

Peace with Israel in Egyptian Textbooks: What Changed between the Mubarak and el-Sisi Eras?

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A change in the content of textbooks is a sensitive move that can bring to the surface internal disagreements about competing historical narratives and divergent perspectives on the society's identity, goals, and values. Yet reports that appeared in the Israeli media in February 2016, whereby the Egyptian government made changes in a new textbook on how peace with Israel was portrayed, did not cause much of a ripple in Egypt.¹ Major Egyptian newspapers ignored the report, and administration officials avoided mentioning it. In comparison, similar reports that were published roughly a year previously about changes in Israel's status in Jordanian textbooks ignited a stormy public debate that included criticism and denials.² The reason for what seems to be lack of public interest in Egypt regarding the development is probably twofold. First, given the sensitivity of the topic, the Egyptian regime presumably preferred that the news maintain a low profile. Second, the changes in how peace with Israel is portrayed in the new textbook, as compared with textbooks from the Mubarak era, were limited mainly to fine nuances, even if some of them were of substantive importance.

The new textbook, entitled *The Geography of the Arab World and the History of Modern Egypt* and printed by the Egyptian Education Ministry, is intended for ninth grade pupils in the second semester of the 2015-2016 school year. A close look at the lessons about the wars and peace with Israel shows that overall the book remains faithful to the content that Egyptian pupils studied during Mubarak's time: the Mandate-era Land of Israel is originally Arab Palestine; the Zionist movement is a colonialist enterprise;

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Israel is an aggressive entity with expansionist aspirations that threaten the Arab states; the Arab wars against Israel were an act of self-defense and an effort to defend the Palestinians; the victory in October 1973 paved the way for peace with Israel; and the peace is a result of pragmatic-utilitarian considerations, not of historic or moral recognition of the Jews' right to the land.

Alongside these fundamental concepts, however, the book includes several adaptations and new emphases, in both its content and its form, that are tailored to the new Egyptian order under el-Sisi. It presents peace with Israel in the current era as a strategic asset whose preservation is a basic condition for Egypt's economic revival; it illustrates the lesser centrality of the Palestinian problem in Egyptian public discourse; and it shines a more positive light than in the past upon Israel's role as a legitimate peace partner, even to the point of mentioning friendly relations. These developments are of great interest, though they are still far from heralding a comprehensive educational revolution.

Historical Background: Peace with Israel in Egyptian Textbooks

Throughout the years of hostilities with Israel, Egypt's educational system served as an important agent in constructing "the culture of conflict" – in other words, the array of opinions, beliefs, and feelings that delineated the goals and meaning of the conflict to Egypt's young generation, justified the sacrifices and victims incurred by the conflict, and defined the desired solution and the ways to achieve it.³ At the same time, the textbooks played a major role in inculcating the political worldviews and historical narratives that matched the traditional perception of Israel as a hostile, racist, and colonialist entity that schemed to expand "from the Euphrates to the Nile."⁴ Following the peace agreement, Israel hoped that the transition from conflict to peace would lead to a parallel cultural-educational change in negative stereotypes regarding the Israeli side and their transformation into a positive, or at least a more balanced, orientation.⁵ A gradual process of reconciliation between the nations could have taken the form of structuring new narratives that matched the reality of peace, and through textbooks, imparting values and positions in that spirit to the young generation.⁶

In reality, although the transformations that were evident in the way that Egyptian textbooks portrayed the Arab-Israeli conflict after the signing of the peace treaty were significant, they were still far from offering a full transition from "the culture of conflict" to "the culture of peace." The

textbooks conveyed the message that peace with Israel was justified from a utilitarian standpoint, even if it was not free of flaws and difficulties. According to the textbooks, among the political and economic advantages that peace provided to Egypt and the Arab states were the return of the Sinai Peninsula to Egyptian sovereignty; savings in life and treasure; the investment of foreign capital; encouragement of tourism; the creation of a precedent for Israel's withdrawal from the remaining occupied Arab territory; and a halt to Israel's expansionist tendencies at the expense of the Arab states. Israel's agreements with the Palestinians and with Jordan and the talks on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks in the 1990s were portrayed as a "stamp of approval" for the peace between Egypt and Israel and as evidence that Egypt had acted properly. Egypt's long term efforts under Mubarak's leadership to advance Arab-Israeli peace agreements were cited as proof of Egypt's commitment to its Arab brethren and particularly to the Palestinians, who belatedly acknowledged the superiority of the political path over the military one.⁷

Beyond the direct context of peace with Israel, the changes that were made in Egyptian textbooks starting in the early 1980s began to show a decline in pan-Arab nationalism and a rise in a particular Egyptian identity. The focus on Egyptian identity matched the regime's desire to gain acceptance for its peace policy, which veered sharply from the Arab consensus, and favored promoting Egypt's own interests. A study that measured the attitude toward Egyptian national identity in the school curriculum after the peace treaty with Israel found that 54 percent of the content was devoted to Egypt's pharaonic identity, 30 percent was devoted to national Egyptian identity, and only 16 percent was devoted to its Arab identity. Fifth grade pupils were asked to memorize the sentence: "I am an Egyptian, you are an Egyptian, we are all Egyptians," while the learning of lines that were supposed to strengthen "national and warlike consciousness" was abolished in 1980-1981. A ninth grade textbook entitled *The History of the Arab Homeland in the Modern Era* was replaced with one entitled *The Modern History of Egypt*, and a textbook entitled *Arab Nationalism* was replaced by *The Arab Republic of Egypt in the Modern Era*.⁸

At the same time, education for peace and tolerance in Egypt's textbooks was often kept separate from peace with Israel, out of a preference for preaching "peace" as an abstract concept cut off from any direct and explicit association with the controversial Israeli peace partner. An official document written by the Egyptian Education Ministry in the 1980s defined the teaching

of the value of “building peace and human solidarity” among pupils as an educational goal.⁹ This message was conveyed in Egyptian textbooks such as *The Egyptian State*, a book for eleventh graders in which peace as an abstract concept was a key condition for modernization and progress: “Peace is one of the most prominent values that a modern society requires in the modern era. The goals desired by all the nations of the world cannot be accomplished without it. Development and progress, as well as social welfare and social justice, liberty, democracy, the rule of law, and the other unique qualities of modern states will not be accomplished in the shadow of wars and skirmishes; rather, they will thrive only in the light of peace.”¹⁰

Alongside these important changes, studies that examined history and religion textbooks in Egypt in the 1990s and the 2000s showed that they rejected the Zionist narrative regarding the Jewish right to the Land of Israel. Elie Podeh found that in tandem with recognition of the contribution of peace, the textbooks continued to portray Israel as an illegitimate state that had driven out the legal owners of the land, schemed to expand in the region, and served Western imperialism. In addition, geographical maps that appeared in the textbooks referred to Israel as “Occupied Palestine.” This perpetuated among the younger generation the dichotomous and one-dimensional stances of “we as just” versus “they as oppressors,” which are part and parcel of the “culture of conflict,” along with delegitimization of the State of Israel.¹¹ The negation of Israel’s right to sovereignty over East Jerusalem was made clear in Egyptian textbooks, which emphasized the city’s Arab, Islamic, and Christian heritage. Although the historical Jewish connection to Jerusalem was mentioned in a small number of the textbooks, along with the fact that it was a Jewish capital in the time of Nebuchadnezzar, the present day Jews were consistently portrayed as foreign occupiers who must be fought in order to liberate the city from their yoke. In addition, even though some textbooks acknowledged the Western Wall as a site sacred to the Jews, they emphasized that the legitimate Jewish rights there did not go beyond the right to conduct religious rituals.¹² Yohanan Manor noted that in religious textbooks, based on selected verses from the Qur’an, Jews throughout history were condemned as inherently possessing and manifesting negative characteristics such as treachery and the failure to honor contracts and agreements.¹³

The Wars between Egypt and Israel in the New Textbooks

The textbook entitled *The Geography of the Arab World and the History of Modern Egypt* (2015–2016), intended for the ninth grade, blends old and new messages. The lesson on peace with Israel teaches Egyptian pupils two preliminary lessons that provide a conceptual framework, “Egypt and the Palestinian Problem” and “October 1973.” As in the older textbooks, Mandate-era Israel is cast historically and ethically as land that was stolen from the Arab residents of Palestine. Zionism is described as a threatening colonialist movement born in sin rather than as a movement expressing legitimate national aspirations. The first lesson, which begins with a paragraph under the heading “Arab Palestine,” explains that “Palestine has special importance in the heart of every Arab” since it is the birthplace of Jesus; the Prophet Muhammad traveled there in his Night Journey; and al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest site in Islam, is located at its center. Only very few Jews, the book says, lived in Palestine before World War I and the Balfour Declaration. According to the historical narrative recorded later in the lesson, the purpose of the invasion of Israel in 1948 by the Arab armies was to “rescue the Palestinian Arabs from the Jews’ aggression,” and the Arab defeat in the war stemmed from the fact that the Jews violated the temporary truce during the battles. As for the wars with Israel in 1956 and 1967, these exposed Zionism’s colonialist character and Israel’s plot to expand “from the Nile to the Euphrates” and take over the Arab world.¹⁴

The lesson entitled “Egypt and the Palestinian Problem” features three maps: a map of the partition in 1947, a map of “Palestine” after the war in 1948, and a map of “Israel’s occupation of Arab land” after the 1967 war. The legend on the two latter maps defines all the territory that remained under Israel’s control after the War of Independence and the Six Day War as “occupied land.” While the three maps deal with historical rather than contemporary contexts, they still strengthen the message regarding the “original” character of the land that currently comprises the State of Israel.¹⁵

The new textbooks portray the 1973 war as a kind of bridge for understanding Egypt’s historical and ideological transition to peace with the long time Israeli enemy. The lesson about the war states that it erupted following “the Israeli refusal of the calls for peace” by Egypt, and led to a “turning point in the Arab-Israeli conflict when it proved [to Israel] that the logic of force would not grant [it] peace.” The war exploded the myth of the undefeatable Israeli army and made a mockery of the Israeli army’s combat doctrine. The lesson quotes the Israeli defense minister, whose

name is not mentioned, as admitting the lesson of the war, whereby “we Israelis must realize that we are not the only military force in the Middle East, and that there are new facts that we must live with.” According to this portrayal, Israel was forced to give up its original “expansionist aspirations” in the region following the 1973 war – a development that paved the way to Sadat’s peace initiative.¹⁶

From “Normal Relations” to “Friendly Relations”

While the content that appears in the new textbook reveals much about the changes in the attitude by the el-Sisi regime toward peace with Israel, a comparison with the content of previous textbooks shows this most of all. Indeed, a comparison between the new ninth grade textbook and a textbook entitled *History for High-School Pupils*, from 2002, shows encouraging findings. First, the new textbook provides firmer and more explicit support than in the past for peace with Israel. The economic advantages of peace are validated as a necessary precondition for Egypt’s stability, development, and material prosperity. Second, the textbook portrays Israel as a legitimate peace partner with no further apologies, and for the first time the picture of Prime Minister Menahem Begin appears alongside that of President Anwar Sadat. Third, the amount of space devoted to the Palestinian conflict and the struggle against Israel is less than in the past. While the textbook from 2002 devoted 32 pages to the wars and only three pages to the peace with Israel, the textbook from 2015 is quite different: the history of the conflict has been shortened to only 12 pages, while peace receives four.

It appears that these changes are in accord with broader reforms that the el-Sisi regime has made to school curricula in recent years in order to quash ideas that, in its view, provide fertile ground for the flourishing of Islamic ideologies. The reforms included the removal of religious texts that could encourage extremism, terrorism, and racism, and their replacement with values on tolerance. As part of these measures, the regime decided in March 2015 to drop the life history of Salah al-Din al-Ayyoubi, liberator of Jerusalem from the Crusaders, for fear that it encouraged violence.¹⁷ The move sparked a wave of internal protest. In February 2016, el-Sisi ordered the Education Ministry to establish a committee to reexamine the school curricula in various humanities subjects including Arabic, history, geography, philosophy, cultural heritage, and psychology.¹⁸ Besides these general trends, the changes in the new textbooks may reflect the strengthened status of peace with Israel as a national strategic asset for Egypt; cultivating

and deepening the peace match the regime's current security-economic agenda. From this perspective, the changes in the textbooks take their place alongside the intimate partnership between Egypt and Israel in fighting terrorism, as well as additional measures of rapprochement, such as the return of the Egyptian ambassador to Tel Aviv in January 2016 for the first time since 2012, the March 2016 Meeting in Washington between Israeli Energy and Infrastructure Minister Yuval Steinitz and Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, and the promotion of the deals for importing natural gas from Israel to Egypt. Even the dismissal of Egypt MP Tawfiq Okasha after his meeting with the Israeli ambassador in Cairo was accompanied by a surprisingly open public debate about the issue of normalization in the official Egyptian press.¹⁹

The conciliatory tone of the messages that appear in the new textbook appears in the preface to the chapter containing the lesson about peace with Israel, where the main study goals are defined. At the end of the class discussion about the dilemmas involved in "Egypt's policies toward ending the Arab-Israeli conflict and making peace," the pupils are expected to analyze "the reasons for President Sadat's peace initiative," memorize the "provisions of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel," and enumerate the "advantages of peace for Egypt and the Arab states." These goals, the textbook goes on to state, are linked with broader educational objectives such as "education for peace," "the fight against violence, extremism and terrorism," and "negotiation for solving conflicts in peaceful ways."²⁰ And indeed, this framing of the lesson reflects the messages that are conveyed throughout the chapter.

An examination of the debate over peace with Israel in the new textbook, as compared with the discussion that appears in the textbook from Mubarak's time, shows that some text was "cut and pasted" without being touched, while other portions of the text underwent slight but weighty changes. For example, the provisions of the peace treaty cited in the textbook were worded differently than in the past: "concluding the state of war" in the older textbook was expanded and interpreted in the new book as "concluding the state of war between Egypt and Israel"; "recognition of the sovereignty of each side in the conflict over its territory" was changed to "respect by each side of the other's sovereignty and independence"; and – the most important change – "establishing normal relations – political, economic, and cultural – between both countries" was changed to "establishing friendly relations – political, economic, and cultural – between the two countries."

Significantly, both terms, “normal” and “friendly,” appear in Article 1 (3) of the peace treaty. In light of the establishment of the “cold peace,” Cairo emphasized for years that its relations with Israel were “normal” or “regular,” but avoided the use of positive terms such as “friendly relations” almost entirely.²¹

Most of the difference between the new and old textbooks has to do with the emphasis on the economic value of peace with Israel. The economy is a critically important issue for el-Sisi’s regime, which is laboring to extricate Egypt from its economic distress and achieve material gains that will strengthen its standing in internal public opinion. Although the old textbooks also mentioned the economic importance of peace, the new textbook makes a special effort to laud it. The primary reason for Sadat’s original peace initiative, as written in the 2015-2016 textbook, was “the series of wars that drained the country’s energy and its human and material resources.” As the lesson states, Egypt’s choice of “peace over war” and the hope of “ending the Arab-Israeli conflict” is more relevant than ever in light of the ongoing advantages of peace: “the internal [preservation] of the Arab states’ internal stability”; “the promotion of economic and social development and the repair of the country’s infrastructure”; “the encouragement of the investment of Arab and foreign capital in Egypt and the other Arab states”; and “increasing tourist traffic, which will increase national revenue and provide foreign currency that is required for [various] needs and the establishment of national projects that will lead to development in Egypt in particular and in the Arab region in general.”²²

Another change, largely symbolic, is the inclusion of the photograph of the signing of the peace treaty at the White House, in which Sadat, Begin, and President Jimmy Carter appear side by side. The placement of this historic picture is more than a mere inclusion of a graphic image that was absent from previous textbooks. It shows the presence of the Israeli partner whose place was hidden in the past, in part by teaching peace as an abstract value. This development may reflect a decline in the antagonism that peace with Israel arouses among the Egyptian public, or it may be a deliberate attempt by the Egyptian regime to foster increased openness to the establishment of friendly relations. In a manner unprecedented in earlier textbooks, the Israeli prime minister is given equal status with the Egyptian president in the description of their receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for their “active efforts over the years to establish peace in the Middle

East.” In the same spirit, the new textbook presents the Oslo Accords as the fruit of the joint labor of Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas.²³

Another difference between the new textbook and the books from the Mubarak era is the attention given to the Palestinian problem. The three paragraphs that described the fundamental principles of the Camp David accords, including “the realization of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians,” were removed from the new book. The new textbook also dropped the failed episode of the “autonomy talks” in the early 1980s, which were discussed at length in the previous textbook. On the other hand, the Madrid Conference and the Oslo Accords are portrayed in a manner that might be interpreted as a completed success story. While the textbook from 2002 stated that “the road to reaching agreements of permanent and final peace in the Middle East is still long,” the narrative that appears in the new textbook contains no such reservation. It states that the Oslo Accords are “a direct, official agreement, the first of its kind” between Israel and the PLO. It includes sections about the establishment of a national Palestinian authority, an elected legislative council in the West Bank and Gaza for a transition period, and a strong Palestinian police force to maintain security and order. As concluded in the textbook, Egypt “supported the agreement and the other agreements dealing with the Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories, and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority.”²⁴

Conclusions

A close look at the new Egyptian textbook reveals slight but substantive positive changes in the approach to peace with Israel, as compared to the stance in previous textbooks. Peace is framed as a necessary precondition for the revival of Egypt’s economy; Israel is portrayed as a legitimate peace partner, and even as a partner for friendly relations. The Arab-Israeli conflict in general, and the Palestinian problem in particular, are given less space and text than in the past. The relative distance that characterizes the current Egyptian attitude toward the Palestinian issue stands in opposition to the emphasis on Egypt’s commitment to the Palestinians, as described in previous textbooks, and the deep involvement of Egypt’s president at the time in promoting Israeli-Palestinian agreements. This development demonstrates the current regime’s focus on issues that are seen as urgent, such as poverty, unemployment, and the threat of terrorism. It also seems that the upheavals that Egypt and the entire region in recent years gave

the Palestinian problem new proportions that are more moderate than in the past – a trend that is reflected in the new textbook.

Yet despite the encouraging picture presented by the new textbook, it is clear that in the current electronic age, the opinions of Egypt's young people are not influenced solely by the Egyptian educational system, but also – and perhaps principally – by content that appears on the internet and on the social networks, which is not mediated by the state. In addition, described here is a change in only one textbook during a specific school year, and it is too early to infer that it constitutes a comprehensive turning point in the Egyptian educational ethos. Changes in a hegemonic educational culture that includes a deep-seated world view and entrenched historical narratives are usually made in moderation, and by their very nature require many years of perseverance. Small, measured steps in this direction could gradually converge and form a new and better situation that will have implications for the shaping of the opinions of Egypt's young generation. Like an aircraft carrier in motion that does not change direction all at once, the Egyptian educational system is moving slowly and cautiously toward new, with, ideally, more conciliatory horizons in its attitude toward Israel. These changes do not take place in a vacuum, and the internal developments in Egypt and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are expected to have a future influence on the continued – or arrested – trends described above.

Notes

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- 4 Avner Giladi, "Israel's Image in Recent Egyptian Textbooks," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 7 (spring 1978): 88-97.
- 5 Aluf Hareven, "Is a Relationship of Trust Possible between Israel and the Arab States?" in *If Peace Should Come: Opportunities and Risks*, ed. Aluf Hareven (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 1978), pp. 22-28.
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- 10 Ibid., pp. 167-68.
- 11 Podeh, "Israel on the Rise," p. 246.
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- 15 Ibid., pp. 61, 64.
- 16 Ibid., pp. 66-70.
- 17 Roi Kais, "Cairo Axes Islam Heroes from School Curriculum," *Ynetnews.com*, March 24, 2015, www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4640598,00.html.
- 18 Ranya Hilmi, "El-Sisi Orders Reexamination of Humanities Curriculum in All Grades," *Misr Journal*, February 11, 2016, www.misrjournal.com/827531.
- 19 See, for example, the essay by Muhammad Ibrahim al-Dasuqi, the editor-in-chief of *al-Ahram*, in which he wrote that the criticism against Okasha's meeting with the Israeli ambassador went against the positive developments in relations between Egypt and Israel that had taken place in recent years, as well as the internal and regional circumstances: "Okasha Exposes that which is Hidden," *al-Ahram*, March 7, 2016, www.ahram.org/NewsQ/483735.aspx.
- 20 Mahsub et al., *The Geography of the Arab World and the History of Modern Egypt for the Ninth Grade*, p. 71.
- 21 'Atiya al-Qaws et al. *History for High School*, Egyptian Education Ministry, 2002, p. 299; Ibid., pp. 72-73.
- 22 Mahsub et al., *The Geography of the Arab World and the History of Modern Egypt for the Ninth Grade*, pp. 72, 74.
- 23 Ibid., p. 72.
- 24 Al-Qaws et al., *History for High School*, p. 30; Mahsub et al., *The Geography of the Arab World and the History of Modern Egypt for the Ninth Grade*, p. 74.