Islamic Education in Syria: Undoing Secularism

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Islamic education in Syrian schools is traditional, rigid, and Sunni. The Ministry of Education makes no attempt to inculcate notions of tolerance or respect for religious traditions other than Sunni Islam. Christianity is the one exception to this rule. Indeed, all religious groups other than Christians are seen to be enemies of Islam, who must be converted or fought against. The Syrian government teaches school children that over half of the world’s six billion inhabitants will go to hell and must be actively fought by Muslims. Jews have their own status. The Jewish religion – the Torah and the Jewish prophets – are considered divine – but the Jewish people, who, it is claimed, deny their prophets, are fated to go to hell and must be eliminated.

At first view, one might expect Syria to promote a liberal and tolerant view of religious difference in its religion curriculum. The reasons for this are many. Syria has been ruled by leaders belonging to a religious minority, the Muslim Alawi sect, for 40 years and is home to many religious minorities both Christian and Muslim. It plays a commanding role in the politics of Lebanon, a country in which no more than 20% of the population is Sunni Muslim. Most importantly, Syria has been good to its minorities, who enjoy greater security and opportunity than in any other Arab country.[†]

Nevertheless, Syria has chosen not to follow a path of religious liberalism. Instead, it has pursued an integralist policy of nation-building for the last 40 years under the Ba’th Party. The Asads have struggled to be good Sunnis, not to make Sunnis into good liberals.

One can only wonder how long Syria’s reputation for tolerance and willingness to protect religious minorities will survive its Alawite ascendancy. Once the Alawis lose power and are unable to protect minorities, the education Syrians acquire in school will not contribute to the continuation of policies of religious inclusion and tolerance. Since coming to power in 2000, Bashar al-Asad has made a number of promises to reform the Syrian education system, including curricular reform of religious education. So far, however, the Islamic textbooks used in the mandatory religion instruction in Syrian schools have been little changed.

History of the Syrian School System and the Religion Curriculum

Religious education in Syria is an integral aspect of the curriculum. Every student studies either Christianity or Islam for two to three hours a week from the first grade to the twelfth. Although religion classes are compulsory, the grade is not calculated in the students’ main annual grade-point average. If a student fails religion class (suff ad-diyana), he is not prevented from passing into the next year, as he would be if he failed Arabic for example. If, however, the student fails two classes including religion, he or she is held back a year. When applying to university, a student’s grade point average is calculated without the inclusion of his grade for religion class. Even sports classes and military training (futuwwa) are given more importance than religion class; their grades are factored into the students’ average. Consequently, many smart students stop studying
for religion by their senior year, knowing that a low or failing grade in religion will not prevent them getting into top university programs. Also, religion is usually taught as the last subject in the school day, when students are tired and have trouble concentrating – an indication of the subject’s overall lack of importance within the curriculum. Although religion class is an essential part of the Syrian curriculum throughout the twelve years of elementary and secondary school training, many students consider it the least important of their classes and remember little of the actual content.

I asked some twenty Syrians to describe the content of their religion classes in an attempt to gain an anecdotal idea of what Syrians remember studying. All described having to memorize suras from the Quran and hadith; they all recalled learning about the five pillars of Islam and how to pray. All claimed to have learnt general values, such as obeying parents and teachers, the importance of honesty and respect for other people. When asked about their instruction in jihad, and in how subjects such as Israel, Jews, and the West were treated, none could recall such matters being discussed in religion class – and doubted that they were part of the curriculum – even though they are, in fact, part of the curriculum. One Syrian explained this collective amnesia by claiming, “It's true. The textbooks are medieval and political, but at the end of the day everyone knows in these countries that you don't pay attention to such classes.” Syrian students at the university level are dismissive of the saqafa al-'amma or general culture class, in which students learn Ba'thist ideology. When I was a student at the University of Damascus in the 1980s, this class was universally referred to as “sakhafa” or silliness class. All the same, the material taught in religion class has an effect on students, even on many of those that do not take it seriously. The world view elaborated in the texts is widespread in Syria, particularly among the ulema and religious classes. Even more secular Syrians absorb elements of the religion curriculum, which are reinforced on television and by other forms of media.

The Genesis of Arabist and Sunni Islamic Orthodoxy

The present school system was established in 1967, when Syria signed the Arab Cultural Unity Agreement with Jordan and Egypt. It introduced a uniform school ladder in the three countries – six years of primary, three years of lower secondary, and three years of higher secondary schooling. It also established norms for universal curricula, examination procedures, and teacher training requirements for each level.[2] Many textbooks, printed in Egypt, were used for years in Jordanian and Syrian schools. They established an academic orthodoxy that guides textbook production today. The genesis of this Arab nationalist school system during the time of Nasser helps explain much of the pan-Arab and Sunni rigidity in the Syrian curriculum. In order to promote cultural and political unity among the Arab peoples, Nasser’s academics hued to a narrow and integralist vision of Arabism just as they reduced Islam to the simple and rigid prescriptions of Sunni orthodoxy. They believed that to discuss the regional differences between Arabs and the sectarian differences between Muslims would open the door to internecine squabbling and discrimination, rather than promote tolerance and ultimate cohesion among Arabs. Perhaps they believed that to air one’s differences would help the enemy to divide and conquer? Whatever the reason, the pan-Arab nationalist and Sunni Islamic orthodoxy in Arab pedagogy was consolidated in 1967 and has remained a barrier to liberalism and the open discussion of religious and national diversity ever since. For
Syria’s Alawite leaders to back away from this orthodoxy is politically dangerous. To dismantle Nasser’s curriculum and to attack Sunni orthodoxy in the school system would cast doubt on their nationalist and Islamic credentials. The Asads have sought to conform to majority Sunni notions of Islam, rather than to enforce secularism or western notions of separation between church and state. The religious conservatism of the regime became pronounced following the Muslim Brother uprising in the early 1980s and is unlikely to change in the face of increased Israeli and US pressure.

Public and Private Schools

In the fall of 1967 following the Six Day War, over 300 Christian schools and some 75 private Muslim schools were nationalized.[3] The nationalization of schools in Syria was a major blow to elite families and in particular to the Christian community. Private schools were largely based on a Western model and often provided by foreign missions. They were of a superior standard and their nationalization contributed to the near extinction of foreign language fluency among a generation of Syrian school children. Some argue that their nationalization contributed to the emigration of a great number of Christian families.[4]

Since then, education has been largely public, though middle and upper class Christians in the major cities managed to preserve or revive a number of excellent private parochial schools. In the last five or six years, wealthy Syrians of all confessions have been building private schools in major Syrian cities to accommodate the growing demand for superior and expensive education since the early 1990s. Some of these, such as the Shwayfat school of Damascus, funded by business men Rami Makhlouf and Nadir Qala`i, have been extremely successful and attract children from wealthy families. Today, some 10% of secondary schools are privately funded.[5] Whether a student goes to public or private school, however, does not make a difference to his religious education: all must follow the same national curriculum.[6]

Illiteracy rates have been falling steadily in Syria, a country with 17 million inhabitants. The government is among the best in the Arab World at providing basic education to its citizens. Today, most Syrians are literate and go to school for more years than they have at any time in their history. According to World Bank statistics, some 93% of Syrian children enroll in primary school, although only 38% continue on through secondary school.[7] In 2002, the government extended mandatory school attendance from the sixth to the ninth grade. The government has also undertaken an ambitious plan, backed by UNESCO, to extend preschooling into the countryside. This will inevitably reduce the illiteracy rate of Syrians, which in 2002 stood at 24% for those over 15 years of age in the general population and at 37% among women. All school-going Syrians, except for the Christians, who make up between 10% and 14% of the population, receive formal training in Islam. This means that some 82% of Syrians receive some Islamic religious instruction, although a majority does not continue on to high school. Syria’s Islamic minorities – Alawis (12%), Druze (3%), and Isma’ilis (1%) study from the same texts as other Muslims. Christians beginning in the first grade are divided into their own religion classes. The only recognized religions in the Syrian school system are Islam and Christianity.

Methodology
This study is based on seven school texts prepared for the 2002-2003 school year by the Ministry of Education. All are entitled: Islamic Education. I have used the texts for the 4th, 5th, 7th, 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. The 4th grade text is 150 pages long and each successive text adds a few pages until reaching 240 pages in the 12th grade. For the sake of simplicity, I will use internal citations when quoting from the texts, giving the grade and page of the text separated by a colon. There are no pictures or photographs included in the texts. Each book includes the date it was first published and the year it last underwent important revisions. The 4th grade text was written in 1999 and has not been revised since. The fifth grade text was written in 2001 and is the only text among these seven that has been rewritten under Bashar al-Asad. The 7th grade text was written in 1967 and last revised in 1981; the 9th grade text was written in 1979 and last revised in 1986; the 10th grade text was written in 1986 and last revised in 1992; the 11th grade text does not give the original date of publication but was revised in 1996; and the 12th grade text was written in 1969 and last revised in 1997. The average text has not been revised for about 10 years and was originally written well before that. Clearly, there has been little change in the content of Syrian Islamic texts since the curriculum was established in 1967.

Even after the well publicized and damning critique of the Syrian curriculum published in 2000 by the director of MEMRI, Meyrav Wurmser, entitled, The Schools of Ba`athism: A Study of Syrian Schoolbooks, there has been no change in the language of the texts. All the anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic quotes high-lighted by Wurmser in the texts for the 1999-2000 school year are still included in the 2002-2003 texts.

**Islamic versus Arab Identity:**

Syria as a nation is not mentioned in the six texts. Only Arab and Islamic identities are evoked in Syria’s Islamic textbooks and they are closely linked. Ba’thism is often referred to as a secular movement and non-religious version of Arab nationalism, but this is not true. More precisely, the Ba’th was forced to back away from its initial secular assertions, due to pressure from the Sunni majority. This process began with the founders of Ba’thist thought, Michel ´Aflaq and Zaki al-Arsuzi, both of whom stressed that the essential values and mission of Ba’thism were identical to those of Islam. Both stressed the umma arabiyya, or Arab community, as the proper unit of analysis, both called for struggle against outsiders and alien influences, and both stressed that their message was the eternal message of the Arab nation no different in its values from that of Islam. It was to be a beacon of hope for the rest of humanity. The outlines of their nationalist philosophy followed those of Islam closely. The content was changed to center on the Arab rather than Islamic community, but the catagories remained largely the same. The close identity between Arabism and Islam adumbrated by the founders of Ba’thism helps to explain why the two so easily coincide in the Syrian schoolbooks. In the school texts, Islam is given primacy over Arabism as the engine of Arab greatness and virtue.

The twelfth grade text explains that Islam is responsible for making the Arabs great. “The revelation of Islamic principles transformed the Arabs into a unified community (umma) possessing a high human civilization which it spread to all people” (12:149). Arabs, we learn, had many bad qualities before being reformed by Islam. They fought amongst themselves, drank alcohol, killed female babies, married many wives,
were tribal and discriminatory, and worshiped idols. These bad traits were ended by Islam. Pre-Islamic Arabs were not all bad, however. Their morals were good because of their Arab blood (12:149-152). We are told that even before Muhammad revealed Islam, Arabs had superior moral qualities, such as, “bravery, manliness, generosity, patience, abstinence, and the honoring of agreements, love of freedom and hospitality.” How did they acquire these good qualities? The answer, we are told, is because they “run in their veins with their blood” (12:150). Islam transformed Arabs from being a generous but divided group of sinners into a virtuous and unified people with a divine mission. Islam directed the Arabs along a more “positive, refined, and advanced” path (12:154). It also united them as a people and gave them a single objective, which was to carry the Islamic message to other peoples so they might be elevated by Islam as well. Today, it is the responsibility of “the Arabs to carry the Islamic message to the entire world,” because it is the highest form of humanity. This mission is more important today than ever before, the twelfth grade text explains, because the world is now in a crisis of “complete materialism” and faces many “disasters, catastrophes and problems.” Chief among them is the evil of nuclear destruction (12:156). These dangers threaten to destroy human values, but they can be turned back if people embrace the “spiritual and human values of Islam” (12:156). “It is the duty of the Arab World to save humanity and human values” (12:156). Although Arabs had certain virtues before the advent of Islam, their religion set them on the divine path of saving humanity. To be an Arab is good, but to be a Muslim is better, and being both is the best.

Islam and Arabism are further linked, we find out, because to become Muslim is to become Arab. The spread of Islam and knowledge of the Quran, readers are told, “is the best way to Arabize non-Arabs and spread Arab thought and culture to hundreds of millions of non-Arabs,” because all Muslims feel that the Arabic language is “their language” (10: 211). Syrian children learn that not only Islamic culture should be spread to the rest of the world but so should Arab culture and language, because the values of Islam and Arabism are inextricably linked and should serve as a model for others. The message for non-Muslims in these texts is that they cannot be the best Arabs.

The Foundations of Islamic Government

The government is to be an Islamic State without separation of church and state. The student is constantly reminded that the Islamic state is a divine order whose wisdom, justice, and laws are imposed by God. The chapter of the twelfth grade text entitled, “The System of Government in Islam,” concludes with the following sentences: We can summarize everything in this chapter by explaining that this system is a divine system of independent laws and principles. It has its own characteristics and unique benefits because it is the imprint of God (12:173)

Although the texts make no mention of “democracy” or “republicanism,” they do insist on consultation and popular participation in government. All the same, when faced with the ultimate question of who should rule – man or God – God naturally wins out. The Islamic ruler must confer with and be guided by a shura or advisory council as well as by the people (12:168-171; 9:130). We are told that “the Islamic community implements its power to choose its leader by voting and the free expression of opinion,” but the consultative process is not described in detail (12:170). The ruler’s term of office
is not limited to a defined period, but can be extended indefinitely so long as the people support the ruler. An Islamic ruler should take advice from his advisory council, which should be made up of “men of religion and fiqh and of people who have specialties in all different walks of life” (12:171). The primary duty of the ruler is to “follow the book of Allah and the Sunna of his Messenger by implementing Islamic life in all different fields, and he must protect Islam from its internal and external enemies” (12:171). Though the ruler must be a Muslim and must know “the aims and judgments of shari`a law,” the texts do not explicitly state that he must have formally studied Islam or be an Imam (12:170-171). All the same, knowledge of Islam and its laws is the major qualification for all politicians and state employees.

It is incumbent on citizens of the Islamic state to advise the ruler and show him the right path. Their responsibility is to observe his behavior and actions in order to direct him. If he persists in going astray and loses his qualification to rule entirely, the people are to “withdraw their trust from him” (12:173). The ruler can be removed if Muslims agree unanimously to do so when he loses his ability to carry out his duties (12:170). How this is to be accomplished is not explained and no defined powers to limit the executive are given to the people.

The power and form of the legislative council is also not spelled out. A constitution giving defined power and sovereignty to the people is something the authors of these texts are unwilling to advocate. No doubt, the authors are circumspect about opposing the practices of the ruler in Syria, but more importantly, they are clear that sovereignty does not belong to the people, but to God. Again and again it is repeated that “He made everything and acts in the affairs of his creation as He wishes. Man must accept what Allah has chosen for him” (12:160). Consultation, not democracy, is the ideal of Islamic government according to the Syrian texts. This is because with consultation Islamic government will be more perfect. If people feel responsible for government policies and laws, they will carry them out more carefully and happily. The point is not that citizens actually have power or that the ruler be their servant, but that if they are consulted by the ruler, they will be less likely to feel that they are his servants and will carry out the injunctions of God’s rule more scrupulously.

The authors of the texts are bolder in discussing the judiciary. “Justice in Islamic government” the authors proclaim, “is completely independent from the power of the ruler.” The judge is to rule according to shari`a law. “No one can change or manipulate this. The ruler, the judge, and the people are equal in submitting to the law of God” (12:166). Although there is a place for ijtihad and human judgment, it is limited (12:167). The overriding principle of Islam is justice, we are told. “Neither emotions, family relations, friendship, wealth, poverty nor the power of the ruler should influence the court’s decision” (12:167). Equally, Islam brings justice to all humankind. There is to be no favoritism of “the Arab over the foreigner, white people over blacks, the rich over the poor” and “there is to be no discrimination based on religious sect (tawa’if) or social class in terms of rights and duties (duties).” “All people are equal before the law (12:66).”

**Christians and Jews as Protected Communities**

Christian and Jewish citizens of the Islamic state enjoy certain rights as dhimma (a protected community) equal to those of Muslims. In a section entitled, “the rights of
non-Muslim citizens,” the authors explain that non-Muslim minorities are called “ahl al-dhimma for whom Islam has organized many rights in addition to general human rights.” The most important of these are “equality between them and Muslims in terms of protection of life, money, and honor; freedom of religious belief, worship, and practice; and the freedom to apply personal law according to their beliefs.” These rights cannot be taken away from them so long as they are “within the framework of the dhimma of the Islamic state and under its protection” (12:162). Syrian students in these passages are instructed that Islam advocates equality between all the people of the book.

Equal political rights, as opposed to civil and religious rights, are not extended to dhimma, however, as Muslims are to rule. The executive and the judicial branches of government should be staffed by Muslims. The legislature is not forbidden to dhimma, for the shura is to be open to people of diverse qualifications in order to represent the needs and experience of the community. All the same, because the leading qualification for a deputy is knowledge of Islam and fiqh, non-Muslims are put at a distinct disadvantage. Quite clearly the notion of an Islamic state implies that non-Muslims are second class citizens, who participate only tangentially in directing and carrying out the affairs of state. Although protected, they cannot lead.

Heaven is accessible to Christians but denied to Jews. We are told that the first people to cross into heaven at the Day of Judgment are “Muhammad and his people.” They are succeeded by “the prophets and their followers (10: 153).” This means the followers of Moses and Jesus and indicates that all people of the book – Christians and Jews – can go to heaven. However, in an earlier section of the tenth grade text, we are told that the tribe of Israel “does not respect prophets for they killed some of them and maligned others, such as when they accused Moses of killing Aaron, committing adultery, and of having defects of the body.” Because of these sins, we are told, “the tribe of Israel deserves God’s tortures,” i.e. to go to hell (10: 82-83). Thus, Jews do not go to heaven even if their prophets do. We must conclude that heaven is open to Christians but closed to Jews.

The texts deal with religious sectarianism as every literalist must – by blaming bad blood and squabbling between the sects on the non-believers for failing to recognize the true faith. The Syrian texts decry sectarianism (ta’ifiyya) and the spirit of chauvinism it produces; yet they also insist that Islam is the best and most complete religion. This contradiction is clearly expressed in the following passage of the ninth grade text:

Faith in all the prophets and divine books ends hateful religious and sectarian divisions. The reason for sending different prophets in different ages was to gradually prepare humanity to accept religion and to be able to discern the most complete religious message, which is Islam. The reason for this was not to spread the spirit of division between people, because God definitely did not intend that (9:110).

God, students are instructed, intended all humanity to accept each new wave of religious revelation as it came down from heaven. God did not intend for the people of the world to resist each new phase of revelation and get mired in the earlier and more primitive phases of revelation, such as Judaism and Christianity. The resistance of Christians and Jews to embrace God’s final revelation makes them responsible for sectarianism. The reason God did not reveal Islam in one original revelation, we are told, rather than sending down first
the Torah and then the Gospels, is because humans needed to be gradually prepared and educated to recognize the full truth of Islam (9:110). The Old and New Testament are viewed as the prolegomena to the real thing, the spirituality advanced by the Quran. Thus we may conclude that Judaism is the most primitive of the revealed religions, Christianity is an incomplete advance on Judaism, and Islam is the final and complete message. A firm hierarchy of religions is established; Islam is at the top and the earlier revelations following down the line based on the date of their historical appearance.

Clearly, the difference in the treatment between Christians and Jews is political. Because the Christian population of Syria has supported the state and is important in size (in 1947 it was estimated at 14 per cent of the total and today not less than 6.5 per cent) it is favored with entrance to heaven.[8] The Jews are reviled and excluded from heaven in the Islamic textbooks because of Syria’s bitter war with Israel. To Syria’s credit, it must be stated, that no other Arab country, as far as I can tell, expressly states in its Islamic classes that Christians will go to heaven. Saudi Arabia, by contrast, condemns Christians to damnation and categorizes them as unbelievers (kuffar).[9]

**Atheists and Pagans**

At the very bottom of the hierarchy beneath the revealed religions of the “people of the book,” are the belief systems of the rest of humanity, who are categorized as “Atheists and Pagans.” Only one paragraph is devoted to them in the twelve years of Syrian schooling and it is tucked away in the ninth grade text under the subtitle, “Islam Fights Paganism and Atheism.” It explains that “pagans are those who worship something other than God, and atheists are those who deny the existence of God.” Islam must fight these two belief systems because they “are an assault to both instinct and truth.” We are told that these belief systems “contradict the principle of freedom of belief.” This is because “Islam gives freedom of belief only within the limits of the divine path,” which “means a religion descended from heaven.” Because pagan religions were not revealed by God, they are considered an “inferior” form of belief that reflects an “animal consciousness.” How should Muslims deal with these peoples who comprise half of humanity? Students are instructed that “Islam accepts only two choices for Pagans: that they convert to Islam or be killed (9:128).” The Islam of Syrian texts does not have a happy formula for dealing with non-believers. Perhaps in recognition of this failing, the ministry of education has buried a mere six sentences on the subject into the middle of its ninth grade text.

**Jihad and Israel**

The notion of jihad and the struggle against Israel are closely linked in most of the Syrian texts. In the chapter entitled, “Jihad in the Name of God,” in the ninth grade textbook, students are taught the difference between jihad when it is a *fard kifayya* (general duty) when only some Muslims from society are needed to fight the enemy (those serving in the military) and *fard `ayn*, when every Muslim – soldier and civilian – must engage in the struggle, whether by offering money for the war effort or by actually engaging in battle personally. Students are taught that at the present time, jihad is a *fard `ayn* and imposed on everyone. The text explains:

Our jihad duty today is a *fard `ayn* because our countries have been exposed to enemy attack and because part of our land has been occupied by Zionist gangs
which threaten our very existence. It is therefore the duty of every Muslim to unite in one rank to take back his land and honor by every means possible (9:166).

School children are told that to be martyred while fighting for their country and faith is a privilege which will be rewarded not only in the next life but also in this life. They learn how the president and state reward the families of those who have given their lives to defend the homeland and compatriots. Even if Syria as a nation is not referred to, the president makes cameo appearances from time to time, as in the following paragraph in the ninth grade text.

The president-leader takes unlimited care of the families of martyrs in order to guarantee a life of freedom and honor for them, both financially and socially. The children of martyrs are provided with special care, education, and upbringing. The children of martyrs are given special schools with the most modern methods and ways of teaching. Last but not least, their residences are provided free (9:79).

Although Asadism is manifest in the Syrian religious texts, references to the president are infrequent and have no comparison with the Iraqi schoolbooks in which Saddam Hussein was featured even in the most mundane exercises.[10]

In some Syrian texts, particularly during the early years of schooling, jihad is hardly mentioned. For example, the fifth grade textbook, which was newly written in 2001 – a year after Bashar al-Asad came to power – mentions jihad only twice, and then, only in passing. Moreover, it contains no mention of Israel and discusses the Jews, their prophets, and the Torah in a respectful manner (5:20). It contains three chapters on the prophet Moses, which describe how he helped his people (banu Isra’il) escape from Pharaoh’s Egypt and which stress how Muslims must have faith in all the prophets equally without discriminating between them” (5:59). It must be added that the text does not explain that Moses took his people to the Promised Land and makes no link between the Israelites and Israel. All the same, the Jews are described as an unfairly oppressed people who God has chosen for salvation and honored with a great prophet. Does the publication of this new text under Bashar al-Asad mark a new trend to avoid characterizing the Jews in an anti-Semitic fashion? It is too early to tell. This is the only text of the seven I have studied which has been newly written since Bashar al-Asad came to power. I was unable to get the 2000 edition of the fifth grade text to see if the language about the Jews had been changed. The texts of all the other grades are reeditions of those used under the previous government in which the characterization of the Jews is overwhelmingly negative.

In the ninth grade textbook originally written in 1969 and last revised in 1986, jihad is mentioned on 22 pages out of 200, or roughly one tenth of the text. Israel is defined as an expansionist and colonialist enemy, which is not only trying to take Arab and Islamic land, but which threatens the very existence of Islam. Because of the existential threat that Israel poses to Islam, war is the only solution and a peace agreement is tantamount to surrender. The only way to deal with Israel is through war and victory, as the following passage reveals.

Our youth should ignore those traitors who encourage them to
surrender to Israel. They should know that our conflict with our enemy is a conflict for existence, not for borders. Israel is an expansionist, colonialist enemy, which will not give up its colonialist plans unless forced to do so by the will of our people who believe that martyrdom is the way to victory and liberation (9:66-67).

Although some Syrians are careful to draw a distinction between Zionism and Jews, this is not a distinction made in Syria’s school texts. Israel is not a danger only because it is a powerful and expansionist state in the Islamic heartland, but because it is inhabited by Jews, who are a wicked and treasonous people. The following passage from the tenth grade text explains why it is a danger to live with or near Jews.

The Jews took advantage of Muhammad’s forgiveness in the old days. They exploited his forgiveness in order to deceive the Muslims and this is a characteristic of traitors and betrayers in every time and place. This is an indication of the evil enemy characteristics that are imbedded in the personality of the Jews. This confirms that it is dangerous to live with or near them. This danger threatens the existence of the Arab and Islamic world with destruction and disappearance (10:78).

Because the Jews seek to destroy the Islamic world, the only proper response for Muslims is to “eliminate” the Jews from their midst. This is stated unequivocally in the tenth grade text.

The logic of justice requires the application of a single inescapable verdict on the Jews; namely, that their criminal intentions be turned against them and that they be eliminated (isti’salihim). The duty of Muslims of our time is to pull together, to unite their ranks, and to wage war on their enemy until Allah hands down his judgment on them and on us (10:79).

Mayrav Wurmser, in her study of Syrian school textbooks, concludes that the Ba’thist government in Syria will have a very hard time making peace with Israel because recognizing the Jewish state will shake the ideological and structural “foundations of Syria’s Ba’thist regime.” Peace would call into doubt emergency rule and notions of perpetual revolution and sacrifice that bolster Ba’thi rule, not to mention the many injunctions against trusting Jews and allowing them to continue their occupation of Islamic lands.[11] Many Arabs argue against this dire interpretation. Munthar Haddadin, a past Jordanian Minister, who was a leading negotiator of the Jordanian peace agreement with Israel, insisted to me that Wurmser’s argument was wrong. “It is all political,” he said.

Once the leaders decide they want peace and negotiate with Israel, they will rip up the textbooks and write new ones. We used to have the same anti-Semitism in our textbooks before peace. Did it stop us? No. It is up to the leaders. They will do what they want. Don’t worry about the textbooks.[12]

Egypt and Jordan have made peace with Israel despite textbooks that were much the same as Syria’s; nevertheless, Jordan’s textbooks have not been substantially changed since the peace, (I will see what the Jordan paper says about this and revise
accordingly) nor has the peace been an easy one. Popular animus in Jordan remains
decidedly anti-Israel. This may be due to the unresolved conflict over the West Bank and
Gaza, but in part, it may also be due to cultural training.

**Colonialism and the Backwardness of the Islamic World**

Backwardness in the Islamic World, Syrian students are instructed, is due to the
incorrect understanding of Islam caused by colonialists and their agents. The ninth grade
text states:

“The primary reason for backwardness in our society is the incorrect
understanding of Islam. This is because the colonialist and his agents have
perverted some aspects of Islam and caused false understandings of the true
path in order to distance Muslims from science and productive work in all
fields of life” (9:161).

What are some of these perversions? The ninth grade text gives several examples of
verses from the Quran that are widely misunderstood. All have to do with the notions of
fate and free will. The texts claim that many Muslims believe that they don’t have to
work in this life because God will provide for them. Another misconception that leads to
inactivity among Muslims is the belief that leading a pious life means renouncing the
present world including hard work and study. Students are advised that hard work and
study are forms of worship and a means to get into heaven (9:162). Ironically, these
commendable injunctions to young Muslims that they take responsibility for their lives
are followed by accusations that external manipulation and skullduggery has caused their
backwardness and that they are not responsible themselves. Who are these colonialists?
The Turks, the French, the Americans, perhaps Westerners in general? We are not told.
Neither are we given a clue to who their agents are? Now that almost 60 years separates
Syria from its colonial past, the persistence of such accusations can only be intended to
promote a general fear and mistrust of foreigners rather than to offer a considered
analysis of Syria’s developmental needs.

**Alawis, Druze, and Isma’ilis**

Over 16% of Syrians are heterodox Muslims, yet no mention of the different sects
of Islam is made in the textbooks. Not only are Alawites, Druze, and Isma’ilis not
mentioned, but no mention is made of Shi’a Islam as a whole. Islam is presented as a
monolithic religion and Sunni Islam is it. Sunni children are given no guidance on how
they should relate to or think of Muslims whose ritual practices and interpretation of the
Quran differ from their own. Even more troubling, perhaps, is that heterodox Muslim
children are given no explanation for why their communities practice Islam differently
than the instructions provided in their school texts. Because of the narrow Sunni
definition of Islam given in the texts, non-Sunni Muslims are forced to either deny their
communal differences or to avow that they belong to a religion that is not Islam. It is
quite common in Syria to hear Sunnis claim that heterodox Muslims, whether Druze,
Isma’ilis, or Alawis, are *ghulat* (theological extremists) or *arfad* (apostates) and not
Muslims because they do not perform the five pillars of Islam and because they are
`abadat al-bashar or worshipers of humans. This is a reference to the Druze deification
of al-Hakim, the Alawi deification of Ali, and the Isma’ili worship of the Agha Khan –
all of whom are considered purely mortal by Sunnis, just as Christ is. The accusation that heterodox Muslims are polytheists and enemies of Islam is an old one, but not yet a wholly academic issue. The Muslim Brothers made these accusations a central justification for their uprising against the Asad regime in 1981-82, and such accusations remain potentially explosive should political instability return to Syria.

When I asked Druze friends and acquaintances what percentage of Syrians accepted the notion that the Druze are Muslims, the unanimous answer was “3%” – the percentage of Druze in Syria. Although, Druze in Syria define themselves as Muslims and are officially categorized as such, they are not viewed as Muslims by many Syrians. They are also set apart by having their own Druze religious courts (madhhabi), granted them under the French and officially recognized by the Syrian government in 1948 following the Druze uprising of 1947. Evidently, the Druze were also offered the opportunity to have their own religion classes taught in schools in the Druze Mountains, but refused because Druze shaykhs wished to preserve the traditional secrecy of their religion.

All other Muslims, including the heterodox sects, were grouped together in the 1953 Law of Personal Status passed under President Shishakli. Based on Egyptian example, this law integrated all Muslims, except the Druze, into one synthetic court system based on Hanafi law and makes no distinction between them. Alawis, who insisted they belong to the Ja’fari Shi’a mathhab (Twelver Shi’a Islam) as early as 1920, despite French attempts to encourage them to define themselves as a separate religion, have persisted in their drive to be recognized as main-stream Muslims ever since. This insistence has brought rich political rewards – Alawis enjoy all the rights of Muslims and can hold the office of President, which must be filled by a Muslim according the constitution. Nevertheless, Alawites have paid a steep price for political success by denying their distinct religious tradition. In essence, they have given up their religion for political power and equality.

The Alawis I asked to speculate on the success of this bargain were considerably more optimistic about the percentage of Syrians who considered them Muslim than were their Druze counterparts. Several claimed that 50% of Syrians or more accepted them as Muslims. The reason Alawis give for their success is that they try harder than the Druze to be like Sunni Muslims and to assimilate to the textbook version of Islam. One native of Latakia, an Alawi woman who is in her thirties with an advanced degree, gave the following explanation:

We are accepted as Muslims because we have worked hard to be accepted. We have copied the Sunnis. Some Alawis cover their hair and wear hijab, either for personal reasons or when they marry Sunnis. We don’t eat ham, and even when we do, we don’t eat it in front of people. We fast – or we pretend to fast; out of respect for others, we don’t eat in front of them during Ramadan. We have built mosques in our major towns. Some Alawis go to Friday prayer and to the Hajj. My grandfather was a modern shaykh who encouraged everyone to pray at the mosque in Jable. The charitable foundation established and run by Jamil al-Asad (the brother of former President Hafiz al-Assad) finances hundreds of Alawis to go on Hajj, and the women working for the organization have to wear the hijab. Hafiz al-Asad prayed in Mosque and fasted. When his mother and son died, he prayed for them in Mosque. He built
the Na’isa mosque in Qardaha, his home town, in the name of his mother. All these things are proof to Sunnis that we try hard to be part of Islam and like Sunnis. They accept it. We have succeeded.

The Muslim identity of Alawites in Syria is practically impossible to define because open debate about sectarian questions is discouraged. Alawite scholars claim publicly that differences between their practices and those of Twelver Shi’ites are due to ignorance on the part of some Alawites due to long years of oppression.[17] The attempt at religious conformism by Alawis raises the question of how the socialization process, of which the religious curriculum is a part, actually works.

When I asked my Alawi informant if the Druze were accepted as Muslims, she answered:

They have their identity. They don’t pretend that they are Muslims. Of course, I don’t know a lot about them because we don’t have any in Latakia. I think they are classified as non-Arab in the minds of most people. They are separate and a small group; most live in Suwayda’.

Our Sunni Damascene friends always talk about them as strange and different. “Ya latif! Shoo byakaloool!” they would say, as if they eat horrible things. Of course it isn’t only their food, they are talking about. And they say these things about the Druze to us without hesitation, and don’t consider that we (the Alawis) are like the Druze. The Druze don’t pretend to be part of Islam. I never saw a Mosque in Suwayda’.

There is only Islam and Christianity in Syria. Those are the only two legal definitions of religion. There are not others: no Druze, no Alawi, and no Isma’ili identity.

When I asked the Alawi if she had made a mistake in suggesting that people classified the Druze “as non-Arabs,” rather than as “non-Muslims,” she said, “no.”

To be Arab, in the end, you have to be Muslim; everything else is not that important. Ultimately, Islam is the measurement of `Aruba (Arabism). A big part of the rejection of the Christians as Arabs is their feeling of belonging (intima’), which is not Arab. Their blood isn’t Arab, their religion isn’t Arab. They feel connected to Europe and France. Why do they immigrate to Canada, America, and Europe? Muslims get rejected for immigration because they aren’t part of the West, but Christians are part of it. Ninety percent of the immigrants from Latakia that I know are Christians. It is their big ambition to go to America. And they are Easterners like us. Why? They live very well in Syria. They are better off than most of us. It’s not because of economic need.

Also, the names of their children – they are all western: Joan, Andrew, Charles, Lara, George, Hanna …. None of these names are Arab. They used to name their kids Khalil, `Abdullah, Hasiiba, etc. This is an indication that they don’t feel Arab. What is the meaning of these names? They have no meaning in Arabic.

They wear gold chains around their necks and wrists. They say, ‘merci, bonjour, bonsoir, and bonne fête.’ I used to tell my Christian boyfriend that everyone would know he wasn’t Arab if he said these things, but he didn’t
care. The Christians criticize the Sunna in a terrible way – how they are religious and how they treat their women. They are embarrassed by Islam and don’t defend the Arabs. In the end, the Sunna are the Arabs. We [the Alawis] don’t speak about Islam like the Christians do. We are Arab.

The identification of Arabness and Islam was total for my Alawi informant. She insisted that because Christians believe in the trinity, they cannot be real Arabs. “Because Christians cross themselves and say, ‘the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,’” she argued, “they deny Islam.” The first thing “we had learned in Islam class is that ‘God has no equal and never gave birth.’” Because the Christian espousal of the trinity denies this Islamic injunction, she claimed, they cannot feel Arab and be Arab.

That an Alawi would internalize this association between Sunni Islam and Arabness is a testament to the effectiveness of Islamic education in Syrian schools and the socialization process in Syria with its emphasis on religious conformity. Because Christians are explained as “bad” or incomplete Muslims in Syrian textbooks, they also become bad Arabs. Nowhere do Syria’s Islamic textbooks explain that Christians and other religious groups are Arabs equal to Muslims.

The Syrian government and the Ba’th Party ostensibly espouses secularism and equality between all Arabs regardless of their religion. This message of equality is directly undermined by the state Islamic curriculum. By teaching that Muslims should rule over non-Muslims and that they are the best Arabs as measured by their faith in God, the government contradicts the message that Christian and Muslim Arabs are equal (11: 227).

Can the hyper-conformism of Syria’s nation-building project actually work? All nations have pursued “melting pot” strategies of one fashion or another to create a unified citizenry, but Syria’s effort to redefine religion is more ambitious than most. One can argue that such a project is necessary because sectarianism poses such an important threat to unity and has been a major cause of national fragmentation and weakness in the region, as the cases of Lebanon and Iraq have made plain. Syrian religious education may serve to narrow sectarian differences and help avoid the religious strife that threatens open political systems in the region. There are indications that at some level religious redefinition is taking place in Syria. Many Alawis and Druze today define themselves as Muslims first and Alawis and Druze second. This would not have been the case sixty years ago. Whereas today Alawi and Druze youth know almost nothing about the historical origins and philosophical richness of their own religions, they do know quite a bit about Sunni Islam, thanks to the national Islamic education. Their knowledge of the Quran gives them a common religious language with Sunnis that did not previously exist. The profound impact of religious education on identity is readily apparent when one considers the dramatic change in religious attitudes within the Asad family itself. Hafiz al-Asad’s father, Sulayman, did not believe that the Alawites would ever be accepted in Muslim Syria, consequently he signed, along with five other Alawite notables, a letter to the French asking that the Alawite territory be attached to Lebanon and not to Syria. The petition explained his view that:

The Alawites refuse to be annexed to Muslim Syria because, in Syria, the official religion of the state is Islam, and according to Islam, the Alawites are considered infidels.... The spirit of hatred and fanaticism imbedded in the hearts
of the Arab Muslims against everything that is non-Muslim has been perpetually nurtured by the Islamic religion. There is no hope that the situation will ever change. Therefore, the abolition of the Mandate will expose the minorities in Syria to the dangers of death and annihilation, not to mention that it will annihilate the freedom of thought and belief.[18]

Sulayman al-Asad’s anxiety about being forced into a state of Muslim Arabs is palpable in his petition to the French. His heirs have worked hard to gain acceptance as Muslims and Arabs in Syria. Another case in point is the contrast between Israeli and Syrian Druze; the former do not identify as Muslims, whereas, the latter do. By any measure Syria has made great strides in bringing the heterodox sects into the Muslim fold since independence. The process may not be complete, but it is far from what it was in the 1940s.

All the same, Syria’s drive to integration leaves little room for discussing differences between religious groups. The straight-jacket of orthodoxy may eventually produce a backlash. Will the Islamic minorities really abandon their traditional religions and embrace official Islam? Liberalism rather than denial and enforced assimilation may ultimately prove to be a necessary strategy for coexistence.

Conclusion

Syria’s Islamic education, which is mandatory in all grades of primary and secondary education, is part of the government’s larger strategy of nation-building. Since the Ba’th Party came to power in the 1960s at the height of the region’s pan-Arab nationalist ascendancy, its members have committed the government to a policy of eliminating all sub-national differences among Syrians, whether they spring from regionalism, economic class, tribalism, or religion. Islamic instruction in Syrian schools serves this integrative agenda by inculcating a narrow brand of Sunni Islam on all Syrian Muslims regardless of sect. Though many of the textbooks have been rewritten since the 1960s, and all have undergone revisions, the main thrust of Syria’s educational project has changed little since it was first established in 1967.

The religious curriculum, however, contradicts the Ba’th Party’s original impetuous to secularism. By setting out a clear hierarchy of virtue among peoples, with Muslims at the top of the scale as God’s preferred people and Christians, Jews, polytheists and atheists falling below them in descending order, Syria’s Islamic texts undercut the notion that Arabs or Syrian citizens are equal. Non-Muslims are defined as strangers to the Arabo-Islamic project who enjoy rights so long as they are “under Muslim protection.” Indeed, the Arab and Islamic missions as described in the texts are so closely identified with each other that school children may easily confuse ethnicity with religion to assume that heterodox Muslims are lesser Arabs and Christians hardly Arab at all.

The politics behind Syria’s Islamic education have been guided by a delicate sectarian compromise. Pressure from the Sunni majority to include Islam in the curriculum and national identity has been overwhelming. In 1973 Hafiz al-Asad was forced to give Islam an integral place in the new Syrian constitution. Pressured by widespread popular protests, the government included the controversial article that the President of the Republic had to be a Muslim. Hafiz al-Asad conceded to the majority
demand to enshrine Islam in the nation’s schools and constitution, but he did so while
pursuing an aggressive policy of redefining the Alawites legally and socially as Muslims.
In essence, Alawis have sacrificed their religion, or perhaps more correctly, they have
converted to mainstream Islam as the price for political power and full inclusion in the
nation. Syrian Christians have paid a heavier price for this Islamic compromise. Even
though they have full national and legal rights in Syria, they have been excluded from the
Islamized spirit of Syrian Arabism. They have not been left out completely, however. The
Syrian texts teach that the Christians will go to heaven, and they draw a clear distinction
between Christians, who have been faithful to the nation, and Jews, who have not. Many
Syrian Christians, having lost the battle over secularism following Asad’s retreat from
Salah Jadid’s radicalism, have given up trying to conform to an Arab identity and instead
have sought refuge in the notion of being Syrian. Because Islam has compromised their
hope of assimilating to an ideal Arab nationality, they adopt a Syrian civic spirit that
eschews religio-ethnic boundaries for geographical boundaries.

It should be noted that Syria has not ceded the Ministry of Education to
extremist clerics as have some other Middle Eastern countries. The textbooks espouse an
Islam that is traditional and Sunni, but not “fundamentalist”. The government killed close
to 20,000 in its campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s and has since
pursued an unwavering policy of stamping out fundamentalist opposition, at times,
working closely with the United States. A clear sign that radical Islamists have not had a
hand in defining the curriculum is that absence of notions of takfir, or declaring others to
be unbelievers, as expressed by radicals, such as Sayyid Qutb or Bin Laden. Jihad,
though widely discussed and advocated in the texts, is limited to Israel, Syria’s national
enemy. The West is not singled out for jihad or described as unbelieving.

That being said, Syria’s drive to suppress open discussion of religious diversity
and to promote Islamic conformism is anything but liberal. No mention is made of Shi’a
sects, sufism, or even the different schools within the Sunni tradition itself. Diversity
within Islam does not exist within the world of Syrian textbooks. The anti-Israeli
sentiment prevalent in the textbooks is not limited to Zionists or Israelis, but is
generalized to include all Jews. The texts frequently repeat that Islam supports human
rights and human equality and forbids all forms of discrimination. Nevertheless, in line
with Quranic injunction, religious discrimination is singled out as the appropriate form of
determining good people from bad.

Bashar al-Assad has called for reform of Syria’s educational system and Islamic
curriculum, but in the three years that he has served as President few changes have been
made. Iraq’s Governing Council, working under U.S. occupation, recently decided to
exclude Islamic education from school curriculum and to replace it with "religious ethics
and values." [19] This watered down approach to religious instruction should help to
alleviate the glaring iniquities in the traditional curriculum. Christian and Muslim
children will be taught the same values in the same classrooms. Presumably, Muslim
children will no longer be taught that they are better than non-Muslims and heterodox
Muslims, at least not in state schools. All the same, not even Iraq’s American governors
believe that Iraqis are prepared to accept separation of religion and state.

The irony in Syria is that so long as minorities have the upper hand in politics,
reform of the religious curriculum is unlikely. The political arrangement in Syria, as it
now stands, is for the Alawi president to mollify the Sunni population and the ulema by
allowing them a free hand in public instruction while curtailing their political influence. The insecurity of the Alawi community’s own Islamic identity severely limits the President’s ability to tinker with Islamic instruction. In fact, it creates a dynamic in which the ulema who cooperate with the government feel compelled to conservatism in order to preserve their dignity in front of a public which questions the Islamic status of the Alawis. In keeping with the “Nixon-going-to-China” principle, Syria may have to wait for a Sunni president before greater liberalization of its religion curriculum is possible. This, of course, is the rosy prediction.

Due to the rise of political Islam in the Islamic World, liberalization seems a distant possibility. Other “secular” states in the region, such as Egypt, have ceded greater influence to conservative Muslims in education despite having Sunni rulers. The future likelihood in Syria is that non-Muslims will continue to immigrate to countries that offer them citizenship with equality as they are doing throughout the region.[20]

[†] Syrian Jews are an exception to this rule. Almost all have left Syria since the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948.
[‡] In Israel, the Druze are not officially defined as Muslim and accept their status as a separate religion.

[1] I would like to thank my wife, Manar Kachour Landis, for explaining the Syrian education system to me and for assisting in the research for this article in numerous ways.


[16] On the Alawis under the French see, Landis, Nationalism, Chap. 2. On the effort of Alawites to gain recognition as Twelver Shiites, see Batatu, Syria's Peasantry; and
Kramer, “Syria’s Alawis.”

[17] al-`Alawi writes in *Al-`Alawiyyun*, p. 12:

"The Alawites are nothing but Twelver, Imami Shiites. If some heterodoxy has appeared among the uneducated members of the community, that is of no account, for the value of a people, their religion, and their culture cannot ultimately be based on the actions of the ignorant among them. The Alawites do not differ from Shiites except that some of them adhere to the tariqa al-Janblaniyya which is a Sufi tariqa like all other Sufi tariqas.... in which some of the beliefs of the prophet's house have been added. Yes, the most that can be held against the Alawites is that some have constructed cultic shrines, but we believe that this would not have happened if the community had not suffered through an oppressive period of history during which the conditions of the community were terrible. The greatest proof of this can be found in the conditions existing today: they have built mosques, they pray, give alms, and go on pilgrimage to the holy city.... They have performed the duties of God ever since the mantle of oppression and injustice was lifted from their shoulders and began to enjoy a bit of freedom."


Sources:

http://www.edume.org/reports/6/toc.htm

* Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi`ism," in *Shi`ism, Resistance, and Revolution,*