

From a Jewish and Democratic State to a Jewish State, Period:

An Analysis of Modifications to the Civics Textbook

“To Be A Citizen in Israel: A Jewish and Democratic State.”

Executive Summary

Over the last few years, the civics curriculum used in Israeli high schools has found itself at the center of a heated political debate, which has taken place in the public sphere, within the professional ranks of the Ministry of Education, in the Education Committee of the Knesset and in the media. Consequently, a number of changes were recently made to the most widely used civics textbook for state and state religious high schools (Ministry of Education, 2011). In the Hebrew edition of the textbook, eight new chapters were introduced, in place of five previous chapters (to date, six of these have been translated into Arabic for use in Arabic speaking schools). These new chapters - which focus on the characteristics and the definition of Israel as a Jewish state - were introduced into classrooms during the 2012-2013 academic year.

The purpose of this report is to offer a thorough examination of recent changes in civics education in Israel as they are reflected in the eight new chapters. The report draws on an in-depth analysis of the Hebrew version of these chapters and focuses on the following:

1. The extent to which the new version of the textbook corresponds with the aims of civics education as stated in the official curriculum guidelines. Special attention will be paid to the pedagogical approach adopted by the new chapters.
2. An identification of inaccuracies and distortions in the new chapters - in particular in relation to the way in which the book presents the idea of liberal democracy.
3. The civic approach adopted by the textbook and the clear preference it gives to ethno-national discourse.
4. The ways in which the Arab-Palestinian minority is portrayed and the challenge this representation poses for teachers and students in Arab schools and for democratic education in Israel, generally speaking.

One of the central and most troubling findings of the study relates to the way in which the state of Israel is conceptualized. If the previous version of the textbook was organized around the definition of Israel as both *Jewish and democratic*, the new chapters much more heavily emphasize Jewish characteristics of the state. The new version of the textbook strengthens the legitimization of the state of Israel as a Jewish ethnic state, while presenting the ethno-national model as the dominant, and to a great extent, the sole model. Indeed, throughout the eight new chapters the definition of Israel as both Jewish *and* democratic is hardly mentioned. Furthermore, even when it appears, the way the material is framed and organized sends a clear message to the students that the Jewish element of Israel's definition takes

precedence over the democratic one. Indeed, the ethno-national model is presented as the preferred and almost exclusive political model.

The new chapters also reflect a change in pedagogical approach. The previous version adopted what might be characterized as a 'thick' pedagogical approach; in this type of pedagogy, assignments encouraged students to think critically and independently through meaningful engagement with controversial social and political issues. In contrast, the eight new chapters adopt a 'thin' pedagogical approach which much more strongly encourages rote memorization and internalization of the primary messages the text is seeking to convey. Questions posed to students are closed-ended while student assignments reward them for their ability to memorize and comprehend the material instead of strengthening their ability to form and defend positions. Moreover, when the text encounters topics which are politically or socially controversial - in particular those which deal with the definition of the state and Israeli citizenship - students are often presented with leading questions whose answers can be found in the body of the text.

Inaccuracies and lack of clarity are another serious problem, particularly in relation to the textbook's presentation of the idea of nationalism. In the three chapters dedicated to the idea of nationalism and Jewish nationalism, it is presented interchangeably as both a modern *and* ancient idea. The motivation behind this seems to be clear – to strengthen the Zionist narrative which forges a link between modern Jewish sovereignty and ancient Jewish rule over the land of Israel during first and second temple periods. This narrative serves as the basis for the justification of the definition of Israel as a Jewish state. As such, the textbook creates an artificial distinction between nationalism and nation-states – both of which are presented as modern concepts - and Jewish nationalism which is presented as an ancient idea.

The new chapters are characterized by a monolithic approach which emphasizes a single civic discourse – the ethno-national one. At the heart of this approach is the idea of belonging to a single, homogeneous, ethnic-national group. This creates clear social boundaries between 'us' and 'them;' whereby access to full citizenship and civic rights are granted first and foremost by virtue of belonging to the dominant ethnic-national group. Through its promotion of this model, the new version of the textbook normalizes the position of ethnic minorities as second class citizens and justifies infringements of their rights. In the eyes of the text, such acts are viewed as a harm which is unavoidable – and even justifiable - in order to realize the vision of the ethno-national state. For example, the textbook introduces the idea that placing limits on the ability of ethnic minorities to influence the public domain and express their religious and cultural traits in public as acceptable. While this idea is presented as being consistent with liberal democracies, in actuality, it serves to strengthen the ethno-national discourse. Strangely, this rather narrow approach is in conflict with the goals of civics education as declared by the curriculum guidelines whereby civics studies is meant to promote a shared notion of citizenship.

Lastly, the report addresses the problematic representation of Arab-Palestinian citizens in Israel in the new version of the textbook. When discussing their status and identity, generally speaking, and in chapter eight more specifically, the book employs a discourse which has been considered to be

unacceptable since the 1980's. It de-emphasizes, almost to the point of complete lack of recognition, this groups' shared national identity as Arabs and/or Palestinians. Rather, Arab citizens in Israel are portrayed as a collection of religious and cultural subgroups. Surprisingly, when Arab national identity is referred to, the textbook make use of the term 'pan-Arab' thus emphasizing Arab Palestinian citizens' connection to other Arab nations and giving students the impression that Palestinian self-determination can and has already been achieved in the context of Israel's 22 neighboring Arab nations. More investigation is needed to see how this term, which was commonly utilized in the previous century, is relevant for Arab students today.

Furthermore, discussion regarding the Arab-Palestinian minority is lacking important context. The information provided to students is disconnected from today's social and political reality; students are not given a complete picture of the complicated historical factors which have shaped Israel's Arab community nor does the text appropriately address their social and political reality today. For example, chapter two notes that they 'became' a minority but there is no explanation or historical narrative as to how this happened. The social and economic status of Arab-Palestinians in Israel is another topic area lacking in context. While the textbook provides the reader with statistics about their rate of participation in the labor market, it does not explain the reasons for their disadvantaged position. Moreover, given the way in which the data is presented, one could assume that their low rate of participation is due to a lack of desire to be productive and contributing members to the state and their lack of belonging to the state. Similarly, while both institutionalized and symbolic discrimination against Arab citizens is well-documented, this is not addressed by the textbook. This is a glaring omission given the chapters' general lack of recognition of the Arab minority's collective rights.

In light of these findings, the report urges the Ministry of Education to take the following steps:

1. Given the large number of inaccuracies and deficiencies in the text, the author recommends that use of the new chapters be suspended until the Ministry of Education can complete a serious examination of the new textbook.
2. A more balanced textbook is needed. To this end, the author suggests appointing additional academic advisors from diverse academic and political perspectives to provide professional input.
3. In order to avoid the deficient way in which the Arab-Palestinian minority is represented in this version of the textbook, and in an attempt to create a common textbook that can be fully embraced by different groups, Arab experts, academics and educators (as well as individuals who are independent of the Ministry) should be included in a meaningful way in the process of formulating the textbook.