

EU-funded study of Palestinian textbooks: tempering allegations while feeding a one-sided narrative

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Key points

- The Georg Eckert Institute (GEI) study, funded by the EU, **largely disproves allegations** of widespread incitement to hatred and violence in Palestinian textbooks.
- The study concludes the textbooks overall **adhere to UNESCO standards**. Across almost 200 PA textbooks, it qualified only two instances as antisemitic, both of which have been altered or removed in the latest editions.
- The Israeli organisation continually producing the textbook allegations, **IMPACT-se, is neither impartial nor credible**. The study dismisses its claims as “exaggerated” and based on “methodological shortcomings”.
- There are ongoing **efforts to brazenly misrepresent the findings** of the study as if they confirm the inflated allegations. The opposite is the case.
- The study does suffer from **two main problems**:
 - 1) It **only looks at Palestinian textbooks**, despite similar problems in the Israeli ones.
 - 2) It does a **poor job of contextualising** the Palestinian textbooks in the situation of occupation and tends to view them through the Israeli prism.
- Much of the **debate on Palestinian textbooks is misplaced**. To think that Palestinian anger towards Israel is motivated by textbooks rather than by the daily injustices and humiliations Palestinians suffer under its occupation lacks any basis in reality.
- The EU should **scrap plans to make the textbooks an even greater priority** in EU-PA relations and should instead **prioritise more fundamental concerns**: PA's authoritarian slide, loss of legitimacy, and deepening intra-Palestinian split.

Background on the GEI study

Allegations of widespread incitement of hatred and violence in Palestinian school curriculum have been repeatedly raised in international media and political bodies for more than two decades. Although they had been largely refuted by previous international studies, the European Commission decided in 2019 to commission another study. The study was carried out by the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research (GEI) in Germany, and made public on 18 June 2021. A reference group for the study included donors to the PA education sector: the EU, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Norway, and the UK. (NB: While they contribute to the salaries of teachers and PA education officials, none of them actually fund the textbooks.)

Findings: The study disproves exaggerated allegations.

The [study](#) analysed nearly 200 Palestinian Authority textbooks and teacher guides. The study significantly tempers the exaggerated allegations that the PA curriculum promotes hatred and violence. The core conclusion:

“Palestinian textbooks are produced and located within an environment saturated with ongoing **occupation, conflict and violence**, which they in turn reflect. The analysis revealed a complex picture: 1) the textbooks **adhere to UNESCO standards** and adopt criteria that are prominent in international education discourse, including a strong focus on **human rights**, 2) they express a **narrative of resistance** within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and 3) they display an **antagonism towards Israel**.”

The latter is to be fully expected as this is not a post-conflict situation but one of ongoing Israeli military occupation involving daily violations of Palestinian human rights and a continuing takeover of Palestinian territory.

On the positive side, the study says that "in numerous instances the textbooks call for tolerance, mercy, forgiveness and justice". It also points out improvements in the curriculum since 2017, showing it has evolved in a positive direction.

There are problematic examples but little if any outright incitement or antisemitism.

Incitement: While the study identifies what it calls “escalatory” examples in the textbooks, it does not claim that these necessarily incite hatred and violence. It points out that the link between textbooks and individuals’ beliefs and actions is not very clear.

Antisemitism: The study qualifies one teaching unit in one Islamic education textbook and one drawing in another textbook (across almost 200 textbooks examined) as displaying antisemitic motifs. However, both of these have been positively altered or removed in the latest textbook editions (p. 84-89, 98 and 144-146).

Glorification of violence: The study says the textbooks depict *past* armed struggle as a “legitimate means of resistance in certain periods of Palestinian history, alongside peaceful and diplomatic ways of confronting Israel”. It qualifies two textbook exercises as “glorifying” such past actions or figures (Battle of Karameh against an invading Israeli army in 1968 and Dalal Mughrabi’s commando attack of 1978 – p. 111 and 114-117). This falls far short of generalised glorification of violence and should be considered against Israel’s and other nations’ schoolbook portrayal of their history.

Dehumanisation: The study says textbooks for Arabic language “contain emotionally laden depictions of Israeli violence that tend to dehumanise the Israeli adversary”, e.g. by portraying Israeli soldiers as overly aggressive and brutal. However, the one specific example the study provides, relating to a story of a Palestinian child shot by an Israeli sniper, is questionable (p. 101). Cases of excessive Israeli violence against Palestinian children are well documented and it is hard to expect the Palestinians to describe them dispassionately or with understanding.

Allegations by IMPACT-se are not credible.

The main source of the exaggerated allegations of incitement to hatred and violence in Palestinian textbooks is the Israeli organisation IMPACT-se that has been continually producing reports claiming such incitement for over 20 years. IMPACT-se has been working with supportive parliamentarians and media outlets in Europe and the US to amplify the allegations and put them on the political agenda.

The GEI study says IMPACT-se reports are "marked by generalising and exaggerated conclusions based on methodological shortcomings" (p. 15).

Likewise, UK minister Alistair Burt [stated](#) in 2018: "Our assessment is that the IMPACT-SE report was not objective in its findings and lacked methodological rigour. For example, some claims were made on the basis of a partial or subjective reading of the text, some findings are presented out of context..."

Already in 2002, Council of the EU [concluded](#) that allegations by IMPACT-se (under its earlier name CMIP) against PA textbooks "have proven unfounded".

There is an effort to misrepresent the report.

IMPACT-se and several other Israel-aligned groups and media outlets have been working to spin and misrepresent the GEI report as if it “proves” the allegations, while also attacking it.

In a characteristic, brazen distortion of the report, IMPACT-se [stated](#): “While deeply flawed, [the report] states what has been obvious to all for years: that the Palestinian Authority systematically incites over a million children to anti-Semitism, hate and violence every school day.” The report clearly does not support such hyperbolic claims.

The misrepresentation effort started already a week prior to the report’s publication, with selective and distorted leaks in the German tabloid [BILD](#) and the [Jerusalem Post](#). It has continued after the publication, mainly in [right-wing Israeli](#) and [Jewish outlets](#) as well as [several German papers](#), all of them falsely claiming the GEI report confirms the severe allegations. The same has also been claimed by Israeli [MFA statements](#). In contrast, mainstream international press has not covered the GEI study and the textbook controversy at all.

It is legitimate to disagree with the GEI report but not to twist around what it actually says.

Mismatch between GEI’s FAQ and the report

About a week after publication of the report, the GEI published an extra [FAQ](#) on its website, which provides a distinctly more negative picture of the textbooks than the study itself.

For example, it says that “many sections or chapters are dedicated to themes such as tolerance and the observation of human rights but at the same time the textbooks contain anti-Semitic narratives and glorifications of violence.” This kind of language is not in the study itself – neither in its executive summary nor in the full text. It also does not match the very few examples of alleged antisemitism mentioned above, which have moreover already been removed or altered. Also when it comes to “glorification of violence”, the study is much less outspoken than the FAQ suggests.

Whether the GEI is bending under the pressure of misrepresentations and accusations in the media or whether it reflects different points of view inside the Institute is not clear. This confuses the whole picture, casts doubt on GEI’s professionalism, and risks giving a boost to the misrepresentation efforts.

The study does not address Israeli textbooks, despite similar problems.

Contents aside, the big problem with the GEI study is that it does not address Israeli textbooks – as if bias and incitement is only something the Palestinians do. The responsibility for this goes to the EU, which was politically reluctant to also examine Israeli curriculum when it commissioned the study.

In contrast, a US-government-funded [study](#), published in 2013, reviewed both Israeli and Palestinian textbooks. Carried out by a team of American, Israeli, Palestinian and international experts, the study found broadly comparable levels of bias, selective historical narratives, and omissions of the other side from maps in textbooks on both sides. It also concluded that instances of truly dehumanising or demonising characterisations are statistically very rare in textbooks on both sides. This concurred with previous international [studies](#).

Israeli textbooks are indeed not free of problematic bias. Uninterrupted right-wing control over the Ministry of Education in the past years led to more nationalist content in the curricula, while earlier attempts to bring in critical reading of history and Palestinian perspectives were blocked out. A 2020 study of Israeli textbooks featured in [Haaretz](#) says the occupation of the Palestinians is rarely addressed, calling this an “interpretive denial”. A 2012 [study](#) by another Israeli scholar argues that Israeli textbooks tend to depict Palestinians as either primitive or dangerous, legitimise past Israeli violence and predispose young Israelis to use force against Palestinians during military service.

The inadequacy of addressing incitement on the Palestinian side only is particularly obvious at a moment when Israel has seen nationalist [mobs](#) in Jerusalem chanting "Death to Arabs", has a new Prime Minister known for having made dehumanising [comments](#) against Palestinians, and where numerous [streets](#) are named after Jewish terrorists from the pre-state era.

The best way to improve textbooks is by addressing them on *both* sides of the conflict.

Everywhere there are societies in conflict, the textbooks tend to present unilateral national narratives and portray the other side negatively. As the US-funded study recommends, the best way to improve the textbooks is through a process of a joint review and mutual accommodation of narratives on both sides. While this is probably unrealistic at the moment given the demise of the peace process, it concurs with European [experience](#) of reconciling conflicting historical narratives (e.g. Northern Ireland, France-Germany, Germany-Czech Republic). The GEI itself has led several such bilateral textbook commissions. In this case, however, the EU and the GEI opted for a unilateral approach, feeding a one-sided narrative portraying the Palestinian textbooks as the only ones in need of improvement.

The study does a poor job of contextualisation and tends to look through the Israeli prism.

In a society under a 50+ year-long military occupation with no end in sight, a “narrative of resistance” should be fully expected. Censoring it would not be legitimate. It is hard to expect any society under such repressive rule to portray their occupiers in a particularly understanding or even positive way.

While the study acknowledges the context of occupation and human rights violations, it often fails to adequately account for it. For example, the study says one textbook exercise has an “escalatory character” because it is “geared to internalise the message that occupation forces violate the rights of children” (p. 94). However, such violations have been widely documented by human rights groups and are part of Palestinian children’s lived experience. The authors are concerned about portraying Jewish settler organisations active in East Jerusalem as “deceptive” (p. 102), even though it is hard to describe some of [their tactics](#) differently.

The study tends to view Palestinian history too much through the Israeli prism. Any affirmative mention – or even presence on a photo – of key Palestinian historical figures known for their armed struggle (Abdul Qader al-Husseini, Izz ad-Din Al-Qassam, Khalil al-Wazir) is treated as potentially problematic and as if they should be ideally deleted (p. 74, 110, 140). The study seems to devote more pages to Dalal Mughrabi than all the Palestinian textbooks themselves. There is no consideration of what applying the same filter to Israeli (or European) history textbooks would mean.

The report calls Palestinian maps that fail to show the Green Line or Israel “irredentist” without acknowledging that the Green Line has been all but erased on the ground through Israel’s policy of settling and de facto annexing the West Bank (and without acknowledging the same trend in Israeli textbooks and maps). How can Palestinian textbooks be expected to promote Israel’s legitimacy on 78% of historical Palestine when Israel is in the process of taking over much of the remaining Palestinian territory and its leaders openly declare their intention to hold on it forever and to prevent a sovereign Palestinian state?

EuMEP’s view is that the study cannot be considered objective. That said, it is complex and nuanced. To claim that it confirms the allegations of widespread incitement is a gross distortion.

The study addresses Israeli censorship of Palestinian textbooks in East Jerusalem.

The study looks at how Israeli authorities interfere with Palestinian textbooks for use in schools in annexed East Jerusalem: “References to Palestinian identity or national symbols are removed, as are passages detailing cultural commemorations and remembrance. The removal of entire chapters on regional and Palestinian history fundamentally changes the national narrative.” (p. 169) It is striking

how little attention this kind of identity-erasing censorship gets in Europe and the US in contrast with exaggerated allegations against Palestinian textbooks.

Textbooks used by UNRWA

The use of textbooks by UNRWA is not addressed in the GEI report. UNRWA does not produce its own textbooks – it uses the host country curricula in its schools in its areas of operation. However, UNRWA [reviews](#) the textbooks against criteria based on UN values and guides teachers how to deal with issues of concern. It also has a complementary programme of [human rights education](#) for its schools.

Israeli policies harming Palestinian education

Education is a fundamental human right and is central to the future of any society. Anyone genuinely concerned for the education of Palestinian children should also pay attention to Israeli policies undermining it: [demolitions](#) of Palestinian schools (sometimes [EU-funded](#)), restrictions [banning](#) Gazans from studying in the West Bank, growing restrictions on [foreign teachers](#) at West Bank universities, [military detentions](#) of Palestinian students, etc. A recent report documented c. [300 attacks](#) on Palestinian education in the West Bank over a two-and-half year period.

Fallacies of the one-sided narrative about Palestinian textbooks

Under the Israeli occupation, Palestinians are facing seizures of their land, invasions and demolitions of their homes, violent repression of peaceful protests, barriers to movement, discriminatory access to water, and other violations of their basic rights. The narrative claiming that Palestinian anger towards Israel is motivated by textbooks rather than the daily injustices and humiliations shows a disconnect from reality and a lack of basic empathy.

Reality check: Although Israel censored textbooks used in West Bank and Gaza schools since 1967 till the establishment of the PA in the mid-90s, the Palestinian generations that grew up with them displayed more violent resistance (incl. in the intifadas) than the subsequent ones raised with PA textbooks.

It is not a coincidence that the politicians and organisations most vocal about Palestinian textbooks are conspicuously silent about the occupation and injustices against Palestinians. By promoting one side's partisan narrative that aims to deflect from its wrongdoings and to portray the other as uniquely hateful and violent, they are engaging in exactly the sort of demonisation that they allege in the Palestinian textbooks. Anyone who is sensitive to antisemitism should be wary of such narratives, regardless of whom they are applied to.

EU follow-up: prioritise PA authoritarianism, not textbooks

Following the publication of the study, the European Commission [stated](#) that it will “step up its engagement” with the PA on the basis of the study to address problematic issues “in the shortest possible timeframe”. It wants to set out a specific “roadmap” for this work that will include a “comprehensive system” of “engagement and incentives”, and a process of “screening and monitoring” of the textbooks.¹ This is deeply misguided and problematic for three reasons:

¹ The EU Commissioner in charge – Oliver Várhelyi of Hungary – has also advocated [conditionality](#) of EU assistance to the PA on the textbook changes. Várhelyi's promotion of the Palestinian textbook issue cannot be seen in isolation from Hungary's special [alliance](#) with Israel under Viktor Orbán. Hungary has been, more than any other EU member state, supporting Israeli government's agenda within the EU while regularly blocking EU foreign policy statements critical of Israel. (Meanwhile, [alarming changes](#) to the Hungarian curriculum introduced by the Orbán government – including compulsory reading of antisemitic authors – do not seem to be addressed by the EU despite EU cohesion funds flowing to Hungary's education sector.)

- Wrong priority: Following the cancellation of the first elections in 15 years scheduled for May, the PA is descending further into authoritarianism and entrenching intra-Palestinian divisions. The death of the activist Nizar Banat in PA custody amid a wider crackdown on opponents sends a chilling signal. The EU has invested billions of euros into the PA. To make textbooks – rather than these more fundamental issues – a central issue in EU-PA relations at this point is completely misplaced. Where is a “roadmap” and “incentives” for PA democracy revival and reconciliation?
- Imbalance: No comparable requests are being made of Israel and its curriculum. Instead, the EU is walking further into one of the traps set up by the Israeli government and aligned organisations in order to delegitimise the Palestinian side and deflect from the occupation.
- How far will the EU go? Given the changes already made in the last PA textbook editions, the study is not clear as to what else needs to be changed. It makes no specific recommendations. It points out a number of examples that it finds escalatory or concerning, but this is often vaguely phrased. Antisemitism and direct incitement of hatred and violence against civilians should be the red lines – but the study found hardly any clear-cut examples remaining in the textbooks. Will the EU demand the PA displays the Green Line on all maps - even while it is being erased by Israeli policies on the ground and missing in Israeli maps? Will it demand no positive mention of Palestinian historical figures who were involved in armed struggle in the past, even while Israel celebrates their own? Will it ask to tone down harsh descriptions of severe Israeli violations of Palestinian rights rather than work to end those abuses? There is a point where textbook “improvements” turn into censorship and into deciding for Palestinians what is acceptable to say about their history and lived experiences. Already some of the examples removed from the latest textbooks as reported in the study are questionable or close to that line.

Recommendation: The EU should cease plans to make the textbooks an even greater priority in EU-PA relations and should instead prioritise more fundamental concerns: PA's authoritarian slide, loss of legitimacy, and deepening intra-Palestinian divisions. Regarding the textbooks, the EU should abandon the unilateral approach and instead promote a revival of bilateral formats to address both Israeli and Palestinian curricula, in line with Europe's own experience of accommodating textbooks and overcoming antagonisms between European countries and communities.

About EuMEP

European Middle East Project (EuMEP) is a Brussels-based organisation focusing on European and international policymaking on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Combining the roles of analytical think-tank, advocacy NGO and coordination hub, EuMEP works closely with leading civil society organisations and experts in Israel, Palestine, Europe and worldwide. EuMEP promotes just, fact-based, and effective policies by the EU, European governments, and the wider international community. It supports freedom, dignity and security for all Israelis and Palestinians. **Website:** www.eumep.org. **Contact:** Martin Konečný, martin.konecny@eumep.org