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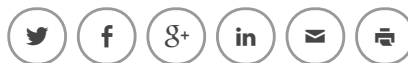
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One of the new textbooks features a picture of a woman without head covering. Salah Malkawi for The National

## Protesters burn books as Jordan reduces religion's role in schools

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Foreign Correspondent

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AMMAN // Changes to Jordan's school curriculum, including less religious content in textbooks, is sparking controversy across the country, with the teachers union, Islamists and parent groups objecting to what they see as an attempt to alienate students from their cultural and Islamic values. Protests have taken the form of a book-burning, a vicious social media campaign and calls for the education minister to resign.

The modifications, which took effect at the start of the academic year in September, include pictures of women without head covering – considered offensive to religious Muslim Jordanians.

Content touching on the coexistence of religions has also been introduced and text interpreted as promoting extremist ideology removed.

Those changes, made by the education ministry for the first time in a decade are part of a wider strategy to combat radical Islam in a country struggling to prevent hate crimes such as the recent murder of a prominent secular writer who was accused of offending Islam.

Education minister Mohammad Thneibat said they were intended to develop the educational system and improve analytical thinking.

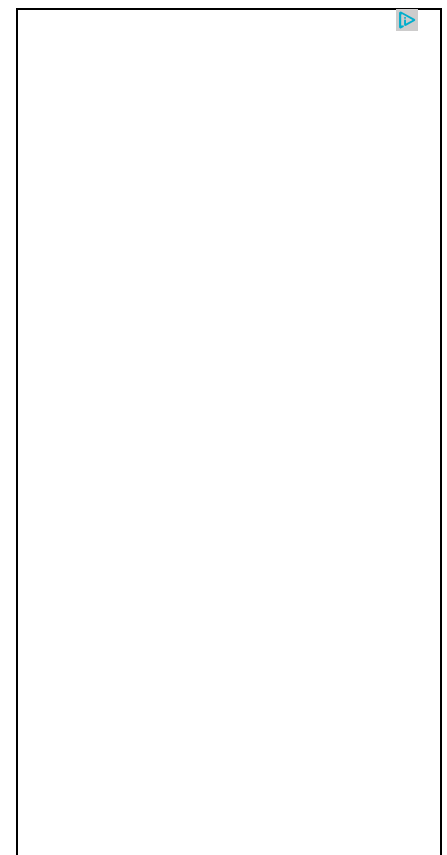
"They focus on the values of the nation, moderation and the core values of Islam and not like some allege," he said.

However, the Jordan teacher's association – the country's teachers' union – condemned the changes, saying they were part of a conspiracy against Islamic values, seeking to create discord and to promote normalisation of relations with Israel.

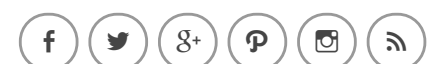
The union said that Islamic references were scaled-down and Arabic names replaced. For example, in one Arabic exercise, "Fatmeh went to Mecca" was changed to "Samia went to Lebanon".

In third grade Arabic books, a photo of male students in a computer lab was changed to include uncovered girls in a mixed class. Another book had a cartoon of a man sweeping the floor next to his child, in an attempt to break away from traditional gender stereotyping of women.

In a chemistry book for tenth-graders, a sentence beginning with "praise be to God" was removed.



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## SPOTLIGHT

"The total number of Quranic verses went down from 261 to 44 in Arabic language books from fifth to tenth grade," said Ahmad Hajaya, a spokesman from the teachers' association. "There are hidden powers that want to normalise the curriculum and globalise it so that the next generation will kneel down [succumb] to other cultures and to the enemy as well."

The Islamic Action Front, the Muslim's Brotherhood political arm that won eight out of 130 seats in last month's parliamentary elections, has also criticised the changes.

"The government is justifying the changes to the curricula as a development, but it is an attempt to underestimate the intelligence of Jordanians," said Ali Abu Al Sukkar, the deputy head of Islamic Action Front.

"We believe that scrapping religious text and Ahadeeth [the prophet's sayings] and changing the women's Islamic image is blatantly targeting [our] religion and culture."

Education experts who had called for a moderation of the curriculum welcomed the changes but said they did not go far enough.

"The changes were largely superficial and religion remained dominant," said Thougan Obeidat, 74, a former deputy secretary general at the education ministry.

"The issue of a woman without a head cover is blown out of proportion. She mostly appears as a cartoon and sitting with her family, so she does not need to be wearing one."

Defending the changes, he said the earlier editions of the textbooks did not even mention that there were Christians in Jordan, and included sentences that promoted extremism, or were derogatory to women. He said the new textbooks redress those imbalances.

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