

ICYMI: Saudi Arabia has been scrubbing its textbooks of anti-Semitic and misogynistic passages

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Staffer,

Hope you are settling in for this new administration and Congress. Want to make sure you saw this story and it finds you well. Please let me know if you have any questions or ever need anything.

Regards,

Tripp Baird

Off Hill Strategies

(703) 965-0388

[Middle East](#)

Saudi Arabia has been scrubbing its textbooks of anti-Semitic and misogynistic passages

The Washington Post

[Sarah Dadouch](#)

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BEIRUT — Saudi Arabia has been sharply criticized over the decades for school textbooks that preach women's subservience to men, anti-Semitism and a general enmity toward

religions other than Islam. But those textbooks have been slowly scrubbed of much of this objectionable content, with particularly significant revisions made in the fall.

Gone is a section on sodomy that was supportive of capital punishment for homosexual relations. Gone are most adulations of extremist martyrdom and its characterization as the highest aspiration of Islam. Anti-Semitic references and calls to "fight Jews" are now far fewer, with the latest edition of a 10th-grade textbook having removed a passage quoting the prophet Muhammad as saying, "The [Day of Judgement] will not come until Muslims fight the Jews, and the Muslims will kill them [all]."

The Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se), an Israel-based group that monitors school curriculums, welcomed the changes. The group's chief executive, Marcus Sheff, called them "quite astonishing."

But some concerns about anti-Semitic themes remain. One textbook still includes a story about a Jewish boy who is saved from hell by being converted to Islam.

Another passage refers to a Koranic text that describes God changing a group of Jews into "real monkeys." A review by IMPACT-se in December said the Saudi textbook ruled out "other, gentler interpretations" of the episode that treat the passage metaphorically.

"Some of the most demonizing passages about Christians, about Jews and about Shiite Muslims have in some places been removed or toned down," said David Weinberg, Washington director for international affairs at the Anti-Defamation League. Particularly of note, said Weinberg, is that the books no longer endorse the death penalty for men having sex with men and for apostasy, sorcery and adultery.

But Saudi Arabia and Israel have yet to establish diplomatic ties, and the textbooks continue to reflect the decades-old animosity as well as the kingdom's traditional support for the Palestinian cause. "There's still a very heavy focus on enmity with Israel and Zionism — which sometimes involved anti-Semitism," Weinberg said, adding that maps in textbooks do not include Israel. "Old hatreds die hard." Although the Saudi government has recently been softening its tone, he said anti-Israel passages in the textbooks will probably be the last to be removed.

The Saudi government did not respond to a request for comment.

Saudi textbooks have long inveighed against anything that diverts from the hard-line Sunni Muslim beliefs that govern the kingdom. Non-Muslims — and in particular, Jews, who are singled out — are considered infidels and have been the most-targeted groups. The practices of Shiites, who follow another branch of Islam and are a minority in Saudi Arabia, have also been heavily criticized.

The Koran, Islam's holy book, is written in complex, archaic Arabic, leaving adherents to depend on interpretations and rulings by religious experts. Conservative sheikhs tend to issue harsher edicts, while liberal sheikhs issue more tolerant or lenient ones.

The textbook editions introduced in 2019 had already made strides, removing lessons that alleged Jewish plans for world domination and deleting a Koranic passage that says men are in charge of women and that wives who continue to stray from the righteous path must eventually be struck by their husbands.

Instead, themes of female empowerment, especially in education and employment, were introduced. One seventh-grade textbook cartoon featured a smiling woman saying, "I think adding material on economics in the course is a positive thing," and a scowling man responding: "What is this opinion? Who even are you to express such an opinion!!!" Underneath, in red, is printed a question — "What is noteworthy in Ahmad's answer?" — to encourage students to critique his response.

But schoolbooks in 2019 still emphasized women's subservience to men and continued to demonize Jews, followers of other religions and gays, and continued to emphasize men's dominion over women. IMPACT-se completed a report on the Saudi curriculum in early 2020, and it was transmitted to the Saudi royal court and the Ministry of Education, according to representatives of the monitoring group.

Sheff said Saudi Arabia then demonstrated a clear institutional effort to make the content more moderate. The revised curriculum introduced in the fall still labels non-Muslims as infidels and continues to criticize Shiite practices. But IMPACT-se's review in December found that there had been notable progress.

Saudi Arabia has been going through a period of dramatic change, ushered in by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. While his ascent to power has brought worsening human rights abuses, he has also sought to modernize the kingdom with a certain amount of cultural liberalization and ambitious economic initiatives. Educational reform has been part of that.

The U.S. government has long turned a critical eye toward the Saudi curriculum, especially after the 9/11 attacks, in which Saudi nationals played a prominent role. U.S. officials have expressed concerns that the curriculum contains what Rep. Ted Poe (R-Tex.), who in 2017 was chairman the House subcommittee on terrorism, nonproliferation and trade, said was "the very ideology that is at the root of many terrorist organizations like ISIS and al-Qaeda." His panel held a hearing that year focused on the Saudi curriculum and educational content, which he said was "full of anti-Semitism, conspiracy theories, and calls to violence that have incited students both at home and across the world."

Weinberg of the ADL testified at that hearing. Three and a half years later, he said he is amazed by the transformation. "Finally, after years of unremarkable changes, they've finally excised some of the hate and incitement in very real ways," he said. "I sure hope they don't treat the current outcome as sufficient, though, because it's simply not."

A State Department official praised the revisions, saying, "We are encouraged by the positive changes in influential textbooks used throughout Saudi Arabia." The emailed statement added: "In addition to supporting textbooks free of intolerance and violence, the

Department is supporting the development of a pilot teacher training program for Saudi teachers."

Textbooks "have a power far greater than any form of media, including social media," Sheff said. He said textbooks have outsized influence in the Middle East, where students see the curriculum as communicating messages formulated by the state and delivered by government employees in the form of teachers.

"And so there is a true understanding of the direct link between textbooks' power to radicalize young people, and it works the other way around: Textbooks have this power to act as a barrier to radicalization, even if young people are getting messages from social media or a crazy uncle at the dinner table," Sheff said.

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EmailAddress	Staffer	FirstName	MemberName	Submission_7
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cesar.ybarra@mail.house.gov	Cesar Ybarra	Cesar	Rep. Biggs	2/1/2021 8:00:37
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