



Turkish, not Saudi, Schoolbooks Under Scrutiny

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In a sign of the times, Turkish schoolbooks have replaced Saudi texts as the focus of criticism of supremacist and intolerant curricula in the Muslim world.

According to a recently released analysis of 28 Turkish textbooks, that country's education system, which was once a model of secularism that taught evolution, cultural openness, tolerance toward minorities, and Kurdish as a minority language, has increasingly replaced those concepts with notions of jihad, martyrdom in battle, and a neo-Ottoman and pan-Turkist ethno-religious worldview in its curricula.

The report, by Israeli research group Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (Impact-se) and Britain's Henry Jackson Society, asserted that recent curricula—in a NATO country that has long aspired to EU membership—include anti-American and anti-Armenian messages, display “sympathy for the motivations of ISIS and Al-Qaeda,” focus exclusively on Sunni Muslim teachings, and replace electives such as Kurdish with religious courses.

Kurds are believed to account for 15-20% of the Turkish population.

The textbooks promote concepts like “Turkish World Domination” and the Turkish or Ottoman “Ideal of the World Order,” the report said.

“Education is a prime pillar in [President Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan's efforts to drape the country in the cloak of Sharia... The Ministry of Education has been pressuring citizens to conform to conservative Islamic practices in public schools,” commented Turkey scholar Soner Cagaptay in a forward to the study.

The study was released as Turkey was attempting to repair relations with Europe and Middle Eastern states, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel, that were bruised by Ankara's aggressive assertiveness in Libya, Syria, the Caucasus, and the Eastern Mediterranean.

[Erdoğan spoke in a video conference](#) to European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in advance of a European summit that was scheduled to discuss relations with Turkey.

The conference came a day after the EU [shelved plans to blacklist senior executives](#) of Turkey's state-owned Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) in retaliation for Turkish drilling for natural gas in disputed waters in the eastern Mediterranean.

The report is likely to add to skepticism about an 11-point human rights action plan recently unveiled by Erdoğan that he said would bolster freedoms and legal protections.

Erdoğan has undermined freedom of the press and the independence of the judiciary and arrested thousands on often flimsy charges since he defeated a failed military coup in 2016. As a result, Turkey ranks today as one of the world's foremost jailers of journalists.

Turkish police recently detained several officials of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), days after a top public prosecutor [demanded](#) the party's dissolution for alleged links to Kurdish nationalist militants.

Parliament also expelled an HDP deputy, undermining Erdoğan's effort to suggest that he is adhering to values projected by Europe and US President Joe Biden.

President Biden, since coming to office in January, has kept Erdoğan in limbo by refraining to give him the customary head-of-government call. White House press secretary Jen Psaki said that [Biden would call Erdoğan "at some point."](#)

Critics link the backslide in Turkish schoolbooks to Erdoğan's Islamist inclinations and support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which has made its home in Istanbul since Egypt's brutal crackdown on the group in 2013.

The fact that [Turkey recently cautioned Brotherhood figures](#) and the group's Istanbul-based media to tone down their rhetoric is going to do little to

convince either them or Egypt, the Gulf States, and Israel that the leopard is changing its spots.

Erdoğan is walking a fine line. His efforts to patch up differences with his detractors threaten to undermine his claim to leadership of the Muslim world in competition with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, and Indonesia.

His projection of himself as the primary defender of Islamic causes has garnered him significant street credibility in various Muslim-majority countries.

The reorientation of Turkey's curriculum serves his aim of raising a "pious generation" at home as well as his positioning of Turkey internationally.

Yet references in Turkish schoolbooks to Jews and Christians as infidels rather than the common reference, the "People of the Book", may go down well with segments of Muslim public opinion but call into question his efforts to dial down the rhetoric and appear more cooperative and constructive.

The fact of the matter is that the textbooks, despite positive references to Hebrew, Jewish civilization, and, for the first time, the Holocaust, contrast starkly with the latest reformed curricula in Saudi Arabia and the UAE as well as efforts by Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim civil society movement, to remove legal categories such as infidels from the faith's jurisprudence.

The contrast with Saudi Arabia is particularly stark given that improvements in Saudi textbooks are the one bright spot in the kingdom's otherwise tarnished effort to portray itself as a moderate and tolerant Muslim leader that has put ultra-conservative supremacist concepts behind it and embraced human rights and the rule of law.

Impact-se and Human Rights Watch recently reported, for the first time in two decades of post-9/11 pressure on Saudi Arabia to remove supremacist references to Jews, Christians, and Shiites, that the kingdom had made significant progress in revising textbooks.

The two groups focused in separate reports on explicit references to other religions but noted that further revisions were needed to eliminate language that disparages practices associated with religious minorities, particularly Shiite Muslims and Sufis, sects viewed as heretical by ultra-conservatives.

By the same token, the UAE last year amended its textbooks as it forged diplomatic relations with Israel. "The treaty is not just presented as a fact in

the textbook. Students are presented with religious, ethical, and national reasons to support the agreement and employ critical thinking in completing an exercise about the importance of peacemaking,” Impact-se CEO Marcus Sheff said.

“The idea that jihad is now part of the Turkish curriculum, that martyrdom in battle is now glorified, might not be surprising given what we know about Erdoğan ... But seeing it in black and white is quite a shock,” [Sheff added](#) in a separate interview, noting that the president has fired some 21,000 teachers and arrested large numbers of academics in recent years. “There was no reason to think he wouldn’t try to influence textbooks,” Sheff said.

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