Hamas," **IMPACT-se**, 2008, <https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/PA2008.pdf>.

⁶ Eldad J. Pardo, "Palestinian Elementary School Curriculum 2016–17: Radicalization and Revival of the PLO Program," **IMPACT-se**, April 2017, <https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/PA-Curriculum-2017-Revised.pdf>.

⁷ Elie Podeh and Samira Alayan, eds. *Multiple Alterities*, in *Palgrave Studies in Educational Media*, Eckhardt Fuchs, Series ed. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018), pp. 211–12. <http://www.gei.de/en/publications/psem.html>.

These require further investigation based on an **overarching and comprehensive examination** of the textbooks, **contextualising the specific passages** mentioned as well as **elements with the potential to promote tolerance** and peaceful coexistence.⁸

Despite the areas of agreement, the *conclusions of GEI's report stand in stark contrast to those of IMPACT-se*. Whereas previous research has consistently shown clear violations of international standards in the PA curriculum—including the negation, demonization and dehumanization of the Jewish Israeli “Other,” glorification of terrorism, propagation of conspiracy theories and false information, insertion of antisemitic tendencies and proliferation of gratuitous violence—GEI’s report employs a series of editorial practices, that are likely to lead the unsuspecting reader to a completely different perspective: one of a PA curriculum that teaches human rights, global citizenship, self-reflection and peace. Since the research of both institutes is based on the same material, this discrepancy must be resolved.

Another aim of this review is to contextualize the GEI report for the public. It shows where the report went wrong: what essential points were missed; methodological errors; how it failed to point out clear violations of accepted standards; and the consequences of such omissions. This review also attempts to provide constructive criticism for how the examined material should be approached and what other research questions need to be asked. By doing so, readers will be more accurately judge the report’s data and gain the most benefit from those portions which are useful.

The first two parts of this review deal with the report’s two major erroneous conclusions: that the PA curriculum teaches peace and non-violence, and that it emphasizes human rights. These assertions not only contradict IMPACT-se’s research,⁹ but also stand in contrast to the report’s own findings, thus misleading, or at the very least confusing readers. The third part deals with region-specific issues: concepts and themes which are peculiar to the Palestinian curriculum, and therefore not easily grasped by most European readers. This includes ideas which relate to Palestinian identity, history and culture, Arabic language, and Islamic faith. Finally, this review will attempt to tackle some of the overarching themes and issues missed by the report, including questions that should have asked but were not. Following the initial presentation of facts, the review’s appendices further illustrate the scope of content excluded from the report. This includes ignored examples from the very same books examined as part of the report’s preparation. (See upcoming Appendices)¹⁰

⁸ GEI, p. 15.

⁹ IMPACT-se website,

<https://www.impact-se.org/reports/palestinian-territories/palestinian-authority/>.

¹⁰ Upcoming publication: Appendix A: overlooked examples in books analyzed by GEI; Appendix B: examples from books not included in GEI Report; Appendix C: examples of textbook revisions made in 2020 which were not addressed in the report.

IMPACT-se welcomes the publication of the GEI report and considers the findings to be complimentary to those identified in its own research. The outstanding research by the report's authors over an extended time period must be commended. The field of Middle Eastern textbook research deserves further scrutiny and debate. It can only be hoped that this review will serve as an opening for further dialogue, discussion and collaboration, to produce future research into Palestinian and Middle Eastern education that is complete, accurate and reliable.

Part I: Peace and Non-Violence

Peace is a major theme explored by the report. From the onset the report seeks to evaluate the PA curriculum's compatibility with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) standards for Global Citizenship Education (GCED), which includes "focus on cultural, social and religious values that support peaceful coexistence", as well as "plans for activities . . . that promote attitudes and skills for conflict prevention, peace building and global citizenship".¹¹ The report also specifies that it looks for "content that promotes tolerance and peace"¹² as opposed to "incitement of hatred or violence", including "indirect legitimisation or de-legitimisation strategies for violence".¹³

However, when discussing the question of violence in the PA textbooks, the report makes the following disclaimer:

Palestinian textbooks are produced and located within an environment saturated with conflict, occupation and ongoing violence, all of which are reflected in the textbooks. Therefore, the analysis considers this context when examining representations of violence.¹⁴

The report's authors are thus transparent about their acquiescence to the fact that the PA textbooks are filled with hatred and violence. They profess their inability to treat it with equity and admit that they are obliged to hold it to lower, unique standards. This worrying supposition foreshadows how the report mishandles violent and non-peaceful content in the PA curriculum, in all its various forms.

Real-Life Connections (RLCs)

What this means in practice can be seen in how the report considers what it calls "Real Life Connections" [RLCs]. This term is used to refer to the background context of exercises in math and the sciences, which purport to recall the students' real lives, helping them identify with the

¹¹ GEI, p. 23.

¹² Ibid., p. 24.

¹³ p. 25.

¹⁴ p. 172.

exercise and the situation it depicts. Classic examples would be math problems which involve children’s reading books, or running long distances. RLCs can also serve a secondary role, implanting ideas into the students’ subconscious by conveying subliminal educational messages, which do not directly relate to the subject taught; in the words of the report, it is expected to find “sporadic fragments of a narrative that does reflect the dominant discourse of the given society and which may also be used to transport messages not derived from the content of those disciplines”.¹⁵ Thus, one may imagine a science problem, portraying women performing non-traditional professions such as construction work or bus driving, and thereby implicitly promoting an egalitarian understanding of gender roles. Similarly, a math problem may have students draw the Palestinian flag, thus strengthening national Palestinian identity. In either case, the objective, universal, non-human subject material is imbued with manmade nation-specific ideals, principles, morals and so on, and both types of content are imparted to the student.

A major issue of the PA curriculum is that a significant number of RLCs are used to specifically promote hateful and violent messages. Math and science textbooks feature examples and exercises that invoke gratuitous violence, death and politicization, such as practicing calculation with the number of Palestinian victims in a historic massacre, and demonstrating Newtonian physics using rock throwing.¹⁶ The purpose of such content is to instill in Palestinian students a conflict-oriented view of the universe, where even the laws of math, physics, chemistry and biology cannot transcend—and in fact serve to prove—the ubiquity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the evil of the Israeli “Enemy,” and the justness of the Palestinian national cause.

The report’s authors confirm that gratuitous violence was blatantly inserted into the Palestinian curriculum, but generally do not take issue with it; on the contrary, they spend considerable ink defending it. Opening the discussion of conflict-related RLCs in math and sciences, the report explains that examples of this type build on “the students’ own direct experiences or . . . an occurrence that students would recognize from everyday lives”, adding that “these examples are always relevant for the everyday”.¹⁷ The report’s authors assume that Palestinian children are exposed to the kind of violence depicted in the textbooks on a daily basis, and therefore believe that this must be echoed and amplified to them in school, as a way to help them relate to other school subjects.

How the researchers were able to ascertain that the depicted instances of violence are indeed a faithful representation of Palestinian students’ real lives is not made clear. However, the report does stress that the incorporation of such examples is a necessity, because otherwise the conflict might not be discussed at all:

¹⁵ p. 124.

¹⁶ IMPACT-se, “The 2020–21 Palestinian School Curriculum Grades 1–12,” May 2021, pp. 13–14, https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/PA-Reports_-Updated-Selected-Examples_May-2021.pdf.

¹⁷ GEI, p. 129.

The exclusion or omission of sensitive topics and issues from the curricula, or giving them the ‘silent treatment’ in classrooms, is considered a type of avoidance which might lead students to hide their true feelings or censor their own viewpoints. Further, avoidance of conflict distances the curriculum from real life, running the risk of making it appear meaningless.¹⁸

Another argument used by the report to defend gratuitous violence is that there is comparatively little of it. A frequency analysis of RLCs in science and math textbooks reviewed for the report showed that “only” five percent, or one in twenty cases, relates to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁹ The report helpfully provides a good idea of what such RLCs look like in practice, by offering several examples: from science and math problems which incidentally lay irredentist claims to major Israeli cities, to those which describe the Israeli military randomly assaulting children in summer camp as a means of teaching how hormones work.²⁰ This may be compared, then, to a twenty-page children’s book where “only” one page contains foul language and gore. Another way to look at the data is to consider that roughly three of four math and science textbooks feature radicalizing subliminal messaging, with the highest rate in textbooks targeting nine-to thirteen-year-olds.²¹ The GEI report, found well over one hundred such examples of violent and politicized content in its sampling of PA textbooks.

One more point the report makes in justification of gratuitous violent depictions is that some of them are ambiguous or difficult to interpret. This is especially true of Arabic language textbooks, where students practice reading comprehension by being exposed to a selection of literary texts which contain highly violent, incendiary material. Examples of this type featured in the report include descriptions of an Israeli soldier burned alive, or of Israeli soldiers raiding Palestinian homes with sadistic glee like predators.²² The report identifies this phenomenon as “poetic elevation” of violence, a “glorification of resistance [which] does not shrink from affirming that opponents may be killed”. This appears justified in the following statement:

It is, however, difficult, in the case of the textbooks for Arabic language and literature, to unequivocally grasp their ‘intentions,’ since they contain not only texts from the pen of the textbook authors, but also literary works by Palestinian and Arab poets and writers with an artistic style that eludes an unambiguous interpretation.

What possible allegorical or poetic interpretation could legitimize the inclusion of such violent, dehumanizing or hateful literary portrayals is not elaborated upon. It should be noted that the report has made clear that RLCs are supposed to reflect the *actual* reality of Palestinian students;

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁹ p. 127.

²⁰ pp. 129, 131.

²¹ IMPACT-se, “The New Palestinian Curriculum: By the Numbers—Quantitative Analysis of the Current Palestinian Ministry of Education Curriculum,” September 2019, p. 15,

<https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/By-the-Numbers-Quantative-Analysis-on-PA-Curriculum.pdf>,

²² GEI, pp. 111–12.

at the same time, it should be noted that the report generally does not identify the incorporation of literary texts in language teaching to be a form of RLCs.²³

On the other hand, the researchers were not entirely dismissive of the destructive potential of RLCs in the PA curriculum. The report does acknowledge that some of the researched examples are clearly conducive to an escalation of hate, calling at least one of them “highly problematic”.²⁴

. . . the RLC[s] of both categories are twofold in character: they reflect everyday life experience (see above), and, at the same time, they **convey a message that extends beyond the mere necessity to illustrate** the scientific material. This message refers to the conflict, its consequences and its actors; by explicitly naming these interrelationships, the contours of the ‘opponent’ come into clearer focus and **the students’ awareness is aligned to** the concept of nation-building in **a state of resistance to an alleged or actual enemy**. In their message, these RLC[s] correspond to the (secondary) learning objectives outlined above, although **with their escalatory elements their impact exceeds these aims**. Rather, escalatory elements intensify the message; **they are emotional triggers for anger and rage, and yet for the actual message** that the textbooks are tasked with conveying **they are expendable**.²⁵

The report therefore admits that violent RLCs are gratuitous, “expendable”, and place students in an environment of hate and enmity. It should further be noted that the UNESCO document cited by the report as the theoretical basis for RLCs, explicitly lays out the limitations of using such connections to convey violence and hatred,²⁶ though the report conspicuously omits this fact.

None of that deters the report from concluding that there is no issue with violent RLCs. In fact, the report’s final statement on the matter—and quite an astonishing one, given the findings—is that “[u]ltimately, the inclusion of RLCs in textbooks corresponds with a UNESCO recommendation”.²⁷ If the authors of the report believe those RLCs included in the PA textbooks, conflict with UNESCO standards, they unequivocally fail to communicate this.

“Historic” Violence

Similar issues can be seen with how the report handles the PA curriculum’s treatment of terrorism, or Palestinian political violence against civilians. The report insists that depictions of

²³ The report only recognizes Arabic language RLCs within grammar exercises and example sentences; violence within literary texts is handled separately, under a chapter titled “Conflict in Textbooks”. This distinction may have some merit in other cases, but given the consistency of messaging within the PA curriculum across subjects, schoolyears and platforms, it is perhaps more useful to see literary texts as one of several vectors through which gratuitous violence and politicization are inserted.

²⁴ GEI, p. 130.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 131.

²⁶ Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP), “Textbooks for Sustainable Development: A Guide to Embedding,” UNESDOC Digital Library (2017), p. 41, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000259932>.

²⁷ GEI, p. 136.

such violence are historic and constrained within a certain time period: “Terrorist operations are presented as a necessary means **during a historical phase in the Palestinian struggle**”²⁸ while “History and [some] social studies textbooks present violence perpetrated by Palestinians as a legitimate means of resistance **in certain periods of Palestinian history**”.²⁹

The idea that PA textbooks’ depictions of terrorism are confined to history is fallacious. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as the report laid out clearly before, is an ongoing, active conflict. The incidences of past violence against civilians described in PA textbooks do not mean they are not relevant for the present.

In fact, there is nothing in the PA textbooks that suggests repudiation of violence against civilians or that it would not be used again; at no point does the PA curriculum condemn, or even criticize past use of violence against Israeli civilians, nor does it explicitly frame it as a historical phase which ran its course. Moreover, the report does not clarify what this crucial argument—which features heavily in both the conclusions and the executive summary to the report—is based on.³⁰

Violence as a part of history should be taught. However, to avoid a repetition of violence, it must be carefully contextualized, and balanced with a clear affirmation of the values of cooperation, understanding of the Other and non-violence.

Oslo Accords and Recognition of Israel

By contrast, the manner in which the report chooses to address depictions of peace and the peace process in PA textbooks are virtually a mirror image of how the violent aspects are portrayed. Isolated instances are highlighted and brought to the fore, as if they are representative of the whole curriculum. Both the executive summary and the conclusions to the report feature a whole sub-section titled “Recognition of Israel and renunciation of terror in source material,” strongly implying that this is a major feature of the curriculum. The section describes a single example, from a tenth-grade history textbook, where Israel’s existence is recognized and affirmed in a quoted historical document, as part of a lesson on the Oslo Peace Accords (1993). The only

²⁸ Ibid., p. 173.

²⁹ p. 172.

³⁰ This argument is brought up in relation to a PA textbook’s reproduction of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat’s letter from 1993, where he declared the organization he leads “condemns the use of terror” (*Geography and Modern and Contemporary History of Palestine*, Vol. 2, 2019, p. 77). The report considers the inclusion of this letter as a normative statement placing terrorism in the historic past development of the Palestinian national movement, not its future vision (GEI, p. 121). However, there is nothing to suggest that the textbook’s authors share this interpretation, nor is there reason to suspect that students are to understand Arafat’s letter as a normative document, given that it also recognizes “Israel’s right to exist”, a notion which the curriculum consistently fails to convey. Considering the use of the term “terrorism” (*irhāb*) in the PA textbooks it can be strongly suspected that students may also understand this to be a condemnation of *Israel’s* “terrorism.” See also discussion of this document in this review.

caveat given is that “this stands in contrast to the questioning of the legitimacy of the State of Israel expressed in other passages and textbooks.”³¹

That the report holds up a single positive example as one of its main findings stands out as a glaring methodological inconsistency. As established earlier, the report trivializes more than a hundred gratuitous depictions of the conflict across multiple subjects, school years and textbooks, by emphasizing how they are relatively few in number (five percent) compared to those not invoking the conflict. If those standards were applied consistently, one would have expected the section to be titled “*Lack of recognition of Israel and non-renunciation of terror*” and then clarified that less than one percent of the examined depictions of Israel recognize its existence as a legitimate entity. In fact, IMPACT-se’s own quantitative research has found that occurrences of the two-state solution in the entire PA curriculum are negligible and 100 percent of them are negative.³²

However, a closer examination of this specific example shows that the report’s summary of its findings is misleading in more than one way. In the body of the report, the researchers correctly point out that the quoted historic text in question was in fact edited by the textbook’s authors, to remove statements which express hope or commitment to end future violence. Thus, phrases such as “*inaugurating a new epoch of peaceful coexistence*” and “*the promise of a new era*” were selectively removed from the text.³³ Nevertheless, this important caveat is not mentioned in the conclusion or the executive summary. Also not clarified is the fact that the text is framed as a historic document, not as the authors’ own words, and certainly not as a prescription or normative guideline of any kind. Other deliberate changes made by the textbook on the topic of the Oslo Accords, such as placing the word “Israel” in ironic scare quotes, or the deletion of wording which references a permanent peace agreement,³⁴ were not discussed in the report.

Finally, the report obfuscates that the current PA curriculum’s treatment of the peace process represents a significant step back from former versions. Before 2016, PA textbooks included multiple references to the peace process, the State of Israel and Jewish history, the vast majority of which were eliminated completely as part of the 2016 curriculum reform or shortly beforehand; in fact, all Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations subsequent to the Oslo Accords, as well as Israel’s peace treaty with Jordan, have been deliberately removed from the new curriculum.³⁵ The body of the report does acknowledge this crucial finding in its chapter about

³¹ GEI, p. 173.

³² “The New Palestinian Curriculum,” p. 20, <https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/By-the-Numbers-Quantative-Analysis-on-PA-Curriculum.pdf>.

³³ GEI, p. 121.

³⁴ “The 2020–21 Palestinian School Curriculum,” pp. 3–4. https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/PA-Reports_-Updated-Selected-Examples_May-2021.pdf.

³⁵ IMPACT-se, “The Rejection of Peace: References to Peace Agreements, Israel, and Jews, Now Removed from PA Curriculum, Grades 1–12—Pre-2016,” September 2019, https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/Rejection-of-Peace_-Changes-from-Pre-2016-PA-Curricula.pdf.

the PA curriculum’s depiction of the peace process.³⁶ Yet, it is nowhere to be found elsewhere, neither in the conclusions to the report, nor the executive summary—where the reform is merely described as “an ongoing process”³⁷—nor is it featured in the entire chapter devoted to discussing the 2016 curriculum reform in depth.

“Escalatory” and “Non-Escalatory” Examples

The report establishes a distinction between “escalatory” and “non-escalatory” descriptions of conflict situations. In this approach, representations of the conflict are not negative, even if they are gratuitous and unhelpful, so long as they do not contain “a strong focus on the side perceived to have caused the grievance”.³⁸ “Non-escalatory” examples are thus understood to be positive, or at least non-problematic. The report further states:

Given that the work for this Report was undertaken in the context of an active conflict in which episodes of armed violence have occurred for almost a century, **descriptions of the ‘other’ group in an antagonistic way**, as, for instance, a competitor, aggressor or as violent **need not necessarily aim at igniting hatred**.³⁹

The underlying assumption is that the conflict is omnipresent in all Palestinian people’s lives, and that the school curriculum should reflect this by invoking the conflict in all contexts and capacities.

With this in mind, the report defends a math exercise which asks students to calculate the geometry of a Ferris wheel, in the context of a school trip to an amusement park, while decrying that “children are banned from entering Palestinian cities of the Interior,”⁴⁰ a reference to travel restrictions on Palestinian citizens entering Israeli territory. The report considers this example “non-escalatory” since the textbook does not explicitly say who is the one banning the children from visiting the “Interior” cities⁴¹—as if that is not obvious to any Palestinian high school student—but at no point does the report question the bizarre and unnatural association between Israeli travel restrictions and calculating the geometry of a Ferris wheel. Is it praiseworthy for a textbook to remind teenagers of irredentist territorial claims and perceived national grievances when they are trying to learn advanced mathematics?

³⁶ GEI, p. 118.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁸ pp. 26–27.

³⁹ p. 26.

⁴⁰ p. 133. The text was somewhat misleadingly translated by the report’s authors as “Palestinian cities inside [Israeli borders]”; the Palestinian nationalist term *ad-dāxil (al-falastīnī)*, usually translated as “the (Palestinian) Interior,” does not imply any recognition of Israel or its borders. It merely acknowledges the unique legal status and experience of Palestinians who hold Israeli citizenship, while asserting their inseparability from the greater Palestinian collective.

⁴¹ pp. 133–34.

Another “non-escalatory” example cited by the report is a science lesson about beehives and beekeepers facing hardships due to “the appropriation of land by the Occupation”, thereby linking the global issue of bee colony collapse disorder (CCD) with Israeli policies. Here, the report explains that, besides faulting Israel with what is essentially a worldwide phenomenon, the textbook generously offers alternative explanations to the decline of beekeeping, which do not involve Israel, making this text “non-escalatory”.⁴²

The standards by which textbook depictions are deemed “escalatory” or “non-escalatory” are therefore opaque and inconsistent. The examples are examined in isolation, not in their Palestinian national context, and sought a “strong focus” within the lesson, which in itself is highly subjective. The only outcome of such representations in the report is that it affords yet another layer of defense for otherwise unacceptably violent and hateful content in the PA textbooks.

Within the textbooks, “escalatory” and “non-escalatory” portrayals of Israel are not separate entities; they are complementary. They simply represent two levels of hate incitement, one more egregious than the other. Lacking any positive portrayals which might otherwise provide balance, examples of both types build up to a critical mass, although the report does not explain where that may lead.

Peace and Non-Violence: Conclusions

The report considers the inclusion of content which promotes peace and non-violence to be a key metric when deciding whether or not the PA textbooks comply with UNESCO standards. The report therefore deals with various forms and depictions of violence and peacemaking in the PA curriculum at length, offering dozens of examples. However, rather than a critical evaluation or analysis of the damaging effects such violent examples may have, it chooses to spend considerable energies on rationalizing and justifying them.

While relying on examples and translations, the report also employs a unique methodology featuring a variety of motifs and methods which make allowances for violence and lack of education for peace in the PA curriculum. Some types of violent content are dismissed because they are quantitatively fewer compared to others, as if that somehow limits their destructive or antagonistic impact. Others are defended as indispensable for educational purposes, or thoroughly searched to contain pedagogical utility—as if all other alternatives have been exhausted, and as if this is the only way Palestinian students could ever be taught. In some cases the report argues for a specific context with which to interpret a text, often with little basis in the text itself, such as the idea that terrorism is “historic,” or for unusual, opaque parameters, under which a text should be examined, to allow for charitable conclusions regarding its nature. A

⁴² p. 134.

single, outlying case, itself framed ambiguously, is highlighted by the report under a misleading titled segment. When all other options fail, the report simply feigns inability to interpret or decipher the supposedly ambiguous violent depiction.

More astonishingly, the report summarizes that the PA textbooks contain a “reflection on peaceful versus violent forms of protest”, and ultimately concludes that the PA curriculum is in line with UNESCO standards of peace and non-violence. This defies GEI’s own findings to the contrary, affirmed further by clarifying statements made by the authors after the report’s publication.⁴³ The employed methodology effectively minimizes even the most incriminating evidence for the destructiveness of the PA curriculum. By taking confrontational, violent, hateful or otherwise politicized content found in PA textbooks—which would be unacceptable in Israel or any European country—and padding it with various justifications, the report dampens the readers’ sensitivity to the sheer extent of hatred fostered by the PA curriculum. In this, the report attempts to hide the glaring contradiction between the report’s findings, as well as the individual examples it showcases, and its non sequitur final conclusions.

The underlying issue is how the report is able to fundamentally view the PA curriculum as a conflict curriculum. The basic assumption is that the PA curriculum was created in a conflict environment “saturated with violence”, which means that the incorporation of violence should not only be considered permissible, but necessary. Conversely, showing restraint from incitement is considered praiseworthy. This blatant application of double standards in the context of the PA textbooks is not only reminiscent of orientalist tendencies but is a quintessential case of mistaking the cause for the effect. One should consider the possibility, instead, that it is *the education* which serves as a tool for fomenting hatred and violence, which in turn “saturates” the environment. Indeed, if violence in the PA curriculum is an immutable given, why attempt to evaluate it based on UNESCO standards of non-violence at all? A conflict curriculum can, and should, only be judged based on how it treats the opposite party to the conflict, or else it might as well not be judged at all.

Part II: Human Rights Education

The report places a strong emphasis on the representation of human rights in the PA curriculum. In its conclusion, it posits that there is an “increased awareness of human rights”, and concludes that “the analyzed textbooks largely adhere to the UNESCO guidelines on Human Rights Education.”⁴⁴ This positive message is amplified in the executive summary: the report credits the PA curriculum with “reframing national issues within a global political context”, “emphasising

⁴³ GEI, “Answers to Frequently Asked Questions,” circa June 2021, <http://www.gei.de/en/departments/knowledge-in-transition/analysis-of-palestinian-textbooks-paltex/study-faq.html>.

⁴⁴ GEI, p. 171.

[human rights] interdependence and inalienability,” and having a “diversity-embracing approach”. Such laudatory content comprises thirteen of the fifteen lines discussing the topic in the report’s executive summary.⁴⁵

Only a meticulous reading of the report reveals that this representation, while on the surface not inaccurate, is misleading. The report’s final conclusion on the topic of human rights representation in the PA curriculum contains a seemingly small yet crucial caveat: “a universal notion of human rights . . . is not carried through to a discussion of the rights of Israelis.” In the next sentence the authors elaborate that “[w]hen the textbooks address human rights violations and mention violators, the transgressions in most cases are carried by Israeli protagonists.” The paragraph concludes that the “textbooks support these narratives” by referring to international conventions.⁴⁶ The executive summary similarly admits, “When the textbooks mention human rights violations, in most cases these are carried out by Israeli protagonists and affect the rights of Palestinians.”⁴⁷

The extent to which human rights are applied selectively in the PA curriculum can only be understood by reading the full body of the report. Here, it is plainly stated that in 104 textbooks analyzed by researchers, 48 percent of references to human rights are in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the rest being found in contexts which largely do not pertain to conflict.⁴⁸ As later established, the sole practical manifestation of this is examples where Palestinians’ human rights are abused by Israeli actors. For example, the right to freedom is taught in the context of Palestinian detainees in Israeli prisons, and the rights of children are taught as being violated by Israeli roadblocks preventing Palestinian pupils from reaching their schools.⁴⁹ This means that from the perspective of Palestinian students, human rights can hardly be thought to exist in any real-life situation outside the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and within that context it is exclusive to Palestinians.

The fact that human rights are largely denied to non-Palestinians is also made clear by the body of the report (far more so than the executive summary and the conclusions): “the textbooks fail to engage with the question of whether violence carried out by Palestinian actors might equally constitute a violation of human rights”.⁵⁰ This statement, which the report’s authors phrase as an afterthought or a suggestion, in fact encapsulates a massive systemic issue. Namely, that as far as Palestinian students are concerned, human rights are in fact *exclusively Palestinian* rights which only become relevant when Israelis violate them.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴⁶ p. 171.

⁴⁷ p. 3.

⁴⁸ p. 57.

⁴⁹ p. 60.

⁵⁰ p. 64.

It is worth bearing in mind, that the Palestinian Authority is a serial abuser of human rights. US-based NGO Freedom House reports that the PA “governs in an authoritarian manner, engaging in acts of repression against journalists and human rights activists who present critical views on its rule.”⁵¹ UK-based human rights organization, Amnesty International, lists numerous offences committed by Palestinian authorities over 2020–21 alone, including repression of dissent, excessive use of force, torture of prisoners, holding detainees without trial, and denial of LGBT+ rights.⁵² The PA textbooks are also used in the Gaza Strip, where the ruling Hamas is officially designated by the EU and others as a terrorist organization.⁵³

While the report emphasizes the importance of contextualizing the curriculum in light of the Israeli occupation, it fails to note that the creators of the PA curriculum are decidedly illiberal in nature. The report repeatedly highlights the violent nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the importance of candidly reflecting this reality to students.⁵⁴ While the report emphasizes documentation of some violations of Palestinian human rights by Israelis,⁵⁵ it seems reasonable that the report might take note of the *lack* of references to Palestinian students’ real-life experiences under a government which routinely abuses their human and civil rights, since none of these violations are mentioned or even alluded to in the PA curriculum. Instead, the report almost seems to take this for granted. Indeed, why would an authoritarian regime admit its own shortcomings? Yet, the report fails to acknowledge that the PA *is* in fact an authoritarian regime.

The more salient point, however, is that the PA’s non-democratic nature puts its “human rights curriculum” in a totally different light. Palestinian students are exposed to lessons about civic freedoms and human rights, knowing full well, based on their day-to-day experiences, that those rights and freedoms do not apply to them. The report celebrates the fact that the PA curriculum teaches active political participation, without mentioning that no elections for Palestinian parliament have been held for over fifteen years. Further field research would be needed to evaluate how, exactly, the intolerant reality of the PA affects the way Palestinian students understand and contextualize human rights education; but one thing is clear: overlooking this crucial fact is a massive oversight on the part of the report’s authors.

⁵¹ Freedom House, “West Bank,” *Freedom in the World*, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/west-bank/freedom-world/2021>.

⁵² Amnesty International, “Palestine (State of),” 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/palestine-state-of/report-palestine-state-of/>.

⁵³ Council Decision (CFSP) 2021/142 updating the list of persons, groups and entities subject to Articles 2, 3 and 4 of Common Position 2001/931/CFSP on the application of specific measures to combat terrorism, February 5, 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021D0142>.

⁵⁴ For example, in the introduction (p. 10): “The exclusion or omission of sensitive topics and issues from the curricula, or giving them the ‘silent treatment’ in classrooms, is considered a type of avoidance which might lead students to hide their true feelings or censor their own viewpoints. Further, avoidance of conflict distances the curriculum from real life, running the risk of making it appear meaningless.” See also discussion of violent representations in PA textbooks in this paper above.

⁵⁵ GEI, p. 60.

For the PA curriculum, human rights are *instrumental*, rather than universal. They only exist as a tool with which to bludgeon Israel and its legitimacy in a conflict setting—“expose the true face of the Enemy”, as expressed in the textbooks themselves.⁵⁶ The report dances around this troubling conclusion by vaguely stating that “references to human rights are invoked by several of the Palestinian textbooks in this **as a vehicle** via which to **address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict**.” The executive summary is even more ambiguous: “References to human rights serve **as a framework** through which the textbooks **address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict** from the perspective of human rights violations in the context of international law.”⁵⁷ Here, the report’s authors are simply obfuscating. For the PA curriculum, human rights education is not merely a “vehicle” or a “framework”—it is a *tool*, and in the context of conflict—a *weapon* that does not seek to “address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” any more than a speech containing racist hate seeks to “address social tensions”; it is abused and utilized as a one-sided attack on a declared “Enemy.”

The weaponization of human rights by the PA curriculum becomes obvious once several key points are examined, most of which, ironically, can be deduced from the report itself. The first is that Israelis (the “Enemy”) are invariably excluded from the discussion of human rights;⁵⁸ the general attitude of the textbooks toward the taking of Israeli lives—ranging from denial to glorification—serves to underscore this point. The United Nations and the international community are also frequently invoked in the context of human rights, as observed by the report.⁵⁹ But the report fails to note that international resolutions and conventions which criticize the conduct of Palestinian groups, or which uphold Israel’s legitimacy as a state, such as UN Resolution 181 (which in 1947 called for the partition of Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state),⁶⁰ are either ignored or dismissed as illegitimate.

Second is that the *violation* of human rights is held to be nearly exclusive to Israel. As the report correctly observes: “While in many cases the perpetrator or cause of a human rights violation is not mentioned, when there is an explicit naming of the responsible entity the most frequent epithets used are “the occupation” or “the Zionist occupation.”⁶¹ The report also found that Israelis are viewed homogenously as perpetrators of human rights violations.⁶² Human rights violations by actors other than Israel exist but are rare by comparison, and include European

⁵⁶ This is presented to be the purpose of the UN Human Rights Council fact finding mission on the 2008 Gaza conflict. See *Arabic Language*, Grade 9, Vol. 2, 2019, p. 94.

⁵⁷ GEI, p. 3.

⁵⁸ This critical observation is noted in the conclusions to the report and its executive summary (see above), but is curiously absent from the body of the report itself, where it is left for readers to infer.

⁵⁹ GEI, pp. 57–58.

⁶⁰ The PA textbook legitimizes and rationalizes Arab countries’ rejection and violent response to that resolution, and strongly insinuates that it was only adopted as a result of US coercion. See *Geography and Modern and Contemporary History of Palestine*, Vol. 1, 2019, pp. 120–23.

⁶¹ GEI, p. 57.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

colonial powers and pre-Islamic Arabians. However, these exceptions are embraced enthusiastically by the report, which opines that “the textbooks assign **significant weight** to the different forms of human rights with their varying applications in **different nations and diverse historical contexts**.”⁶³ This is a mischaracterization of reality, which crucially misses the fact that among these few non-Israeli/Palestinian examples—whether it is pre-Islamic Arabians, or twentieth-century colonial Italy—not one is shown to challenge the traditional Islamic, Palestinian-or Arab-nationalist narrative of history. Thus, even while citing foreign experiences, the PA curriculum fails to depict human rights as truly universal and absolute.

The third point is that PA textbooks exempt Palestinians from responsibility for human rights. This is alluded to once in the body of the report (“violence carried out by Palestinian actors”), but without further discussion. However, to say that the textbooks fail to acknowledge Palestinian violations of *Israeli* human rights would only be describing one part of the problem. The bigger issue is that the PA school textbooks fail to acknowledge *any* Palestinian violations of human rights. Simply put, human rights are divorced from any discussion of Palestinian violence, even when the victims are Palestinians themselves.

As stated above, the report consistently ignores the idea that the PA curriculum was prepared by an authoritarian state entity which in general, does not respect human rights. It follows, unsurprisingly, that this is entirely missing from the curriculum. Thus, the rights of prisoners are only taught in the context of *Israeli* prisons, not internal Palestinian ones; the Geneva Convention is only invoked in the context of *Israeli* military operations, and *not* Hamas activity; and violence and excessive force are exclusively attributed to *Israeli* troops. None of this is questioned or even mentioned by the report.

A corollary to these issues is that the PA textbooks do not discuss violations of Palestinian human rights by non-Israelis, an observation entirely lost on the report’s authors. That includes the historic denial of human and civil rights for Palestinians under Jordanian and Egyptian rule (1949–67), and historic and current human rights abuses of Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere in the region. Normally, one might expect these to also qualify as “Real-Life Connections”, but the report ignores this aspect of the Palestinian experience entirely. The report seems to presume that the Palestinian national curriculum cannot openly challenge supposed ideals of Arab unity nor the PA’s actual diplomatic relations with members of the Arab League, even while Palestinian students are likely more than aware of the difficulties of unity and relationships.

The final point is that the PA curriculum often fails to distinguish *human* rights from *national* rights. Here the report presents much of the evidence, but fails to follow through to conclusions. For one thing, the report notes that the PA curriculum uses a variety of terms for rights, including

⁶³ p. 57.

“human rights”, “rights of individuals”, and “essential rights”; such references “address a variety of civil, economic, social, cultural and political human [*sic*] rights”.⁶⁴ It should be noted that these rights are not taught as a clearly-defined, comprehensive system with discreet sub-categories—i.e., human rights, civil rights, social rights, etc.—but as a mass of terms introduced seemingly without any relationship or context. The report’s authors take it upon themselves to comprehensively list all the rights mentioned in the PA curriculum, and then sort them into categories, including one labeled “additional terms attributed to rights”,⁶⁵ which seems to refer to ad hoc rights devised for the PA textbooks. For example, the PA curriculum teaches “the right to resist” as a “right of nations”, despite no such right existing in international conventions; the report simply concludes that this is a “minority opinion”,⁶⁶ without further comment or explanation.

This confusion seems deliberate. By conflating human rights—an internationally-recognized standard backed by universal, humanistic and religious ethics and morals—with claimed national rights, such as the right of Palestinian refugees to settle in Israel, or right of Palestinian groups to use violence against Israeli civilians and military alike, the PA curriculum effectively exploits the concept of human rights to promote its own national narrative and achieve its own national goals. In doing so, it successfully snuffs out any internal debate about these goals while ruling out any possibility that they may be negotiated in return for peace in the future.

The GEI report places great emphasis on the increasingly central place of human rights discourse within the PA curriculum. While indeed the case, by itself that is no cause for celebration. A context-sensitive examination of the curriculum, and indeed, of the report’s own findings, offers more than enough reason to further question those results. While for some it may be debatable whether or not a regime which disregards human rights as a matter of course can be expected to teach those rights in good faith, it is certainly not debatable that such a pertinent question should not remain unaddressed in any research of that regime’s educational material.

The report should state clearly what its own findings show: that the PA teaches human rights as one weapon from its toolbox to be used in the conflict. Human rights education is very much a *tool* with which the PA seeks to delegitimize those it views as an “Enemy”, expose their supposed immorality and wickedness, while asserting the mantle of justice and righteousness despite its own crimes and misconduct and those of its allies.⁶⁷ Human rights may neither be extended to such an “Enemy”, nor to its own people, even when they are victimized by their government. The report should have presented these troubling points in clear and unambiguous

⁶⁴ p. 47.

⁶⁵ p. 48.

⁶⁶ p. 64.

⁶⁷ This corresponds to Bar-Tal’s conceptualization of the “ethos of conflict”, particularly the components of self-image, delegitimization and victimization. See Daniel Bar-Tal, “Ethos of Conflict,” *Beyond Intractability*, Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, 2004,

<https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/ethos-of-conflict>.

language, rather than expect readers to “read between the lines” in order to reach these troubling conclusions on their own.

Part III: Terminology and Culture-Specific Issues

Maps

One systemic issue of the PA curriculum is in the consistent use of ultra-nationalist maps which depict “Greater Palestine” and erase Israel. The maps not only lay territorial claim over the entirety of present-day Israel, a territory never controlled by Palestinian Arabs at any point in history, they also erase the existence of the Jewish community in that territory by deleting cities founded by Jewish immigrants (such as Tel Aviv, Netanya, and Petah Tikva). These maps convey false information to students, and serve to erase the existence of the “Other.” This has been well-documented by IMPACT-se in the past.⁶⁸

The report correctly identifies the PA use of maps as “irredentist” and states that it “negates the existence of the State of Israel”. It also notes that “maps can always also be instruments of manipulation or tools for the denial of reality”.⁶⁹

However, GEI also devotes half of the opening page to this section to defending the use of these maps:

Abufarha explains that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not only over material that can be returned and compensated for, but also the recognition of relationships and roots pertaining to the land itself. **Given the Palestinian experience over the years, as refugees and as divided groups under different sovereignties in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, one of the main symbols of Palestinian nationhood derived from cultural representation has become the map of historical Palestine as recognized during the British mandate. The map has become a symbol of unity that transcends time and space, providing signals for the different groups who have been through the Palestinian experience. . . . As a result, the map has become an important unifying symbol of Palestinian national identity.**⁷⁰

While attributing these statements to a cited researcher, the deliberate choice to highlight this particular viewpoint as a central component in understanding the PA’s use of revisionist maps,

⁶⁸ “Reform or Radicalization,” pp. 48–55,

https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/PA-Curriculum_2017-Grades-5-11.pdf.

⁶⁹ GEI, p. 75.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 75.

can be taken as an expression of the writers' own view: that irredentist nationalist maps are legitimate "symbols of national identity."⁷¹

It should first be noted that up until publication of the 2016 curriculum, PA textbooks included maps naming Israel along with its territory.⁷² This somewhat weakens the report's argument that irredentist maps are an immutable national symbol, which must be used in all circumstances.

Furthermore, it is indeed possible to conceive of irredentist maps as symbols of national identity, in the same way a disembodied, blindfolded African man's head can be considered a symbol of Corsican and Sardinian identity in which the national flag is the head of a hostage—"mauro"—symbolizing their triumph over African pirates. The pertinent question is whether such violent, exclusionary symbolism should be brought out of the realm of historic imagination, which at one point in time may have been appropriate, and into school children's minds as an actual point of reference with which to understand the contemporary world around them. Ultra-nationalist imaginary maps used as national symbols does not excuse the damage brought about **by their exclusive and ubiquitous use as factual teaching tools in school textbooks.**

While the report indicates that maps are used as a practical tool with which to teach geography as well as the having the purpose of "visualising for the students the topographical shape of All-Palestine",⁷³ it does not state the obvious implications of this. Palestinian students are taught a counter-factual view of the world, depicting a supposedly historic situation ("historical Palestine" in the words of the report) which in fact never took place in reality, and are encouraged to demand a "return" to this fantastic, impossible geopolitical situation. Worse, the maps further serve to erase the "Other", presenting Jewish communities of millions of people as a detail of little importance, an illegitimate, transient state. It helps raise a generation of young Palestinians, who will view any territorial concession short of the complete end of Israel as unacceptable.

Occupation (*iħtilāl*)

The report confirms that the curriculum generally replaces the State of Israel with "the Zionist Occupation" or simply "the Occupation".⁷⁴ However, it attempts to discriminate between two applications of the term: one to address Israel proper and one pertaining to the Israeli military and civilian presence in the Palestinian Territories. In the words of the report, the term "Zionist

⁷¹ This editing "trick", citing one researcher and using her or his quoted statements as arguments in lieu of expressing the writers' own conclusions, is also used in the report's discussion of the Jerusalem curriculum. See GEI, p. 169.

⁷² "The 2020–21 Palestinian School Curriculum," p. 3,

https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/PA-Reports_-Updated-Selected-Examples_May-2021.pdf.

⁷³ GEI, p. 76.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 68.

Occupation” may refer at times to “the effects of Israel’s occupation policy in the occupied territories”, rather than to Israel itself.⁷⁵

The distinction between Israel as a nation and Israel as an occupying power, or between internationally-recognized and unrecognized Israeli territory, has no basis in the PA curriculum, and is entirely the creation of the reports’ authors. In the PA textbooks, there is no such thing as a non-occupying Israel. As the report itself shows, these textbooks consistently consider all of Israel to be occupied, Palestinian territory,⁷⁶ stolen and unrightfully held by a foreign power. When the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are acknowledged to be a discreet territorial entity from Israel proper, this is only a reflection of an unfortunate, intolerable reality, not an acceptance of Israel itself. Israel’s legitimacy is never acknowledged—not verbally, nor visually (in maps), and with few exceptions, not even implicitly—and thus there is no reason to suggest that Palestinian students would view the Israeli occupation of the West Bank as distinct from Israel’s existence as a nation. As far as the PA textbooks are concerned, both are equally illegitimate.

As such, it is remarkable that the report even concedes at all that, within the PA textbooks, the “(Zionist) Occupation” is in fact a code word for Israel, if only in some cases. This carries some troubling implications as to what message these books are attempting to convey, when they encourage students to “end” this particular form of “occupation”.

Jihad and Martyrdom (šahādah)

The terms *jihād* (which found its way into common Western parlance as simply “*jihad*”) and *šahīd* (usually translated “martyr”), as well as some of their variants,⁷⁷ have a long history of use since the early days of Islam and have accrued many layers of meaning. They also occupy a central space in modern Palestinian national discourse, and feature heavily in the PA curriculum, where they are generally used to glorify and morally elevate the conflict with Israel, as well as the personal and collective price Palestinians must endure in order to prolong it.⁷⁸

The report focuses heavily on the diversity of meanings both terms have acquired in Islamic theology, and therefore takes a highly conservative approach when interpreting their use. Regarding *jihad*, the report notes, not without basis,⁷⁹ that the term has different, sometimes contradictory meanings, and therefore advises caution when drawing conclusions about its use. It thus goes on to break down specific forms of *jihad* named in the textbooks, including “*jihad* of

⁷⁵ p. 69.

⁷⁶ pp. 75–81.

⁷⁷ Such as *jāhada* (to wage *jihad*), *mujāhid* (*jihad* warrior), *šahādah* (martyrdom), *ustušhida* (to become a martyr), etc.

⁷⁸ For further reading see “Reform or Radicalization,”

https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/PA-Curriculum_2017-Grades-5-11.pdf.

⁷⁹ See for example Emile Tyan, “Djihād,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, 2012.

the self” (*jihād n-nafs*) and “*jihad* of possessions” (*jihād l-māl*).⁸⁰ The researchers fail to clarify whether they consider these forms of *jihad* and the way they are expressed in the PA curriculum, to be distinct from, or contradictory to militant *jihad*. Nevertheless, in their conclusions they report identifying two major forms of *jihad* in the textbooks, including one which signifies “engaging in combat.”⁸¹

Taking an agnostic approach might be prudent in many situations when considering interpretations of *jihad*, but a pointless endeavor with respect to the PA curriculum. Within the Palestinian context, *jihad* is virtually inseparable from the conflict with Israel. The reality of this conflict must also be recalled—something the report does not shirk from doing elsewhere, as seen above. With that idea in mind, nearly all references to *jihad* in the PA curriculum can easily be understood to support a religiously motivated war against Israel, and virtually none of them can be understood to dismiss the idea. The report itself concedes this exact point in one example, informed by the literal context of a lesson,⁸² but does not apply it in general, with regards to the situational context of the conflict.

Even without considering the context of the conflict, a simple familiarity with Islamic theology alone suggests that the supposedly non-violent forms of *jihad* identified by the report are not as innocent as they appear. In fact, many sources consider “*jihad* of possessions”, and “*jihad* of the self”, etc., as *supporting*—not replacing—*jihad* war. Thus, financial *jihad* can be understood to mean the funding of warriors, by providing them with weapons or supporting their family;⁸³ “*jihad* of the pen”, translates into war propaganda, and so on.⁸⁴ These may indeed not necessarily be the meanings intended by PA textbook authors in all situations, yet their omission by the report seems overzealous in segregating or isolating instances of overtly militant *jihad* from other references.

The report trivializes the PA curriculum’s encouragement to militant *jihad* in other ways. For example, it highlights one chapter that places *jihad* within a humanitarian framework, by listing several Islamic restrictions on militant *jihad*, such as a prohibition on fighting non-combatants.⁸⁵ While the report sees fit to amplify this example in its final conclusions and elsewhere, it fails to

⁸⁰ GEI, p. 71. The report chooses the misleading translation “charity” for the latter term, which only partially covers its breadth of meaning. See continued discussion in this chapter.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 122.

⁸² p. 89: “Whilst the text does not specify a military *jihād*, and peaceful means of resistance may be meant, there is no explanation to ensure such an understanding is negated or rejected.”

⁸³ Aimen Dean, Edwina Thompson and Tom Keatinge, “Draining the Ocean to Catch one Type of Fish: Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Global Counter-Terrorism Financing Regime,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (August 2013), pp. 62–78.

⁸⁴ See for example: Abdisaid M. Ali, *The Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahidiin: A Profile of the First Somali Terrorist Organization*, (Berlin: ISPSW, 2008), p. 6,

<https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/55851/AlShabaab.pdf>.

⁸⁵ GEI, p. 72. Note that there appears to be an error in the report’s footnote, as the text cited by the report is not found on p. 99 of the 2008 textbook, but p. 100. See also next footnote.

acknowledge that the very same chapter teaches *jihad*—here understood as unambiguously militant—is the “peak of Islam” (*ḍurwat sanāmi l-’islām*) and “one of the gates to achieving martyrdom.”⁸⁶ In another example the report erroneously ascribes the quote “Islam is not thirsty for bloodshed and the killing of people” to a paragraph titled “The Wisdom behind Fighting the Infidels”,⁸⁷ when in fact the quote appears in a separate section, not immediately related to infidels. Regardless, this reference is contradicted by the paragraph’s content, which states that God wishes Muslims to fight non-believers so that they may die as martyrs and be rewarded with Paradise.⁸⁸

The report similarly understates the use of *šuhadā’* (martyrs). Like “*jihad*”, the term is kept in the report in its original Arabic form, and not translated; unlike *jihad*, however, this is a far more obscure term to European readers, and the report does not adequately convey its highly emotive connotation in the Arabic language.

Much like *jihad*, the report attempts to discriminate between the more overtly militant references to martyrdom, and ones that it considers more benign. In this case, the report distinguishes between “civilian martyrs” who died as a result of the conflict, and “militant martyrs” who died while fighting.⁸⁹ Even if one accepts this classification, the report fails to state the obvious outcome of this dual treatment: that the PA textbooks make no distinction between militants and civilians, and considers the death of either to be a glorious gift from God.⁹⁰ In either case, all uses of this term are highly incendiary.

One key difference between *jihad* and martyrdom, however, is that the report makes no secret of the latter’s confrontational value: “The term ‘*shahīd*’ . . . is nearly exclusively connected to the conflict context”. This is true, but blatantly contradicts the report’s earlier statement, that “[the terms’] use in textbooks reflects the diversity of meanings that these terms embody”.⁹¹

“Revolution” (*ḥawrah*) or Uprising

In a chapter titled “Violent and Peaceful Means of Palestinian Resistance”, the report finds that the PA curriculum encourages students to consider Palestinian nationhood in the context of an anti-colonial “(people’s) revolution” (*ḥawrah [ša’biyyah]*).⁹² In this view, Zionism is a manifestation of European colonialism, and the adequate response to it should be the same as

⁸⁶ *Islamic Education*, Grade 12, 2018, p. 99.

⁸⁷ GEI, p. 72.

⁸⁸ *Islamic Education*, Grade 9, Vol. 1, 2018, p. 13.

⁸⁹ GEI, p. 74.

⁹⁰ For example see *Islamic Education*, Grade 9, Vol. 1, 2018, p. 13: “God wants to take martyrs from among the believers [*an yattaxiḍa minna l-mu’minīna šuhadā’a*] and honor them by martyrdom [*yukrimuhum bi-š-šahādati*], to forgive their sins and raise their standing in Paradise.”

⁹¹ GEI, p. 122.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 103; the character *ḥ* is pronounced *th* as in *thing*.

those successfully employed by the Algerians against the French and the Libyans against the Italians: a prolonged, violent resistance, until the complete removal of the colonizer, which in the eyes of Palestinian nationalists is the Israeli Jews.

Within this framework, however, the Arabic word *thawrah* conveys a range of meanings which the report unfortunately misses. Derived from the verb “to stir, to rise in excitement”, it can potentially refer to revolution, as in regime change, but also, more generally, to any violent uprising.⁹³ For example, in the PA curriculum, one finds “the American *thawrah*”, referring to the American War of Independence,⁹⁴ but also “the 1936 *thawrah*”,⁹⁵ referring to the wave of Arab uprisings in Palestine against British rule and Jewish immigration, which resulted neither in regime change nor in Palestinian Arab independence. Very few historians would describe the latter as “the 1936 Revolution”, as sympathetic as they may be to the causes of that particular event.

Where this becomes a problem is that by describing *thawrah* as “revolution,” the report unwittingly legitimizes acts of popular nationalist violence, associating it with Marxist revolutionary language, even though in Arabic such a link is not necessarily self-evident. A good example of this is the 1929 Arab riots in Palestine, which had neither a guiding set of objectives nor leadership, resulted in no immediate systemic changes, and mostly targeted native and immigrant Jewish civilians.⁹⁶ Calling this event “the revolution of 1929”, as the report does,⁹⁷ must be understood as a translation mistake more than an act of malice; “1929 *uprising*” or “1929 *revolt*” would be more suitable here. Another example is the 1936 *thawrah*.

As a side note on the topic of resistance and revolution in the PA curriculum, one fact which stands out is that the PA textbooks consider rock-throwing to be “peaceful”.⁹⁸ The report amazingly seems to agree, considering rock-throwing a form of “comparatively civilian resistance”.⁹⁹ Why this view must be rejected and condemned should require no further explanation.

Part IV: Issues Absent from the Report

Having established why the report’s conclusions regarding the PA curriculum should not be accepted, it is important to shed light on what the report does *not* say about the PA curriculum.

⁹³ Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan, 4th ed. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasowitz, 1979), pp. 130–31.

⁹⁴ *Social Studies*, Grade 8, Vol. 2, 2018, p. 34.

⁹⁵ *Social Studies*, Grade 9, Vol. 1, 2019, p. 50.

⁹⁶ For further reading see for example: Hillel Cohen, *Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1929*, Brandeis University Press, 2015.

⁹⁷ GEI, p. 109.

⁹⁸ *Social Studies*, Grade 9, Vol. 1, 2019, pp. 50–51. Translated and featured in the GEI report, p. 109.

⁹⁹ GEI, p. 106.

Doing so is useful for several reasons, among them providing constructive recommendations for future research in the field of Palestinian education; and to give the reader a chance to gain a more complete picture of the PA curriculum, filling in the gaps left by the report.

In the first case, the report fails to notice several crucial historical topics that the PA curriculum does *not* teach. There is little question that the curriculum withholds content from students which might lead them to question its essential narrative. For its part, the report does not mention that the Jewish Holocaust is entirely missing from the PA curriculum, an event which had monumental consequences for Palestinian Arab history and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The report's authors also ignore the curriculum's silence over the destruction of Jewish communities in the Arab world—including in what is now the West Bank and Gaza Strip—beginning in WWII and throughout succeeding years. The role of prominent Palestinian Arabs in the exacerbation of these events—and in contrast, the voices raised by Palestinian Arabs who rejected anti-Jewish violence—are both silenced by the curriculum, and ignored by the report's authors. Simply put, the report fails to take the PA curriculum to task for refusing to teach any historical fact which challenges the nationalist Palestinian narrative, even if that means leaving Palestinian students with an extremely distorted view of the region they live in.

The report's second major oversight is how the curriculum portrays Jews as a religious community, rather than a people. Focusing on individual “ambivalent” representations of Jews, it fails to understand that the PA curriculum categorically rejects Jewish presence in the region. Content teaching Jewish history and the origin of the Jews was removed entirely from PA textbooks in recent years;¹⁰⁰ in fact, the current curriculum explicitly refutes the existence of a Jewish people.¹⁰¹ The PA curriculum only recognizes the Jews as a religious community, which is how they are portrayed in the Qur'an and other Islamic sources, thus denying them the right to self-determination.¹⁰² It is in *this* context that the report should have addressed the simple truth that the Palestinian conflict with Israel is frequently compared to anti-colonial struggles against European empires, such as the French in Algeria.¹⁰³ The PA curriculum encourages students to believe that they share the same goal: of expelling the “colonizing invaders”, i.e., the Jews, from the Palestinian indigenous homeland, presumably to Europe since they are presented as entirely

¹⁰⁰ See IMPACT-se website, “The Rejection of Peace,”

https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/Rejection-of-Peace_-Changes-from-Pre-2016-PA-Curricula.pdf.

¹⁰¹ See for example *History*, Grade 11, Vol. 1, 2018, p. 81, “Zionism was founded on the basis of three false assertions. The first, that the Jews, though they belong to many countries and communities, represent one nation distinguished by Semitic ethnic characteristics. . . .” This example stands out since it was featured in the report (p. 70) but with no mention of its antisemitic nature.

¹⁰² The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, adopted in 2016 and endorsed by the EU, includes “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination.” IHRA, “Working Definition of Antisemitism,”

<https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>.

¹⁰³ The report does note such comparisons but does not discuss how they may be interpreted. See for example GEI, p. 70.

foreign to the region. The example of Saladin, frequently invoked in the textbooks, is also an illuminating case study of an Arab Islamic leader remembered for successfully banishing the invading European Crusaders. It is notable that the only significant capacity where the textbooks teach about Jews not being European colonizers—or, indeed, about Jewish history at all—is pre-Islamic Arabia, from which the Jewish community was ultimately expelled as well. By using its own particular, limited definition of antisemitism,¹⁰⁴ the report fails to engage with the question of whether such portrayals of Jewish (non-) identity qualify as antisemitism, and if, not how, they may be otherwise understood.

The report also fails to ask the question about what the curriculum *should* teach. In an environment of conflict, it would be desirable for a national school curriculum to give students the tools necessary to end that conflict; certainly not to perpetuate it. This means imparting values such as cooperation, coexistence, tolerance, forgiveness and understanding of the “Other,” *within* the context of the conflict. The PA curriculum does none of this and the report does not view this as a cause for concern. Nowhere is the suggestion that the curriculum should reflect the common values and thousands of years of history shared between Arabs and Jews in the region. The unique experience and perspective of Arab citizens of Israel, who are widely seen as part of the Palestinian collective, is ignored as a means of bridge-building. Environmental issues such as the climate crisis and pollution, which impact neighboring Palestinian and Israeli communities equally, may present a great opportunity to teach the importance of collaboration and joint problem-solving; instead, the textbooks squarely blame Israel for creating these problems,¹⁰⁵ and the report suggests no alternative to this portrayal. Neither does the report acknowledge real-life Palestinian-Israeli collaboration in areas such as scientific research, the arts, and even security, which are nowhere to be found in the curriculum.

Finally, the report does not ask what sort of vision the PA curriculum paints for the future. Rather, it concentrates on intricate expressions of Global Citizenship Education and misses the broader process at play, which is the lack of any peaceful national vision, for the conflict or the day after. Israel is condemned as an illegitimate entity from birth, and its practices are only described as criminal; Palestinian students are not encouraged to imagine any peaceful coexistence with it. The curriculum does not discuss possible solutions to the plight of Palestinian refugees other than a Return (‘*awdah*’) to their ancestors’ communities in present-day Israel, which will be accomplished at an indeterminate time and with indeterminate means. The textbooks do not address the sensitivity and complexity of Jerusalem and how the holy city might be shared or otherwise governed. The curriculum does not present a vision for the future

¹⁰⁴ GEI, p. 26. “a textbook portrayal is characterized as drawing upon anti-Semitic motifs or feeding into specifically anti-Semitic narratives if a) Jews as a collective are assigned negative characteristics such as greed, deception, cowardice, aggression, hatred towards other groups, etc.; b) Jews are alleged to be plotting a conspiracy against the ‘in-group’ or its representatives; c) the portrayal promotes enmity towards Jews; and/or d) explicitly or implicitly calls upon the reader to engage in violence against Jews”.

¹⁰⁵ See for example *Science and Life*, Grade 9, Vol. 2, 2019, p. 12; featured in the report, p. 96.

of the Palestinian nation: what its guiding principles should be; what role Palestinian citizens should have in it and how they should interact with each other; how such a Palestinian state should be governed; what its place might be in the region and the world; among any number of questions Palestinian citizens might be asking. Only a bleak vision of “Resistance” (*muqāwamah*) against the Israeli “Enemy” is taught; the report, for its part, opts not to discuss what this implies for future generations of Palestinian students.

The report’s authors chose to focus on individual themes and issues at the expense of patterns and processes on a larger scale. As such the report fails to “connect the dots” regarding what the PA curriculum is trying to achieve: to instill a radical nationalist narrative and suppress “uncomfortable” facts; how it portrays the Jewish collective as an alien, hostile entity that must not be allowed to exist in the region; how it obstinately refuses to teach cooperation and coexistence, while dismissing examples already occurring among people and communities; and how it offers no hopeful vision for a peaceful future, but one of protracted resistance. The report does not draw attention to any of these major themes, and as a consequence produces a woefully incomplete take on the curriculum.

General Observations and Conclusions

The 2021 GEI report on the PA curriculum represents a significant contribution to the body of research on the post-2016 PA curriculum. It provides a fresh perspective on this much-discussed but poorly understood topic, and in the sensitive, complex and emotional environment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is crucial that reputable researchers and institutions do their part to keep the discussion fact-based and objective. While GEI does not specialize in Palestinian and Middle Eastern education, it is apparent that considerable efforts and rigor were invested in the report’s creation, both in terms of compiling materials as well as devising a methodology. As such, it is not surprising that it produced findings which are to no small extent in line with previous research in this area, conducted by IMPACT-se and others.

Having understood this, it is important to understand that this report has several critical shortcomings, which cast a shadow on its usefulness and relevance to the discussion. Such inadequacies alone do not render the report false or worthless per se, but they do severely harm the ability to accomplish its stated goals¹⁰⁶ and have far-reaching impact on how the report’s conclusions are to be understood; as a consequence, such limitations must be taken into consideration in future discussion and research.

Perhaps the most important of these shortcomings is the disconnect between the report’s findings and its conclusions; the findings simply do not lead to logical conclusions.

¹⁰⁶ GEI, p. 8.

Among the findings are a myriad of examples, found in the PA textbooks, which teach hatred, violence and rejection of peace in a variety of ways and methods. These examples are sometimes alluded to in footnotes, but many screenshots and full translations from textbooks are displayed within the report. One finds a wide array of alarming and harmful content there: from glorification of terrorist actions, like those of Dalal Al-Mughrabi; to negation of Israel as a legitimate entity, expressed through means such as maps and nomenclature; to incorporation of “expendable” violence and death in math, science and Arabic language textbooks; to evocation of antisemitic tropes and themes, such as Jewish hostility toward Muslims, or negation of Jewish history—all within the report’s pages. Some of these troubling examples are easily discernible and understood for what they are by the uninitiated reader; some require familiarity with the Palestinian context, or a broad perspective on their place in the curriculum as a whole. In the latter cases, one would expect the authors of the report to provide the necessary context or perspective, though they often failed to do so.

The sheer mass of troubling examples in the report is striking. The authors criticize **IMPACT-se** for what they perceive to be “generalising and exaggerated conclusions based on methodological shortcomings” (p. 15), and yet inexplicably end up identifying the very same motifs in the PA textbooks: antisemitism, gratuitous violence, glorification of terrorism, negation of Israel’s existence, and demonization of Israelis. The absurd extent to which the report’s conclusions are divorced from these findings is demonstrated by this review, since a great majority of the report’s inconsistencies and shortcomings are informed by the report’s own findings and examples.

However, the report’s authors fail to draw meaningful conclusions about the negative examples found in the PA curriculum. At a cursory first glance, the report does not even seem to acknowledge the existence of damaging content. Section headings in the conclusions and executive summary include such titles as “Ambivalent Representation of Jews” when addressing antisemitism, or “Renunciation of Terror” with regards to a single isolated example which could be shown to support this claim; the textbooks’ actual glorification of terrorism is handled in the far less definitively titled “Representations of Violence Differ According to Subjects”. Most busy readers only skimming these headings will be left with the impression that the report found no damaging content of any kind.

It is important to remember that obfuscation of negative content effectively undermines the report’s *raison d’être*. The report starts with the following premise: “Recently, serious allegations have been raised that the new Palestinian textbooks incite hatred rather than promoting tolerance. These allegations are still contested and research is needed to produce robust evidence on the matter” (p. 8). Thus readers might presume that the report will attempt to settle this debate, provide the needed evidence and offer a definitive response to those serious allegations. Are the allegations true or unfounded? Does the PA curriculum incite hatred, or not? And yet, the

authors do not unequivocally state their position on what is understood to be their primary research question.

Where negative findings are acknowledged, the report often avoids making value judgements altogether. A striking motif is that the report tends to pair descriptions of negative findings with more neutral or ambivalent ones, carefully placing the latter first, to leave a positive impression on the whole: “The textbooks . . . repeatedly call for reflection on peaceful versus violent forms of protest” (p. 173); “textbooks introduce the concept of *jihād* . . . as a spiritual struggle . . . but also as engagement in combat” (p. 171); “[t]he conflict-related Real Life Connections carry non-escalatory and escalatory potential” (p. 5) and so forth. What are readers to make of this presentation? Is there or is there not inflammatory content? If there is inflammatory content, is that not worthy of attention as a problem? Is that not what the GEI report was meant to determine?

Finally, the only definitive conclusions made are those which relate to positive or neutral content. According to the report, “the textbooks adhere to UNESCO standards and adopt criteria that are prominent in international education discourse, including a strong focus on human rights” (p. 3). Simultaneously the textbooks are said to convey “a narrative of resistance” and “an antagonism towards Israel” (p. 3.), neither of which sounds particularly alarming or worthy of further attention. And yet, the report’s pages contain hateful, violent, incendiary, militaristic and antisemitic examples taken from the same textbooks. Are those examples in line with UNESCO standards as well? If not, at what point do violating examples form a “critical mass” to disqualify the curriculum as a whole? Put simply, how much is too much?

In this review, it was demonstrated how such an internal disconnect was made possible. Here, one finds a variety of motifs, tendencies and argumentation, which have one feature in common: they all serve to rationalize, justify, dilute or excuse violent, hateful, incendiary or unnecessarily politicized content in the PA textbooks.

The report shields the PA textbooks from criticism for teaching violence and rejection of peace. Whereas violent content of this sort rightfully would have been harshly criticized if not condemned, if found in any the national curriculum of any EU country—not to mention Israel—the report seems to pre-emptively neutralize this point by arguing that the Palestinian situation requires unique standards. Because the Palestinians are embroiled in a violent conflict with Israel, so the argument goes, the PA curriculum should be *expected* to express violence towards Israel, too. But if one were to accept this premise, there would be no point in examining the curriculum according to any international standards, since one cannot envision that the textbook authors would have abided by them. Ironically, this argument effectively nullifies the purpose of the entire report, while voiding the idea that the curriculum should undergo any kind of reform at all. The report essentially negates its own stated goal of providing a “factual basis for a

constructive discussion”: no constructive discussion can be had, since the Palestinian situation cannot be changed.

The report nevertheless examines individual examples of violent content. With lowered standards, the report methodically and systematically minimizes damaging content found in the textbooks. It variously portrays violent content in the PA textbooks with diminished importance or impact, alternately undecipherable, isolated, pedagogically useful, requiring further context, a faithful representation of reality or narrative, or any combination of the above. Conversely, isolated tidbits of exonerative material are elevated and given extensive exposure as a critical facet of the corpus as a whole.

The persistence in which these individual arguments are made is what casts a shadow on this report’s conclusions. Individually, some of the report’s findings in defense of the textbooks may have merit. Taken as a whole, however, they represent a clearly defined and entirely different reality. Whether or not this reflects a deliberate effort on the part of the report’s authors is irrelevant. The result is the same: a great deal of the violent material in the PA curriculum is not properly addressed, analyzed or reflected in the report.

The report expresses great enthusiasm for the issue of human rights education in the PA curriculum; this review has shown that much of this enthusiasm is critically misplaced. While discussing human and civil rights in the PA curriculum, the report fails to note that the curriculum has been prepared in an environment where such rights are not a feature of governance or everyday lives. As such, the report downplays—and in some cases, ignores completely—that human rights are taught as a weapon of national conflict rather than as a universal ideal. This is largely supported by the report’s own examples, which show that human rights never apply to Israelis, and apply to Palestinians only when Israelis violate those rights. In the PA textbooks, human and civil rights are thus nothing more than a tool to demonize the Israeli “Enemy” and support a nationalist narrative. To say that the PA curriculum’s “strong focus on human rights” alone means it abides by UNESCO standards of peacemaking, tolerance and non-violence, and end the discussion there, is to ignore reality—akin to burying one’s head in the proverbial sand.

This review also exposes how the report mishandles some region-specific issues in the PA textbooks. Concepts which relate to Palestinian culture and identity, Arabic language and Islamic faith are treated as exotic objects of interest, impossible to judge or interpret, rather than active components of the curriculum’s confrontational nationalist narrative. Ideas such as *jihad*, martyrdom (*šahādah*), Greater (or “Historic”) Palestine, “occupation” (*iḥtilāl*) and “revolution” (*ṯawrah*) are given positive, ambivalent or agnostic interpretations, and not examined in the wider context of the curriculum or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The report fails to reflect how such concepts are used by the PA curriculum to promote violence and reject peacemaking. This

does a great disservice to the vast majority of readers in EU countries, who are not well-acquainted with these concepts and what they convey to Palestinians.

Furthermore, the report fails to “take a step back” and view the curriculum critically as a whole. It concerns itself with individual applications of human rights and Global Citizenship Education on the one hand, and violent and non-violent portrayals on the other; but in doing so, it misses the greater narrative and messaging the curriculum intends to establish. The report fails to ask cogent questions such as why the PA textbooks do not mention the Holocaust; it seems unconcerned with any fact that challenges the curriculum’s nationalist view of history, the distortion of Jewish history, attempts to erase Jewish identity and deny Jewish self-determination, or the rejection of any future where Israel exists. The report also does not challenge the PA curriculum to incorporate cooperation and coexistence with the Jewish-Israeli “Other,” or to even acknowledge that such instances occur in real life. Lastly, the report does not reflect on the future vision offered by the PA textbooks, one where the conflict never ends, where the only constant is the perpetual “Resistance” against the sworn “Enemy”, and how such a hopeless worldview might affect Palestinian students born into a reality of conflict.

An additional review of PA textbooks partially or fully omitted from the report showed much was excluded. Among books included in the report, additional pernicious material was found but not used by the report’s authors, such as sections glorifying the 1972 Munich Olympic massacre, or the conspiracy that Israeli authorities are attempting to dig under the Al-Aqsa Mosque to make it collapse. Textbooks not examined in the report contain even more harmful material, teaching that Israel was created as a European plot to bisect the Arab world, and displaying graphic imagery of children “assassinated” by Israel. The report’s overzealous portrayal of revisions made in 2020—as considered proof that the PA curriculum is following a clearly positive trend—has been demonstrated to be woefully misplaced; the forthcoming appendices for this review show that 2020 textbooks also introduce new content which, among other things, explicitly claims the Western Wall as a stolen Islamic holy site, and asks students to think of *jihad* for the “liberation of Palestine” as the personal duty of every Muslim. Unfortunately, the negative examples shown in the report, as plentiful and as alarming as they are, represent only a small fraction of the reality of malicious content.

It is clear that the GEI report does not provide a complete, accurate and useful picture of the state of the PA curriculum. It greatly exaggerates positive features, minimizes negative aspects and refrains from making meaningful conclusions about the latter. It examines minor details and does not attempt to describe a complete narrative of the PA curriculum, let alone contest its severity. The report does not discuss the effect of the curriculum on Palestinian students and what sort of Palestinian national civil society may emerge as a result of such education. An unwitting reader of the report will not have a realistic grasp of the PA curriculum, all the more unfortunate given the considerable effort and time spent in its preparation.

Methodology

IMPACT-se applies methodological standards which are based on UNESCO and UN declarations, and international recommendations and documents on education for peace and tolerance (see notes). Our methodology is designed to consider every detail within the textbooks; it does not paraphrase, rely on interpretations, or attempt to illustrate preconceived notions.

The following is an updated, condensed version of the IMPACT-se UNESCO-derived standards for peace and tolerance in school education:

1. **RESPECT:** The curriculum should promote tolerance, understanding and respect toward the "Other," his or her culture, achievements, values and way of life.¹⁰⁷
2. **INDIVIDUAL OTHER:** The curriculum should foster personal attachment toward the "Other" as an individual, his or her desire to be familiar, loved and appreciated.¹⁰⁸
3. **NO HATE:** The curriculum should be free of wording, imagery and ideologies likely to create prejudices, misconceptions, stereotypes, misunderstandings, mistrust, racial hatred, religious bigotry and national hatred, as well as any other form of hatred or contempt for other groups or peoples.¹⁰⁹
4. **NO INCITEMENT:** The curriculum should be free of language, content, and imagery that disseminate ideas or theories which justify or promote acts and expressions of violence, incitement to violence, hostility, harm and hatred toward other national, ethnic, racial or religious groups.¹¹⁰
5. **PEACEMAKING:** The curriculum should develop capabilities for non-violent conflict resolution and promote peace.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ As defined in the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance Proclaimed and signed by Member States of UNESCO on November 16, 1995, Articles 1, 4.2. See also the UN Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding Between Peoples (1965), Principles I, III. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial and religious groups and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

¹⁰⁸ The goal of education for peace is the development of universally recognized values in an individual, regardless of different socio-cultural contexts. See *Ibid.*, Article 6. See also, on exchanges between youth, the UN Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples (1965), Principles IV, V.

¹⁰⁹ Based on *Ibid.*, Articles III.6, IV.7 and VII.39; and on the Integrated Framework for Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy, approved by the General Conference of UNESCO at its twenty-eighth session, Paris, November 1995, Article 18.2.

¹¹⁰ As defined in Article 4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2106 (XX) on December 21, 1965. See also Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2200A (XXI) on December 16, 1966.

¹¹¹ Based on the Integrated Framework for Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy, approved by the General Conference of UNESCO at its twenty-eighth session, Paris, November 1995, Article 9; and on the

6. **UNBIASED INFORMATION:** Educational materials (textbooks, workbooks, teachers' guides, maps, illustrations, aids) should be up-to-date, accurate, complete, balanced and unprejudiced, and use equal standards to promote mutual knowledge and understanding between different peoples.¹¹²

7. **GENDER IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION:** The curriculum should foster equality, mutual respect, and should aim for equal representation between individuals regardless of their gender identity. It should also refrain from language, content, and imagery that depicts limiting and/or exclusionary gender roles.¹¹³

8. **SEXUAL ORIENTATION:** The curriculum should be free of language, content, and imagery that promulgates violence or discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.¹¹⁴

9. **SOUND PROSPERITY and COOPERATION:** The curriculum should educate for sound and sustainable economic conduct and preservation of the environment for future generations. It should encourage regional and local cooperation to that effect.¹¹⁵

Declaration of Principles on Tolerance proclaimed and signed by member states of UNESCO on November 16, 1995, Article 5.

¹¹² Based on UNESCO recommendation concerning education for international understanding, cooperation and peace and education relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms, adopted by the General Conference at its eighteenth session, Paris, November 19, 1974, Article V.14.

¹¹³ The preamble to the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance proclaimed and signed by member states of UNESCO on November 16, 1995, notes the Convention on the Elimination of Any Form of Discrimination against Women and emphasizes respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to gender.

¹¹⁴ Based on Resolutions 32/2 (adopted June 30, 2016) and 17/19 (adopted July 14, 2011) of the UN Human Rights Council, and numerous UN General Assembly resolutions expressing concern and condemnation of laws and practices around the world which target individuals based on their gender identity and/or sexual orientation for discrimination, violence, and even extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions—all of which contradict the most basic principles of the UN and have no place in education.

¹¹⁵ Based on UNESCO recommendation concerning education for international understanding, cooperation and peace and education relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms, adopted by the General Conference at its eighteenth session, Paris, November 19, 1974, Articles III.6, and IV.7. On the imperative for developing "systematic and rational tolerance teaching methods that will address the cultural, social, economic, political and religious sources of intolerance," see the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance proclaimed and signed by member states of UNESCO on November 16, 1995, Article 4.2. On education for international cooperation, see also the UN Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples (1965), Principle II.