



May 16, 2017

**Hamas and the Palestinian Authority's ministry of education undermine UNRWA's intention to slightly moderate the curriculum used in its schools. The dispute between them raised the problem of Palestinian textbooks, which are infused with hostility towards Israel**



Rami Hamdallah (right), prime minister of the Palestinian national consensus government, meets with Pierre Krähenbühl, Commissioner General of UNRWA (April 17, 2017). It was decided not to change the PA curriculum also taught in UNRWA schools in the Gaza Strip (Facebook page of Rami Hamdallah, April 17, 2017).

## Overview

1. In recent months there has been a dispute between Hamas and UNRWA **over the agency's intention to make changes in the curriculum used in UNRWA elementary schools in the Gaza Strip**. Hamas claims the changes UNRWA intends to introduce are intended to harm the "national identity" of young Palestinians and serve Israel. In an effort to prevent changes from being introduced Hamas announced its strenuous objection and initiated "popular" demonstrations in the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip.<sup>1</sup> In addition, **Sabri Sidam, Palestinian Authority (PA) minister of education and higher education**, also expressed his opposition to changes in the curriculum, and announced the suspension of the ministry's ties with UNRWA.

2. **Apparently UNRWA did in fact consider making slight modifications to problematic issues in the Palestinian textbooks by adding "enrichment**

<sup>1</sup> See the April 2, 2017 bulletin, "Hamas Strongly Attacks UNRWA for Its Intention to Introduce Changes in the Curriculum of Its Elementary Schools."

**material"** (UNRWA does not have the authority to unilaterally change the PA's textbooks). However, after the strenuous opposition voided by both Hamas and the PA's ministry of education, **UNRWA Commissioner General Pierre Krähenbühl,**<sup>2</sup> met with **Rami Hamdallah, prime minister of the Palestinian national consensus government,** and **Sabri Sidam, the Palestinian minister of education.** After the meeting Hamdallah announced that there would be **"no change in the curriculum in UNRWA's schools"** and that "any change will be carried out only after full consultation with the ministry of education."

3. Studies, both recent [see below] and past, indicate that the PA's **textbooks teach the younger Palestinian generation the ideology of struggle against Israel, fundamental hostility towards Israel, refusal to accept Israel's existence, a disregard for the strong ties of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel and adherence to the so-called "right of return" of the Palestinian refugees.** The ideology of struggle and hatred towards Israel is manifested, among other ways, in the PA's textbooks. That **blatantly contradicts the claim made by Mahmoud Abbas at the press conference he held with Donald Trump at the White House.** Mahmoud Abbas said, "we educate our children, our descendants and our sons on a culture of peace. We are working to have them live in security, freedom and peace like the other children in the world, among them, children in Israel" (Wafa, May 3, 2017).

4. **In ITIC assessment, UNRWA finds itself is in a quandary** when it comes to the sensitive issue of textbooks, as well as other unsettled issues with Hamas (for example the double identities of Hamas activists who are employed by UNRWA). On the one hand, UNRWA is under pressure from Hamas and the local population controlled by Hamas (and in this case, joined by the PA). On the other, **UNRWA's budget is being threatened with cuts by the donor countries (especially the United States), which exert pressure on the agency and demand it make changes in the way it is run.** Apparently, **in the meantime the pressure on the ground has more influence on the agency.**

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Krähenbühl was born in Geneva, Switzerland. He holds a B.A. in Political Science and International Relations from the University of Geneva and an M. A. from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. He has been UNRWA's Commissioner General since March 2014, appointed by then Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. He serves at the level of Under Secretary General.

## The sequence of events

5. On March 16, 2017, Hamas' organ al-Risalah published an article by Wassam Afifa, which gave examples of changes in the curriculum which Hamas claimed UNRWA was planning to make:

a. **Removal of maps of Palestine from textbooks and no mention of Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine.**

b. **No mention of cities in Israel which were "occupied" by Israel in 1948:** "...In describing the weather and climate in a city like Tiberias, Tiberias was replaced by Gaza, and Safed was replaced by Nablus. Thus we are prevented from even mentioning our cities occupied [by Israel] since 1948. [That is] an outrageous blow to our [Palestinian] principles" **[Note:** Hamas regards Tiberias and Safed as "occupied Palestinian cities" and for Hamas, Israel has no right to exist].

c. **Coeducational education:** showing boys and girls together dancing the *debka* [a Middle Eastern folk dance] in lessons about Palestinian traditions.

d. **No use of the word "Palestine" as a didactic measure to teach the letter "t."** To teach the letter in the first grade, the word *yaqtin* (pumpkin) is used instead of "Palestine" (leading Wassam Afifa to write, "UNRWA turns Palestine into a pumpkin").

e. **No glorification of Palestinian prisoners:** a play about Palestinian villages welcoming released prisoners was replaced with "a fairy tale about people welcoming a prince."

f. **Improving the image of Israel:** UNRWA removed the topic of "rebuilding a home which the occupation [i.e., Israel] destroyed in the West Bank and Jerusalem."

6. Hamas was joined in its strenuous opposition to curriculum changes by **Sabri Sidam, minister of education and higher education in the Palestinian national consensus government in Ramallah.** He told the media that **his ministry would not permit UNRWA to change the curriculum** (al-Araby al-Jadeed, March 29; i24news.tv, March 25, 2017). **To increase the pressure on UNRWA, the Palestinian ministry of education in Ramallah decided, on April 13, 2017, to suspend its relations with UNRWA.**

7. **Sabri Sidam, Palestinian minister of education, told Palestinian TV that until UNRWA changed its mind, relations with the agency would not be renewed.** He called for a **"peaceful intifada" against UNRWA** and appealed to the Palestinian UNRWA staff and the "popular committees" in the refugee camps **to rise up against UNRWA's intention "in cultural ways" and to quietly protest UNRWA's intention** to change the curriculum (in a video uploaded to YouTube on April 13, 2017, by a Palestinian named Fathi Abu Sa'ada from Khan Yunis. It included a segment from an interview given by Sabri Sidam, Palestinian minister of education, to Palestinian TV. The subject of the interview was the suspension of relations with UNRWA).



**Sabri Sidam, PA minister of education, interviewed by Palestinian TV about the decision to suspend relations with UNRWA (YouTube, April 13, 2017).**

## UNRWA announces it will not change its curriculum

8. Apparently the combination of pressure from both Hamas and the Palestinian ministry of education bore fruit and led UNRWA not to carry out its intentions. On April 17, 2017, **Rami Hamdallah met in his office in Ramallah with Pierre Krähenbühl, Commissioner General of UNRWA.** According to an announcement later released by UNRWA, they discussed the various issues related to the Palestinian refugees, among them **the issue of the curriculum taught in UNRWA schools.** According to Krähenbühl, "The discussion with the Prime Minister was very important, reflecting the solid and constructive partnership between the Palestinian government and UNRWA" (UNRWA website, April 17, 2017).



**Pierre Krähenbühl, Commissioner General of UNRWA (Twitter account of Pierre Krähenbühl, April 8, 2017)**

9. Krähenbühl told that, in conformity with its practice since the 1950s, based on an agreement with UNESCO, **UNRWA taught host-country curricula in its schools.** That included the Palestinian Authority's curriculum and he said **UNRWA has no intention of changing the practice.** He told the Prime Minister that it had **"long been UNRWA's practice to review newly issued textbooks and to produce enriching teaching material."** That was done, he said, through dialogue with the Palestinian Authority, in particular the ministry of education and higher education, and **in full recognition of the right of Palestinian students to learn about their identity, history and culture.**<sup>3</sup>

10. As opposed to the convoluted announcement from UNRWA, the Palestinian announcement about the meeting was **shorter and far clearer: Rami Hamdallah, the prime minister of the Palestinian national consensus government,** reported on his Facebook page that at the meeting it had been decided that **"no change will be made in the curriculum taught in UNRWA schools"** and that **"any change will be made in full consultation with the ministry of education [of the Palestinian national consensus government]."**

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/commissioner-general-unrwa-meets-palestinian-prime-minister-ramallah>

وتم الاتفاق خلال الاجتماع على انه لا تغيير على المناهج التي تدرس في مدارس وكالة الغوث، وأي تعديل عليها يتم بالمشاورات الكاملة مع وزارة التربية والتعليم.

Facebook page of Palestinian prime minister Rami Hamdallah: at the meeting with Pierre Krähenbühl, the decision was made not to change the curriculum taught in UNRWA schools (Facebook page of Rami Hamdallah, April 17, 2017)



Palestinian prime minister Rami Hamdallah meets in his office in Ramallah with Pierre Krähenbühl (second from left) (Facebook page of Rami Hamdallah, April 17, 2017).

11. The day after the meeting, April 18, 2017, **Sabri Sidam, the Palestinian minister of education**, met in his office in Ramallah with Pierre Krähenbühl. **The results of the meeting were posted to the Palestinian ministry of education's Facebook page:**

A. "The **UNRWA Commissioner General** noted the agency's full commitment to the Palestinian curriculums. He said no change would be made that would harm the curriculums" (Facebook page of the Palestinian ministry education, April 18, 2017).

B. "Pierre Krähenbühl explained that the agency [UNRWA] considered itself a primary partner of the [Palestinian] ministry of education, especially in the field of education. He said it was the right of Palestinian children to receive a high-quality education and preserve the fundamentals of their identity and culture. He praised the active cooperation between UNRWA and the ministry [of education], which is manifested by the intensive efforts invested for Palestinian students, and said

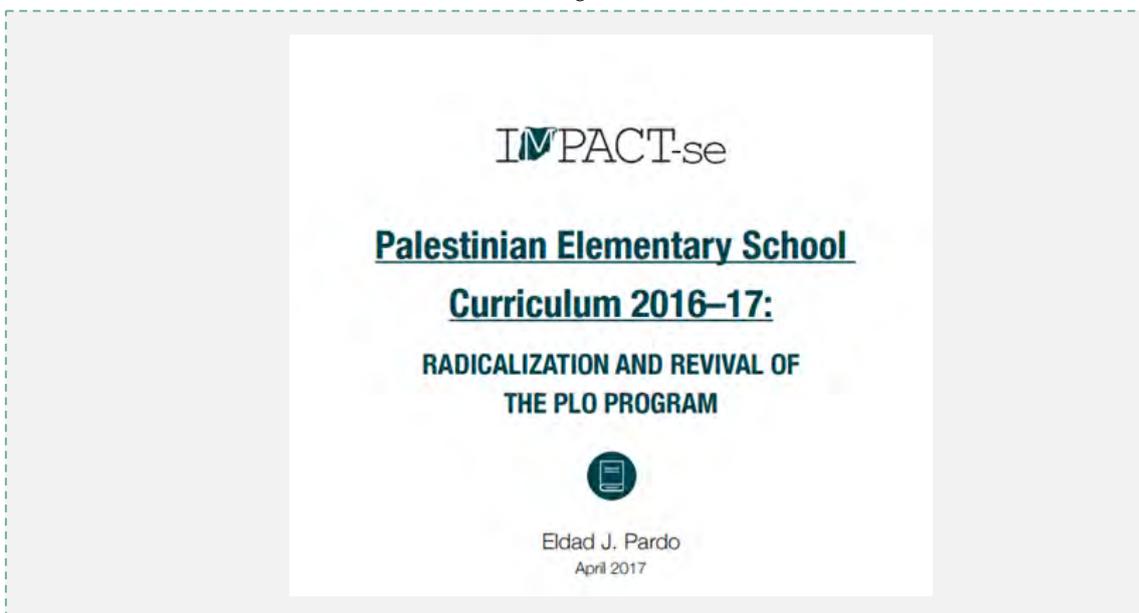
that **all enrichment of material in Palestinian textbooks would be coordinated between the [Palestinian] ministry [of education] and the agency**" (Facebook page of the Palestinian ministry education, April 18, 2017).

## The problematic nature of Palestinian textbooks

12. The affair of amending the Palestinian textbooks **is not, in ITIC assessment, a unique event in the relations between UNRWA and Hamas and the PA. Rather, it reflects a problem deeply rooted in principle.** UNRWA, which runs (and funds) its education system in Palestinian refugee camps, **is forced to use textbooks issued by the Palestinian ministry of education which inculcate the ideology of struggle against Israel, hatred and hostility towards it. Absent are universal values and peace.** UNRWA's attempts to make even minor adjustments, especially in view of the pressures exerted by donor countries, **again failed.**

13. Reports issued over the past ten years have repeatedly indicated that hostility toward Israel is ingrained in the Palestinian curriculum. The most recent report was issued by **IMPACT-se (Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education) of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem**, which dealt with a study of textbooks and curriculums to promote peace and tolerance through education. The study was carried out by **Dr. Eldad J. Pardo** from the Hebrew University and entitled **"Palestinian Elementary School Curriculum 2016-17: Radicalization and Revival of the PLO Program" (April 2017).**

14. The executive summary of the report begins, "The new Palestinian curriculum, which includes new textbooks for grades 1-4, **is significantly more radical than previous curricula.** To an even greater extent than the 2014-2015 textbooks, **the curriculum teaches students to be martyrs, demonizes and denies the existence of Israel and focuses on a "return" to an exclusively Palestinian homeland.**" It continues, "Within the higher-grade textbooks, **there remain an absolute lack of empathy for the "Other,"** nor any comprehension or explanation of the root causes of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. **Thus the hatred of Israel persists"** (ITIC emphasis throughout).



The front page of the study carried out by Dr. Eldad Pardo for IMPACT-se of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

15. The findings of the study were consistent with those of two other studies done on Palestinian textbooks. One was published by a German research institute in 2016 and the other by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center in 2006.<sup>4</sup> **The similarity of all the findings demonstrates the consistent, systematic education provided for the younger Palestinian generation which inculcates the children with hostility towards Israel, even if the textbooks are occasionally replaced. The findings of the studies contradict the remark made by Mahmoud Abbas at a press conference held with Donald Trump at the White House, where he claimed, "we educate our children, our descendants and our sons on a culture of peace. We are working to have them live in security, freedom and peace like the other children in the world, among them, children in Israel" (Wafa, May 3, 2017).**

<sup>4</sup> The study was carried out by the German institute "Mideast Freedom Forum Berlin" (MFFB), which, according to its website, has, "Over the past years...worked to combat anti-Semitism, hostility towards Israel, Islamism and right-wing extremism." On March 12, 2016, it published a report called "Educating the Next Generation. Changing Palestinian Textbooks as a Precondition for Mutual Understanding." Its main findings appear under the title "**An Analysis of the Representation of Israel and Jews in Palestinian Textbooks.**" For a discussion of the report see the April 20, 2016 bulletin "About the Report of the Mideast Freedom Forum Study of Palestinian Authority Textbooks by Brigadier General (Ret.) Amos Gilboa." Another study published on March 7, 2006 was written by Ms. Noa Meridor, "**An examination of Palestinian fifth and tenth-grade textbooks for the 2004-2005 school year shows a continuing denial of the State of Israel's right to exist and a continuing cultivation of the values of armed struggle against Israel. The books contain incitement against the State of Israel and the Zionist movement, one of them even employing anti-Semitism.**"



**Mahmoud Abbas and Donald Trump hold a joint press conference at the White House. Mahmoud Abbas claimed the PA educated its children on a "culture of peace" (Wafa, May 3, 2017).**

**16. The educational policies which foster hostility towards Israel, and are reflected in the Palestinian textbooks, are manifested more strongly in the Gaza Strip.** In Gazan schools the policies are accompanied **by informal education led by principals and teachers who are affiliated with Hamas.** They inculcate the school children with **Hamas' radical Islamist ideology**, not necessarily based on textbooks. **Schools not run by UNRWA allow semi-military training to be held on their premises (the al-Futuwwa, "youth, heroism," program), to prepare the younger generation to join the ranks of Hamas in the future.**



**The al-Qaraqe school (east of Khan Yunis) uploaded pictures and selected videos to YouTube from the al-Futuwwa camps held in the school in 2015 and 2016. The students practice infiltrating IDF posts and abducting IDF soldiers (YouTube, May 10, 2017).**



**Children participating in the al-Futuwwa project at the Jamal Abd al-Nasser school in the eastern part of Gaza City photographed holding real and dummy rifles. In the background are senior figures from the Hamas administration's education and interior ministries in the Gaza Strip (Dunia al-Watan, April 4, 2013).**