

# Teaching Terror: The Islamic State's Textbooks, Guidance Literature, and Indoctrination Methods

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### [Jacob Olidort \(/experts/jacob-olidort\)](#)

Jacob Olidort, a 2016-2017 Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, focuses on the history and ideology of Salafi movements and Islamist groups in the Middle East.



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Brief Analysis

**Just how "Islamic" is the Islamic State? Watch video or read a summary of two scholars discussing how the self-declared "caliphate" uses religious doctrine and potent publishing activities to justify its actions.**

*On July 13, Jacob Olidort and Marcus Sheff addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Olidort is a Soref Fellow at the Institute and received his Ph.D. from Princeton, where his dissertation focused on the history and ideology of Salafism. Sheff is CEO of the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se), a Jerusalem-based nonprofit that assesses educational efforts across the world. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

## JACOB OLIDORT

**T**he battlefield of ideas is a vital theater of conflict for the Islamic State (IS). The organization has expended significant efforts to develop its own publishing office, separate from its propaganda arm, with the goal of indoctrinating a diverse audience. Called "Zeal Press," this office seeks to cement the group's authority as the heir to legitimate Islamic tradition by publishing everything from children's textbooks to guidance literature on personal piety to long commentaries on scholarly works. Yet this two-tier approach to indoctrination necessitates compromises that leave IS vulnerable to ideological challenges -- a weakness policymakers should consider

exploiting.

On one level, IS textbooks and guidance literature promote an originalist, exclusivist Sunni identity and a Salafist interpretation of Islam that relies solely on the Quran and the hadith (sayings ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad). At the same time, many of these books attempt to indoctrinate readers with priorities and beliefs unique to IS: namely, an apocalyptic worldview and an emphasis on rebuilding the Caliphate, founding a Salafi Islamic state, and employing extreme violence. This promotion of IS priorities is what makes the group's indoctrination uniquely lethal and distinct from the religious intolerance promoted in Saudi religious textbooks. IS children's books are explicitly designed to raise a "jihadi generation," with subjects ranging from the proper Islamic family unit to weapons skills.

The group's guidance literature similarly adds a unique IS twist to traditional Islamic concepts. For example, to properly carry out the concept of *hijra* (migration), the group's publications declare that Muslims must travel to the physical territory of the Islamic State. Its literature also argues that the charitable contributions required of all Muslims must be paid to IS, since the group regards itself as the only true bastion of Islam. Moreover, IS often takes issues that Muslims regard as matters of personal piety (e.g., beard length) and treats them as matters of civil obedience, justifying punishment for "violations." By redefining these Islamic concepts, the group seeks to convince readers that the Islamic State is the only place on earth where authentic, correct Islam is practiced.

Zeal Press publications also rebrand historical Islamic figures and texts as parts of the IS tradition, particularly the works of Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, the forefather of Salafist thought in Saudi Arabia. For the most part, the aim of such literature is to discredit the Saudi state and religious establishment, though some publications are issued as more straightforward reference materials (e.g., grammar treatises and hadith collections).

Specific rebranding tactics range from simple use of IS iconography to more subtle changes in narrative. For example, the group often includes images of its flag and weapons in textbooks covering physical fitness, math, and other subjects, often adding these images to pages taken from other sources. Other textbooks show a more sophisticated reshaping of the classical Islamic curriculum, such as by interspersing letters from jihadist ideologues with chapters on medieval Arab poetry, or listing the Islamic State as the final stage in the history of Islamic governments.

Yet in publishing textbooks that cater to its unique priorities, IS has to make ideological tradeoffs in its sourcing. For example, in assembling Islamic treatises on state-building, the group has referenced works by Sufi and medieval scholars that other jihadis would typically find reprehensible.

In light of these and other factors, policymakers have a number of opportunities to break the Islamic State's ideological indoctrination. First, they should recognize that the group is exploiting very real education gaps in the region for its own nefarious purposes, and that these gaps are exacerbated by current conflicts. IS fills these gaps not only through its textbooks, but also through mobile apps, visual aids, and other materials. The United States can compete with such efforts by providing greater educational access to local communities. In terms of fighting the group's ideas, while America lacks an authoritative voice on the matter, it can encourage religious figures in the region and elsewhere to reclaim those traditions being appropriated by IS publications. Finally, U.S. efforts to counter violent extremism should make greater use of a key tactic: promoting the narratives of those who have fled IS-controlled territory and are disillusioned by its ideology.

## MARCUS SHEFF

**T**he Islamic State understands the importance of education for indoctrinating those living in areas under its control and elsewhere. Thus the most important tool to puncture extremist influences and root out extremist narratives is in children's brains. A study conducted by IMPACT-se shows that in areas of the Middle East not under IS control, the manner in which school curricula address issues such as tolerance and identity exhibits progress in

some places, but stagnation in others.

In Egypt, for example, new history books characterize the peace accords with Israel as good for the Egyptian economy and show pictures of Menachem Begin shaking hands with Anwar Sadat. Additionally, bilateral relations are described as friendly rather than merely "normal," and the conflict/peace ratio has shifted in favor of peace.

Elsewhere, the secular curriculum in Tunisia has served as a bulwark against Muslim Brotherhood influence. In Morocco, the government is reassessing its education system, while in Lebanon, the discourse challenging Hezbollah's narrative has grown. In the Palestinian Authority, official textbooks do not mention peace with Israel, but they do address civil and gender issues more favorably than they used to.

In Iran, curricula and textbooks are rather troubling. While many schoolbooks encourage creative and critical thinking, they also promote a culture of militarism and Iranian hegemony. Paranoia and hostility toward foreigners are also encouraged, as is blind obedience to the Supreme Leader. And in an unwelcome gesture of egalitarianism, some Iranian textbooks extend the culture of martyrdom to girls.

IMPACT-se has also assessed Islamic studies curricula in the United States. Currently, five main curricula are published in America, for use in 272 educational institutes throughout the country. Four of the five meet the standards issued by the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) regarding peace and tolerance -- these curricula are free of imagery and ideologies that generate contempt for others. Yet the fifth -- issued by Bilal Philips, originating from Saudi Arabia, and believed to be taught at roughly a dozen institutes in the United States -- does not meet the UNESCO standards. Rather, it rejects more liberal strains of Islam (including Sufism), makes references to jihad, and fails to mention LGBT issues. Moving forward, IMPACT-se plans a similar review of Islamic curricula in Europe.

*This summary was prepared by James Bowker.* ❖

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