



REPORT

THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

MYTHS AND LEGENDS: MODERN HISTORY AND NATIONALISTIC PROPAGANDA IN EGYPTIAN TEXTBOOKS

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Patrycja Sasnal

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Introduction

In 2011, Egyptians overthrew their authoritarian president, Hosni Mubarak. Since then, tumultuous shifts in civilian rule and military interventions have marred Egypt's transition to democracy, prompting speculation about the potential for reversion to an authoritarian system. How revolutionary was Egypt's change and how much of it remains? Among the most basic barometers of overall systemic revolutionary change is the education system and, more precisely, the way history is taught.¹ "History is written by the victors," Winston Churchill was to have remarked, and so history is often rewritten after a revolution. The victors usually want the old narrative removed and their own, new vision presented in textbooks, as they are understood to shape young people's understanding of the past and present, thus they are conducive to the survival of the new regime.

In fact, since the revolution, there has been hardly any change in the way school textbooks shape Egyptians' views of their country. In contrast, other countries that underwent a revolutionary change from an authoritarian to a democratic system have made such changes a priority, knowing how critical a role textbooks and curricula play in forming the national psyche. In the 1990s in Poland and South Africa, changing history course syllabi was one of the first decisions of the new governments.² This may lead to a conclusion that there is no institutional (and perhaps overall) awareness of a deep systemic change in Egypt if the most delicate lining of the system is not being substantially altered. Furthermore, the modern-history curriculum—sullied by simplism and distortion—implants a very specific image of Egypt in a young mind. Egyptians are taught an elaborate mythology that has little to do with reality and lives its own life regardless of political change.

¹ See W.E. Marsden, *The School Textbook: Geography, History and Social Studies*, Woburn Press, London, 2001.

² Textbooks and changes in the curriculum were already introduced in 1990. Z. Osiński, "Osiąganie celów ideologicznych i politycznych za pomocą treści podręczników historii dla szkoły podstawowej w latach 1944–1989," in: S. Roszak, M. Strzelecka, A. Wieczorek (eds.), *Polska–Europa–Świat w szkolnych podręcznikach historii*, Stowarzyszenie Oświatowców Polskich, Toruń, 2008, pp. 199–211.

Changing History after 2011

There was some hype about the scope of changes that were going to be made to history curricula after the 25 January revolution in Egypt. It caught students in their midterm break in February.³ Before they returned to schools in April 2011, a committee had already been formed by the Ministry of Education to oversee the changes.⁴ The committee⁵ recommended a three-pronged approach: new content should be added (information about the revolution); old content should be removed (mostly information and pictures of Hosni and Susan Mubarak); and some corrections should be made to the existing history curriculum.

The first changes were introduced to the curriculum and textbooks in the next school year, 2011/2012. The most relevant subjects in this regard are Civics⁶ (*tarbiyya wataniyya*), Arabic, and most important, History. In primary and preparatory school,⁷ a subject called Social Studies consists of history and geography. In secondary school, these two are separated and a history textbook *per se* is used. Civics is introduced in the secondary school and Arabic has a history component to it throughout the formative years. Making substantial changes to the history curriculum thus requires intervention in the curricula of three subjects, each with a textbook for almost every semester of every school level.⁸

The most vivid examples of change are in three textbooks. The textbook for Social Studies for Year 6 of primary school, Chapter 4, titled “Egyptian personalities” (ca. 20 pages), was almost completely modified.⁹ Instead of personalities (Nasser, Sadat, Mubarak, scientists) there are now three revolutions—1952, the war of 1973 and 2011. In the Social Studies textbook for Year 3 of preparatory school, the changes were not as striking, but nonetheless important. In the 2011/2012 textbook, a short, five-page chapter was added about the 2011 revolution and new political parties, and a couple of graphics changed (see Pic. 1). The covers of both textbooks were also changed (Pics. 2 and 3).

³ Altogether they were absent from school for at least two months.

⁴ S. Farid, “Chapters Praising Mubarak Regime Removed from Egyptian Textbooks,” *Al Arabiya*, 21 April 2011, www.english.alarabiya.net. The recommendations of the committee were not entirely accurate. If press reports are to be believed they made claims that, for example, Mohamed Naguib needed to be reintroduced into the textbooks as the first president of Egypt in 1952 because he had previously been omitted (source, *ibidem*). See also another article that mistakenly claims that pre-2011 textbooks had Nasser as the first president: W. Hussein, “Egyptian School Curriculums Dictated by Ruling Powers,” *Al-Monitor*, www.al-monitor.com. That claim is false: Naguib is described as the first president in both of the history textbooks for 2009/2010 for secondary school and 2010/2011 preparatory school. See p. 200 in *Al-Hadara al-Islamiyya wa tarih al-Arab al-hadith, Ath-thanawiyya al-amma*, 2009/2010 and 2012/2013. See p. 82 in *Ad-dirasat al-igtimaiyya. Giugrafia al-alam wa tarih Masr al-hadith, As-saf ath-thalith al-'idadiyy*, 2010/2011. In that book, Naguib is also on the cover, so is Mubarak, Sadat and Nasser.

⁵ Apart from the committee, under the Ministry of Education there is a separate body called the Center for Curriculum and Instructional Materials Development, which also participates in the development of curricula. Its Facebook page is www.ar-ar.facebook.com/ccimd.cairo.

⁶ The equivalent English subject would be Civics although the Arabic name of it literally means “motherland education” and content-wise is necessarily different from English civics lessons.

⁷ It concerns Egyptian curriculum only, both public and private, but does not apply to international or Al-Azhar schools.

⁸ The Egyptian education system has three parts: primary school lasts six years (pupils are 6 to 11 years of age), preparatory school lasts three years (students are 12 to 14 years of age) and secondary school is also three years (students are 15 to 17 years of age).

⁹ In the pre-2011 textbook there were four lessons in the chapter, titled “President Gamal Abdel Nasser,” “President Muhammad Anwar as-Sadat,” “President Muhammad Hosni Mubarak,” “Contemporary Egyptian Scientists.” After 2011 these were changed to “The Revolution of 23 July 1952,” “The October War (heroic crossing) of 1973,” “The 25 January (freedom and dignity) of 2011.” Source: Social Studies textbook, Year 6, primary school, *Wataniyy Hayatiyy, Ad-Dirasat al-Igtimaiyya*, 2010/2011 and 2012/2013, pp. 89–113 in both.



Pic. 1. Social Studies textbook for Year 3, preparatory school, the front graphic of the subchapter about political parties, women and civil society. Pictured are Hosni and Susan Mubarak in the middle in the 2010/2011 book on the right, and a woman voting in the newer one, from 2011/2012, on the left.



Pic. 2. Covers—Social Studies, Year 3, preparatory school, from left: 2010/2011, 2011/2012, 2013/2014.



Pic. 3. Covers—Social Studies, Year 6, primary school, from left: 2012/2013, 2010/2011. Apart from the removal of the Egyptian leaders, the change of background—from the Red Sea to silos and a mosque—is also of note.

But the most elaborate history compilation in the Egyptian curriculum—the secondary school history textbook—has hardly changed at all. The only change in the 2012/2013 version is the removal of Hosni Mubarak’s name in the description¹⁰ of the air raid over Sinai in 1973 and his picture from p. 237 (Pic. 4). In the 2013/2014 history textbook another change is made—information about other leaders in the 1973 war has been added, including a picture and short description of Saad al-Shazly,¹¹ a critic of the 1978 agreement with Israel, who was subsequently in conflict with Anwar Sadat. A mistake was also corrected: in pre-2011 textbooks, Sadat was described as participating in the Palestine War of 1948, which he did not. Adding to his pan-Arab posture, he used to be described as “the hero of war and peace.”¹² These corrections and additions are supposed to show how Mubarak-era distortions are being corrected.



Pic. 4.

¹⁰ Literally only Mubarak’s name is removed from that description: “220 Egyptian planes set out to do a task set by [Hosni Mubarak] the leader of the air force.” See *Al-Hadara al-Islamiyya wa tarih al-Arab al-hadith*, 2009/2010 and 2012/2013, p. 237 in both textbooks.

¹¹ History, Year 3, secondary, school, *Tarih Misr wal-Arab al-hadith*, 2013/2014, p. 153.

¹² Social Studies textbook, Year 3, preparatory, *Wataniyy Hayatiyy, Ad-Dirasat al-Igtimaiyya* 2009/2010, pp. 96–97.

In textbooks for other subjects, i.e., Arabic, references to the Mubaraks were rare. For example in the Arabic textbook for Year 1 of preparatory school, a reference to Susan Mubarak and her programme for popularising reading was removed,¹³ as was another exercise that asked students to find information about the leaders of Egypt, among them Mubarak.¹⁴ In Arabic, Year 5 (primary school) in a lesson about Nagib Mahfuz, a picture of Mubarak congratulating the writer has been removed.¹⁵ These are most of the changes that could be found in a thorough process of comparing the old and new textbooks.

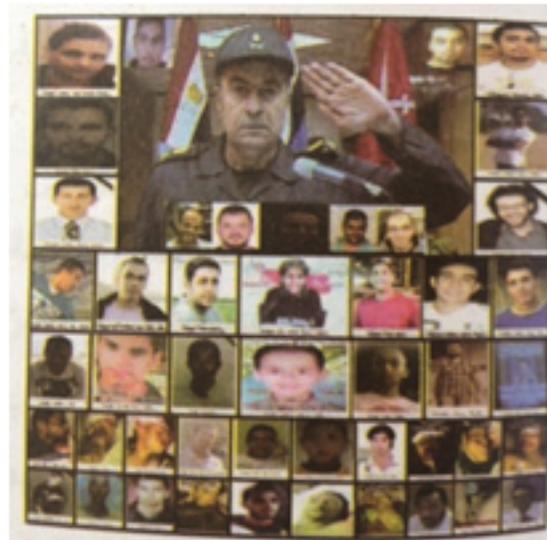
One subject that needed a complete restructuring, however, was Civics (*Tarbiyya Wataniyya*). The 2010 textbook, subtitled “the civilisational role of Egyptian society,” was written by different authors than the post-2011 textbooks. New textbooks were printed with a lot of new content, mostly about the 2011 revolution and civil society.¹⁶ However, the subject—Civics—is neglected throughout the educational system: there is only one class per week in two years of secondary school, but usually students take Arabic or Social Studies instead of Civics to catch up with the other, more important curricula rather than devote time to *Tarbiyya Wataniyya*. Civics grades do not count towards a student’s overall secondary school score and neither students nor teachers pay much attention to it. In fact, in the first term of 2013/2014, the Civics textbook was distributed to students one week before the end of the term.

Simplistic Representation of the 2011 Revolution

The 2011 revolution was added to the curricula as early as the 2011/2012 and more has been added in subsequent years. Even though it is visible as a topic, the information provided is oversimplified. The perfidy of it is that the new content is usually presented in the context of the military, not as a “people’s revolution” but one that happened thanks to the army. Grave omissions include information about the discontent with the rule of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces in 2011 and events involving Muhammad Mahmoud street in Cairo.¹⁷ In the imagery, a notable emphasis is given to the role of the army and its unity with the people (see examples in Pics. 5–7).



Pic. 5.



Pic. 6.

¹³ Arabic textbook, Year 1, preparatory, 2010/2011, p. 63.

¹⁴ Arabic textbook, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

¹⁵ Arabic textbook, Year 5, primary school, 2010/2011, p. 25. An exercise to learn about other Nobel prize winners (El-Baradei, Sadat, Zwait) was also removed from that textbook on p. 27.

¹⁶ See Civics, Year 2 and Year 3, secondary school, *Al-muwatana wal-huquq al-insan*, 2013/2014 and *At-tarbiyya al-wataniyya*, 2012/2013.

¹⁷ Clashes here between protesters and police in November 2011 resulted in more than 40 people killed.



Pic. 7.

As the primary reasons given for the revolution, “external” ones are presented first, including the fact that Egypt lost its leading role in the Arab and African world, which led to “foreign interference in the region, loss of confidence in the Western powers, their standing behind Israel, lack of response to the needs of the Palestinian people and aggravation of the Arab–Israeli conflict.”¹⁸ This is a new addition in the 2013/2014 textbook. Among the internal reasons, “economic opening” and “privatisation” are singled out (additional information is presented in a box alongside the text) and implicitly described as negative. This kind of representation is probably supposed to appeal to the general public’s feeling of anger at what Egyptians call the “neoliberal” policies of Mubarak. Prioritising the external factors of the revolution may also steer opinions in the direction of believing there was an external conspiracy and play on anti-Israeli sentiments, but it is inaccurate in terms of the demands of Egyptians at the time of the revolution.

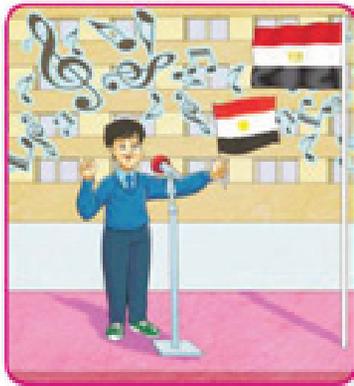
These examples come from textbooks for teenagers, but information about the 2011 revolution has also been added to textbooks for younger pupils. It has been smoothly interwoven with the existing nationalistic message in the very same way as other historical events (i.e., the 1973 war). For example, in the Arabic lesson “Beautiful memory,” 8-year-olds are asked, “what did you like most in the revolution?” (Pic. 8). The most emphasised aspect in this lesson is that the people, the army and the police are together. In another Arabic reading lesson, “the most beautiful day” is described: a boy singing at school about the revolution and freedom with a picture of him



Pic. 8.

¹⁸ Social Studies textbook, Year 3 preparatory, *Wataniyy Hayatiyy, Ad-Dirasat al-Igtimaiyya*, 2013/2014, p. 80.

surrounded by Egyptian flags (Pic. 9). The exercise that follows asks students to choose whether these sentences are true or false: 1. The most beautiful of motherlands is mine. 2. All motherlands are like mine. 3. My motherland is a model of freedom.¹⁹



Pic. 9.

This kind of representation of the 2011 revolution may serve a different, greater purpose—instilling the very same myth of Egyptian pride and sense of change even though the system has hardly changed and is not something to be proud of. The fear of criticism of authority is visible even in these meagre, extremely cautious post-2011 additions.

All these modifications, however substantial they may appear to some, need to be seen in the context of the whole curriculum as laid out in three subjects and more than 30 textbooks—these changes have only been made in a couple of them. The majority (more than 90%) of textbooks were written by the same authors.

These changes can be summarised as slight and aimed at removing direct references to the Mubaraks in text and graphics (with one exception²⁰) and adding information about the revolution. In the changed information, Mubarak is not particularly vilified but not a result of a sober analysis of history, but probably because of the ingrained fear of criticism of authority that remains after 2011. There have been no changes in the most fundamental ways history is told in Egyptian schools. The defining moments of history are presented in the very same distorted and simplistic ways as before.

History by the Book and Mubarak Propaganda

Irrespective of the political changes—pre- or post-2011—the short history of Egypt that is transmitted to the student has remained constant and includes the following defining moments: antiquity is given a special, incommensurate place in the curriculum (primary, prep and secondary school all have a year devoted to this very topic). In a mysterious leap, the students are then taken straight to Prophet Muhammad and Islamic history with the great Umayyad and Abbasid leaders, doctors and philosophers. In the modern era, the focus is on Muhammad Ali and the fight against the French and the British occupations, which led to the 1919 revolution and Saad Zaghloul. Finally, the absolutely most important event in Egyptian history takes place, the 1952 revolution, which leads to the victorious war of October 1973, a great victory by the Egyptian army, and the 2011 revolution right after that.

¹⁹ The two examples are taken from the Arabic textbook, Year 2, Term 2, primary school, 2013/2014, pp. 46 and 58.

²⁰ Post-2011, his picture remains in the Social Studies book, Year 3 prep, 2013/2014, p. 86, as one in the sequence of the presidents of Egypt.

When asked about their memories of history classes and the events they memorised best, history students today often mention how these classes improved their national feelings and ideas about Egyptian leaders and the importance of unity between Arab nations. Egypt is described as a strong state that has particular influence over other Arab states: “one of the best countries in the past that had fallen into political and economic decline because of colonialism.”²¹ In the past (possibly antiquity), it was a pioneer state that inspired other nations. Countries took Egypt very seriously in their decisions because it was a strong and influential country. These memories reflect decades of a propagandist and distorted history curriculum that contradicted the reality of the students’ lives.

In the pre-2011 period there was some propaganda related to Mubarak himself in the textbooks but it was neither ostentatious nor omnipresent.²² A large section of the Civics book published before 2011 is devoted to Arab nationalism and contains the most vivid examples of propaganda, some of which has disappeared (the Mubarak appraisal) but some (general nationalistic feelings) has remained.

In the textbook, the renewal of Egyptian society included education reform, put down as the first decision by Nasser in 1952, who added civil subjects to the religious Al-Azhar curriculum. The textbook goes on to describe Hosni Mubarak’s achievements: when Hosni Mubarak became president he made national, popular education one of his goals; he issued the document “Mubarak and education—A look into the future.”²³ Education is portrayed as a fundamental pillar of national security (*aman qawmiyy*). Civic participation as one of the traits of democracy is mentioned, as is the role of creating more opportunities for learning and lessening burdens for families. Then, three pages about economic reforms after 1952 follow and a part about the “achievements of Mubarak in reforming the Egyptian economy”²⁴ along with his picture. He introduced reforms “felt everywhere in the country,” it notes. His first concern was food safety for all Egyptians, says another part, and he reformed agriculture (i.e., through increased exports to the EU). Other of Mubarak’s plans (giving ownership of land to young graduates, reconstruction of Sinai, reforms in the transport system) are praised.

The third part of the textbook is about the political renewal of Egypt: the constitution of 1971 finally instilled a “truly democratic” and pluralistic order, so finally after the disaster of 1967 it freed the Egyptian people from trepidation and fear of the future.²⁵ The great war of 1973 allowed for the recovery of Sinai. The greatest achievement in terms of the social renewal of Egypt is social justice—providing services at low prices, education, the creation of various councils (national/popular council of women, popular council for childhood and motherhood, etc.). The concept of Arab nationalism is explained in the following chart:

Foundations of Arab nationalism					
specific			general		
spiritual unity	unity of roots (Sam bin Nuh, father of the nation)	common culture	common history	common language	common climate and region

²¹ This information is based on interviews with current and former students of different ages.

²² In the effort to compare pre- and post-2011 history textbooks, one cannot escape the general conclusion that the older ones are not as bad as expected despite the propagandist note. In fact, the older the textbook the better quality it is. A history book from the 1990s is quite good on history in that it covers especially those parts that the current books do not: geographic discoveries, 19th century European history, the first and second world wars, etc.

²³ Civics, secondary school, 2010/2011, p. 24.

²⁴ Civics, secondary school, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

²⁵ Civics, secondary school, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

Under Mubarak, religious references are clearly avoided but present. There is no mention of terrorism but an emphasis on commonality. The democracy and human rights narrative is also omnipresent in the pre-2011 textbooks. In the Arabic textbook for Year 1 (2008/2009 version, preparatory school) the first chapter is “Know your rights” and consists of lessons on topics such as “freedom” and “our motherland.”

The Propaganda That Remains: Glorification of the Army and Nationalism

The larger problem in teaching history that has not been addressed yet is the glorification of the army and the propagation of a particularly nationalistic feeling—both date back more than half a century. If there was a revolutionary change in the way history was taught in Egypt, it was after the 1952 revolution. The change engrained a specific nationalistic attitude of bringing Egypt back to its people and vilifying “imperialists” and the deposed King Faruq. After all, it was the first time in more than 2,000 years that Egypt was finally being ruled by an Egyptian. Nasser wanted to incite nationalistic pride after decades of colonialism and then-recent scandals.²⁶ His intentions are understood and *per se* cannot be discredited, but the creation of new nationalistic feelings and the apotheosis of Egypt have morphed into an unrealistic mythology.

With time and the growth of new state structures, that narrative has been calcified. Since 1952, the great leaders of Egypt have not erred and their misfortunes are either absent from the curriculum or blamed on “outside” forces.

Egypt the Bold

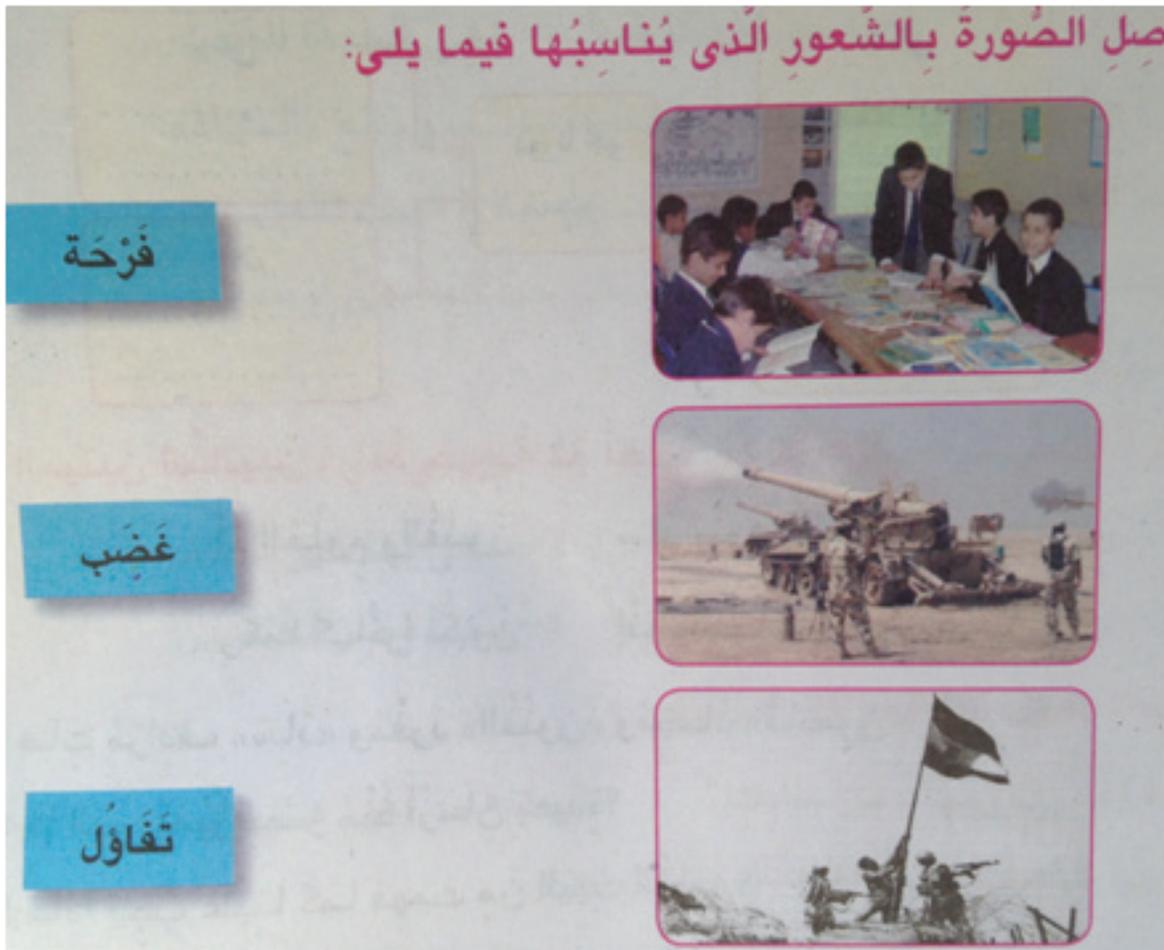
Textbooks published before and after 2011 contain a multitude of references to the army. It may be understandable in a country that has fought three wars in the past 70 years, but the abundance and context of these references verge on propaganda. For example, the Year 1 Arabic textbook shows a picture of a soldier above the caption “my motherland,” with pyramids, the Nile, factories and an Egyptian flag in the background (Pic. 10). The image captures the essence of how Egypt is represented



Pic. 10.

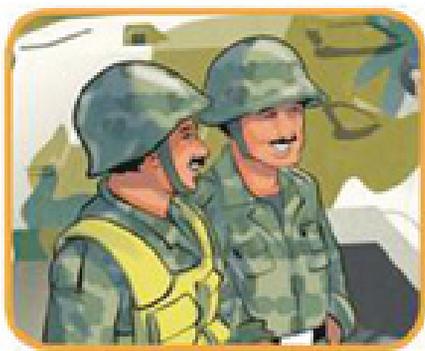
²⁶ The scandals involved King Faruq and his entourage. He had been accused of purchasing faulty weaponry that exploded in the faces of Egyptian soldiers during the 1948 war with Israel—an instance so incredible that pupils sometimes make fun of this information in textbooks as they think it is fabricated. Among other things, the King was also notorious for owning one of the biggest libraries of pornography in the world.

in textbooks in general and is ingrained in the collective mindset. An exercise (Pic. 11) for Year 5 of primary school (Arabic class) promotes a militaristic, nationalistic message combined with a sense of



Pic. 11.

self-creation. It asks students to describe the feelings that the three pictures stir. Two of these pictures show tanks and war, one shows a school. The words that need to be attributed to them are: anger, optimism, pride.²⁷ The army is clearly propagated both in the imagery—a soldier carrying a little boy with the caption “the military and the people are one” (Pic. 14, for other examples see Pics. 12–13)—and in readings (an officer is “brave,” a soldier is “strong”).



Pic. 12.



Pic. 13.

²⁷ Arabic textbook, Year 5, primary school, 2009/2010, p. 34.



Pic. 14.

Even the new information about the 2011 revolution is militarised. In the Arabic textbook for Year 2 in primary school (7-year-olds) one drill tells pupils to describe three pictures—a civilian shaking hands with soldiers, a tank, and Khalid Said—with one sentence²⁸ (Pic. 15). Such an exercise binds a civilian symbol—Khalid Said, a victim of police brutality—with military symbols, obscuring the differences between institutions of coercion and civilian institutions.



Pic. 15.

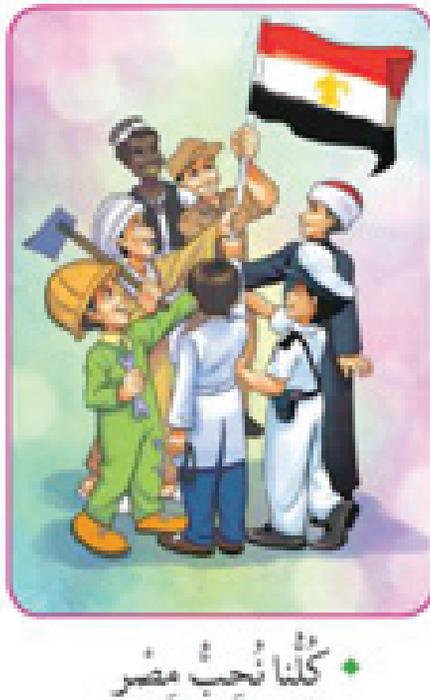
Egypt the Beautiful

Another recurring topic is the way Egypt is presented to the student: it is the most beautiful country in the world, one that has two seas (the Red Sea and the Mediterranean), a strategic location on two continents (Africa and Asia), the best climate (always sunny) and the longest river in the world, the Nile. Because of these national treasures and its strategic location it has constantly been

²⁸ Arabic textbook, Year 2, Term 1, primary school, 2012/2013, p. 32.

in danger of foreign intervention or occupation—that deduction, by many accounts, is implied throughout the history curriculum.

In the imagery, this is manifested in the proliferation of the Egyptian flag: kids often rally around the flag or salute to it (Pic. 16 with the caption “We all love Egypt,” and Pics. 17–18). It is not surprising that the home country is idealised in its textbooks. What is, however, unusual is the multitude of nationalistic references combined with the scarcity of information about the outside world as well as the connection that the textbooks make between the extraordinary specificity of Egypt and the fact that it has always been a victim of foreign intervention or interest.



Pic. 16.



Pic. 17.



Pic. 18.

The Muslim Brotherhood Did Not Change the Textbooks

In 2012, a parliament dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood was formed and Mohammad Morsi became president in June 2012. He later appointed Ibrahim Deif, considered independent, as minister of education. There is little analysis about the changes in textbooks in the time when the Muslim Brotherhood had the majority in parliament and Morsi was president. Even experts base their opinions on what they think happened and not on what actually happened. Some experts are certain that the Muslim Brotherhood “changed everything” in the textbooks, including adding their own history,²⁹ while others claim that MB wanted to introduce such changes but did not have enough time and, despite Morsi, the lower echelons of the ministries remained intact. Both statements are only partially true. The authors of the textbooks remained mostly the same in the school years right before and after 2011. The only textbooks that the MB could have had an impact on are the 2012/2013 or 2013/2014 versions. The contents, however, compared with 2011/2012 hardly changed, and even these changes do not seem to be imposed by the MB.

²⁹ There are claims that the MB were stopped just in time to prevent them from imposing an “outrageous” curriculum. M. Kennedy, “Teaching Recent History in Egypt,” *NPR*, 5 October 2013, www.npr.org.

If there is a single book that deserves a closer look with regard to the Muslim Brotherhood and possible changes it might have made, it is probably the *Tarbiyya Wataniyya* textbook “Citizenship and human rights” for Year 2 of secondary school. First, there is a religious aspect to the change of covers. Religious references—the Coptic cross and Quran—were removed (see Pic. 19). In an example of another change in the newer version, the part on “political consciousness in Islam” is moved further up front in the book.³⁰



Pic. 19. The cover on the left shows a Coptic cross and the Quran, which have been removed from the newer cover on the right.

These mild but visible changes may lead to the conclusion that under Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood the ministry clerks, who oversaw school curricula, most probably out of institutional avidity, changed only as much in the existing textbooks as they needed to please the new authorities without really altering the substance. Perhaps they did not have enough time to introduce meaningful changes, but this does not seem to be the case if elsewhere new content was added (a substantial change). Perhaps the new authorities simply did not have a plan to change them. Overall, it seems that the ministry clerks wanted to do just as much to please the MB authorities on the one hand as to keep the curriculum essentially the same on the other.

³⁰ *Al-muwatana wal-huquq al-insan*, 2013/2014, p. 19.

Conclusion: Mystified History, Distorted Revolution

“Education and power are terms of an indissoluble couplet. It is at times of social upheaval that this relationship between education and power becomes most visible.”³¹ This is strikingly visible in Egypt today. If, as a result of what is dubbed a revolution, only insignificant changes are made in history textbooks—one of the most accurate barometers of systemic change—then the revolution has not happened yet. There does not seem to exist an institutional (and perhaps overall) awareness of deep systemic change in Egypt. The institutions that are responsible for school syllabi—from the prime ministerial and ministerial levels to clerks, consultants and authors of textbooks—seem convinced that mere references to the Mubaraks were the greatest problem in history textbooks, neglecting the nationalistic and militaristic propaganda.

The current situation is a result of a sort of vicious circle: the institutions and the people who create them—taught a nationalistic, biased, divorced-from-reality version of history and worldview, unaccustomed to criticising authority, rewarded for obedience—cannot conceive of a different educational system. How could they? Real change can either come via an order from the very top or when the people in the lower echelons are replaced. Neither has happened in Egypt and, by that token, it proves the existence of a natural but unrealised auto-censorship—the fruit of decades of propaganda.

Among the reasons for this continued mythological take on history is first and foremost a certain negligence throughout the post-1952 decades. In 1952, the new authorities recognised the need to create a sense of national pride, to give Egypt back to Egyptians after centuries of colonialism and clientelism. But the exaggeration in propaganda did not fade with time—reality has changed but the tone in the curriculum has remained. Nationalistic feelings have created a certain inferiority complex, diminished critical thinking, and distorted Egyptian history. The authoritarian system bred authoritarian institutions, such as the ones responsible for curricula, and in time morphed into a bureaucratic behemoth preoccupied with its own survival, divorced from the changing realities, and neglecting the sense of service for which it had been created in the first place. Corroborating that possibility, a former ministerial advisor, when asked if there was a specific message about modern history in Egyptian textbooks, answered: “I would appreciate if there was a message because that would mean that there is a vision. But there is none.”

The overall poor system of education in Egypt shares some blame. The Global Competitiveness Report 2013–2014 ranks Egypt among the very worst performing countries in the overall quality of its educational system (145 out of 148) and the quality of primary education specifically (148 out of 148).³² Another explanation for the insignificant changes in the post-2011 modern history curriculum is that they had to be made in some haste before the new 2011/2012 year was about to start,³³ but then in the next years there was more time for revisions, though they were not undertaken. The most probable explanation, however, is that the system—the decision-makers, ministry officials, scientific councils—thought and still think that this is a proper way to teach history. The fact that new information about the revolution was added and Mubarak removed proves that the institutions are aware of the social need for change, but there has not been a serious attempt at objectivising history yet.

³¹ M.W. Apple, L.K. Christian-Smith (eds.), *The Politics of the Textbook*, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 2.

³² *The Global Competitiveness Report 2013–2013*, World Economic Forum, p. 177.

³³ The unsophisticated nature of the post-2011 changes would point to the validity of this argument: covers were quickly changed without any substantial changes to the curriculum itself, the 2011 revolution content was added as the last subchapter in the last history lesson, to name a few.

What seems as a major recurring rule in the teaching of history is that authority must not be criticised.³⁴ It is another explanation for why recent changes do not include a deeper revision of history curriculum but instead cosmetic changes are made in order to suit almost any current government. An analysis of the new content related to the 2011 revolution shows that possibly out of bureaucratic avidity the curriculum creators not only shy away from criticism but also want to please the highest authority. When that authority is the army outright (as it was in 2011 and since the second half of 2013), history syllabi tilt towards glorifying that institution. What may be most likely after Abd el-Fattah al-Sisi is elected president of Egypt is a further petrification of that history textbook content—a complete reversal of what is expected from a democratisation process after a revolution. It is recommended that changes in the history curriculum be monitored in the coming years as this will serve as a litmus test of the direction in which the system is going.³⁵

There is a clear gap between contemporary life in Egypt and the history curriculum, slowly but surely depriving the latter of credibility. The schools are unable to relate to the most important events in the country. What Egyptians live is absent at school. The most vivid example of this is that the Muslim Brotherhood is nowhere to be found in any Egyptian textbook, either pre- or post-2011. The story of its formation, role in internal affairs, crackdown in the 1950s, etc., has all been omitted. Likewise, there is no mention of internal struggles of other kinds, such as the bread riots of 1977 or the conscription riots of 1986. These events, however, are the ones that Egyptians remember as they happened in front of their own eyes, for some while they went to school. There is not any information about the conflicts between the army and Sadat and Mubarak. There is also no information about the rule of Morsi. The gaps in history—as told by these textbooks—cannot go unnoticed, even for an average Egyptian who has spent his last 15 years at school. History is chopped, specific events are selected for comment while others are left out without any explanation, and no background is given. In the newest textbook (Social Studies, Year 6, primary school) after the 1952 revolution comes the 1973 October War, and right after that the 2011 revolution.³⁶

Some Egyptians say that “there’s an element of magic to our history,” With Sisi as president, history will make a circle and go back at least 33 years to when Mubarak was grabbing the reins of power. But even school kids know that without magic, time does not go backwards. The myths and legends are becoming less and less credible.

³⁴ Except for King Faruq.

³⁵ Since education is such a good barometer of national politics, there’s a clear need for more studies of Egyptian curricula—the few reports available and information in media outlets are either inaccessible, too specific (for specialists) or sometimes inaccurate. For example, according to NPR (U.S.) “the national curriculum has also morphed with every change in leadership.” See M. Kennedy, *op. cit.* There is, for example, an obvious but neglected and rarely studied factor of authoritarian zeal that prohibits lower-level clerks (still trying to fathom their own place in the future governmental system) and school teachers from changing history lessons substantially.

³⁶ The overall sequence of historical events in the same textbook but for preparatory school is this: 1952 revolution, “Egypt and the Palestinian question,” 1973 October War, “Egypt and the Arab-Israeli conflict,” 2011 revolution; M. Kennedy, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–82.

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