

Israeli civics textbook reinvigorates debate on nation's character

by [Joshua Mitnick](#) in the [June 22, 2016](#) issue

[\(The Christian Science Monitor\)](#) Can Israel be both Jewish and democratic? For generations of Jewish Israelis, the answer was presumed to be yes, but it's no longer so simple.

The issue has already brought down one national government and has deep implications for Israel's ability to accommodate Palestinians' political aspirations.

For Israeli high school students, the path to the answer was supposed to start in Israel's official civics textbook, *To Be Citizens in Israel*, which was recently released in a revised edition.

Civics educators and academics allege that political appointees in Israel's Education Ministry—controlled by the right-wing Jewish Home party—rewrote the textbook to water down discussion of democracy and Israel's Arab minority, while filling it with content emphasizing Israel's Jewish religious character.

One copy editor who reviewed a final draft for the Education Ministry described the revised book as “a hostile takeover” of the civics curriculum.

Political battles over civics textbooks and how they teach history and current affairs have been fought around the world, from the United States to South Korea. The problem is especially acute in Israel because liberals, religious nationalists, ultra-Orthodox Jews, and Arab citizens share little common ground in their relations with the state, said a prominent Israeli law professor.

“Civics is a place where one should find what are common denominators of all parts of Israeli society—both Jewish and non-Jewish parts,” said Mordechai Kremnitzer, who is also a vice president at the Israel Democracy Institute. “Not enough thought was given to what brings us together.”

Defending the revised textbook, Israeli education minister Naftali Bennett has said that Israel's secular schools need a curriculum with more Jewish content. Bennett and his Jewish Home party favor Israeli annexation of the West Bank and oppose

creation of a Palestinian state.

“The book makes significant mention of the Jewish identity of the Jewish state, and we’re proud of that,” he said.

The dispute reflects a deepening fissure between the country’s religious conservatives, more confident and assertive after the right won the last three parliamentary elections under the leadership of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Israel’s secular left, which despite retaining influence throughout much of the government and cultural establishment feels threatened.

“Given the depth of the political divide, it’s not surprising that we should have such controversy,” said Daniel Statman, a professor of philosophy at the University of Haifa and a fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, a nonpartisan think tank in Jerusalem. “Each political side in this debate wants a say in how to educate the next generation.”

It also highlights decades-old friction in a country that has never been able to draft a constitution because its Arab, religious, and secular groups cannot reach a formal agreement on the basics of Israel’s system of government.

“The fundamental problem is the lack of a common civic language,” wrote Naftali Trachtenberg, a fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, another nonpartisan think tank, in an article on the Israeli news website Ynet. “A democracy is dependent on a healthy civil society in which a majority of its components share the same civil concepts.”

Revision of the 15-year-old textbook has been in the works for several years, but in the months before its release a string of educators who worked on the book sounded concern about the content. Several authors asked that their names be removed from the book.

In a five-page protest letter to the ministry, Yehuda Yaari, the book’s copy editor, wrote that five of the six ministry officials responsible for the updated version were Orthodox Jews and that the book was strewn with right-wing political bias.

Tamar Hermann, a political science professor at Israel’s Open University who advised the ministry on a previous draft, said fundamental concepts about citizenship were relegated to the end of the book.

The uproar over the civics textbook is the latest in a series of controversies in the past year in which religiously observant ministers in the Netanyahu government have been accused of politicizing culture: a novel about an Arab-Jewish romance was removed from high school reading lists, and public funding was removed from a play about a convicted Arab militant.

In the case of the textbook and other disputes, Israeli right-wing politicians have insisted that they are simply carrying out their electoral mandate to implement a more nationalist policy.

Avraham Diskin, a Hebrew University political science professor who has consulted on previous editions of the civics textbook, said civics education curricula in Israel has for decades been dominated by secular “post-Zionist” educators who focus on “slogans” like tolerance and equality. Israeli educators mistakenly believe that democratic systems of government must be liberal by definition, he said.

*Haaretz* noted in a May 13 editorial that the final edition included small changes as a result of the criticism it received before its release, but the text basically stayed the same.

“The book’s message is impossible to mistake: Jewish identity, as expressed in the state’s definition of itself and in the public sphere, takes priority over civic identity,” *Haaretz* wrote. “The text contains no model of shared life between Jews and Arabs. The Jews’ rights are clear; the Arabs’ place is restricted; and the walls separating them are only raised even higher.”

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