

Poll: Most Israeli Jews feel schools should teach 'Palestinian narrative'

The results, announced on Thursday, reignited the longstanding controversy over the content of school curricula on both sides.

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A majority of Israeli Jews believe the schools should present the Palestinian narrative about the conflict, according to a Tel Aviv University survey.

The results, announced on Thursday, reignited the longstanding controversy over the content of school curricula on both sides, and drew sharp criticism from a senior government official.

The poll was conducted between December 19 and 21, before the recent series of terrorist attacks and Israeli air strikes in the Gaza Strip. It surveyed the opinions of 502 randomly selected Israeli Jews, a representative sample of that population, according to Prof. Daniel Bar-Tal of Tel Aviv University.

More than 64 percent of respondents said Israeli schools should teach the "Palestinian narrative."

Respondents in the Center and Left overwhelmingly supported the idea – 70.9% and 89.6%, respectively.

Those on the Right were split within the margin of error, with 53% supporting teaching the Palestinian view.

Bar-Tal said the results indicate that the Jewish public is more open than the government to learning about the Palestinian narrative.

"Both sides present [their] own narrative, and it's not surprising in many respects," he said. "You don't expect that Palestinians will present the Jewish narratives, and you don't expect that Israeli schoolbooks will present the Palestinian narratives... Each of them is focusing mostly on the negative side that the 'other' did to us."

Yosef Kuperwasser, director-general of the Strategic Affairs Ministry, said seeking to learn about the Palestinian narrative is reasonable. But, he said, "know that it has a very limited relationship with history."

“History tells us that most elements of the Palestinian narratives are very problematic. And the way that some people want to teach the Palestinian narrative is very questionable,” said Kuperwasser, who has been critical of Palestinian curricula in the past.

He called for reciprocity on the Palestinian side.

“I don’t believe that the other side, the Palestinians, is anywhere close to learning the Israeli Jewish narrative,” Kuperwasser said.

The survey also found that a majority of respondents, 72.9%, believe Israel and the Palestinian Authority should coordinate “peace education” programs that would begin even before a deal is signed.

But respondents were divided about whether Israeli schools should teach Palestinian customs and culture in a positive way. While 85.7% of respondents on the Left said yes, 70.2% of those on the Right disagreed. Among respondents in the Center, 65.8% agreed.

Dr. Arnon Groiss – a prominent figure in the textbook debate who argues that Palestinian textbooks delegitimize Jews and Israel – said there is room for improvement in Israeli textbooks.

“Regarding that Israelis are not exposed to Palestinian lives and habits, well this is partly true, because Israelis are exposed in civic textbooks to Palestinians who live in Israel,” Groiss said. “It is true that they are not exposed to Palestinians [who live] in the West Bank or Gaza.”

Respondents across the political spectrum agreed overwhelmingly that the PA’s education system “incites and educates violence” against Jews and Israel. Nine out of ten respondents agreed with the statement.

“If you will think about it, almost probably... 99.9% of the Israelis never saw a Palestinian textbook, but this accusation is repeated time and time again by the Israeli leaders,” said Bar-Tal, who co-led a controversial study, published in February, which argued that Palestinian textbooks do not preach hate.

The Education Ministry rejected Bar-Tal’s study at the time, and the ministry did not respond to a request for comment on the recent survey.

More than 82% of respondents said critical thinking should be a main goal of the education system. At the same time, 65.5% said the education system ought to present Jewish and Zionist values uncritically. The results were split along political lines.

The majority of respondents – 81.1% – opposed the idea that schools should teach children that the West Bank is not part of Israel. Left-leaning respondents, however, were split almost evenly over this question.

The survey was funded by the university's Walter Lebach Center and conducted by the Midgam Project, and had a sampling error of 4.4 percentage points. It was presented at a conference at the university discussing the role of peace education in Israeli and Palestinian schools.

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