

BACKGROUNDER

**RETHINKING SCHOOLS'
TEACHING PALESTINE**



NORTH AMERICAN VALUES INSTITUTE

Executive Summary

Rethinking Schools' Teaching Palestine is a deeply biased curriculum that presents an anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, and often antisemitic perspective under the guise of education. It offers no balanced view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, downplays the Holocaust, erases the events of October 7th, and portrays the United States as complicit in genocide.

Introduction

[Teaching Palestine](#) is a new collection of lessons and resources, created by [Rethinking Schools](#), aimed at students from kindergarten to 12th grade. Rethinking Schools provides curriculum and other resources to teachers and schools. Through its [Zinn Education Project](#), more than 100,000 educators across the country have access to free teacher resources including some of the lessons in Teaching Palestine. In addition to lessons and resources, the materials include a free discussion guide for educators, designed to help them apply the curriculum in the classroom.

Spanning over 200 pages, the curriculum excludes any effort to provide a balanced view of the complicated history and events in the Middle East. This bias and political agenda are openly stated in the discussion guide:

The five editors of Teaching Palestine became educators to serve our students and to make the world a better place. As we watched and read about the unfolding genocide in Gaza after Oct. 7, 2023 — funded largely by the United States — we wrestled with how we could honor our commitment knowing the enormity of violence and misery there. We developed curriculum, taught our students and colleagues, led teach-ins on Palestine — and expressed our solidarity in other ways.

— Discussion Guide, 2

Editors and contributors to Teaching Palestine include Jesse Hagopian, Samia Shoman, and Keziah Ridgeway. According to Hagopian, an editor for [Rethinking Schools](#) and an [anti-Zionist activist](#), "you're either teaching for oppression or you're teaching for liberation. And you have to pick a side." Shoman is a co-coordinator of [Teach Palestine](#), a program for the Middle East Children's Alliance (MECA), which has [alleged ties](#) with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a U.S. State Department-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. Ridgeway was [suspended](#) from teaching over [allegations](#) that she threatened violence against Jewish parents.

The curriculum is divided into seven sections: "Why Teach About Palestine," "History of Palestine-Israel," "Gaza," "Israeli Apartheid and Settler Colonialism," "Challenging Zionism and Antisemitism," "Solidarity with Palestine," and "More Teaching Ideas and Resources."

This backgrounder outlines the major themes in the book and its attendant problems.

Open Bias: Israel as an Apartheid State

The creators of Teaching Palestine openly announce their bias while simultaneously claiming they actually aren't biased at all: "Teaching Palestine is partisan in that it centers Palestinian lives, uplifts and celebrates Palestinians' struggle for justice, and denounces racism and inequality. We make our premise explicit. **We are not biased (bold added by author).**" This is followed by a quote, "I am against the state of Israel (Teaching Palestine, 14-16)."

The contributors attempt to use their open political bias as a shield against claims of bias, stating that "what makes a text or curriculum biased is when one's premises are masked, when one claims neutrality but in fact takes sides (Teaching Palestine, 14)." They seem to claim that simply acknowledging their bias exempts them from criticism. But disclosure is not the same as neutrality, and admitting bias does not erase it.

While the discussion guide attempts to offer open-ended questions, the lessons and resources lead to predetermined answers. For example, students are asked: "What have you heard or what do you know about the apartheid system in South Africa? Are there comparisons that can be made to Palestine?" This question may seem neutral on its face, but the section explicitly titled "Israeli Apartheid" makes the intended answer clear.

Additional sections explicitly support teachers in leading political activism with K-12 students. For example, the discussion guide for the article, "[What We Learned From Our "Oakland to Gaza" K-12 Teach-In](#)," asks:

Imagine that you are organizing a teach-in around Palestine-Israel in your school district. What would you want to accomplish? What could you learn from the experience in Oakland? What might you do differently than what they did in Oakland? How would you respond to the pushback that Oakland educators received about their teach-in?

– Discussion Guide, 10

BILL BIGELOW'S "THE LAWS OF ISRAEL: DEMOCRACY OR APARTHEID?" IS AN ACTIVITY DESIGNED FOR USE WITH HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS, BUT IT IS ALSO ONE THAT A GROUP OF ADULTS COULD DO.

SEE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THIS ACTIVITY ON PP. 131 AND 132.

What are some Israeli laws that you find startling or particularly unjust?

The activity's conclusion asks students to read the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid and to determine whether a careful look at some of the laws of Israel justify concluding that Israel is an apartheid country. What do you think?

– Discussion Guide, 7

The curriculum seeks to frame the Israeli/Palestinian conflict as similar to other global conflicts, specifically relating it to colonialism. Hagopian contributes an essay titled, [“Israel’s War on Gaza is also a war on History, Education and Children”](#), and cites the scholar Rashid Khalidi, author of “The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine”:

The British treated the Palestinians with the same contemptuous condescension they lavished on other subject peoples from Hong Kong to Jamaica. . . . As in Egypt and India, they did little to advance education, since colonial conventional wisdom held that too much of it produced ‘natives’ who did not know their proper place.

– Teaching Palestine, 102

The Discussion Guide for Hagopian’s essays asks: “Where else in history and in the world have you seen this attack on the education of colonized people and people of color?” (Discussion Guide, 6).

Lessons include: [“Teaching Solidarity: The Black Freedom Struggle and Palestine-Israel”](#), [“Israeli Apartheid: A Simulation”](#), and [“Independence or Catastrophe: Teaching 1948 Through Multiple Perspectives”](#). This last lesson, written by Samia Shoman, is already being used in classrooms. According to Shoman, one of the most common student questions during this lesson is: “How could Jews treat Palestinians without dignity or humanity after what they had experienced?” (Teaching Palestine, 45).

Antisemitism versus anti-Zionism

Although the curriculum repeatedly insists that anti-Zionism is not the same as antisemitism in an attempt to deflect criticism, its extreme stance renders that distinction meaningless. The authors’ claims against Israel often ignore Jewish humanity, historical suffering, and indigeneity, as well as the legitimate needs of Israel’s Jewish population. They deny the deep connection between Judaism and the land of Israel and ignore the antisemitism inherent in that denial.

Nora Lester Murad, who [recorded](#) herself ripping down posters of Israeli hostages and is a key figure in the campaign to remove the ADL from schools, contributes an essay titled, [“Educators Beware: The Anti-Defamation League is not the Social Justice Partner it Claims to Be”](#) (Teaching Palestine, 163).

MURAD CLAIMS THAT THE ADL BULLIES EDUCATORS.

According to her, how and why do they do this?

– Discussion Guide, 9

Contributors [Nina Mehta](#) and Donna Nevel are co-directors of [PARCEO](#), a far-left curriculum development organization. This organization, which has been accused of [radical views](#) on antisemitism, claims that Jews who seek police protection when faced with antisemitic incidents play a role in the “continued oppression, incarceration and murder” of the black community

Mehta and Nevel’s contribution is an essay titled “What Antisemitism Is and What It Is Not” (Teaching Palestine, 161). The essay begins by referring to the ADL as a “conservative and right-wing Jewish organization” which encourages Jews to see themselves in an “‘us’ [the Jewish people] against ‘them’ [the rest of the world]” framework. This framing reinforces the antisemitic trope that Jews are “other” and somehow separate from the societies in which they live. It defines



Image used in Teaching Palestine

antisemitism as “historically contextual” and blames it on right-wing white nationalism. The essay concludes with a one-sided view of “safety” rather than peace: “Safety never grows from guns, checkpoints, walls, and a police state. True safety is built through forging solidarity with those fighting for a more just world” (Teaching Palestine, 161-162).

The Holocaust

In addition to painting Israel as a settler-colonial and apartheid state, an ongoing theme in the material is the devaluation of the Holocaust as a reason for Israel’s existence. The curriculum includes an interview with Zeiad Abbas, the executive director of MECA, who states that “the plan to colonize Palestine started long before the Holocaust” (Teaching Palestine, 19). The resource omits the origin of the Jewish people, its claims to the land, and historic and ongoing history of antisemitism. Abbas also refers to Palestinians in Gaza as refugees, but he ignores the fact that Jews fleeing to Israel were also typically refugees.

In one inflammatory article, Bill Bigelow, Zinn Education Project co-director, blames all violence on Israel, slandering the Jewish people by falsely claiming that they wanted a state to exclude non-Jews. He asserts that “[t]oday’s violence did not begin on Oct. 7... It did not begin with the Holocaust. No. It began with the Zionist movement’s conviction that Palestine should be a Jewish-only country and that Palestinians should disappear” (Teaching Palestine, 38).

“LESSONS” ON SETTLER COLONIALISM INCLUDE ESSAYS TITLED, “UNCOVERING SETTLER COLONIALISM: A CONCEPT FORMATION LESSON,” BY JESSE HAGOPIAN, AND “BORDERS AND WALLS: STORIES THAT CONNECT US TO PALESTINE,” BY JODY SOKOLOWER.

HAGOPIAN QUOTES SHREYA SHAH:

‘Settler colonialism as a structure requires genocide. . . .’ Why does Shah make this claim? How can this be applied to what is happening in Gaza?

In early Zionist writing and agitation, the aspiration to colonize Palestine was public and explicit. Why do you think that today’s Israeli leaders are reluctant to identify Israel as a colonial undertaking?

– Discussion Guide, 8

Sokolower contrasts quotes about Manifest Destiny from John O’Sullivan (154) with those about Zionism by Israeli prime ministers, Golda Meir and David Ben- Gurion (155). What is similar about these quotes, what is different? What can we learn about settler colonialism through these two examples? Toward the end of Sokolower’s unit, she explores the U.S.-Mexico border. She asks her students: “When you think about everything we’ve learned about borders and walls in Palestine and at the U.S.-Mexico border, what patterns emerge? What’s similar? What’s different between the two situations?” What thoughts do we have about these questions?

– Discussion Guide, 8

antisemitism as “historically contextual” and blames it on right-wing white nationalism. The essay concludes with a one-sided view of “safety” rather than peace: “Safety never grows from guns, checkpoints, walls, and a police state. True safety is built through forging solidarity with those fighting for a more just world” (Teaching Palestine, 161-162).

Bypassing October 7th

The curriculum similarly downgrades the importance of October 7 for Israel. In an article titled, “Teachers: Lift up Palestinian Stories,” the author claims that “[t]oday’s dominant storytellers in media and government insist that history began on October 7, 2023, in order to erase the Palestinian experience of apartheid and genocide that began before and continue after” (Teaching Palestine, 26). Little is said about the actual events of October 7th; the curriculum fails to mention the brutal rape, murder, and hostage-taking carried out by Hamas.

The materials also fail to mention Hamas’ use of civilian structures within Gaza to hide its operations, including using tunnels to imprison hostages and harbor terrorists, which impacted Israel’s military options. Instead of addressing this reality, the curriculum accuses Israel of genocide, “cultural genocide,” and a “deliberate effort to destroy not only the possibility of their future but a trace of their past” (Teaching Palestine, 26). It also notably fails to provide the context for Israel’s actions in light of [Hamas’ vow](#) to continue Oct. 7-like attacks “again and again” until Israel is destroyed.

The events of October 7th are so irrelevant to the curriculum creators that they include a poem by Refaat Alareer, described as “a professor of world literature...who was killed by an IDF airstrike” (Teaching Palestine, 176). The authors fail to mention that he is also known for his post-October 7th jokes such as this one about a dead Jewish baby:



Blaming the United States

Not only is the curriculum anti-Israel, it is also anti-American, blaming the United States for the plight of the Palestinians because it grants aid to Israel. The material frequently compares the experiences of Native American communities and the Palestinians by referring to the idea of settler colonialism and genocide.

In an illustrative example, students are informed that the United States does not protect equality and justice. In the lesson titled “The United States and Palestine-Israel: Fifty Years of Choices (1956–2006),” by teacher [Adam Sanchez](#), students are instructed to “imagine...we had a government that cared about promoting equality, justice, and ending oppression” (Teaching Palestine, 53). The class is tasked with discussions about complex geopolitical issues and further pushed towards the opinion that the U.S. acted incorrectly in supporting Israel.



Image used in Teaching Palestine

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE U.S. RELATIONSHIP WITH ISRAEL?

Adam Sanchez introduces his lesson, “The United States and Palestine-Israel: Fifty Years of Choices (1956–2006),”:

“Students may be puzzled about the role that the United States has played in Israel’s war on Gaza following the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attacks. With tens of thousands of civilians killed in Gaza, why has the United States continued to arm Israel? Looking at the choices and U.S. responses in Sanchez’s lesson, how would you respond?”

– Discussion Guide, 4

In addition, when a student expresses concern about this lesson as “one-sided” due to its omissions, the material suggests that teachers should deliberately deflect from this criticism by refocusing on United States policy: “Ilana wrote that the lesson was “one-sided” and did not contain enough details about “what innocent Israelis have gone through” (Teaching Palestine, 54). Sanchez’s response is as follows: “Although I tried to discuss attacks on Israeli civilians when relevant, the lesson aimed to focus on key choice points for the United States in deciding policy toward Palestine-Israel” (Teaching Palestine, 54).

Sanchez also seems to use student quotes to illustrate his teaching goals. He concludes with a quote from a student that the lesson helped her “understand the frustrations that led to Oct. 7” and another who said that “[t]he U.S. helped Israel ruin so many lives and helped kill countless children and civilians. People need to understand this as the buildup to Oct. 7” (Teaching Palestine, 54). These quotes suggest that students learn to rationalize terrorist violence, which highlights the risks of presenting only one perspective in the classroom.

Conclusion

Teaching Palestine is a handbook for indoctrinating children into the creators' radical anti-Israel worldview. The curriculum delivers relentless propaganda targeting children from kindergarten through high school. Palestinians are consistently portrayed as innocent victims and Israelis as violent oppressors, presenting a simplistic narrative of a deeply complex conflict. The material disregards the events of October 7th, ignores Hamas's strategy of embedding within civilian populations, and erases the Jewish people's historic claim and need for a homeland. Instead of offering a balanced historical perspective or opportunities for critical inquiry, the curriculum relies on maudlin poetry and repeated stories of victimhood in order to shape student views. This is not an education; it is anti-Zionist propaganda that crosses the line into antisemitism.