UNRWA textbooks still include hate, antisemitism despite pledge to remove — watchdog

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/unrwa-textbooks-still-include-hate-antisemitism-despite-pledge-to-remove-watchdog/>

An Israeli watchdog has found that educational textbooks produced by the UN’s Palestinian refugee agency continue to contain incitement to violence against Israel and hatred of Jews, despite promises to remove such content.

Instead, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has hidden the material by removing it from its public educational [online portal](https://keeplearning.unrwa.org/), the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) said in a statement Thursday.

According to an IMPACT-se report, UNRWA-produced educational literature “contains material that encourages jihad, violence and martyrdom, promotes antisemitism, and promotes hate, intolerance, and lack of neutrality.”

“False conspiracy theories teach students that Israeli policies include attempts ‘to erase Palestinian identity,’ to ‘steal and falsify the Palestinian heritage,’ and to ‘erase the cultural heritage of Jerusalem,'” the statement said.

The educational content, which was distributed in the West Bank and Gaza this year, does not appear on UNRWA’s new educational portal, even though it was produced by the official UNRWA Department of Education.

“They were drafted, supervised, approved, printed, and distributed to thousands of students by UNRWA teachers and staff, whose names also appear on the materials as contributing to or supervising the content,” IMPACT-se said.

IMPACT-se noted that UNRWA claims that it posts all of its self-produced material on the website for the sake of transparency.

There was no immediate comment from UNRWA on the report

IMPACT-se CEO Marcus Sheff said in the statement that UNRWA promised last year to remove all offending content.

“It seems that UNRWA has interpreted this as removal from the website where it can be scrutinized, rather than removal from actual classrooms,” Sheff said. “UNRWA was again made aware of our concerns just two months ago.”

Among the content that IMPACT-se flagged was a grammar exercise teaching that “the Palestinians sacrifice their blood to liberate Jerusalem,” the statement said.

Other exercises include sentences about “Jihad warriors” against “the occupier,” commitment to “liberate” Palestine, and “resisting the enemy courageously,” according to the report.

A poem teaches students that to die as a martyr by killing Israelis is a “hobby.”

“The poem glorifies the rejection of a peaceful ceasefire during battle, presenting peace-making as a sign of weakness,” it said.

Islamic education material depicts Jews as “inherently treacherous, and hostile to Islam and Muslims,” including another grammar exercise implying that Jews are impure and defiling the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem.

“Israel is described as having been implanted by an imperialist, European, colonial, anti-Arab conspiracy with the goal of dividing the Arab world,” IMPACT-se said.

Israel is erased from the UNRWA material and the entire area of the Jewish state is labeled as modern-day Palestine. Students are given exercises of naming Israeli cities as Palestinian, it added.

IMPACT-se said its report shows that UNRWA material does not live up to its claim to align with “UN values of neutrality, human rights, tolerance, equality, and non-discrimination with regard to race, gender, language, and religion.”

The group said it had met with UNRWA’s Commissioner-General Philip Lazzarini in May to raise its concerns over “hate materials produced by UNRWA and secrecy over teaching materials.”

IMPACT-se also provided Lazzarini with a copy of its report before it was published.

Though Lazzarini has said there are “robust internal mechanisms” to ensure the content matches UN values, IMPACT-se accused UNRWA of refusing to make the process public “or to disclose key documents, and the exact methods it uses to combat the deeply problematic Palestinian curriculum.”

IMPACT-se noted that in June, US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield raised the issue of UNRWA textbook content at a House Appropriations Committee budget hearing and declared it was “a red line for all of us.”

Sheff said the majority of the $338 million that the US funds for UNRWA goes to education.

“Surely, the will can be found to enforce policy, given that red lines are being crossed so egregiously,” he urged.

In January 2021 a similar [report](https://www.timesofisrael.com/monitoring-group-unrwa-textbooks-glorify-terror-deny-israels-existence/) from IMPACT-se found UNRWA-produced material to be “rife with problematic content that contradicts stated UN values.”

In a statement released following the publication of that report, UNWRA vowed again to crack down on incitement.

UNWRA chief Lazzarini said in a tweet at the time that “there was no place [for] incitement to hatred/violence in UNWRA schools.” He asserted that the inciting material had been published by accident.

Israel has long pushed for UNRWA’s closure, arguing it helps perpetuate the conflict with the Palestinians, since it confers refugee status upon millions of descendants of those originally displaced around the time of Israel’s War of Independence in 1948.

US President Donald Trump’s administration supported Israel’s stance by cutting aid in 2018. Washington had been providing UNRWA $300 million a year, roughly a third of its core annual budget. The Biden administration has reinstated the funding.

There has been similar criticism of textbooks produced by the Palestinian Authority.

The European Parliament passed a [resolution](https://www.timesofisrael.com/eu-parliament-passes-resolution-condemning-hate-speech-in-palestinian-textbooks/) in 2020 condemning the Palestinian Authority for continuing to include hate speech and violent material in school materials, stating it “is concerned that problematic material” in Palestinian school textbooks had not been removed.

However, in January this year, IMPACT-se found that the PA [textbooks](https://www.timesofisrael.com/despite-eu-vow-to-end-incitement-palestinian-textbooks-remain-unaltered-report/) have remained largely unchanged.

Palestinians reject the argument that their textbooks constitute incitement. In a speech to the United Nations last year, PA President Mahmoud Abbas defended the curriculum as merely expressing the Palestinian national narrative.