

## **Press Release:**

**Embargoed for 00:01 Thursday 1st April**

### **Academics uncover bias in GCSE history textbooks**

- *Report finds alterations to textbooks on Middle East conflict 'dangerously misleading'*
- *Academics say Israel advocates are targeting school children with propaganda under the guise of education*
- *NEU passes motion to express concern and to seek clarification*
- *Report concludes books are 'not fit for purpose' and calls for them to be withdrawn*

A group of academics have called for the immediate withdrawal of two GCSE textbooks which they say distort the historical record and fail to offer students a balanced view of the Israel/Palestine conflict.

The eight-page report, by Professors John Chalcraft and James Dickins, Middle East specialists in History and in Arabic, respectively, and members of the British Committee for the Universities of Palestine (BRICUP), found hundreds of changes to the textbooks - averaging three changes per page.

The report found that alterations had been made to text, timelines, maps and photographs, as well as to sample student essays and questions - concluding that 'school children should not be supplied with propaganda under the guise of education.'

The Executive of the National Education Union (NEU) has expressed its concern about the findings outlined in the report as well as the editorial process which led to the changes to the textbooks, and will be contacting the publishers for clarification.

The books, published by Pearson, titled *Conflict in the Middle East* and *The Middle East: Conflict, Crisis and Change*, are read by thousands of GCSE and International GCSE students annually. The alterations were made after an intervention by the Board of Deputies of British Jews working together with UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI).

The report noted that despite the scale of the changes the books carry no notice that they have been revised.

#### **Key Findings from the Report:**

The text changes include

- Providing distorted definitions of international law or mis-stating it
- Removal of reference to some historical events, and the insertion of others
- Changes in the language used to describe particular events or groups of people
- Changing statements of fact into statements of opinion, and vice versa

John Chalcraft, one of the authors of the report, explained: “Narratives in this area are inevitably contested. Overwhelmingly, the changes which have been made to these texts add or substitute statements, information and interpretations which favour an Israeli narrative, and remove or replace those that support Palestinian narratives. The overall effect is to make these books dangerously misleading.”

### **Example of change found in report – the characterisation of violence.**

One aspect of the textbooks’ account which has been the focus of intensive revisions is the description of acts of violence and of those who committed them. Many references to Jewish and/or Israeli violence and aggression have been removed or softened, while references to Arab and/or Palestinian violence or aggression have been systematically added or intensified.

In the original version of the domestic GCSE textbook there are 10 references to Jewish terrorism and 32 to Palestinian terrorism (in each case including use of ‘terror’, ‘terrorist’ or ‘terrorism’). After revision there are 4 references to terrorism by Jewish groups, and 61 references to terrorism by Palestinian ones.

The change of emphasis is pervasive, not always captured by a word count. For example the original version had the observation that ‘Fedayeen were freedom fighters or terrorists, depending on one’s point of view’. This has been revised to ‘Fedayeen were terrorists who fought for Palestinian freedom’.

### **Reactions to the report**

**Eugene Rogan FBA, Professor of Modern Middle Eastern History at the University of Oxford said:** “Given Britain’s historical responsibility, it is particularly important that the subject be taught in a way that is impartial and objective. It is a betrayal of such objectivity to allow Israel advocates the opportunity to edit teaching materials without giving Palestine advocates an equal opportunity to provide input. The result can only undermine confidence in the impartiality of the teaching of an intensely complex and sensitive issue.”

**Neve Gordon, Professor of International Law and Human Rights at Queen Mary University of London, said:** “Through their rigorous analysis of two GCSE text books, Professors John Chalcraft and James Dickins uncover how hundreds of revisions have been inserted in order to modify and distort historical and political facts relating to Israel/Palestine. Their report suggests that when accredited publishing houses allow lobbying groups to help

develop high-school curriculum, knowledge is replaced by indoctrination and our children are encouraged to adopt biased thinking.”

**Khaled Fahmy, Professor of Arabic Studies, Kings College Cambridge, said:** “While it is laudable that Middle Eastern history books are regularly revised and updated, the manner in which these two school textbooks have been revised is shocking and unacceptable. School textbooks should be revised based on the advice and expertise of academics and scholars, not by reviewers selected by an organisation of lawyers whose rationale is advocating for a foreign country.”

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## Notes for editors

1. **For further information** please contact [contact@bricup.org.uk](mailto:contact@bricup.org.uk) or [chair@bricup.org.uk](mailto:chair@bricup.org.uk)

2. **Origins of the review of the textbooks**

The review of the textbooks was sparked by the Zionist Federation in late 2019. It launched an online petition for the books’ removal.

By early 2020 both the Board of Deputies of British Jews and UK Lawyers for Israel had engaged with Pearson about the alleged bias in the books. In an interview with *The Bookseller* a Pearson spokesperson said “An independent review of the text by an educational charity found no overall evidence of anti-Israel bias. It identified some areas where the balance of sources could be improved and we are updating the texts.”

In a statement (See Note 5) the Board of Deputies state that the detailed changes actually implemented were attributable to its collaborative work with UK Lawyers for Israel, stating ‘*we are pleased with the final material*’.

The authors of the report on the alterations to the texts said that they are unaware of any consultation by Pearson with Palestinian historians or proponents of counter-balancing narratives.

3. **Further reaction to the report:**

**Caroline Rooney, Professor of African and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Kent said:**

"It is alarming to discover that these school textbooks have been extensively revised in a manner that is inconsistent with a scholarly academic review process. It is important for pupils to learn to distinguish between different perspectives on a conflict and

propagandist bias produced by those with strongly vested interests in one side of a conflict. The revised textbooks are not fit for purpose."

**Ken Jones, Emeritus Professor of Educational Studies at Goldsmiths University of London, said:**

"History depends upon evidence and interpretation. Where interpretations differ, students should have the means to explore them. The revision of these textbooks denies students those means and steers them towards selective and incomplete narratives."

**Henry Maitles, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of the West of Scotland, said:**

"The amendments seem to me to take some perfectly balanced books and turn them into one-sided, biased resources. It is important in dealing with contested issues that a balanced approach is taken. These changes take these textbooks away from this. They are now in danger of being seen as propaganda. The publisher should reassess these textbooks and ensure that balance is returned to them."

4. **Some illustrative examples of changes made** (see report for full details)

- The original version says that 'international law states that a country cannot annex or indefinitely occupy territory gained by force'. This is the overwhelming international legal consensus. The revised version replaces this with "*Some argue that* international law states that a country cannot annex or indefinitely occupy territory gained by force' (emphasis added).
- The original edition includes the statement that during the first intifada of 1987-93 'The arms and fingers of [Palestinian] child stone throwers were broken [by Israeli soldiers]'. This fact is well documented. For the revised edition it has been removed.
- The original edition has a description by a member of Haganah (the main Jewish paramilitary organisation) of the mass expulsion of traumatised Arabs in the 1948-9 war. In the revised edition it has been replaced by an account of the much more peaceful departure of a single Arab family.
- OPEC's reduction in oil production with resulting price rises following the 1973 'Yom Kippur War' is presented differently in the two editions. In the original edition "it shows the strength of their anger about Israel's advance into Egypt". This explanation is replaced in the revised edition by OPEC countries' "'hostility towards Israel and her allies'. The reason for that hostility has been deleted.
- Plan D was drawn up by the Haganah in May 1948, a blueprint for expanding Jewish-held areas beyond those allocated to the proposed Jewish State in the UN Partition Plan. The original edition says that "Even if it was not the intention, one

modern Israeli historian has written that Plan D ‘paved the way for the ethnic cleansing operation in Palestine’”. This has been deleted from the revised edition.

- A statement in the original edition that Palestinians were evicted from East Jerusalem at the hands of Israelis has been edited in the revised edition to say that they *‘felt* that they had been forcibly evicted’ (emphasis added).
- No change is too small: the Deir Yassin massacre (in which Israeli forces killed at least 107 Palestinian civilians) is described in the original version of the International GCSE textbook as ‘one of the worst atrocities of the [1948] war’. In the revised edition the word ‘atrocities’ has been replaced by ‘acts’.

5. **Description of the process** of revision of the texts from the Board of Deputies of British Jews

A statement issued by the Board of Deputies of British Jews describes the process leading to the revision of these textbooks. It includes the following:

*“After initial constructive conversations with Pearson, the Board of Deputies worked together with UKLFI [UK Lawyers for Israel] to produce thorough comments on both textbooks, which Pearson have received and acted upon. After detailed and lengthy process over a number of months, the books have now been published for students to use in the 2020-1 academic year.*

*Board of Deputies of British Jews President Marie van der Zyl said: “We applaud Pearson for their openness to constructive feedback and willingness to revise these textbooks. We are pleased with the final material which gives a balanced and accurate portrayal of the Middle East conflict. I would like to pay specific tribute and thanks to UKLFI for their hard work on this project and their collaborative effort with us to get these textbooks to where they needed to be.”*

In this account, a spokesperson for the publisher refers to the ‘a new edition’ but there is no indication for the reader of the revised texts that these were new editions, or any indication of the extent of the revisions that had been made to the originals.