

Assessing Religious Freedom in Egyptian Curriculum Reform



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Cover Photo: School children attend the first day of classes at the Talaat Harb government primary school, in the popular district of Shubra, Cairo, Egypt, Monday Sept. 28, 2015. Some 19 million Egyptian students began the academic year on Monday as Education minister El-Helali el-Sherbini, told the state-run news agency MENA that the government had repaired 95% of the country's notoriously rundown schools. (AP Photo/Mohamed Elraai)

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CONTENTS

- 3 About The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**
 - 3 Who We Are
 - 3 What Religious Freedom Is
- 4 Executive Summary**
- 5 Overview: Project Scope and Methodology**
- 6 Challenges and Limitations of the Research**
- 7 Religious Diversity in Egypt**
- 8 The Education System in Egypt**
 - 8 A Critical Analysis of the Egyptian Education System
 - 9 Legal System (Constitution and National Human Rights Strategy)
- 10 Types of Education in Egypt**
 - 10 An Overview of Pre-university Education in Egypt
- 11 Public Schools**
 - 11 Government-managed Public Schools
 - 11 Independently Managed Public Schools
 - 12 International Public Schools
- 13 Private Schools**
 - 13 Private Schools (National Curriculum)
 - 13 Independent, International Private Schools
- 14 Overview of Courses and Curricula**
 - 14 Arabic Language
 - 14 Religion
 - 15 Social Studies

16	Curricula: The Authoring Process and Content Quality
17	Education Development Plans and Curricula Review
19	Review of EMEC 2021/2022
19	Fifth Primary Grade – Arabic Language
19	Fifth Primary Grade – Religion
20	Fifth Primary Grade – Social Studies
20	Third Preparatory Level – Arabic Language
21	Third Preparatory Level – Religion
22	Third Preparatory Level – Social Studies
22	Third Secondary Level – Arabic Language
24	Third Secondary Level – Religion
24	Third Secondary Level – History
26	Comparison between 2016–2017/2017–2018 and 2021–2022 EMEC
26	Fifth Primary Level – Arabic Language
26	Fifth Primary Level – Religion
27	Fifth Primary Level – Social Studies
27	Third Preparatory Level – Arabic Language
27	Third Preparatory Level – Religion
28	Third Preparatory Level – Social Studies
28	Third Secondary Level – Arabic Language
28	Third Secondary Level – Religion
29	Third Secondary Level – History
30	Conclusion
31	About the Authors
32	Appendix
32	Number of Lessons Including Religious Aspects or Relating to Religious Diversity and Freedoms

ABOUT THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

WHO WE ARE

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF uses international standards to monitor violations of religious freedom or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

WHAT RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS

Inherent in religious freedom is the right to believe or not believe as one's conscience leads, and to live out one's beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear. Freedom of religion or belief is an expansive right that includes the freedoms of thought, conscience, expression, association, and assembly. Religious freedom is a core human right that international law and treaty recognize; a necessary component of U.S. foreign policy and America's commitment to defending democracy and freedom globally; and a vital element of national security, critical to ensuring a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable world.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report assesses the progress that Egypt’s government has made in its stated intention to reform the Egyptian Mandated Education Curriculum (EMEC) throughout its primary, preparatory, and secondary education systems as it pertains to religious material.

The Ministry of Education has been working, at least since 2018, to evaluate, update, and improve the ways in which public school textbooks instruct primary and secondary students on religion, religious communities, and religious diversity. Accordingly, this research assesses the extent to which the Ministry of Education has made progress in 1) removing material promoting intolerance, hatred, discrimination, or violence against religious minorities, including Christians, Jews, and other non-Sunni Muslim groups; 2) introducing material that proactively teaches religious inclusivity and tolerance; and 3) implementing said changes throughout the full range of grade levels (primary through secondary, or in the Egyptian system, *ibtida’i* through *thanawi ‘ama*).

This report presents qualitative findings from the examination of the EMEC. The research set out to examine the most current EMEC (academic year 2021–2022) to gauge the qualitative and quantitative changes (whether any exist, and if they are positive or negative) in comparison to the independent variable (academic years 2016–2017/2017–2018).¹

Initial observations suggested that, overall, the EMEC shows a noticeable improvement with regard to the amount and severity of discriminative content. However, as the research progressed, it became clear that many changes were cosmetic at best and that little has been done by the current government to mitigate the existing sectarian language and incitement against non-Sunni Muslims.

Additionally, examples of direct sectarianism affecting non-Muslims remain present, encouraging students to harbor contempt and distrust of others based on their faith. Further, the overarching issue of religionization of EMEC remains prevalent; the prevailing influence of Islam, whether in the form of Quranic samples to teach the Arabic language or through anecdotal examples of piety or righteous behavior in social sciences, leaves non-Muslim and non-Sunni Muslim students excluded or under-represented.

Most lessons (Arabic, social studies, and Islamic religion) include vague words describing objectives for the students to learn—for example, “human rights,” “tolerance,” and “rejecting violence and radicalism”—but the actual lessons are void of any definitions of practice. Such objectives are usually not represented by the lessons, exercises, and suggested activities. It is fair to say that most of this content has not changed significantly from previous iterations but witnessed the addition of such terms with no further explanation or definitions.

¹ The EMEC for the academic years of 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 are identical.

OVERVIEW: PROJECT SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

This research focused on three critical academic grade levels—fifth primary, third secondary, and third preparatory—and examined the Egyptian Mandated Education Curriculum (EMEC) as it applies to state and public schools. The research did not include an evaluation of Al-Azhar’s education system.² The research team employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches, the latter of which is presented in a tabulated format, evaluating the number of instances a given curriculum presented language or instructions that either violate inclusivity or promote sectarianism. Qualitative assessment of these instances was based on their positive and negative societal values pertaining to religious freedoms, sectarianism, diversity, and inclusivity.

Furthermore, the study evaluates the infusion of religiosity and religious texts embedded in the curriculum of courses that do not address theology directly, to gauge the influence of religion on science, history, and language studies.

Of the 8–13 courses mandated through the EMEC,³ this study compared the mandated curricula of the Arabic Language, Religion, and History/Social Studies courses for the fifth primary grade,⁴ the third preparatory grade, and the third/final year of secondary (high) school. Additionally, the study examined curriculum language related to citizenship and human rights. These curricula were chosen because they are the most commonly required courses across the education system in Egypt.

² Al-Azhar is the oldest institution in the Islamic world. It was established to disseminate Islamic and scientific knowledge and became the principal foundation for classical Islamic religious tradition. Al-Azhar works with the Egyptian state to develop a normative Islam, taking a stance against what they consider to be extremist thought. The institution includes the Council of Senior Scholars which consists of approximately 40 members of Al-Azhar’s scholars from the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence. Al-Azhar is inclusive of the four major Sunni schools of law, the Ashari and Maturidi schools of theology, and seven major Sufi orders. Al-Azhar also provides religious education at the primary and secondary level. Families from all over the country send their children to these schools. Some students choose to continue their education at Al-Azhar University, which has branches throughout the country. Classes are segregated based on gender.

³ The number of mandated courses varies across academic grades.

⁴ Fifth primary grade was chosen due to the fluctuating existence of the sixth grade. The Ministry of Education has revisited its decision on keeping or removing a sixth primary grade from the education system a handful of times over the last two decades, making it an unreliable gauge for a comparative study.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

This research focused on three academic grades or years: the final year of grade school (fifth primary), the final year of middle school (third preparatory), and final year of high school (third secondary). To better understand the potential limitations presented by the analysis of a limited number of academic grades, the researchers conducted a general overview of a random sample of other grades. This quick analysis showed, for example, that the seventh-grade (second preparatory) curriculum interweaves more lessons based on Islamic teachings in all subjects in comparison to the curriculum of the final year of middle school (third preparatory).

One unforeseen challenge was the availability of the latest version of EMEC for third secondary grade. Regrettably, all government sources provide only the third secondary EMEC for the academic year of 2019–2020. It is our understanding that the third secondary EMEC for 2019–2020 is no different from that of 2020–2021.

Another challenge was how to deal with Islamic religious educational curricula. This research attempted to differentiate between the Islamic religious texts associated with belief and worship and those which prioritize Islam as the superior and correct religion. Accordingly, the researchers focused on analyzing texts that dealt with Muslims' relations and transactions with non-Muslims and texts that used historical anecdotes and incidents relevant to current socio-political circumstances. Additionally, if the text included clear incitement of violence or promoted discrimination against certain citizens, the researchers included it in their analysis.

The concept of the “hidden curriculum,” which considers the unique context in which teachers and the school present a given curriculum to students, is also a key factor. Despite its importance, teachers' manner of presentation was not part of this research. Lastly, while this analysis looks at the three selected subjects or courses as a preliminary indicator for the development of educational curricula, it recognizes that these do not represent all curricula. For example, some curricula in academic years not included in the study contained blatant incitement of sectarianism and discrimination.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN EGYPT

Egypt, a country of 105 million people, is located on the northern coast of Africa, bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north and the Red Sea to the east.

Religious diversity has been one of the distinctive aspects of Egyptian society for many centuries, with various religious traditions successively leaving their mark on the indigenous population. Egypt's religious lineage has incorporated polytheistic pharaonic religion, Judaism, and Greek and Roman influences from the ancient era; Christianity, which emerged in the first century CE, and Islam in the seventh; and the Bahá'í, Jehovah's Witness, and other faith communities in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Today, according to statistics from the United Kingdom (UK) Home Office report on Christians⁵ in Egypt, approximately 90 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim,⁶ while 10 percent is Christian (though estimates range from 5 to 15 percent of the population), and the number

identifying as Jewish has decreased to fewer than 10 people. Copts, indigenous Egyptian Christians, are the largest non-Muslim minority population and the single largest Christian population in the greater Middle East and North Africa region.⁷ The Coptic Orthodox Church remains the largest denomination among Copts.

Modern Egyptian society encompasses several unrecognized schools and branches of Islam as well as other religious groups; these include, for example, Shi'a,⁸ Quranists, Ahmadis, Bahá'is, and atheists. The January 25, 2011 revolution galvanized religious minorities—especially Christians, Shiites, Bahá'is, and atheists—to participate in protests to demand equal rights and religious freedom. The UK Home Office report indicated that in 2020, conditions for religious freedom had improved to some extent, while systemic and persistent obstacles remained as religious minorities suffered from various violations.

⁵ The United Kingdom Home Office Report on Christians in Egypt, October 2020. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/931834/_E__Egypt_-_Christians_-_CPIN_v4.0.pdf

⁶ The Egyptian government does not distinguish Muslims by sects.

⁷ Pew Research Center, Global Christianity - A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population, December, 2011. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/12/19/global-christianity-regions/>

⁸ Estimates of Egypt's Shi'a population range from 800,000 to 2 million, according to Minority Rights Group International. <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/shia-3/>

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN EGYPT

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EGYPTIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Egyptian education system⁹ faces several challenges, such as lack of funding, which has a direct effect on students, teachers, and the curriculum. In the 2021–2022 budget, education ranked third in spending priorities, and though the total budget for education increased by 15 billion Egyptian pounds (around US\$1 billion¹⁰), this was less than half the minimum stipulated by the constitution. Although the government affirmed its commitment to the constitutional provisions which target 6 percent of the nation's total budget for educational spending, published figures show that spending on education does not exceed 2.42 percent.¹¹

This deficit is most evident in public schools, where most Egyptians send their children. Students sit in overcrowded and poorly ventilated classrooms, in schools that may not have proper infrastructure such as meals, transportation, and playgrounds and lack educational materials and resources such as science labs and multimedia rooms. Further, they may lack enrichment and extracurricular activities like arts, music, sports, and field trips. This leads many families to resort to private lessons for their children to pass exams, rendering the public education system ineffective. Despite the government's attempts to introduce modern services (such as administering exams on electronic tablets¹² or offering school meals), corruption and inconsistency lead to the failure or postponement of these initiatives. Many who criticize public schools are met with censorship or dismissal.

Lack of resources and overcrowding also affects the teaching process. Teachers—who are typically graduates of Egyptian

public universities, either the Faculty of Arts or the Faculty of Education—are underpaid and do not receive proper training, which then affects the way the curriculum is taught to students. Despite the government's efforts to crack down on informal private lessons,¹³ they remain a common and easy tool for students to pass exams or score higher grades.¹⁴

Additionally, public schools are plagued with violence among students, as well as between students and teachers, with reports of attacks appearing almost weekly in the press.¹⁵

Observers have condemned the Egyptian educational system's style of pushing students to memorize material in order to pass exams, rather than engaging them in critical thinking and encouraging them to raise questions. As a result, graduates might lack the skills required to keep pace with the modern global market. Another main criticism is the involvement of a conservative religious discourse in classrooms and in the decision-making circles that formulate and monitor educational policies.¹⁶ In that sense, these policies often impose an Islamic identity on the school administration, activities, and curriculum, from Arabic language courses to social studies. In some cases, the curriculum even invokes sectarian discrimination and incites animus toward religious minorities.¹⁷ Some lessons place more emphasis on conservative Islamic values at the expense of pluralistic norms or other religious beliefs. Similarly, activities related to arts and culture have been neglected.

The inclusion of these sectarian dynamics in textbooks was one of the main factors that prompted officials in Egypt to commit to introducing reforms in the field of education and scientific research. In 2014, the government adopted a

⁹ Readers may find more information on reforms in the Egyptian education system during Mubarak's era in *Modern Egypt: The Formation of a Nation-State* by Arthur Goldschmidt, Jr.

¹⁰ Based on 2021 average exchange rate where 15.7 EGP = US\$1.

¹¹ The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, "The 2021/2022 budget: priority for debt, the new capital, and senior state workers... and less than half of the constitutional limit for health and education," July 11, 2021, <https://www.eipr.org/2021/07/11/2021-2022-budget-priority-for-debt-the-new-capital-and-senior-state-workers-and-less-than-half-of-the-constitutional-limit-for-health-and-education/>.

¹² Since 2019, the Ministry of Education has attempted to deliver exams using electronic tablets that were distributed to students, but the exercise has been riddled with challenges. Inequity in students' access to the internet and corruption within the Ministry of Education led to leaked exam questions which garnered criticism of the new system from the public and from the Egyptian parliament.

¹³ Since 2014, the Egyptian authorities have been attempting to crack down on private academic lessons offered by individuals or institutions not registered with the Ministry of Education. Crackdowns involve police forces storming the centers, detaining teachers, staff, and owners of the businesses, confiscating materials, and shutting down operations and facilities. Business owners can be referred for state prosecution and fined. The official media narrative endorsed by the state celebrates these raids as "waging war on private lessons" and describes the centers as mafia or big business, blaming the phenomenon on the financial greed of business owners and parents who willingly agree to send their children to private tutoring centers. In January 2021, the Ministry of Education said that it shut down 15,145 centers in the second half of 2020 alone. For more information, see: Yasmin Badawy, "The state declares war on private lessons centers," January 7, 2021, <https://www.elbalad.news/4646652>

¹⁴ Due to lack of resources on all sides, students must pay for private lessons by the same teachers outside of school time, and teachers rely on this for part of their teaching income. This happens not just in public schools but across the board at all levels, for all levels of income and socioeconomic classes.

¹⁵ "School Violence and Teachers," The Social Justice Platform, September 18, 2021, <https://www.sjp.org/2021/09/18/school-violence-and-teachers/>

¹⁶ Ilham Abdel Hamid Farag, "Students' Attitudes towards Citizenship in Egypt," November 6, 2013, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2013/11/06/ar-pub-53516>

¹⁷ Mohamed Mounir Megahid, "Education and Citizenship, Egyptians Against Religious Discrimination," National Conference Against Religious Discrimination, April 25, 2009

strategic plan for the development of pre-university education, and in 2018, the government launched the National Education Project,¹⁸ which mainly focuses on public schools.

LEGAL SYSTEM (CONSTITUTION AND NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS STRATEGY)

Education as defined within the Egyptian constitution and implemented within a centralized framework

The educational system in Egypt is governed and managed through the centralized federal government and is also provided a rough framework within the nation's constitution. The current Egyptian constitution defines the objectives of education in Article 19:

Every citizen has the right to education with the aim of building the Egyptian character, maintaining national identity, planting the roots of scientific thinking, developing talents, promoting innovation and establishing civilizational and spiritual values and the concepts of citizenship, tolerance and non-discrimination. The state commits to uphold its aims in education curricula and methods, and to provide education in accordance with global quality criteria.¹⁹

In addition, the current Egyptian regime has made another pledge to ensure the right to education for citizens as part of the state's Sustainable Development Strategy: Egypt Vision 2030. The vision promises:

A high quality education and training system available to all, without discrimination within an efficient, just, sustainable and flexible institutional framework. Providing the necessary skills to students and trainees to think creatively, and empower them technically and technologically. Contributing to the development of a proud, creative, responsible, and competitive citizen who accepts diversity and differences, and is proud of his country's history.²⁰

¹⁸ National Education Development Project, State Information Service, December 2021, <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/230743/التطوير-القومي-للتعليم-المشروع?lang=ar>

¹⁹ Egypt's 2014 Constitution, Article 19, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Egypt_2014.pdf?lang=ar

²⁰ Egypt's 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy, <http://sdsegypt2030.com/>

TYPES OF EDUCATION IN EGYPT

AN OVERVIEW OF PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN EGYPT

While the available systems of education in Egypt are diverse—with specialized schools reflecting a variety of curricula, ownership, and institutional management—some of the options are not accessible to many segments of society.²¹ There are two main types of education systems in Egypt: one managed by the state (public schools) and the other managed privately. Public schools include government-managed institutions in which the language of instruction

is Arabic, as well as international and experimental public schools, where the language of instruction varies depending on the curriculum and material. Private schools include those that teach the EMEC in foreign languages and international private schools that do not teach the EMEC, except as an elective if students opt-in. Instead, such institutions teach the curricula affiliated with the country of instruction.

Table 1. Student Population in Egypt per Academic Grade Level of EMEC Reviewed in this Report

Academic Level	Number of Classrooms	Number of Students in the 2021–2022 School Year	Total Number of Students in the Level
5th primary level	19,578	2,191,433	13,678,021
3rd preparatory level	13,300	1,994,052	5,829,775
3rd secondary level	4,254	729,833	2,008,664

²¹ “The Egyptian Education System,” *Misr Online*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.egyptsonline.com/2019/07/Education-System-In-Egypt.html>

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

GOVERNMENT-MANAGED PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Uses the EMEC

Total number of students²² enrolled in 2021:
19,633,984²³

Governmental public schools are institutions that are fully supervised and financed by the Egyptian government and run by the Ministry of Education. Such schools use the EMEC. Students in these schools come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Students must pay fees—ranging from 205 zEGP (US\$11) to 505 EGP (US\$27)²⁴— to acquire textbooks and enroll in the schools. Within this system students are grouped according to two educational levels, basic and high school.

- **Basic education** represents compulsory and free education in public schools, i.e., the necessary level of education that provides the basic knowledge, skills, and theoretical foundations and applied experiences. This consists of two stages: primary school, which includes six compulsory years, and the preparatory stage of three years.
- **High school education** is the middle stage between basic education and college education. It is categorized into two types: general secondary education, which enables graduates to enroll in universities and higher education institutes (if they achieve high marks), or technical/vocational secondary education, whose graduates are prepared to become skilled workers and technicians.

Government-managed public schools are divided into two types:

- **Public schools** teach state-mandated national curricula in Arabic. Along with the Al-Azhar system, most Egyptians enroll their children in the public system, and it includes a wide range of students, from socioeconomically underprivileged to affluent backgrounds.

- **Public “language schools”** (also known as “experimental schools”) teach the state-mandated national curricula, but mathematics and sciences are taught in a foreign language (primarily English, though sometimes in French or German). In addition, students are offered advanced courses in English. Students in these schools must pay extra fees for textbooks and materials, such as the advanced English textbooks or the English-translated textbooks for science and mathematics. As speaking a foreign language is considered a step up the social ladder for some of the population, some families with means to pay more enroll their children in these types of schools to better equip them for the global job market.

INDEPENDENTLY MANAGED PUBLIC SCHOOLS²⁵

Al-Azhar

Uses the EMEC (in addition to their own curriculum)

Total number of students enrolled in 2021: 1,901,986²⁶

The Al-Azhar education system is administered and regulated through the Supreme Council of Al-Azhar.²⁷ It is independent from the Ministry of Education and falls under the auspices of the prime minister. Annual tuition fees are minimal (ranging from 49 EGP, around US\$3, to 214 EGP, around US\$12), and many students receive scholarships. Students study the same curricula as their counterparts in other state administered public schools like sciences, foreign languages, and mathematics, in addition to extensive Islamic subjects such as jurisprudence, advanced studies in the Quran, *Sunna*, *Fiqh*, and Islamic History. Strict gender segregation takes place in these institutions, which are located across the country. All students enrolled in this system are Muslim, and the majority come from working class or middle class families. The system covers the first primary level to

²² The total number of students: 24,403,924. This includes primary, preparatory, and general secondary stages [*Thanawia Amaal*], in addition to pre-kindergarten, special education, agricultural secondary stages [*Thanawia Zeraa*], commerce secondary stages [*Thanawia Tugarya*], hotel secondary stages [*Thanawia Fundkia*], technical secondary stages [*Thanawia Senae*], and societal education: (CAPMAS, *Annual Bulletin of Pre-University Education*, 2021, https://www.capmas.gov.eg/Pages/StatisticsOracle.aspx?Oracle_id=2110&page_id=5104&YearID=23420)

²³ Ministry of Education Statistics Handbook, 2021, <https://emis.gov.eg/Site%20Content/book/021-022/pdf/ch2.pdf>

²⁴ Where US\$1 = 18.6 EGP. Currency conversion rates are sourced from xe.com, May 2022.

²⁵ The report uses some of the terminology employed by the UNESCO in its overview of Egypt's education system: <https://education-profiles.org/northern-africa-and-western-asia/egypt/~non-state-actors-in-education>

²⁶ CAPMAS, *Annual Bulletin of Pre-University Education*, 2021, https://www.capmas.gov.eg/Pages/StatisticsOracle.aspx?Oracle_id=2110&page_id=5104&YearID=23420

²⁷ For more information about Al-Azhar, refer to footnote 2

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Total number of students enrolled across Egypt: 2,557,712

PRIVATE SCHOOLS (NATIONAL CURRICULUM)

Uses the EMEC (in addition to their own curriculum)

In these schools, students pay considerable tuition fees as a condition of enrollment, understood to be proportional to the wide availability of extracurricular activities, better environment in the schools, bigger classrooms, and extra amenities like transportation and meals. The schools are owned and managed by private individuals or entities, but they fall under the administrative supervision of the Ministry of Education and use the EMEC and Ministry of Education-mandated national textbooks in addition to their own supplemental materials. Some of these schools brand themselves as Islamic and include related religious activities, while other schools are branded as Catholic or Evangelical.³⁴ The latter may be staffed by nuns or offer religious services to Christian students every Sunday. Examples of these schools are the German Evangelical High School in Cairo, Collège du Sacré-Cœur, and Ramses College for Girls.

INDEPENDENT, INTERNATIONAL PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Uses the EMEC only for Arabic, Social Studies, and Religion for students who opt to attend Egyptian universities

These schools are not managed by the Egyptian government and are not fully regulated by the Ministry of Education, but they exist pursuant to certain legal agreements with the Ministry of Education. According to Article 54 of Chapter Six of the 1981 Constitution, all curricula taught in private schools must be approved by the High Council of Education.³⁵ Students pay much higher tuition fees—sometimes charged in US Dollars or Euros—than their counterparts in other private schools as a condition of enrollment. These schools are affiliated with foreign entities or individuals and follow different education models, such as the British (GCSE/IGCSE), American High School Diploma, the German Abitur system, or International Baccalaureate. Examples of these schools include the Cairo American College, British Columbia Canadian International School, and Saxony International School Cairo West. If students want to graduate and apply to an Egyptian university—whether public or private—they have to get a minimum passing grade on the Ministry of Education’s exams for Arabic, national studies, and religion. Only students who want to enroll at the American University in Cairo (AUC) are exempt from taking these exams, but in doing so they forgo any possibility of student aid in the form of scholarships or grants.

³⁴ These schools were originally missionary schools administered by Christian clerics.

³⁵ Law no. 139 of 1981 (the “Education Law”), <https://moe.gov.eg/media/13hnmv4/educationactno139of1981.pdf>

OVERVIEW OF COURSES AND CURRICULA

The education system in Egypt consists of three levels. The basic education stage starts with kindergarten at age four, followed by primary school, then preparatory school. The basic education stage spans nine academic years, for students aged 4–14, and it is compulsory. It is followed by secondary

school, which lasts for three academic years, serves students between the ages of 15 and 18.

This research focused on the stated EMEC from the fifth primary level, third preparatory level, and third secondary level.

Table 2. Students' Ages and U.S. Equivalent Grade Level to Academic Grade Levels Covered by the Research in this Report

Academic Level	Level in Arabic	U.S. Equivalent Grade Level	Age of Student
5th primary level	الصف الخامس الابتدائي	5th grade	10/11
3rd preparatory level	الصف الثالث الاعدادي	8th grade	13/14
3rd secondary level	الصف الثالث الثانوي	11th grade/High School	17/18

The curricula are delivered through lessons based on textbooks (in digital format for the academic year 2021–2022), which are divided into units. The Ministry of Education is responsible for developing the EMEC and for the selection of experts who develop the curricula. In the development of curricula for religion classes, the Ministry of Education appoints Christian experts for Christian religious education and Muslim experts and teachers from the prevailing Sunni sect to develop Islamic religious education, both under the supervision of the Curriculum Development Department.

ARABIC LANGUAGE

The Arabic language courses are compulsory for all students in pre-university education systems, starting at the first primary grade and continuing up to the third secondary grade. The Arabic language courses, which students must pass, carry GPA-determining grades and advance in complexity with each progressive academic grade level. They cover a range of subjects, including reading, writing/composition, vocabulary, poetry, grammar, reciting verses and texts, rhetoric, and the history of Arabic literature from the pre-Islamic era to the present. The curriculum typically contains verses from Sunni Islamic heritage and theological sources.

RELIGION

Similar to Arabic language courses, religion is a compulsory course that students across all academic grades must enroll in and pass. Unlike the Arabic language courses, however, courses in religion are pass/fail and have no impact on the GPA.

During religion class,³⁶ students are divided into separate classrooms based on their official religion (Sunni Muslim or Christian) to allow students to follow their respective religion requirement. Muslim students make up the majority, and as such, Christian students leave the primary classroom to take their lesson in another room. In 2016, the Ministry of Education reported a shortage of Christian religion teachers and vowed to meet the need.³⁷ There is no teaching of Judaism, Bahá'í, or other religions.

³⁶ Throughout every academic grade level in all Egyptian education systems, with the exception of the international systems, students are designated a classroom where they spend the entirety of their school day for the duration of the academic year. Each student in the class will have the same daily course schedule, and teachers rotate between classrooms (similar to the practice in elementary schools in the United States).

³⁷ "Ministry of Education: Filling the deficit in teachers of the Christian religion and allocating a place to teach it in schools," *El Balad*, September 8, 2016, <https://www.elbalad.news/2397448>

SOCIAL STUDIES

Social studies is compulsory for primary, preparatory, and secondary grade levels. In the primary stage, the curriculum encompasses both history and geography, as students study economic, social, historical, and environmental topics about various regions and countries. As the academic level advances, the social studies curriculum becomes more detailed, and subjects such as history and geography become separate courses. Social studies curricula vary drastically for students in secondary grade levels, depending on their academic-track choice.³⁸ Accordingly, the conducted research provides a deeper analysis of social studies for the third preparatory and third secondary grades.

³⁸ In the Egyptian public and private school systems, students are given a choice of three different academic-track courses: 1) physical sciences, 2) social sciences, and 3) technical/vocational.

CURRICULA: THE AUTHORING PROCESS AND CONTENT QUALITY

Curricula are one of the main tools that enable the success of the educational process. School textbooks represent the objectives of the curriculum, guiding teachers on how to implement these objectives and educate students. They are also the source of knowledge and values that the ministry wants to instill in the students.³⁹

Curricula in Egyptian schools are developed in a centralized process consisting of three steps:

- the Ministry of Education issues a call to authors to apply to publish the book(s);
- accepted applicants obtain a brochure of conditions and an arbitration guide, and they meet with representatives of the Curriculum Development Center to discuss issues related to the criteria in the call; and
- the Curriculum Development Center selects the book(s) that will be used.

The Ministry of Education's Center for Curriculum and Educational Materials Development sets general policies for every subject in the curricula for all educational levels. It is also the entity responsible for tailoring the guidelines for the textbook-writing competitions.⁴⁰ The Ministry reviews existing curricula every four years, although it does not provide an official schedule for the review. Moreover, a curriculum may be reviewed if there are developments that require change in the content.⁴¹

In April 2016, Dr. Hazem Rashed, the former director of the center, stated that he did not receive any instructions from any state agency with regards to “politicizing the curricula.” He added that all the “educational directions” he received were issues that were agreed upon in society, such as advocating for a moderate understanding of Islam while modifying the Islamic religion curriculum; developing values and morals in the textbooks of the Arabic language curriculum; and raising awareness about the importance of tourism and respecting traffic signs in the social studies textbooks.⁴²

The curricula are seen as a starting point for broad educational reforms, such as redefining the basic elements related to educational objectives and developing the educational content through a series of teaching and learning processes.⁴³ In this context, the quality and content of textbooks is closely measured by the right to education, which is guaranteed in international human rights covenants. This includes Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which stipulates the need for education to enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, and to promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic, or religious groups.

³⁹ Doha Mimari, “Citizenship in School Curriculum,” Al-Jazeera Blog, June 15, 2018, www.aljazeera.net/blogs/2018/6/15/المواطنة-في-المناهج-الدراسية

⁴⁰ The official Facebook page of the Center for Curriculum and Instructional Materials Development (CCIMD) in Egypt May 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/ccimdegypt1/>

⁴¹ Motaz Attalah and Farida Makar, “Nationalism and Homogeneity in Contemporary Curricula,” August 2014, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, https://eipr.org/sites/default/files/reports/pdf/nationalism_and_homogeneity_in_contemporary_curricula_e.pdf

⁴² Wafaa Yahia, “Hazem Rashed, the former director of the Center for Curriculum and Instructional Materials Development: No orders to “politicizing the curricula,” *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, April 21, 2016, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1612889>

⁴³ “Training Tools for Curriculum Development,” United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2014, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000222796_eng

EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT PLANS AND CURRICULA REVIEW

Following the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood from power in July 2013, the Ministry of Education announced that it would initiate the development of education and the revision of the curricula. In December 2014, the ministry developed the “intellectual security strategy,” which was prepared by the National Center for Educational Research and Development, to confront the radicalization and violence in pre-university education.⁴⁴ Then-Minister of Education Mahmoud Abu Al-Nasr issued a decree to form a ministry committee to review some of the religion textbooks and to send the committee to review the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Al-Azhar.⁴⁵

Al-Nasr’s successor as Minister of Education, Dr. Moheb Al-Rafei, agreed with the findings of the committee formed by the Curriculum Development Center, which was tasked with censoring the topics that promoted violence or extremism or which made reference to any political or religious affiliations or any concepts that could be “misused.”⁴⁶ As a result, the ministry decided to remove certain topics which invoked violence and extremism from the 2015 curricula. Some of these passages were in the Arabic language curriculum of the fifth grade level and included graphic details and violent terminology regarding battles led by Muslim leaders like Salah El-Din Al-Ayouby and Uqba Ibn Nafe’, such as “turf war,” “kicking out the Crusaders,” and “burning the enemies.”⁴⁷

In May 2018, the Ministry of Education announced the implementation of “The New Curricula for Pre-University Education,” which was launched in September 2018 and began with students of the first primary level onward.⁴⁸ The ministry stated its attempt to strike a balance between overhauling the textbooks and staying loyal to traditional lessons, noting that the new developments reflected the implementation of the education articles of the newly ratified

Egyptian constitution. Further, the ministry noted that the changes would help pursue a unified national identity and the respect for cultural autonomy. The new education strategy also provided multiple activities meant to advance nationalist sentiments, citizenship, belonging, self-confidence, and the importance of accepting others, and to link education to the local, regional, and international labor market.

The general framework of the curricula focuses on major issues and challenges facing Egyptian society. These topics are divided into groups that are included in the textbooks and distributed among the different levels—primary, preparatory, and secondary. The issues include discrimination, globalization, citizenship, health and population, the environment, and development. Every issue encompasses several specific problems for study. For example, discrimination issues include discrimination against children, women, and individuals with special needs; issues related to globalization include problems of cultural exchange, technological awareness, entrepreneurship, and digital citizenship; and citizenship issues include problems of national unity, loyalty and belonging, and awareness of legal rights and the legal system.

Dr. Tarek Shawky, the current Minister of Education and Technical Education, announced the ministry’s plan to develop curricula that promote religious freedom, spread a culture of tolerance, and strengthen national identity.

The initiative included several axes:

- Teaching a new curriculum (“Values and Respect of Others: Together We Build”), starting from the third primary grade during the current academic year 2020/2021.⁴⁹ The content of the associated textbook is presented to students through children’s stories.

⁴⁴ Zaki Al-Saadany, “Plan to fight radicalism in schools,” Al-Wafd, December 8, 2014, [خطة لمواجهة ظاهرة العنف بالمدارس | الوفد](#)

⁴⁵ Reham Moqbel, “Egypt is considering changing religious education curricula as a way to combat extremism,” Deutsche Welle, February 23, 2015, [عربية | رؤية أخرى للأحداث في ألمانيا والعالم العربي | DW](#) | مصر تبحث تغيير مناهج التعليم الديني كسبيل لمكافحة التطرف

⁴⁶ Mahmoud Taha Hussein, “The deleted parts in the Arabic language from the first primary to the high school,” Youm7, March 18, 2015, [الأجزاء المحذوفة في اللغة العربية من أولى ابتدائي إلى الثانوية العامة - اليوم السابع](#)

⁴⁷ Youssra Mohamed, “Why has the Ministry of Education removed Salah El-Din Al-Ayouby and Uqba Ibn Nafe’ from Curricula,” Dot Misr, March 20, 2015, [لماذا حذفت التعليم «عقبة بن نافع» و«صلاح الدين» من المناهج؟](#)

⁴⁸ Wafaa Yahia, “Al-Masry Al-Youm publishes the document the “New Curricula for Pre-University Education,”” Al-Masry Al-Youm, May 9, 2018, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1289375>

⁴⁹ Mahmoud Taha, “Teaching a curriculum of values and respect for others, starting from the first grade of the next academic year,” Youm7, February 7, 2021, [التعليم: تدريس منهج القيم واحترام الآخر بداية من أولى ابتدائي العام الدراسي المقبل - اليوم السابع](#)

- Training teachers to promote religious freedom and coexistence and reject intolerance inside and outside the classroom. The Minister of Education stressed that the new curricula aim to provide students with life skills that will improve their behavior and seek to eliminate negative phenomena such as bullying, noting that values of love, compassion, respect, perseverance, and honesty will be taught in the new model.⁵⁰
- Training teachers to use various strategies and activities to promote belonging, intellectual security, and equality among the students. For example, the Directorate of Education in Minya held training sessions titled “Renouncing Violence, Tolerance and Accepting Others” with the stated goal to promote religious freedom. The sessions were held for three days at *Al-Ahd Al-Geded* Private School in the Samalout Educational Administration.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Yasmin Badawy, “Ministry of Education reveals a plan to promote religious freedom and reject radicalism in schools,” *Sada Al-Balad*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.elbalad.news/4691434>

⁵¹ Islam Fahmy, “Training to promote religious freedoms at the Samalout Educational Administration in Minya concludes,” *Al-Watan*, October 7, 2021, <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/5731660>

REVIEW OF EMEC 2021/2022

FIFTH PRIMARY GRADE – ARABIC LANGUAGE

The Arabic language curriculum for the fifth primary level contains six units, divided into three units per semester. The six units focus on various topics: “Crucial Virtues” and the importance of work in Islam; “Science and Technology” and how Islam helped foster science, benefiting all people; “Habits and Behaviors” about Islam’s call for moderation; “Key Figures” and the importance of peace; “Sports and Skills” on encouraging tolerance via sports; “Tales and Wisdom” on the importance of hope and fulfilling promises. In each of the six units, students study either a verse from the Quran or *hadith* (the collection of traditions and sayings of the Muslim prophet). The curriculum includes a novel titled *Adventures in The Deep Sea* by Ahmed Naguib.

At this level, the textbook on “Habits and Behaviors” (pp. 2–19), for example, contains lessons discussing the importance of work through an Islamic lens to develop the individual and society. One section reads, “Islam encourages people to work and promises workers good treatment on judgment day. All of this is due to its sense of care toward making the Islamic *Ummah*⁵² a working nation.” The lesson features a Quranic verse about the importance of work as well as a *hadith* to explain how the Prophet Muhammad deemed scholars and scientists a higher category of people. In these exercises, students must memorize the religious text, interpret it, and demonstrate proper grammar and vocabulary throughout the verses.

The Arabic curriculum for the fifth primary level is infused with Islamic references and illustrates a clear relationship between Islam and “positive” social or nationalist values and good deeds, such as moderation and patriotism. This association is reinforced in the learning material with examples and exercises based only on Islam. In addition to Quranic verses and *hadith*, the lessons use poetry to educate the students. There is no mention of Christianity, its figures, or any Coptic texts in the language lessons, nor is there an invitation to compare what other religions or groups have to say about the mentioned topics.

FIFTH PRIMARY GRADE – RELIGION

The Islam religion course curriculum for the fifth primary level consists of two textbooks. Each book contains four units: “God is Gracious” discusses the importance of charity; “From the Tales of the Prophets” addresses the importance of worshipping God and believing the messengers; “This is our Country” discusses nationalism and love of the homeland; “Prominent Islamic Personalities” teaches the life and work of 7th century, pre-Islamic Arab woman poet Al-Khansa; “Belief” emphasizes monotheism; “Soldiers of God” sheds light on patriotic acts; “The Birthplace of Islam” considers the rise of Islam and the construction of the honored *Ka’bah*⁵³ in the Arabian Peninsula; and “Preserving the Environment” touches on the importance of protecting nature.

The fifth unit of the curriculum (“Soldiers of God”) contains one of the most obvious cases of discrimination. This is taught as the second unit in the second semester and appears on pages 11–18 of the textbook. The objectives of this unit are to use religion to justify love of the homeland, for students to learn “the vile history of the Jews” and to “stay alert to the treacherous nature of the Jews,” and to note the similarities of “the doings of the Jews now and then” (p. 11). The unit focuses on the 1973 October War against Israel and the value of the Sinai Peninsula, making comparisons between the crossing of the Suez Canal and the victory of the Prophet against Jewish people living in Medina in the 7th century. The unit utilizes Quranic verses to validate the concept of “the deception of the Jews” (p. 11).

This unit exemplifies the interweaving of nationalism and religiosity, via the citing of examples such the Prophet Muhammad asking the Jews to leave the city of Medina “and only to pack what their camel can carry.” The unit further relates alleged incidents of Israelis destroying infrastructure of the Sinai territory right before surrendering it back in 1979 to the Egyptians⁵⁴ to 7th century Medina Jews destroying their houses before leaving.

In addition, several activities and exercises in this unit encourage students to search online for more examples of “the treachery of the Jews” (p. 12), to discuss in groups the

⁵² *Ummah* is commonly used to refer to the collective community of Islamic people across the world.

⁵³ The *Ka’bah* is a building in the center of Islam’s most important mosque, Al-Masjid Al-Haram in Mecca, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

⁵⁴ As part of the peace process and Camp David accords, many Israeli settlers in the Sinai Peninsula were forcefully removed by Israeli forces to fulfill the agreed-upon return of occupied lands to Egypt.

“characteristics of the Jews,” and to write an essay titled “Yesterday’s Jews are Today’s Jews” (p. 16). The lesson also encourages students to be wary of “the hypocrites,” describing them as those who “support the Jews and the non-believers,” emphasizing that “they are even more dangerous, as they are pious on the outside but infidels on the inside,” with the lesson concluding, “hence Muslims have to beware of them” (p. 17).

This course provides solid examples of the religionization of history and nationalism that is endemic in the EMEC. The course goes beyond theological education, subtly and overtly encouraging discrimination against non-Sunni Muslims.

FIFTH PRIMARY GRADE – SOCIAL STUDIES

The social studies curriculum for the fifth primary grade contains six units, divided into three per semester. First semester units are “Natural Resources in Egypt,” “Egypt’s Economic Activities,” and “Egypt before Islam,” which focuses on the successive Ptolemaic, Roman, and the Byzantine and Coptic periods. The second semester units are “Tourism,” “The Rise of Islam in Egypt” (which presents the early life of Prophet Muhammad and his companions), and “Personalities and Events in the Independent Countries” which discusses key military and political leaders after the expansion of Islam in Egypt and Syria.

Two alarming observations related to this curriculum center on the religionization of historical narratives and the heavy emphasis on the early Islamic period in Egyptian history, in comparison to all other historical periods.

In unit three of the first semester, “Egypt Before Islam,” students study Egypt under Ptolemaic rule, which starts with Ptolemy I Soter in 305 BC, and covers Cleopatra VII in 30 BC, the birth of Jesus, and the start of the Coptic Church in Egypt in 284 AD. The whole unit is covered in eight pages, with seven pages dedicated to the Ptolemaic period and only three dedicated to the Coptic period. Meanwhile, the “Rise of Islam” unit spans 13 pages (pp. 29–42).

Further, religionization of historical figures is prevalent in the paragraph that describes the origins of Jesus through an Islamic theological lens (first semester, p. 38). Another example of the heavy-handed religionization of historical narratives is found in the 12 pages dedicated to the origins of Islam in Saudi Arabia, the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, as well as their achievements (second semester, pp. 19–30).

In the same unit which discusses the expansion of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, the lesson derives from an uncritical narrative of the development of the religion—ignoring the power dynamics, economic relations, and social development—and instead only provides a religious (Islamic) view of history at the time. While it portrays the conquering of Mecca as a peaceful episode (p. 24), several pages glorify the *ghazawat* (غزوات)⁵⁵—the battles and conquests that were led by Prophet Muhammad and his companions in their effort to spread the message of Islam outside the Arabian Peninsula. This text is contradictory as it presents the spread of Islam’s message as a peaceful, word-of-mouth development, while simultaneously representing it as an ideology that was spread and used to invade nearby countries. For example, one part of the lesson, which discusses the rule of Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq, reads “Abu Bakr pointed the eyes of Muslims to *Jihad*, and sent a campaign to lead Usama Ebn Yazud to the Levantine” (p. 27) to fight the “apostates” who refused to pay *zakat* (p. 27).⁵⁶

Overall, this social studies curriculum glosses over an approximately 600-year period in Egypt, with Christianity and other faiths presented through an Islamic lens. Meanwhile, the expansion of Islam in Egypt is explored in noticeably more detail, with a focus on the military battles that the Arab-Muslim armies (during and after Prophet Muhammad’s lifetime) waged to spread the message of Islam and subdue infidels. The infusion and interweaving of the Islamic faith within the social studies curriculum is endemic and exclusionary in nature. An overarching concern found through the research is the religionization of sciences, which opens the door for a variety of discriminatory issues, including unbalanced representation of theological opinions, views, and historical narratives.

THIRD PREPARATORY LEVEL – ARABIC LANGUAGE

The Arabic language curriculum for the third preparatory grade consists of two textbooks (one per semester), along with a booklet for practicing Arabic calligraphy and a historical novel that draws its title from the medieval Arab woman leader Shajar Al-Durr. The textbooks consist of six units of study that include 20 lessons spread across two semesters. In the first semester, the units are “Let’s Communicate,” which encourages solidarity among society; “Mercy and Love” to promote friendly behavior and compassion; and “The Road to Knowledge,” which emphasizes the importance of science and education. In the second semester, the units are “Moments

⁵⁵ *Ghazawat* are battles or raids conducted by Muslim forces against non-Muslims for the expansion of Muslim territory, with the purpose of converting non-Muslims to Islam.

⁵⁶ *Zakat* (الزكاة) is the Islamic system of charity where well-off individuals give away a certain percentage of their salary, winnings, and profits to poorer individuals, which, according to the Islamic tradition, ensures equality in society.

that Changed History,” which promotes positive work ethic; “Toward a Better Life,” which focuses on the values of honesty and success; and “Be Beautiful,” which centers on various virtues, such as giving back to society, respecting elders, and helping others.

Each lesson begins with major headlines, objectives, and issues that are meant to be understood by students over the course of the lesson. These issues include “tolerance, teaching peace, national unity, and countering extremism.” However, we found that the content does not reflect the lessons’ stated objectives.

References to Christians, Copts, or Christianity as a whole are only found in one lesson, in the context of Cairo’s historic Hanging Church as a monument. It is included in the first unit of the first semester, in a lesson titled “A Story of a Monument” (p. 17). This example is problematic as it mentions the church in the context of discussing the Qaitbay Castle in Alexandria, describing its use as a fortress for soldiers (p. 18), thus casting it as militarily significant. This gives the impression that the church was a safekeeping location for soldiers defending a sea invasion rather than a place of worship. In addition, when defining the Hanging Church, it is mentioned that it is close to the Amr Ibn Al-As mosque, which also gives a flawed impression that the church exists only because the mosque tolerated it, not because it is a sign of the right to equal citizenship.

Another unit in the first semester titled “Mercy and Love” addresses women’s rights (p. 23). The lesson (p. 24) uses a speech by the founder of Cairo University, Qassem Amin, an Egyptian judge, philosopher, and nationalist figure who was among the first to address the issue of women’s liberty in Egypt. The addition of this content discussing women’s rights is considered a positive step, but once again the lesson relies on religious vocabulary to justify equality (p. 24), citing a quote from Amin’s 1899 *Tahrir al Mara’a (The Liberation of Women)* which invokes a *hadith* from Prophet Muhammad saying, “I warn against (oppressing/failing to fulfill the rights of) two weak groups: the orphan(s) and women.”

The “Road to Knowledge” unit emphasizes the importance of viewing science through an Islamic lens. The lesson states that Islam is keen on science and describes it as the reason for the progress of countries (p. 40). The lesson draws a link between science and going to heaven (p. 41) in order to motivate students. From an Islamic perspective, heaven is promised to individuals who pursue knowledge. However, Muslim scholars dispute the interpretation of many Quranic

verses. In any case, the use of these verses inherently excludes all non-Muslim students. Other instances of discrimination through omission and lack of equal representation can be found throughout the curriculum, such as the inclusion of a Quranic verse which argues the superiority of Muslims over others (p. 45). The verse argues there is no one better than one who “prays to God, does good deeds, and who says, ‘I am Muslim.’”⁵⁷

Further examples of the religionization of the Arabic language curriculum can be found in the Arabic calligraphy (handwriting) textbook, where 22 of the 62 lines that students are required to copy and recite are verses from the Quran and *hadiths*. The rest are quotations from Arab poets and scholars.

In its review of this curriculum, the research team noted an alarming trend in lessons with misleading titles, which belied the largely unrelated content. Furthermore, researchers found that all units include Islamic religious texts (Quran and *hadiths*), some of which are presented in their entirety. Students must recite, memorize, and discuss these texts. The lessons containing lengthy Islamic religious text, in which the main topic of the lesson is Islam, together constitute no less than 20 percent of the total course curriculum. Non-Muslim students are obligated to recite, memorize, and sit for exams about lessons including Quranic verses and/or *hadiths*, not only for the purposes of learning the basics of grammar and linguistic structure, but with the intent of promoting Sunni Islam as the basis of morality, scientific advancement, and ethics at large.

THIRD PREPARATORY LEVEL – RELIGION

The Islamic religion curriculum for the third preparatory grade contains eight units, divided into four per semester. The units in the first semester are titled “Lessons from the Quran,” “Islamic Values,” “Islam and Social Systems,” and “Islam and Cleanliness.” The second semester consists of four units under the titles “From the Holy Quran,” “From the Pillars of the Faith,” “*Hajj and Umrah*,” and “*Ghazawat* and Islamic Personalities.”⁵⁸

In the second unit of the first semester, a lesson titled “Permitted Freedoms” argues that “the entire history of mankind confirms that Islam’s holy book, the Quran, is the first global document that proclaimed human rights for more than 14 centuries and affirmed the principles of freedom and equality” (p. 34). It also adds that Islam guaranteed the aforementioned freedoms to individuals before Europe witnessed the French Revolution, which called for freedom,

⁵⁷ Original Arabic text: ومن أحسن قولا ممن دعا الى الله وعمل الصالحات وقال إني من المسلمين

⁵⁸ *Ghazawat* means Islamic conquests.

fraternity, and equality for human beings. The lesson praises freedom of religion and belief, citing that Islam guaranteed freedom of belief to all and was not imposed by force, “but rather used dialogue as a method of calling for the faith” (p. 34). Additionally, it mentions that even though Islam regards a man to be the guardian of his wife in society, a Muslim husband cannot force his non-Muslim wife to adopt Islam or to convert (p. 34).⁵⁹

The same lesson asserts that Islam gives due importance to freedom of speech and allows rational minds to participate in the nation’s politics and problem solving. The lesson also warns that “the ban on freedom of speech threatens the stability of the state and spreads strife among the people” (p. 35).

In the curriculum, the introduction of all lessons, and some of the selected Quranic verses and *hadiths*, assert the importance of human rights, tolerance, national unity, and countering extremism, as well as women’s rights, prohibiting discrimination against women, peace, charity, globalization, rights, and duties. However, some of the curriculum includes lessons and references that are contradictory to the universal human rights framework and equality discourse, promoting Islam as the superior religion. Furthermore, various examples attribute positive qualities and values to Sunni Muslims alone, as well as encourage a sense of camaraderie within and toward the Sunni Muslim community and the exclusion of all others.

THIRD PREPARATORY LEVEL – SOCIAL STUDIES

The social studies curriculum for the third preparatory level consists of a two-part book titled *Social Studies, World Geography and Modern and Contemporary Egyptian History*. Each part consists of four units: two units about world geography and its resources, and two units about history. As stated in its introduction, the textbook “takes students on a tour around the world to learn about the natural features of the continents in terms of location and climate.” The book also tackles Egypt’s modern history since Ottoman rule until the 1952 revolution.

The first semester’s part of the book consists of 132 pages and includes four units: “Natural Geography of the World,” “World Population Geography,” “Egypt under Ottoman Rule,” and “Egypt, Colonial Advances, and Attempts at National Liberation.”

The textbook for the second semester is 156 pages-long and consists of four units as well: “Resources and Economic

Activities in the World,” “Models of Some Developing and Developed Countries,” “The July 23 Revolution and the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” and “Political Life and Egypt’s International Relations.”

Although the first book deals with ideas like Egyptian identity as a concept that unites all civilians, the curriculum does not include any reference to the Copts and their political and social realities, both historically and in the present. This is the case with one lesson in unit four, “The National Struggle Against the British Occupation,” which also ignores the two slogans that came to define the 1919 revolution when Egyptians took to the streets against the British to demand the right to self-determination. One of these slogans, “Religion is for God and the homeland is for all,” showed that the issue of faith was a private matter, while the nation belongs to all. The second slogan, “Long live the crescent with the cross,” indicated the coexistence between Muslims and Christians.

In the second textbook, a lesson about “Egypt and the Palestinian Cause” begins with a paragraph:

Palestine has a special importance in the heart of every Arab. Jesus Christ was born there, and Prophet Muhammad visited it, and it is home to the Al-Aqsa Mosque.... It has a unique location and several enemies tried to conquer it. Some Jews lived there before the First World War, alongside Christians and Muslims.

This paragraph may be understood in the context of demonstrating the status of the city before the establishment of the state of Israel, and the religious division within it. However, only mentioning the Al-Aqsa Mosque ignores the existence of Christian and Jewish places of worship.

THIRD SECONDARY LEVEL – ARABIC LANGUAGE

The Arabic language curriculum for third secondary level consists of four sections, which constitute 226 pages. The Arabic reading section includes five topics: “The Will to Change,” which is a lesson about the historical figure Abu Al-Rayhan Al-Beiruti; “Jerusalem, an Arab and Islamic City”; “Knowledge in Islam”; and “Human Values.” The curriculum includes a section for Arabic literature and texts, which focuses on the different types of Arabic poetry, the art of prose, and samples from articles, novels, short stories, and plays. The curriculum also contains a section on linguistic rhetoric and its methods. Separately, the curriculum also includes a novel, *Al-Ayam [The Days]*—an autobiography of Egyptian modern historical figure, writer, and intellectual Taha Hussein.

⁵⁹ Muslim men are permitted to marry non-Muslim women as long as they are Christian or Jewish, as they are considered the sequential predecessors of Islam. Muslim women are not allowed the same interfaith marriage privileges.

Topics related to religion, discrimination, and freedom of worship appeared in several places throughout the curriculum. The lesson titled “Islamic Scientific Civilization” profiles medieval Arab scientist Abu Al-Rayhan Al-Beiruti. This lesson presents a narrative that foreign historians, in not giving enough credit to the contributions of such scientists, are biased and unfair toward Islamic and Arab civilizations (p. 9). The text supports the discourse of victimization among Muslims, relying on a claim that foreigners are hostile and intolerant and discriminate against Muslims.

“Jerusalem, an Arab and Islamic City” (p. 14), which discusses the history of the city under Muslim and Christian rule (705–1244 AD), frames its narrative through a religionized Islamic lens, which ignores the sociopolitical and socioeconomic backdrops of the era and nuanced contexts of its wars. The narrative uses anti-Jewish and anti-Christian rhetoric to make the claim that sectarianism was rampant under non-Islamic rule, whether Christian or Jewish, and that diversity was shunned. The text argues that, in contrast, the governance of several Muslim rulers allowed for other believers to practice their religion freely (p. 15). Furthermore, the lesson states that “Jews”⁶⁰ spread lies and continue to falsify the facts regarding Jerusalem, trying to convince the world falsely that they are the ones who established and built the city” (p. 14). The text justifies an Islamic identity of Jerusalem by citing how Caliph Umar Ibn Al-Khattab arrived in the city from Medina in the 7th century and met the Patriarch Sophronius, promising peace between Muslims and Christians (p. 15).

Similarly, using the term “Crusaders” (p. 16) to refer to Christians involved in the conflict supports the narrative that the conflict was primarily religious and perpetuates the positioning of Christians as “the Other.” Even though this is an Arabic language course, the language of the curriculum feeds into a larger narrative attempting to reshape history by highlighting sectarian differences and ignoring interfaith cooperation in historic conflicts, which foments discrimination and extremism. The text also completely and clearly excludes any mention of the significance of Jerusalem to Christians and Jews, only referencing Muslims protecting the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Caliph Umar ibn Al-Khattab refusing to pray inside when he conquered the city in the 9th century.

In the “Knowledge in Islam” unit, the lessons contain many Islamic religious texts that all students, regardless of their religion, must study and be tested on. The textbook suggests that to be knowledgeable in Islam means understanding the religion’s rules but also having knowledge about sciences

and other subjects (p. 19), with the argument that Islamic teachings came to include all forms of human activity. In a lesson about human values and Islam, the text glorifies the religious values that Islam establishes and lists examples of them from the Quran, *hadith*, and Islamic history without reference to or inclusion of the human values promoted by other religions, especially those within modern and ancient Egypt. This method assumes that all students are Muslim or that the religious and historical texts of other religions (e.g., Christianity) do not have good models of human values that ought to be included.

The text’s use of the term *zhimmi* (ذمي), which is derived from *ahl al zhima* (أهل الذمة) to refer to Christians and Jews, is also notable. The concept of *zhimmi* is a social contract between any Islamic state/empire and the *ahl al zhima* (Christians and Jews living there), who are offered protection in return for paying the *jizya* (جزيّة), a tax levied at non-Muslims to be paid to their Muslim rulers or government operating under Islamic law. This contract does not allow full rights for Christians and Jews, and this dynamic has become outdated with the emergence of concepts like the modern nation-state, citizenship, and human rights, which give equal rights to all citizens.

In a lesson based on national unity, a short story entitled “The Church was Enlightened” centers on Christians who fast in spiritual solidarity with Muslims during the month of Ramadan and describes how Christians congratulate their Muslim neighbors in this holy month. This echoes the discourse of the textbook—that the foundations of coexistence are based on the Islamic religion and tolerance of Muslims by those of other faiths, and one of the manifestations of this coexistence is that Christians greet Muslims on their holiday, with no indication that Muslims would do the same.

In the section of the textbook that includes language exercises, there are seven units that discuss grammar rules. Sixteen out of the 28 exercises feature paragraphs or sentences that come from Islamic religious texts, the Quran, or *hadith*.

Repeatedly linking religious tolerance with Islam creates a misconception that coexistence is only possible under the rule of Islam, rather than the rule of law or legal, civil, and constitutional rights. Several of the arguments and framing in this curriculum offer both subtle suggestions and overt narratives about the moral supremacy of Islam. Islamic texts are not simply used as examples to enhance linguistic knowledge; rather, Islam is essentially portrayed as an integral part of morality, history, and science—all in a curriculum that is intended to teach the Arabic language, not these subjects.

⁶⁰ The curriculum language consistently offers interchanging references to historical military, political, and social incidents as precedent in justifying suspicion of the Jewish community and encourages readers to assume the inherent hostility of people of Jewish faith.

THIRD SECONDARY LEVEL – RELIGION

The third secondary level religion curriculum for Islam contains six units, divided into three per semester, titled “The Call to God,” “Islam and Diversity,” “Tolerance in Islam,” “The Status of the Mind in Islam,” “Solidarity in Islam,” and “Islam and Modesty.”

The lesson “The Call to God” cites a *hadith* in which Prophet Muhammad calls on believers to right any wrongdoings they see and intervene to correct sins. Extremist and terrorist groups often refer to this *hadith* to justify their interventions, restrictions on the freedoms of individuals, and attacks on those they see as violating what they believe is contrary to Islamic law. In its explanation, the textbook intentionally takes a moderate approach to this material by emphasizing that ordinary individuals do not have the right to correct evil. Hence, there is no objection to limiting the freedoms and behavior of individuals and preventing what can be considered reprehensible; that role is entrusted to rulers. This explanation and framing can be considered a positive step by the Ministry of Education to prevent the spread of radical interpretations of the Quran. Although the same lesson emphasizes that Islam did not spread its message using aggression against others (p. 20) and that the Prophet started to preach Islam peacefully, it adds that he was turned away and attacked by non-believers (p. 20). It also states that these conquests at the beginning of Islam’s rise were a reactionary act of defense (p. 20).

The lesson titled “Islam and Diversity” argues that differences in religions, languages, and nationalities enrich humanity. It argues that Islam preaches tolerance and opposes extremism and fundamentalism (p. 31). The lesson is a positive addition to the Islamic religion textbook, as it represents Islam as accepting of the other, and calls for coexistence as a religious virtue. Thus, having this lesson in the curriculum is a positive step.

In another lesson, titled “Islam and Accepting the Other,” tolerance and coexistence are discussed based on the history and interactions of the Prophet Muhammad with non-Muslims. It also mentions the agreements that took place between Muslims and non-Muslims as having preserved the rights of the latter. Although the lesson discusses coexistence, it repeats the same prevailing clichés about Islam’s respect for other religions, urging readers to cooperate and coexist with “the People of the Book,” an Islamic term which refers to people who are descendants of the Abrahamic faiths—namely Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The lesson focuses

on interactions between Muslims with Jews and Christians, while omitting any mention of followers of other religions.

The lesson echoes the same narrative that radical and ultraconservative groups preach, which is the impermissibility of accepting gifts from Christians or offering condolences. For example, the textbook states that congratulating non-Muslims after giving birth or getting married is permissible, but not when it comes to their religious holidays. This statement contradicts the religious opinion of Dar al-Iftaa, one of Egypt’s top official governmental bodies for issuing *fatwas*.⁶¹ In another instance, the lesson discusses Islam’s respect for non-Muslims and their beliefs by using the example that Islam allows for a Muslim man to marry a Christian woman. However, the text does not mention that within Islam it is not permissible for a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man.

Consistent with earlier findings, this curriculum offers a heavy emphasis on the utilization of discriminatory opinions and misses several opportunities to counter exclusionary narratives.

THIRD SECONDARY LEVEL – HISTORY

Students in the third secondary grade who specialize in literature only are required to study history in their last year of high school. The book used is *The History of Egypt and the Modern and Contemporary Arabs*. As stated in its introduction, the book addresses economic, social, military, educational, and intellectual aspects of building modern Egypt during the 19th century. It also discusses how these developments led to the building of the identity of Egypt and how the country became a part of the Arab world.

The 154-page book includes eight chapters: “The French Campaign Against Egypt and the Levant,” “Building the Modern State in Egypt,” Egypt from the Urabi Revolution to World War I,” “Egypt after World War I,” “Colonial Expansion in Arab Countries Before World War I to Independence,” Colonial Expansion in the Arab Countries under Ottoman Rule: World War I to Independence,” “Egypt and Issues of the Contemporary Arab World,” and “The January 25, 2011 and June 30, 2013 Revolutions.”

The research team made a few observations regarding freedom of religion and belief and the state of religious minorities in Egypt. Notably, the textbook makes no reference to historical events that support freedom of belief or improved conditions for religious minorities. The book deals with a period extending from 1798 to 2013, including *Hatt-i*

⁶¹ [Celebrating New Year’s Eve and Congratulating Christians](#) (Fatwa Number 15716), Prof. Dr. Shawky Ibrahim Allam, Dar al-Iftaa (AR), January 2020 .

humayun which regulates the conditions of non-Muslims in Arab countries, the abolition of the *jizya*⁶² imposed on non-Muslims by Mohamed Sa'id Pasha, and the conscription of non-Muslims. The book also marginalizes the role of Copts in the 1919 revolution.

Meanwhile, on the topic of religious institutions, the textbook emphasizes the role of Al-Azhar, within the context of its role in national resistance to the French campaign (p. 7) or as a leading Islamic and cultural institution in Africa (p. 88). At the same time, the book ignores the prominent role of the Coptic Orthodox Church, an institution indigenous to Africa, dating back to the first centuries of Christianity, during which it cultivated relations with other African regions and communities.

In the updated book, the word "Muslim" has been removed twice, when referring to the now outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, in an attempt to cover the religious identity of the group (p. 76). This change comes in parallel with the Egyptian government's ongoing campaign to demonize and blame members of the group for militant activities and extremism.

⁶² *Jizya* (Arabic: جَزْيَةٌ) is a per capita yearly taxation historically levied in the form of a financial charge on non-Muslim subjects of a state governed by Islamic law.

COMPARISON BETWEEN 2016–2017/2017–2018 AND 2021–2022 EMEC

This section examines the 2021–2022 curriculum as the control variable to gauge the extent of changes implemented by the Ministry of Education since the 2016–2017/2017–2018 curricula. Of particular importance for the research are the changes with regards to promoting inclusion, diversity, and pluralism, and to removing material that promotes hatred, radicalization, or sectarianism (whether directly

or anecdotally). Findings from this in-depth comparison suggest that while some changes were made to the EMEC under examination, little has been done to address most of the thematic issues of religionization. This means that the issues that were glaringly prevalent in the 2016–2017/2017–2018 curricula carried over to the updated version of 2021–2022.

Table 3. Comparison of Quantitative and Qualitative Changes in EMEC 2016–2017/2017–2018 vs. EMEC 2021–2022

Academic Grade	Curriculum	Quantitative Change	Qualitative Change
5th Grade	Arabic	None	N/A
5th Grade	Religion	None	N/A
5th Grade	Social Studies	None	N/A
3rd Preparatory	Arabic	None	N/A
3rd Preparatory	Religion	Minimal/negligible Removal of two Quranic <i>Surahs</i> although the lesson remains Removal of a portion of the lesson on aniconism	Substituted one religious <i>hadith</i> for another with the same meaning
3rd Preparatory	Social Studies	None	N/A
3rd Secondary	Arabic	Removal of two lessons not related to the topic of study	Negligible improvement
3rd Secondary	Religion	Three minor editorial changes not related to the subject of the study	Negligible improvement
3rd Secondary	Social Studies	A moderate number of changes	Rearranged sections and added subheadings while the same units and lessons remain in the same sequence

FIFTH PRIMARY LEVEL – ARABIC LANGUAGE

The Arabic language curriculum for the fifth primary level in the 2017–2018 year is identical to that of 2020–2021; no changes to the text have been made. The only notable change is the commissioning of a new publishing house. Substantively, the curricula are identical; the page numbers, authors, and the revising committee all remain the same. Essentially, the primary textbook’s units, sections, and lessons are exactly as outlined for the 2021–2022 curriculum.

FIFTH PRIMARY LEVEL – RELIGION

The 2017–2018 (Islam) religion course curriculum for the fifth primary level consists of two textbooks with four units each. **No change can be detected between the 2017–2018 textbooks and that of 2020–2021.** The page numbers, layout of lessons, content, illustrations, unit and textbook names, as well as the authors, and the revising committee are the same.

The obvious cases of discrimination documented in the 2020–2021 textbook exist verbatim in the 2017–2018 textbook, as do the overused religionization of history and social context.

FIFTH PRIMARY LEVEL – SOCIAL STUDIES

The text of the social studies curriculum for the fifth primary grade in the year 2021–2022 is identical to that of 2017–2018; no changes have been made. Further, within the ranks of the revising committee only two changes have been made, with no tangible changes to the curriculum overall.

The same alarming observations the research team cited in the 2021–2022 curriculum are also prevalent in the older curriculum: 1) the religionization of historical narratives and 2) the heavy emphasis on the early Islamic period in Egyptian history, in comparison to all other historical periods.

Minor changes have been made to the textbooks, though none of these are related to the text, content, or scope of this study. For example, in the 2017–2018 textbooks, in the first unit under a lesson titled “Water Resources in Egypt,” a set of recommendations is listed to deal with water shortages (p. 8). The list includes treating sewage water, increasing water conservation campaigns, using modern irrigation systems, monitoring costs, and digging water wells. In the 2021–2022 curriculum, only the first two recommendations exist, while others have been removed.

Similarly, some updates were made to the data found in the 2017–2018 textbook relating to Egypt’s natural resources. In a lesson titled “Agricultural Produce in Egypt,” statistics from 2007 about Egypt’s agricultural collaboration with the European Union were removed in the 2021–2022 textbook. Conversely, in the lesson “Types of Tourism in Egypt,” statistics from 2013 about the number of tourists who visited the country were added to the new textbook.

THIRD PREPARATORY LEVEL – ARABIC LANGUAGE

By reviewing the 2021–2022 Arabic language curriculum and comparing it with that of 2017–2018, **the research team found that there have been no changes made to the curriculum content.** Furthermore, the syllabi from 2016 and 2021 are completely identical. There was change neither in the experts authoring and reviewing the curriculum, nor in the content of the lessons.

THIRD PREPARATORY LEVEL – RELIGION

The Islamic Religion curriculum for the third preparatory level consists of a 140-page textbook. The authoring committee has not changed. Similarly, the introduction remains the same and continues to emphasize the importance of values and morals, to “help students deepen their Islamic perception and values and to emphasize the importance of faith and jihad for the sake of God.” The introduction also argues that understanding these principles will “protect (them) from slipping into harmful behavior such as extremism, violence, and addiction.”

The book’s eight units all retain the same titles in the same order. Meanwhile, **the content of the lessons reflect minor changes as follows:**

- In the third lesson (p. 33) titled “Legitimate Freedom” (which is part of the unit titled “Islamic Values”), there was a picture of a parrot on a tree branch that was removed in the 2021–2022 curriculum. A *hadith* by the Prophet Muhammad which says “People are equal like the teeth of a comb. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, rather superiority based on *taqwa* (piety)” was removed, while a new *hadith* has been added that states, “There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab, nor for a non-Arab over an Arab. Neither is the white superior over the black, nor is the black superior over the white—except by piety.” The lesson explains that the Prophet affirms that human beings are equal before God, so “there is no distinction between one among them and another without regard to his gender or color, but rather by his piety and his closeness to God.”
- In another lesson, “Freedom of Speech,” a picture of two people speaking to a group of women dressed according to the Islamic code features prominently. The image was removed in the 2021 curriculum, but the content remains the same.
- In the 2021–2022 curriculum, a *hadith* was added which reads:

“Every one of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock. The leader of people is a guardian and is responsible for his subjects. A man is the guardian of his family, and he is responsible for them. A woman is the guardian of her husband’s home and his children, and she is responsible for them. The servant of a man is a guardian of the property of his master, and he is responsible for it. No doubt, every one of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock.”

- In lesson three, “Islam, Culture, and Arts” (part of the “Islam and Social Systems” unit), the 2017–2018 curriculum included a paragraph at the end of the lesson that prohibited the ownership of statues:

“As for the manufacture of sculptures or statues, scholars unanimously agreed on the prohibition of owning them, because they are an abomination from Satan’s wrongdoings that must be avoided.”

The lesson then cites verse 30 from Surah Hajj in the Quran:

“That [has been commanded], and whoever honors the sacred ordinances of Allah—it is best for him in the sight of his Lord. And permitted to you are the grazing livestock, except what is recited to you. So, avoid the uncleanness of idols and avoid false testimonies.”

In the 2021–2022 curriculum, the verse and the explanation were removed.

- Similarly, the method of formulating questions in this section, which previously implied that art is problematic, was changed in the 2021–2022 curriculum. The following set of questions from the 2017–2018 curriculum was removed:

What do you think of each?

- A. An artist singing a patriotic song?
- B. A sculptor making statues for students of the Department of Sculpture at the Faculty of Arts?
- C. A novelist writing a story calling for freedom from all restrictions?
- D. A musician playing a piece on a religious occasion?

The questions were altered in the updated curriculum as follows:

- Literature is useful as long as it calls for what virtues?
- How do the arts have an effect on self-discipline?

THIRD PREPARATORY LEVEL – SOCIAL STUDIES

By comparing the syllabus for the year 2021–2022 with that of 2017–2018, the research team found that the Ministry of Education’s authoring and review committee did not change. Nevertheless, a new additional committee was created and introduced to the curricula drafting process, to “amend and deepen the African dimension” in the 2021–2022 textbooks.

In reviewing the two books for the Social Studies curriculum, the researchers noted **none of the units or exercises changed, and there were no changes in the text of the various lessons.** Only some exercises were omitted at the end of each semester to reduce the number of pages.

THIRD SECONDARY LEVEL – ARABIC LANGUAGE

The Arabic language curriculum for the third secondary level consists of four sections: Arabic reading, literature and texts, rhetoric and criticism, and grammar. This curriculum was drafted by the same authoring committee as the previous iteration. **There are minor changes in the introduction, and the stated objective of the book remains the same.**

The 2021–2022 curriculum witnessed the cancellation of two lessons from the 2016–2017 curriculum:

- In the Arabic Reading section, a lesson titled “The Arab Civilization’s Legacy in the World” (p. 9) by Egyptian writer Abbas Al-Akkad, was removed.
- In the Literature and Texts section, an article titled “Glimpses from the Life of Abbas Al-Akkad” by the writer Neamat Ahmed Fouad (p. 126) was also removed.

The omission, on both occasions, seems to have no bearing on the content of the textbook, only the length. The 2016–2017 curriculum totaled about 240 pages, which was reduced to 226 pages in the 2021–2022 curriculum.

THIRD SECONDARY LEVEL – RELIGION

The Islamic religion curriculum for the 2016–2017 academic year included six units across 148 pages.

By comparing the 2016–2017 syllabus with the 2021–2022 syllabus, the research team determined **that the content has not changed.** The number of pages and the names of the authoring and reviewing committees remain the same. Similarly, the unit titles and lessons are identical. Finally, **the text of the lessons has remained the same, except for three minor changes that do not affect the subject of the study.**

The first unit, “Lessons from the Battles of the Prophet,” discusses the Battle of Uhud, which was fought in 625 AD between the Qurayshi Meccans and the Muslim army in Medina. The Muslims were ultimately defeated in a counterattack. Here the text (p. 22) argues that the battle is a confirmation of an eternal conflict between right and wrong. It also argues that victory and defeat will be interchangeable until the final victory is granted to the believers: “If falsehood revives one hour, but the righteous will triumph till judgment day.” The same lesson (p. 25) includes a paragraph about the importance of the battle as an exercise that allows the Prophet and his companions to achieve other victories in the future, as the battle allowed them to walk for a long time in the desert with few sources of water.

THIRD SECONDARY LEVEL – HISTORY

For the third secondary level’s history curriculum, **no major changes were documented**. The word “contemporary” was added to the title of the book (in the 2017–2018 syllabus it was *The Modern History of Egypt and Arabs*, while in the 2021–2022 the title was changed to *The Modern and Contemporary History of Egypt and Modern and Contemporary Arabs*). The authoring committee remained the same, while a review committee was added to oversee content relating to Egypt’s role in the African continent. However, these additions did not affect the observations made regarding freedom of religion and belief, religious minorities, and the role of religion in public life.

CONCLUSION

A comparison of the curricula for the academic years 2021–2022 and 2017–2018 revealed that the government made only slight modifications to the textbooks, most of which have nothing to do with the content of this study. These changes stand in contrast to officials' pledges to develop the curricula.

The review of the EMEC yielded the following insights:

- The textbooks examined in this report do not include lessons that directly encourage violence against religious minorities, but they contain many lessons that encourage discrimination and incite contempt for those who practice other religions, especially Judaism, and who are referred to as enemies. Such discrimination is based on relating Jewish religion and the antagonism against the state of Israel and its policies. In doing this, the textbooks use religious verses and historical heritage to politicize an issue and incite discrimination or violence against Jewish people.
- The religionization of the EMEC is broadly embedded in diverse subjects like Arabic language, history, and social studies as many lessons include Quranic verses and *hadiths*, and forces students of different religions to study them, memorize them, and recite them in exams.
- The curricula emphasize that Islam is the only source of positive virtues and values, in a way that depicts other religions as immoral or, at the very least, frames other religions as not having these same virtues. Similarly, relying on Islamic references for topics that are not religious facilitates discrimination and gives preference to Islam over other religions and beliefs.
- Promoting the idea that Islam is the basis of human values and communal solidarity, rather than citizenship, opens the door for radical interpretations which are not welcoming of diversity.
- Imposing religious values and teachings that may contradict what Christians believe in is a violation of the constitution which seeks to promote equality between citizens.
- Evaluating the efforts of the Ministry of Education, the research team noted that officials have added only minor improvements and developments in the curricula, because the lessons which promote religious discrimination are still present, and therefore, it is believed they will have a negative impact on the goal of supporting a culture of pluralism and acceptance.

When compared to its previous iteration in 2016–2017, the current 2021–2022 EMEC shows slight improvement in reducing the prevalence of sectarian language and rhetoric; however, the overarching issue of religionization of the EMEC remains endemic, not only in the Religion course curricula but across all subjects, including languages and sciences curricula. The pervasive influence of Islam, whether in the form of Quranic text to teach the Arabic language or through anecdotal examples of piety or honorable behavior in social sciences, leaves non-Muslim and non-Sunni Muslim students excluded or under-represented.

Our examination of materials was limited to the curricula for Arabic, Religion, and Social Studies, which are three of the 14 mandatory academic disciplines mandated by the Egyptian education system. This means that there could be changes to the EMEC that may have been made in other courses that were not examined in this report.

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The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) directed the research team. TIMEP is a non-profit (501(c)(3)) that centers localized perspectives in the policy discourse to foster transparent, accountable, and just societies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). TIMEP is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and has a network of partners and fellows based both in the MENA region and across the world.

APPENDIX

NUMBER OF LESSONS INCLUDING RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OR RELATING TO RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND FREEDOMS

Academic Grade	Curriculum	Total Number of Lessons in the Syllabus	Number of Lessons Including Religious Content	Comments
Third Prep	Arabic	20	5	25% of the lessons include direct Quranic texts and prophetic <i>hadiths</i> . The Arabic calligraphy booklet include 62 phrases, 35 percent of which are from the Holy Quran, <i>hadiths</i> , and Islamic heritage.
Third Prep	Religion (Islam)	23	3	13% of the lessons deal with topics related to the relationship of Muslims with non-Muslims and the way non-Muslims should be treated or heeded.
Third Prep	Social Studies	30	0	No religious lessons are included directly, but thematic glorification of the Islamic culture is prevalent throughout the curriculum.
Third Secondary	Arabic	14	6	All the language exercises include Islamic religious references, and 40% of the lessons involve Islamic faith, heritage, or values in some capacity.
Third Secondary	Religion (Islam)	18	5	27% of lessons deal with topics related to the relationship of Muslims with non-Muslims and the way non-Muslims should be treated or heeded.
Third Secondary	Social Studies	8	0	No religious lessons are included directly, but the text contains thematic glorification of Al-Azhar and other Islamic heritage or institutions.

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