



ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN TEXTBOOK PROJECT

The Texts of "the Others" - An Israeli-Palestinian Textbook Project on the History of the Middle East Conflict

The PRIME Institute (Peace Research Institute in the Middle East), co-founded by the Israeli psychologist Dar Bar-On (Beer Sheva University) and the Palestinian educationalist Sami Adwan (Bethlehem University), has been committed since 2002 to the development of a binational textbook on the history of the Middle East conflict. With the expert cooperation of the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research in Braunschweig/Germany, a team of teachers and scholars is writing a textbook, in which important phases of the conflict-ridden Israeli-Palestinian history of the 20th century are presented from both perspectives. The book shall be used in schools on both sides of the Armistice line of 1967 ("Green Line"). This PRIME project is among the few ones launched in Israel/Palestine, which carry on their work, in spite of the escalating situation since the collapse of the Oslo process.



The photo shows the co-directors of PRIME, Professor Sami Adwan (on the left side) and Professor Dan Bar-On, at a visit to the Concentration Camp Memorial Neuengamme (Photo: Karin Desmarowitz, July 2006)

The idea to develop common teaching materials was born at the time of the Oslo Accords, when there was hope for the development of common action in limited fields, on the basis of factual, unbiased analyses. Yet the attempts undertaken during the short period, when

the word "peace" was linked with concrete prospects for the future on both sides, did not lead either to the full assessment of Civics and History curricula and textbooks used in Israel and in the Palestinian autonomous territories, or to the finalization of relevant recommendations for a common line of teaching and presentation of historical events. Nevertheless, some results of the curricula and textbook studies, the presentation of teaching models and recent developments were published in English language within the Georg Eckert Institute's series. In Israel, several history textbooks came out during the 1990s, which took account of the research of so-called revisionist historiography and broke the formerly monopolistic Zionist interpretation. This triggered a controversy about the approval of these textbooks. However, some of them could maintain their position on the market, in spite or just because of the public debate they had generated. Anyway, Israeli schools are free to also use teaching materials, which have not been officially approved by the competent authorities.

Changes are more far-reaching on the Palestinian side. For the first time, Palestinian curricula and textbooks have been produced for most school subjects and levels, which shall gradually replace the old contents supplied by Egypt and Jordan, and partially censored by Israel.

The new curricula and textbooks are based on the concept of a Palestinian national history. Although the new textbooks have been harshly criticized by some Israeli organizations, the analyses carried out have established in a rather sober way that in particular the Civics textbooks make endeavours towards conflict mediation and balanced thinking. Yet this cannot hide the fact that this interpretation of history is marked by Israel's concept of liberation and attainment of sovereignty. Knowing for certain that in the present situation, it is hardly possible to reach a consensus on a common interpretation of the history of the Middle East conflict, the teachers and scholars committed to PRIME's work agreed upon to produce a textbook in which both narratives are separately taken into account. The aim is to make clear, by confronting diverging interpretations of the events which partially exclude each other, how conditional both



national narratives are, and thus to foster self-critical thinking and mutual dialogue. Within the project, all textbook chapters are being discussed among all team members. A wide consensus on contents should be reached, as far as possible, but in the end, both sides are responsible for their respective texts. This work demands a lot of patience and the capacity to endure tensions and to re-examine one's own identity. When Palestinians and Israelis mean the same, they generally use different words, when they use the same names, they often mean different places. What is said to be a "national catastrophe" on the one side is depicted as a "War of Independence" in the textbooks of the other side. Does the "capital Jerusalem", as illustrated in Palestinian Civics textbooks, only include the Old City and the Arab parts? And how may Israeli pupils imagine an "international resolution" of the Jerusalem issue, when their textbooks show Israeli soldiers standing in front of the Western Wall?

Under the pressure of the escalating events in Israel/Palestine and in the whole region, some of the teachers involved decided to leave the project. However, new team members could be gained. Since 2004, both teams regularly meet for one week at the Georg Eckert Institute, to work in a serene atmosphere on the further development of the teaching material. They can also benefit from the Institute's mediation expertise in past or current conflicts shaking other regions. A teacher's guide facilitating classroom use shall be produced till the end of the current project stage, in February 2007. The project is sponsored by the German Foreign Ministry. From March 2007 on for further two years, funds will be given by the European Commission. The final phase will be devoted to the evaluation of the material based on classroom experience. The project findings will be presented to a wide public within the frame of an international conference.

Project report

- Kriener, Jonathan: "Israeli-Palestinian Teachers' Seminar", *Internationale Schulbuchforschung*, 26 (2004) 3, 321-324

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