



Foreign & Commonwealth Office

MEPP: Incitement and the Palestinian Textbook Controversy

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Summary

1. Incitement has been part of the discourse of the peace process since Oslo. The current Netanyahu government argues that the PA education system teaches terrorism. **But Netanyahu has a history of using the incitement issue as a delaying tactic in peace talks.** Authoritative studies agree that PA textbooks are not inciting hatred of Israel. Nevertheless, Palestinian - and Israeli - school curriculums could do better and should aim to teach something objective or positive about the other.

Detail

2. The issue of incitement has been part of the discourse of the peace process since the Oslo Accords in 1993. During the 1990s, the debate tended to revolve around the PLO's recognition of Israel's right to exist and the extent of its commitment to ending violence. In the last decade, Palestinian school textbooks have frequently been the focus of Israel's ire. Israel's Vice Prime Minister Ya'alon recently stated that the PA's education system teaches "young Palestinians how to make suicide belts" and "incites them to kill Israelis."

3. This paper reflects on the evolution of the incitement debate and considers the extent to which there is substance to Ya'alon's claims. The key points are: First, **the history of this issue suggests that Netanyahu administrations have a tendency to charge the PA/PLO with incitement as a delaying tactic in peace talks.** Second, Ya'alon's assertion that the PA education system is breeding terrorism is, according to a series of highly respectable studies, without foundation. Third, there clearly are improvements the PA could make to its education system with respect to its treatment of Israel and Israelis. But the Israeli education system could also do better with respect to teaching young Israelis about Palestinians.

Incitement in Peace Negotiations (1993-2009)

4. The peace negotiations set the context against which the schoolbook controversy must be viewed. The Oslo Agreement, which Israel and the PLO signed in 1993, calls on both parties to: "abstain from incitement including hostile propaganda". For Israel incitement was clearly an important issue from the

outset given its desire for both security and acceptance within the region. Thus, Israeli Prime Minister Rabin

demanded, as part of the Oslo Agreement, that the PLO state unequivocally that it both recognised Israel and renounced violence.

5. PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, in a historic letter to Rabin, made these commitments. He added that: “those articles of the Palestinian Covenant [ie. the PLO Charter] which deny Israel’s right to exist...are now inoperable and no longer valid.” Arafat also promised that the Palestine National Council (PNC) would formally excise these articles from the PLO charter.¹ It is important to mention that the Palestinian side certainly had its own view of what constituted Israeli acts of incitement against Palestinians – not least settlement expansion and Israel’s rejection of Palestinians’ right to an independent state. **But as the weaker party in the peace talks the PLO was in no position to extract such commitments from Israel.**

6. By the time of the Wye River Accord of October 1998, the PLO had not altered its charter. While Shimon Peres, the previous Israeli Prime Minister, had declared himself content with the commitments Arafat had made, Israel’s Prime Minister of the time, Binyamin Netanyahu, **was not. Netanyahu, a strong opponent of the Oslo Accords,** refused to make any further moves on the MEPP until the Charter had been altered and the PA delivered on security. The Wye Agreement made a further, specific, demand of the Palestinians. The Palestinians had to: “issue a decree prohibiting all forms of incitement to violence and terror”. This decree would be “compatible with Israeli legislation.” Wye also called for the establishment of a trilateral US-Israel-Palestinian Committee to monitor cases of incitement on both sides.

7. The PA subsequently issued a Presidential decree banning incitement and, in December 1998, the PNC, in the presence of President Clinton, annulled the offending elements of PLO Charter. The US also declared itself content with the PA’s efforts on security. Yet, the Netanyahu government **was still unsatisfied and** it suspended implementation of the withdrawals stipulated in the Wye Accord. **It was clear to most analysts that Netanyahu’s refusal to implement Wye was not about incitement. It was about the fact that he did not wish to make any further withdrawals from the OPTs. As for the trilateral committee established at Wye its work failed to deliver tangible results.** It stopped meeting in 2003 due to disagreements between the parties over terms of reference and next steps.

8. After the collapse of the Oslo process, the Quartet Roadmap (2003) reiterated the call on the parties to end incitement. And at Annapolis, the two parties committed to “propagate a culture of peace and non-violence” and to “confront terrorism and incitement.” As a result a culture of peace subcommittee was set up. But it has not reported its findings. **The central problem for the Wye and Annapolis committees is that while the parties cannot resolve the final status issues (future of Jerusalem, settlements, Palestinian statehood, refugees etc) defining what is and what is not “incitement” becomes both complex and highly contentious.**

Palestinian Textbooks

1 The Palestine National Council is the legislative arm of the PLO.

9. In the mid 1990s, the Palestinian Curriculum Development Centre produced a report that was damning with regards the state of Palestinian education. The Palestinian Education Ministry subsequently undertook (in cooperation with UNESCO and international donors) the revamping of school textbooks. A phased introduction of new books occurred from 2000 – 2006. The PA resolutely asserts that its textbooks conform to the spirit and letter of the requirements on the incitement issue within the Oslo agreement.

The Chief Critic

10. Virtually all of the charges against Palestinian textbooks can be traced back to the work of one organisation – the Centre for Monitoring the Impact of Peace (CMIP) – which has recently been renamed the Institute for the Monitoring of Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT – SE). Since 1998, CMIP/IMPACT – SE has produced reports which level some serious charges against Palestinian textbooks. The most recent, in 2008, states that “Palestinian textbooks continue to deny the Jewish and Israeli „others“ any legitimacy, avoid any expression that would advocate peace, and encourage instead violent struggle against them.”²

Independent Studies

11. A large number of respected research institutes have carried out studies into the Palestinian curriculum. Three are particularly noteworthy: The Congressional Research Service’s (CRS) report entitled, “Palestinian Education and the Debate over Textbooks” (2006); UNESCO’s „Studies on the Palestinian Curriculum“ (2006), and the Israel Palestine Centre for Research and Information (IPCRI) which produced two important reports in 2006 and 2008. The first two reports usefully consolidate all the research done into Palestinian textbooks on this issue. And IPCRI is important since its work has been funded by USCG Jerusalem.

12. The attached table summarises the findings of these studies on two of the specific charges – that PA textbooks incite violence and deny Israel’s right to exist. But the key points are as follows:

- CRS, UNESCO and IPCRI agree that there is no evidence for the view that PA textbooks can be accused of inciting hatred to Israel or anti-Semitism;
- But there is a striking lack of reference to the historical and contemporary presence of Jews in the region. A striking example of this relates to maps in Palestinian textbooks. These tend to be topographical, or historical. They are exceedingly vague vis-à-vis political boundaries and Israel does not appear. As the UNESCO report indicates, these omissions mean that PA education is guilty of “at best, maintaining ignorance of, at worst, promoting antagonisms towards Israel and its people“ ;
- As such, Palestinian education could do better at promoting understanding of the Israeli „other“ (though there is much in the Palestinian curriculum that promotes tolerance).

2 IMPACT – SE Report: Palestinian Textbooks: from Arafat to Abbas and Hamas, 2008.

13. The difficulty of not having resolved the final status issues is thrown into relief with the map issue. A map which shows Israel, within its internationally recognised boundaries and does not show a Palestinian State, only a PA with temporary authority provokes a set of difficult questions for PA educators. Not least – why is there no Palestinian State? The answer to that question is of course highly charged and political. A full explanation in school textbooks from the Palestinian perspective would doubtless draw further fire from the critics. Palestinian educators have therefore tended to seek awkward fudges. The problem, as one other report neatly put it is that: “In a situation where even factual information about historical Palestine is seen as a provocation, those so minded will interpret texts in as negative a light as possible.”³

Are Israeli textbooks better?

14. In 2008, IPCRI published a report comparing Palestinian and Israeli school books. Its principal finding was that: “There is nothing in Israeli or Palestinian textbooks that teaches the students something objective or positive about the people they are in conflict with.” It adds, “Currently the messages transmitted by each society to the next generation is the virtual non-existence of the other people.”

Conclusion

15. IMPACT – SE notwithstanding, all the reports recognise that Palestinian schoolbooks represent a considerable step-forward, especially when compared to their Jordanian/Egyptian predecessors. Part of the problem in the text book debate is that the parties have not agreed on a definition of incitement or on what practices might constitute incitement. But perhaps more importantly, the two sides have failed to reconcile their own, very different historical narratives, and their differing views of a political settlement. Until a political agreement is reached that resolves final status issues and brings an end to violence better Palestinian and Israeli school curriculums are not likely to emerge.

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³ Belgian Technical Report into Palestinian Education, 2005.