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Scientific Study of Israeli and Palestinian School Books Documents Ways In Which “The Other” is Portrayed

JERUSALEM, Israel – Feb. 4, 2013 – Led by a team of scientists who are prominent experts in the field of textbook analysis, a new and definitive study disproves the widely-held belief – and concern to the worldwide public – that Israeli and Palestinian school books present dehumanizing characterizations of the other. These characterizations are very rare in both Israeli and Palestinian school books.

The study, “Victims of Our Own Narratives? Portrayal of the ‘Other’ in Israeli and Palestinian School Books,” also found that some books in Israeli State schools have taken steps toward a more balanced examination of historical events and in so doing acknowledge elements of the Palestinian narrative. However, both Israeli and Palestinian school books omit important information about each other, creating obstacles to peace. The school books also present national narratives that consistently describe the other community as acting to destroy or dominate its own community, and its own actions as peaceful and acting in self-defense. The absence of the other on maps provides striking and concrete examples of these contrasting narratives. Unilateral national narratives like these are typical in societies in conflict.

The study was conducted over three years and is among the most comprehensive, fact-based investigations ever done of school textbooks. There are four main findings:

- Dehumanizing characterizations of the other are rare in both Israeli and Palestinian school books.
- Both Israeli and Palestinian school books present unilateral national narratives that present the other as the enemy, chronicle negative actions by the other directed at their own communities, and present their own communities in positive terms. Historical events, while not false or fabricated, are selectively presented to reinforce each community’s national narrative.
- There is a lack of information about the religions, cultures, economies and daily activities of the other, or even of the existence of the other on maps. The absence of this kind of information serves to deny the legitimate presence of the other.
- While present and problematic in all school systems, the negative presentation of the other, the positive, non-critical presentation of the self, and the absence of images and information about the other, are more pronounced in the Israeli ultra-Orthodox and Palestinian school books than in the Israeli State school books.

The study was carried out jointly by Prof. Sami Adwan, Associate Professor of Education at Bethlehem University; Prof. Daniel Bar-Tal, the Branco Weiss Professor of Research in Child Development and Education at Tel Aviv University; and Prof. Bruce E. Wexler, Professor Emeritus and Senior Research Scientist in Psychiatry at Yale School of Medicine. (Academic institutions are referenced for identification purposes only.)

The study was initiated in 2009 by the Jerusalem-based Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, which includes the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the Minister of Religious Affairs of the Palestinian Authority, the Greek, Armenian and Latin Patriarchs of Jerusalem and the Anglican and Lutheran Bishops of the Holy Land, among others. The Council monitors and condemns defamatory statements attacking any religion and desecration of holy sites. In that context, the Council asked Professor Wexler to design,

seek funding for and manage a study of school books used in Israel and Palestine. As the study expanded in scope beyond the Council's expertise and area of activities, the Council asked the scientists, Professors Adwan, Bar-Tal and Wexler, to present the results of the study. The study was funded through a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor.

The study engaged a Scientific Advisory Panel that resulted in the worldwide collaboration of 19 experts, including textbook scholars, social scientists and educators from across the political spectrum of both Israeli and Palestinian communities. The advisory panel includes textbook researchers from Germany who led Germany's self-examination of their textbooks in the decades after World War II, and U.S. scholars who have themselves analyzed school books in Israel, the Arab world, and the former Yugoslavia. The advisory panel reviewed every aspect of the study and agreed on the findings. The panel concluded that the study meets the highest scientific standards and provides an innovative methodological approach to the study of school textbooks. A list of the Scientific Advisory Panel members and their biographies is available at www.IsraeliPalestinianSchoolbooks.blogspot.com.

The researchers developed a new research methodology that employed a standardized, manualized, multi-rater system in order to produce a transparent and scientifically rigorous investigation of current Israeli and Palestinian school books. The research assistants who analyzed the books are all fluent in Arabic and Hebrew. They systematically performed the data acquisition and the data was entered remotely, similar to a blind study, into a database at Yale University so that they, consciously or unconsciously, could not be influenced by how the study was progressing. Statistical analyses were done by members of the Department of Statistics at Yale University.

The study is also groundbreaking in analyzing such a significant number of Israeli and Palestinian school books. The official list of books included those approved by the Israeli and Palestinian Ministries of Education for 2011. The study examined school books used in the Israeli State secular and Religious tracts and from independent ultra-Orthodox schools. Palestinian books were the Ministry of Education's textbooks used in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and a small number of books from the few independent religious schools (Al-Shariah) when relevant to study themes. A total of 640 school books (492 Israeli books and 148 Palestinian books) were reviewed for relevancy to study themes, and content in the 74 Israeli books and 94 Palestinian books with most relevance was analyzed in detail. The researchers analyzed more than 3,100 text passages, poems, maps and illustrations from the books.

The school books covered subjects including Literature, History, Languages (Arabic and Hebrew), Geography, Social Studies, Civic/National Education and Religion. Natural Sciences textbooks covering subjects such as Biology, Math, Physics, Chemistry, Geology, etc., were not included. In addition, Language textbooks were not included, except Arabic language books in the Jewish Israeli educational system (there were no comparable Hebrew language books in the Palestinian system).

The Israeli and Palestinian school books were evaluated simultaneously by the same research team using the same methods for both sets of books. One-third of the Israeli books were analyzed by a Palestinian and one-third of the Palestinian books were analyzed by an Israeli. The units of analysis, called "literary pieces," included poems, stories, text passages, maps and photographs. The analysis examined 2,188 literary pieces from Israeli books and 960 from Palestinian books. The data was entered remotely via the Internet to a database at Yale University and analyzed by members of the Department of Statistics. A total of 670 literary pieces were analyzed independently by two different research assistants. Statistical analysis demonstrated high inter-rater reliability, meaning that two different raters independently evaluated the same poem, passage or map in highly similar ways. The overall sample size of more than 3,100 literary pieces was so large that the results would remain the same if a few hundred literary pieces were eliminated or added.

The Scientific Advisory Panel met in Jerusalem with the research team to review all study methods before data acquisition began, and they monitored work throughout the study. The advisory panel reconvened again in Jerusalem at the end of the study to discuss and interpret the study findings along with the research team.

“From the researchers’ careful analysis of the textbooks, it is clear that both the Israeli and Palestinian school systems need to consider the results of this study, and then formulate and implement a plan for the review and revision of the contents of its textbooks,” said Emily Vargas-Barón, Director, The Institute for Reconstruction and International Security through Education (RISE) and a member of the Scientific Advisory Panel. “The Israeli-Palestinian school book study represents the first phase of their endeavors to achieve this critically important goal to developing education for peace.”

The Israeli-Palestinian school book study was undertaken because school textbooks, among other social processes and agents, play an important role in shaping and projecting public attitudes and future relations between the two communities.

“There is no doubt that school books have a strong influence on forming a child’s identity, attitudes and value systems,” said Professor Adwan. “Textbooks carry the message of official leaders and the majority of children are subject to them. It is important to consider the progress of history in order to understand the significant role of textbooks on this issue.”

“Dealing with the narrative of the other is one of the key issues in any intractable conflict and the peace building process,” said Professor Bar-Tal. “As an ultimate goal, we will need to find a way to reconcile the two conflicting narratives of Israel and Palestine, and even construct a new, united narrative for both groups to adopt. This process is necessary if we aspire to engage in constructing an ethos of peace. School textbooks serve as one of the salient mechanisms of this long and gradual process.”

“We know that it is possible for communities deeply divided by sustained violent conflict to change their narratives and create a different future,” said Professor Wexler. “We hope that this study – which we believe is one of the most public, comprehensive and multi-sided investigations of the content in current Israeli and Palestinian school books – inspires a coordinated effort to move the educational systems in a direction more supportive of peace building.”

About the Study Researchers

Sami Adwan is Associate Professor of Education at Bethlehem University. He is a Fulbright Scholar and his research on Palestinian education, religious education, and school books has been published extensively in academic and professional journals. Professor Adwan has received many prizes for his work in the field of peace education, including the Victor J. Goldberg IIE Prize for Peace in the Middle East, the International Alexander Langer Prize, the European Association for the Education of Adults Grundtvig Award, among others. He has been a consultant to many schools and is a member of the Board of the International Association for Textbooks and Educational Media. He co-authored *The Status of Religious Education in Palestinian Schools* (2001), *Comparative Analysis of the Israeli and Palestinian Conflict in History and Civic Education* (2004), *Participation and Reconciliation, Precondition of Justice* (2011), *1948 Palestinian Refugees Remembered* (2011) and *Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel and Palestine* (2012).

Daniel Bar-Tal is Branco Weiss Professor of Research in Child Development and Education at the School of Education, Tel Aviv University. His research interest is in political and social psychology studying socio-psychological foundations of intractable conflicts and peace building, as well as development of political understanding among children and peace education. He has published 20 books and more than

200 articles and chapters in major social and political psychological journals, books and encyclopedias. Professor Bar-Tal served as President of the International Society of Political Psychology and received various awards for his work, including the Lasswell Award of the International Society of Political Psychology for his distinguished scientific contribution in the field of political psychology. In 2012 he received the Nevitt Sanford Award of the International Society of Political Psychology for engaging in the practical application of political psychological principles, and creating knowledge that is accessible and used by practitioners to make a positive difference in the way politics is carried out.

Bruce E. Wexler is an internationally renowned expert on the scientific study of the brain and human cultures. He is Professor Emeritus and Senior Research Scientist in Psychiatry at Yale School of Medicine, the recipient of multiple awards, and a prolific author, including the 2006 book *Brain and Culture* (MIT Press). For many years, Professor Wexler was a National Institute of Health career research scientist. In 2010 he received a prestigious award from the Director of the United States National Institute of Health for high innovation, high impact, potentially paradigm changing medical research. In addition to his work at Yale, Professor Wexler is founder and president of A Different Future, an international nonprofit organization.

Resources

Additional information about the Israeli-Palestinian school book study can be found at www.IsraeliPalestinianSchoolbooks.blogspot.com. Downloadable materials available in Arabic, Hebrew and English include:

- The complete study report
- More than 1,000 quotes from Israeli and Palestinian text books in Arabic, Hebrew and English
- The Scientific Advisory Panel members
- Biographies of the study authors

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