**PA suspends ties with UNRWA over planned curriculum reform**

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The Palestinian Authority Education Ministry on Thursday announced it was suspending ties with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) over plans by the international agency to reform its curriculum.

The Palestinian ministry, in a statement published on its official website, called the possible revisions to the curriculum an “affront to the Palestinian people, its history and struggles,” and said the suspension would continue until the UN agency’s “positions are corrected.”

UNRWA has over 312,000 students in its schools across the West Bank and East Jerusalem (together, 50,000) and the Gaza Strip (262,000).

The UN agency has not formally published any plans to alter its curriculum, but leaks to the Arab press of possible changes have led to outrage over recent weeks in Gaza and the West Bank.

The changes, according to Arab media reports, include revisions to maps of Palestine to exclude references to cities inside Israel as Palestinian cities, a practice that numerous studies of Palestinian textbooks have labeled as “incitement.” Other changes were reportedly planned to tone down praise for Palestinian prisoners and improve Israel’s image.

According to a March report by COGAT, the Israeli Defense Ministry agency responsible for civilian affairs in the West Bank and Gaza, part of the reform to the UNRWA curriculum “is a balanced representation of Jerusalem as having religious significance to the three major monotheistic religions (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism), and mentioning that Muslim believers have access to the holy sites.”

“UNRWA additionally sought to amend textbooks in cases where the content showed gender bias, lacked objectivity, and incited violence against Israel,” COGAT added.

The Israeli government, US State Department, and independent organizations have for many years accused the Palestinian education system, including UNRWA schools, of educating Palestinian children to hate Israel and support violence.

COGAT praised the proposed changes as an effort “to create a balanced, positive curriculum with universal values free from violence and incitement.”

A representative of the Palestinian Authority Education Ministry refused to speak with The Times of Israel.

“Any distortion of the Palestinian curriculum is a flagrant violation of the laws of the host country, and any change to any letter to appease any party is a betrayal of the Palestinian narrative and the right of the Palestinian people under occupation to preserve its identity and struggle,” the PA ministry said in a statement on Thursday.

Chris Gunness, the spokesperson for UNRWA, wrote in a statement to The Times of Israel that the UN agency “has worked with the PA for years and has a long track record as a partner teaching children in a highly complex environment.”

“UNRWA schools follow the curriculum of the host authority, a practice agreed in 1954 with the support of UNESCO and reaffirmed following the Oslo Accords. It is UNRWA policy to review and where appropriate enrich the official PA textbooks, curricula and other learning materials used in UNRWA schools to ensure compliance with UN values and principles,” the statement added.

A report published earlier this month by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se), said that the 2016-2017 elementary school curriculum in the PA “teaches students to be martyrs, demonizes and denies the existence of Israel, and focuses on a ‘return’ to an exclusively Palestinian homeland.”

The Israeli government has long argued that incitement in Palestinian textbooks is a main contributor to terrorism against Israelis. The issue has taken on increasing significance of late, as members of the United States Congress have threatened to decrease aid to Palestinians if incitement is not curbed.