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Critical Thinking in Syrian Secondary School History Education

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ABSTRACT

Despite much research on the socioeconomic effects of public education in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region, few studies have been made that investigate the qualitative dimensions of these countries' national education systems, modes of instruction, and educational materials. Knowledge- and skills attainment should be at the fore of such research, as well as the sociocultural, historic and political implications of education. Syria is a case in point.

A previous, tentative study by the author pointed towards a lack of classroom discussions and analytical exercise in Syrian primary and secondary education. This stresses the need for textbooks to provide for analytical skills training in a balanced and creative way.

The objective of this essay is to qualitatively evaluate a Syrian history textbook's rationale for promoting critical thinking among students, focusing on the structure and content of the material. Using a grounded theory method, it is at once a descriptive and exploratory study of a Syrian schoolbook and, as such, may add to knowledge on education in the Middle East more broadly.

The study concludes that neither the textbook's structure or content is conducive to critical thinking because it does not equip students with the necessary tools for developing thinking that is clear, inquisitive, balanced and self-aware. Rather, the worldview presented in the textbook is a subjective account that focuses on victimization of the own ethos and projecting enemy images onto historic rivals, past and present, and the textbook leaves little room for alternative views.

The findings of the research may be informative to the link between public education and regime stability in MENA countries such as Syria, Iraq, Egypt or Libya. Such research would indeed be relevant today as these countries may be forced to restructure their education systems thoroughly in the face of late political upheaval.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

1.1. INTRODUCTION

The topic of this essay is the unintentional result of a nearly three years' long residence in Syria. Through my encounters with friends and their children, who were elementary or secondary school pupils, I became acquainted with the Syrian school system and methods of instruction. One of the things that caught my attention early on was the, at times, shallow knowledge and slow learning noted among friends' children. After several years of English or French classes, the children hardly ever knew much beyond very standard phrases and were lacking ability to elaborate on what they had learned, creating sentences and meanings of their own. I accidentally made a colleague's daughter blush silently when I responded to her "*Bonjour*" with a friendly "*Ça va bien?*" (How are you?). She had studied French for four years and could not see where this conversation was going… (Perhaps my informal greeting in place of the schoolbook "*Comment êtes-vous?*" threw her off.) One young boy, who I sometimes helped with homework, was surprised and then increasingly vexed when I tried to make him write sentences in Arabic other than the one he was instructed to learn for his writing assignment. The task was, he told me, to write the sentence ten times in his notebook to be able to repeat it in class on the whiteboard the next day, a job he then reassumed.

Having some teaching experience, I became absorbed with Syrian school pedagogy and the routine of classroom instruction, examination and grading. I started making comparisons against my own school experience from Sweden. There were similarities, but also many great differences. Looking closer, I noted an inconsistency between the stated goals of the Syrian education system and the skills and competences acquired through that system. Despite having quite lofty ideals and ambitions, it seemed that the knowledge attained was less than satisfactory. At the same time, education seemed to be centered on a rather shallow and descriptive study of facts and reiteration of axiomatic knowledge rather than deep learning, as in exploring, understanding and making inferences from the phenomena studied. I was, for instance, alarmed to learn that university students of English literature never once handed in a book review or analysis of their own making during their entire training, but exams were based on multiple-choice questions (!). The focus on independent learning and creative use of knowledge seemed low.

During the fall of 2010, I coauthored a qualitative study of Syrian adults' experiences of, and attitudes towards, their school years. The findings of this inquiry point to a general lack of classroom discussions and analytical training in Syrian primary and secondary education (Heinrich & Jusufi 2010:12). The interviewees of the study all in different ways expressed how learning was largely mechanical and a matter of reiterations, accepting at face value, and even copying (ibid. 14). Relying somewhat uncritically on given facts as truths in combination with teacher indisposition to address controversial issues or encourage classroom discussions pushes the relevance of textbooks to the fore. In few other situations does the need for factual and balanced course literature stand out as plainly.

The essay at hand is therefore both a continuation and deepening of my previous work to shed light on education in the Middle East. The interest this time is to qualitatively evaluate a Syrian school textbook in order to see if and to which extent it encourages critical thinking among students. A coinciding ambition is to describe how Syrian textbooks are structured. For this purpose I have chosen a history textbook for upper secondary school and there are several reasons for this: history is, first of all, immensely important in terms of creating logic and meaning to human understandings of the world. Worldviews have a profound impact on how national and personal identities are constructed; it equips students with the knowledge about the world and their place in it. The decisive moment, however, occurred when reading the preamble of the textbook under scrutiny. I was surprised to see that the question of critical thinking, and the need with recent school reforms to better develop students' analytical skills was dealt with expressively. The authors wished, "to activate student pursuit in the search for knowledge, to stimulate his moral conscience and his mental capabilities in explaining, memorizing, testing, inductive reasoning, and drawing conclusions" (al-Ḥammawī 2009:3). My interest in the textbook was markedly heightened. The analysis, which covers slightly more than 30 percent of the material, will focus on both structural and content features to estimate whether the textbook develops students' ability to think independently and critically.

1.2. OBJECTIVE STATEMENT

The objective of this essay is to qualitatively evaluate a Syrian history textbook's rationale for promoting critical thinking among students. Focusing on the structure and content of a sample of the material, its ability to train students to think independently and critically will be estimated. It is likewise a descriptive study of a Syrian schoolbook and, as such, it may add to knowledge on education in the Middle East more broadly.

1.3. METHOD (INTRODUCTION)

The general lack of similar studies to consult has prompted the use of an explorative research design based on grounded theory, which, in simple terms, is a method for constructing theory through observation and scientific scrutiny. Key concepts for textual analysis have not been set out beforehand, but have been the result of a continuous refinement work. I have read the material several times and kept track of findings by indexing and making extensive notes in a database. The analysis has therefore grown naturally from the empirical material.

1.4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the purpose of my study, I simply began this research with the broad question:

1. To what extent does the textbook's structure and content promote critical thinking?

Having screened the material at hand, I refined the formulation. Noting that the book, already in its early sections, contained some strong language and value statements, I added:

2. What effect do existing value-laden language, themes and imagery have on independent, critical reflection?
3. In what way(s) does language, themes and imagery shape the worldview presented by the textbook?

1.5. EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

Tārīx al-'Arab al-Ḥadīṯ wa al-Mu'āṣir ("The Recent and Modern History of the Arabs"; henceforth *History of the Arabs*), authored by Doctor Mohammed Nihād al-Ḥammawī (hereafter al-Hammawi) and a group of eight other scholars, is the official history textbook for graduate students at all public and private high schools in Syria. It is published by The General Foundation for Printing for the school year 2009/2010 and approved by the Syrian Ministry of Education. Being reworked and published very recently, it is a part of the Government's recent efforts to reform Syrian education (dealt with further in chapter two). The preamble mentions how an increased focus on developing students' analytical faculties is among the new directions in Syrian history education, as noted previously. With the subject matter for this study in mind, it therefore lends itself well for analysis, and inferences from it should be well suited for comparison with studies from other countries with similar education systems, in the region and elsewhere.

1.6. RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

Ideologies and cultural beliefs have a real impact on how the world is perceived and how social and political order is sustained. The postmodernist experience[1] has brought attention to the fact that knowledge is not neutral (cf. Devetak 2009; Steans & Pettiford 2005). It prompts us to always situate facts and knowledge within the broader sociocultural and political fabric in which it is created. The adage is that "knowledge is always political, ideological, value-laden, and produced by particular interpreters" (Iivari 2006:49). "Power," it is understood, can therefore be defined in terms of capacity to influence how the world is perceived. The role of compulsory school is unrivaled in providing this basic, coherent understanding of modern life. In Sweden, educational materials have long been valued as a means to control the knowledge transmitted through the national education system to the citizens (Skolverket 2006:7). Unsurprisingly therefore, the Swedish Government has regularly evaluated textbooks through state commissions for nearly hundred and fifty years (ibid.).

What makes historical readings particularly relevant? Jennifer Reed gives several explanations in her dissertation "*Effect of a Model for Critical Thinking*" (1998). First, history can provide the knowledge to make wise decisions in response to some of our greatest modern challenges, such as global warming, inequitable distribution of wealth and resources, and runaway population growth. Secondly, it equips students with the knowledge and understanding of the world and their place in it. Finally, studying history "is to provide a broader understanding of human thinking processes and the extent to which they are the same or different from one domain to another" (ibid. 5). Weak understanding of historical events and processes consequently makes for weak capacity to grasp the contemporary world and make valid and rational claims about it. For all these reasons, I have chosen a history textbook as the basis for my inquiry into how critical thinking is either promoted – or discouraged – in Syrian schools. "Developing critical minds is a long-term affair… For critical thinking to be successfully fostered in students, it must be explicitly discussed and required in the classroom" (Cosgrove 2010:6). As my previous inquiry has shown, classrooms discussions are not sufficiently encouraged in Syrian schools (Heinrich & Jusufi 2010). Instead, we must turn to school textbooks in order to see how they teach students discernment and logic. The wider implications of the study may contribute to the knowledge on how authoritarian states are maintained, particularly in the Middle East.

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[1] Including, as it were, various forms of "critical" theories, feminism, developmental theory and more.

On a final note, researching this subject has led me to review a large number of texts; journals, essays and articles; treating Syrian education in different ways. In this process, I have found that save one report by Groiss (2001), qualitative studies of Syrian textbooks and instruction materials are virtually non-existent. As such, this essay may serve also to reduce this oversight in academia.

1.7. NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION

Transcriptions of Arabic in this essay are done according to the DIN 31635 standard, recommended by Bo Isaksson (2009:4) and preferred also by Hans Wehr dictionaries (1980). This is mainly due to the advantage (and beauty) of representing letters unavailable in the Latin alphabet on a one-to-one basis. For example, whereas the guttural خ sound (as the end sound in the German composer's name "Ba<u>ch</u>") is transliterated *kh* according to some models, here, the letter *x* will simply be used to denote the Arabic consonant. The exception being *tāʾ marbūṭa* (ة), which may be transcribed *–a* or *–ah* in pausal form, and *–at* when carrying case ending or conjoined with *adāh at-taʿrīf*, the definite article (*alif lām*); however, since this is not a work written exclusively for linguists, I have kept to pausal transcription for simplicity. Since omitting case endings naturally eliminates confusion whether a final *a* denotes *tāʾ marbūṭa* or accusative tense, I have represented it as *–a*, like Hans Wehr dictionaries customarily do. One a related note, *nisba* endings in the masculine, like *ʿarabī* ("Arabic"), loses its *–iyy* form (compare: *ʿarabiyy/un*) in pausal mode; in the feminine, it must keep its *y* for pronunciation reasons (Isaksson 2009:10-11), but will be written *ʿarabīya* (resembling Hans Wehr) for consistency instead of *ʿarabiyya* (preferred by Isaksson).

Names immediately familiar to readers from different backgrounds, such as "Mohammed" or "Damascus," have been kept in their conventional Anglicized versions. Capitalization of first letters in titles and names, moreover, is kept to resemble the English language custom. A full table of the DIN standard is available to the reader at the end of the essay as Annex II.

Please note that all translations from Arabic to English throughout this essay are the work of the author.

1.8. DISPOSITION

This introductory chapter has outlined the study at hand. It has delineated the research field and the reasons for the inquiry. In the background chapter next, I review previous scholarly efforts regarding our subject and describe developments in Syria of the past decade and how these have affected Syrian society and political life. The chapter also presents the Syrian education system and current attempts to reform this system. Methodology is then dealt with in chapter three, and the concept "critical thinking" will be defined. Chapter four, the analysis, examines the empirical material of the study from a structural and textual perspective. The results of this inspection are then summarized in chapter five. Finally in chapter six, we go over the main points of the study and conclude.

Background

The purpose of this chapter is to sketch Syria and Syrian education as a research field. It will point to the under-researched nature of the subject matter and review recent significant economic, social and political changes in the country. We will then describe the workings of the national education system and its current challenges.

2.1. SCHOLARLY PRECURSORS

When searching for background material for this research, particularly looking for similar qualitative textbook studies, it became clear that this type of inquiry is largely neglected in academia. Where some countries, such as Sweden, has instituted regular textbook evaluations through state commissions since the second half of the nineteenth century (Skolverket 2006), it is decidedly more difficult to come across qualitative assessments of school materials in other parts of the world. Syria is a case in point. The qualitative dimensions of the Syrian education system are largely un-researched. Even though education in Syria is treated in a host of works (typically with attendant recommendations that education standards need to be raised), this literature does not include a qualitative assessment of textbooks and instruction materials. These studies are rather concerned with developmental economics, that is, the sociopolitical impact of education (cf. al-Fattal 2010; Huitfeldt & Kabbani 2005; Kabbani & Kothari 2005; UNDP 2010; UNICEF 2009; World Bank 2007).

One exemption was found, however. The report *Jews, Zionism and Israel in Syrian School Textbooks* (Groiss 2001) produced for the Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace (CMIP) reviews sixty-eight Syrian textbooks for grades one to twelve in various subjects. The study concludes that the Arab-Israeli conflict is a central theme in Syrian education dealt with in most textbooks, and that the language used to describe Jews and Israel is ridden with strongly value-laden terms and depictions. If my analysis fails to address some dimensions of antagonism against Israelis, it is because Groiss' study has already done so, and much more extensively at that. Although different in terms of research focus and with much more modest goals about its scope, this study is nevertheless an effort to complement the CMIP initiative.

2.2. COUNTRY BACKGROUND: RECENT TRANSFORMATIONS

Syria has perhaps too long been confined to the periphery of the scholarly gaze. Its role as regional black sheep (this position only seriously threatened by Iran) and its political coloring as "stable authoritarian state" (Lesch's definition; 2007:21) should perhaps warrant a more prominent position. The historical link between the Baath parties of Syria and Iraq, and the equally durable and oppressive regimes of Hafez al-Asad and Saddam Hussein, furthermore, would call for a closer inspection of the relation between regime stability and, for instance, propaganda and education. Perhaps this academic blind spot is the reason why "Syria's political, economic, social and diplomatic affaires are often described as 'mysterious', 'puzzling' or 'strange'" (Lawson 2009:9).

Since the ascent of President Bashar al-Asad, in 2000, however, some willingness to reform coupled with changing social, economic and political structures has been noted in both scholarly works and the media. According to Pace and Landis, Syria has broken out of its diplomatic and political isolation (2009:138). It has strengthened its role as a regional player, both in economic and diplomatic terms. The resumption of negotiations with Israel, albeit temporarily halted by the 2008 War on Gaza, and its rapprochement with Turkey during and after the war signals this shift. In February 2010, the U.S. appointed its first ambassador to Syria since the Rafik Hariri killing in Beirut, 2005, confirming also Washington's renewed confidence in Syria as an important regional actor (BBC 2010). Changes over the past ten years have affected various strata within the Syrian societal fabric, among them:

Economic restructuring:	Syria has moved from a centrally planned to a private sector-led hybrid: the "social market economy" (Araujo 2009; Haddad 2009)
Political transformations:	Political alliances have been reconfigured internally (Ismael, 2009) and externally. The latter is seen in the increasingly warm relations with Turkey (Forward Magazine 2010) and Lebanon (Pace & Landis 2009), as well as strengthening of Syrian cabinet authorities by ceding presidential powers to the ministers (Lesch 2007)
Educational reform:	The Syrian Government has been overseeing its education system during the past five years, cooperating also with the World Bank on a new, comprehensive education sector

strategy (Araujo 2009; Huitfeldt & Kabbani 2005)

Some improvement of civil   New means to democratic opposition and political dissent
and political rights:

The last is perhaps best illustrated by the "Damascus Spring" of the early 2000s and later the 2005 "Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change" through which long-suppressed opposition groups in Syria, among them human rights organizations, civil society activists, Kurdish and Assyrian nationalists, and political fractions of different colors (liberals, communists, socialists, Islamists), found a common cause (Pace & Landis 2009; Freedom House 2010). Yet others argue that while some significant reforms have been made in government administration, education and the economic sector, changes in the judicial and political spheres have been "largely cosmetic" (Lesch 2007:3). A very recent UN report is pessimistic about the advancements of the Damascus regime stating that it remains "highly repressive" (UN 2000:13). Freedom House's yearly *Freedom in the World Report* mentions that despite some indications of increasing political tolerance, civil rights such as freedom of expression, association and assembly are still heavily restricted (2010). Academic freedom is likewise limited and professors have been dismissed or imprisoned for expressing dissent.

Following the massive and tumultuous developments across the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) Region known as the "Arab Spring" of 2011 – a popular wildfire that has engulfed countries from Tunisia and Libya in Africa to the Gulf and Near East states in the span of a few months – Syria has likewise been subject to much political turmoil. At the time of writing, it is still too early to say what these transformations to Syrian political life will mean. For the sake of the present study, however, it means little. What is at scrutiny here is the education system that is the result of the forty-year long Baathist reign that preceded these events. That being said, it may be the case that some or most of what is described in this background chapter and in the ensuing analysis will be obsolete in a very near future.

2.3. SYRIAN EDUCATION AT A GLANCE

Syrian schools are under the supervision of the Government through the Syrian Ministry of Education (MoE), which governs the National Curriculum as well as oversees the publication of textbooks available to students across the country (Groiss 2001:7). This is true for public and private faculties alike. As a result of Syria being home to a large cohort of exiled

Palestinians, furthermore, there are numerous UNRWA[2] schools throughout the country to provide for Palestinian refugee children. Although managed and financed by the UN, the mandate and syllabus of UNRWA schools are nonetheless dictated by the MoE (ibid).

The education system itself is a borrowing from the French Mandate period (al-Fattal 2010:4). Syrian children typically attend a six-year primary school education, followed by three years in lower secondary and three years upper secondary school (ibid). Upper secondary school is divided into a scientific and literary branch from the second year (eleventh grade), which is concluded in the third year with the *baccalaureate* examinations, in which the entire corpus of the final year is reexamined per subject (ibid. 5). Baccalaureus results determine the alternatives open for post-secondary education. Syrian education is free of charge and primary education is compulsory.

There is a strong ideological element in the Syrian National Curriculum, promulgated by the Syrian Constitution. Article 21 of the same states that:

> The educational and cultural system aims at creating a socialist nationalist Arab generation, which is scientifically minded and attached to its history and land, proud of its heritage, and filled with the spirit of struggle to achieve its nation's objectives of unity (Damascus Online).

To this day, *qaumīya* ("nationalism") is taught as a separate subject throughout all levels of Syrian education, presumably as a way to shoulder this mandate. Similarly, all Syrian schools used to have mandatory military exercises twice a week until the late 1990s. Military classes involved assembling firearms, learning to couple ammunition with the right weapon and how to load it, beside drills and physical exercises (Heinrich & Jusufi 2010, Annex A: Samar). Perhaps slightly surreal and even alarming to spectators in less militarized societies, this has nevertheless been a naturalized reality to many young Syrians.

MENA countries started to invest in their human capital later than most other regions. Despite this, a fairly recent World Bank report (2007:3) states that the achievements of MENA countries over the past forty years are "impressive" considering their humble prospects in the 1960s. Most countries have reached full mandatory primary school gross enrollment in this period; Syria achieved this as early as 1985[3] (World Bank 2010). Youth illiteracy rates have continuously declined throughout the period, from 70 percent in 1970 to 26 percent in 2000 (Kabbani & Kothari 2005:29), although still trailing behind relative to other regions (ibid. 28). Improvements to female education are foregrounded. Average years

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[2] United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
[3] Possibly even in the first years of the 1980s since figures for the years 1981-84 are unavailable.

of schooling for males and females fifteen years and older rose by more than 400 percent between 1960 and 2000 in the region as a whole (ibid. 27).

Despite advancements at the level of education, many MENA countries still battle against elevated youth unemployment rates. In Syria, this figure stood at 26 percent in 2005 (Kabbani & Kothari 2005:5). Compared to the total national unemployment at working age[4], youth of fifteen to twenty-four years of age made up 78 percent of the total (ibid. 6). Out of this group, over two-thirds, or 68 percent, were first-time jobseekers (ibid. 7). Huitfeldt & Kabbani discuss this dilemma in "Returns to School and the Transition from School to Work" (2005). Whereas Syrian unemployment conditions are no exception in the MENA region, Syria "stands out in terms of the sheer magnitude of the problem" (ibid. 7). Unemployment, they conclude, is a labor market insertion problem involving young, first-time jobseekers.

As a result of economic developments and private sector growth since 2000, the need for skilled technical professionals in Syria has increased rapidly. If left to its own, this may cause mismatches between the skills of recent graduates and the new labor market needs, Huitfeldt and Kabbani warn (ibid. 8). Already in 2005, figures seem to have indicated that this was the case (ibid. 19). Other sources confirm this, referring to the Syrian educational system as "extremely lacking" in skills training (Lesch 2007:16). As a way to counter this effect, Huitfeldt and Kabbani propose thoroughgoing educational reform to ease the school-to-work transition, especially for vocational and technical training (2005:28). In 2005, reform was already underway in Syria, both in terms of revising curricula and additional teacher training (ibid. 8). The ongoing collaboration between the Syrian Government and the World Bank to develop a new education sector strategy shows that this work has since progressed (Araujo 2009:26).

Against this background we begin the present study. Lacking skills training may be key to understanding labor market inertia in accommodating young jobseekers. The present study investigates one such ability: critical thinking. Creating versatile, adaptive and solution-oriented minds is a prerequisite in preparing Syria's student body to meet new economic and political conditions in the country.

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[4] Defined as sixteen to sixty-four years of age by the report.

Methodology

In pioneering, explorative studies such as this methodology and the process of gathering and examining data require careful planning. In the following chapter both topics will first be dealt with in turn. Delimitations of the empirical material are then covered and, finally, we consider existing ethical implications of the research.

3.1. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS: GROUNDED THEORY

Given the rather under-researched nature of the subject studied in this work, I have employed an explorative model for textual analysis based on grounded theory. Rather than being a theory in its own right, grounded theory is a set of methods to analyze empirical material without a preformulated hypothesis or theoretical framework. Instead, it is a collection of systematic, yet flexible principles for gathering and analyzing qualitative data (Chambliss & Schutt 2006:220). It is akin to *empirical research* in the sense that it is experience-, or observation-based, but with the important distinction that it puts more emphasis on the epistemological assumption that researchers, through preexisting knowledge and unconscious preferences, frame that which is studied; they limit what can be seen or observed. In simple terms, things are what we believe them to be. On a methodological level, this is countered by the strategic choice not to employ fixed sets of theories or hypotheses that confine empirical scrutiny. The match is never seamless, however (see critique below). Through grounded theory the researcher may examine the empirical data and develop a systematic theory grounded in the observations made as the research unfolds, and it is particularly appreciated as a method of social analysis in education and health studies (Thomas & James 2006:768).

Three terms are central to grounded theory research methodology: *codes*, *concepts* and *categories*. They are hierarchically organized and interdependent according to the following:

- Code: the smallest identifying unit that highlights key points of the data
- Concept: collections of *codes* that allow for grouping of similar data
- Category: larger groups of similar *concepts* that, when combined, can be used to generate a theory

Concepts, or collections of codes, discovered through research are continuously retested against more observations, then refined and interlinked in categories until a "saturation point" is reached (Chambliss & Schutt 2006:220). This is referred to as "progressive focusing" (ibid. 194).

All qualitative research in some way involves analyzing "texts" (Charmaz 2006:35). This is true whether we are dealing with actual texts, like interview transcripts or narrative reports, or when capturing verbal narratives, body language, gestures, or other embedded information ("text" understood in its broader, ethnographical sense). Texts not directly authored or influenced by the presence of the researcher are known as *extant texts*. Examples of such are archival data, public records of various kinds, taped radio and TV broadcasts, books and anthologies. The study of extant texts can offer important information about "others'" perceptions of reality not easily obtained through other qualitative methods (ibid. 39). Extant data are also typically regarded as *unobtrusive* since the researcher does not affect the content and the compilation of the material. This minimizes risks of biased empirical data watering down the validity of a study. Naturally, however, this does not eliminate a researcher's own normative assumptions or biases, or rid him or her of personal beliefs and ideologies that may affect the end results.

3.1.1. *Critique against the choice of method*

Qualitative research is commonly criticized for its limited generalizability and scholars have highlighted the added validity concerns it entails. First, it sometimes faces difficulty being compelling in the eyes of more statistically minded social researchers, who prefer clear indicators, explicit theorems and hypotheses, and readily transferable data that meet the test-retest criterion, that is, which can be falsified. Second, the risk of interpretation on personal inclination lingers in the pages, because, "claims of value-free neutrality assume, paradoxically, a value position" (ibid. 132). Charmaz has asserted that grounded theory can bridge traditional positivistic methods with interpretive methods, but rejected the objectivity of early versions of grounded theory on behalf of a more constructivist stance (Thomas & James 2006:770); "The myth of silent authorship is false but reassuring" (ibid.). The unobtrusiveness of extant text studies, as in this case, does positively affect the validity of the research, however. The researcher does not influence the information or behavior of that which is studied; anyone with an interest to do so may easily duplicate the "test." This demands of the researcher but a careful and transparent account of methods employed, clear substantiation of reasoning, and sufficient embedding in previous scholarly work. It should

further, with regards to the generalizability of this study, be stated that it in no way aims to be exhaustive. This would include a cross-section of history books for several educational years or a cross-subject, and preferably even *cross-country*, comparison.

Grounded theory has, more recently, received criticism by scholars like Thomas and James (2006), who claim that what is contrived through this method is not a "theory" in any meaningful sense. Central in this discourse is the difference in classification of the term, and a gulf exists between "accommodationist" and "predictivist" interpretations, where the latter is related to positivist expectations about the predictive–explanatory function of theories. "Accommodationists" more loosely view the term as a process of patterning and accommodation, about bringing ideas together and theorizing (ibid. 772). Others have likewise noted that most times the outcome of grounded theory is descriptive rather than theoretical (Charmaz 2006:133). This work will not offer an exception to this claim, but seeks to explore the empirical material along descriptive–explanatory lines.

Having said that, qualitative and interpretive exploration of a limited amount of text can offer valuable insights to the inner workings – the embedded meanings and tacit understandings – of the material.

3.2. METHOD (THE REAL THING)

Using grounded theory for this study based on the textbook *History of the Arabs* has meant continuously revisiting the empirical material in a nonlinear fashion. I have kept extensive notes and highlighted important findings in spreadsheets, and modified key concepts along the way. The analysis is reflexive and the method has been adapted as the work progressed; I have let the research problem frame the method used.

Having read a few sections of the book and taken an interest in the subject, I began my inquiry by glancing through and indexing the source material. I took note of chapter subjects, order, and page distribution per chapter; I studied text distribution, formatting, and the few drawn pictures in the book. I then began sifting a few chapters. Already at this tentative stage, codes for analysis started to emerge, and these were entered as analytical categories in a spreadsheet database. At the second reading, it was a fairly easy task to translate segments of text straight into this spreadsheet with attendant codes, indicated with capital letters:

> The Tishreen War produced great results (F), the most important of which was the Arab
> initiative to wage a war for the first time in modern Arabic history, and through this revealed the

strength of the Arab Fighter (E) and his battle skills and bravery (F, W) (al-Hammawi 2009:208).

The codes in this example denotes (F) for questionable factuality, (E) for ethnocentrism, and (W) for strong or value-laden wording. The collection of processed data proved fruitful when summarizing the end results: the material was compiled, translated and encoded in one and the same place. Having conducted this careful groundwork, I was later greatly helped when screening the document for keywords or calculating, for instance, the number of times a certain term or phrase was used.

By the second (and sometimes third) reading of early chapters the analytical categories were more or less settled. They had been sufficiently refined. These categories remained roughly the same throughout the study, a sign that the empirical material was rather homogeneous and that further reading would bring little added value: a saturation point had been reached. Despite this, I made sure to cover at least thirty percent of the book (view section 3.3. next).

Kathy Charmaz' example questions in *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (2006) helped me approach the textual analysis in a structured manner. The following have been inspirational to this study (ibid. 39-40):

- What is the ostensible purpose of the text and how well does it meet its goals? Might it serve other unstated or assumed purposes? […]
- Which meanings are embedded within it? How do those meanings reflect a particular social, historical and perhaps organizational context?
- What is the structure of the text? How does this structure shape what is said? […]
- How does its content construct images of reality? […]
- How is language used?

The reader should note that no promise is made to account for these questions separately in the analysis that follows. They frame how the research questions one and two (section 1.4) are understood and evaluated. That being the case, I have employed them where the analysis has benefited from it.

Regarding the structural analysis, I have limited it to text outline, type and design; number and type of discussion assignments and study questions; and, finally, use of works cited and recommended further reading lists. As with the textual analysis, I have used a spreadsheet database to mark up the findings.

3.3. DELIMITATIONS

The textbook studied comprises 365 pages of text, which has necessitated the use of a manageable but sufficiently representative sample. In the end, 111 pages or slightly more than 30 percent has been studied in detail, comprising eighteen subchapters (1-4; 25-34; 37-40) from Chapters One and Four. This was the result of an analytical "saturation point" having been reached rather than a preset goal to cover a designated portion of the book. However, the entire book has been screened for any inconsistencies that would diverge from or contradict the structural analysis arrived at through the sample without finding any such instances. Chapters One and Four have been selected on account of content considerations. Chapter Four, the largest in the book, deals with developments in the Arab world during the First World War. I have limited myself to developments in Syria from the Great Arab Revolt in 1916, through independence, to the consolidation of the country under Hafez al-Asad in the early 1970s. This section is chosen on the merit of dealing specifically with Syria becoming a nation-state with a specific cultural and political identity. Sections on Palestine have been chosen on account of it being a core conflict issue and a matter of the heart in the Syrian security debate (see Groiss 2001). As a way to balance this seemingly biased selection, I have included the first and most historically remote chapter dealing with the Arab world under Ottoman rule that would strike a balance by offering alternative representations and world analysis.

Finally, the reader should note that although the selected textbook and sample thereof have been screened meticulously, this study does not aim to be exhaustive, as noted earlier. The findings of this study will therefore be indicative only of the textbook at hand. Future studies could include a more encompassing selection of empirical data.

3.4. DEFINITIONS: "CRITICAL THINKING"

"Critical thinking" could be viewed as a way or reasoning about and exploring thinking processes. "To consistently reason at a high level requires not only being able to analyze thinking, but also to critique it" (Cosgrove 2010:10). In the field of education the concept is contested due to the multiple possible meanings it holds. According to the Swedish National Agency for Education, "critical thinking" primarily stands for two things: the ability to reason and evaluate facts (Fossgammar & Sandberg 2006:11-12). It stresses the importance of being able to distinguish between facts and opinions, and work to increase awareness about the importance of source critique. The definition begs us to consider the role of facts in shaping

internally consistent and meaningful narratives about the world, and how this "tones" personal ideas and behavior (reactions to the worldview). For our purposes, however, it is a weak definition because it reduces critical thinking to source critique.

Richard Paul, founder of the Foundation for Critical Thinking, offers a more exhaustive interpretation. Paul distinguishes between two forms of high-level thinking: "Sophistic," or "egocentric," and "fair-minded" critical thinking (1992a). The latter form is the stronger because it demands both judiciousness and high ethical standards in a thinker, who is ready to go wherever reason and epistemology takes any inquiry, regardless of personal interests and ideological commitments. It is "devotion to truth over self-interest." The following five points distinguish critical thinking (ibid. 47):

1. The art of thinking about your thinking while you're thinking so as to make your thinking more clear, precise, accurate, relevant, consistent, and fair
2. The art of constructive skepticism
3. The art of identifying and removing bias, prejudice, and one-sidedness of thought
4. The art of self-directed, in-depth, rational learning
5. Thinking that rationally certifies what we know and makes clear wherein we are ignorant

Pauls' definition is compelling because it refutes self-centered and propagandistic use of knowledge and critical reasoning. When evaluating "critical thinking," we must always consider our own biases and the *purpose and implications* of the knowledge we create.

3.4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The use of archival data, narratives and other extant texts is typically regarded as "unobtrusive" (Charmaz, 2006:37; Chambliss & Schutt, 2006:64-5). They form a data collection method that does not immediately affect the people or phenomena that are being studied. This is not to say this type of research is void of ethical dilemmas. The use and misuse of the results of text-based research is always a factor that needs to be carefully considered (ibid. 41, 225). Furthermore, employing a theoretically reflexive method such as grounded theory directs attention to the researcher's biases. Consequentially, this increases the need for the researcher to be aware of personal attachments and to carefully account for each step in the research process. I have sought to counter the negative side effects of the method by detailed accounting of my own reasoning at each level throughout the analysis.

Analysis

The textbook under scrutiny is not easily found in bookstores outside Syria. For this reason, this chapter begins with a brief description of the outline and content of the book. We will then proceed to the structural analysis. Since elements of this structural inquiry require consideration of content, I have, for fear of cluttering later sections of the text, included this here. Last, we deal with the textual analysis of *History of the Arabs* per conceptual category. All references in this chapter missing year or ibid indications refer to al-Hammawi's textbook.

4.1. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS: OVERVIEW OF THE TEXTBOOK

History of the Arabs consists of 365 pages excluding chapter directory, divided into five chapters and sixty subchapters or "lessons" (*durūs*). The book begins with a short, two-page preamble. Chapter One summarizes over six-hundred years of "Ottoman Occupation of the Arab Homeland" (*al-iḥtilāl al-uṯmānī li al-waṭan al-ʿarabī*), while Chapter Two covers "the European Invasion" (*al-ġazw al-ūrubī*) of the same, starting from the early 1800s. This is followed by "The Arab Awakening" (*al-yaqẓa al-ʿarabīya*), referring to the decades of heightened Arab self-assertion around the turn of the twentieth century, in the Third Chapter. Chapter Four examines developments in the Arab countries during the First World War from whence the authors move straight to discuss "The World System and Globalization" (*an-niẓām al-ʿālamī wa al-ʿuwlama*) in the Fifth and last chapter, surprisingly omitting the second Great War entirely.

The chapters take up an uneven amount of pages. The fourth and largest chapter comprises 180 pages, dwarfing the smallest (Chapter Three) consisting of merely twenty-five. Chapters One, Two and Five are thirty-nine, seventy-seven and thirty-five pages respectively. For reasons explained in the previous chapter (section 3.3.) this study examines eighteen subchapters (lessons) of the textbook from Chapters One and Four, a sample of 111 pages or slightly more than 30 percent.

Lesson One (First Chapter) begins with an overview of the Arabic Ummah[5] at the dawn of the Ottoman rule in the Near East. It considers the rationale for Ottoman conquests during the early era, and proceeds to account for the gradual expansion of the their empire, which was concluded with the annexation of the Maghreb states. Lesson Two deals with the political and economic situation during the Ottoman rule, and Lesson Three with the social and cultural aspects of the same. In Lesson Four, some of the resistance movements throughout the empire are accounted for.

Lesson Twenty-Five, the first lesson of the Fourth Chapter, we again meet the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, this time in the shape of the newfound Turkist ambitions of the occupying force. We are then guided through the events of Great Arab Revolt that ensued in Lessons Twenty-Six and Seven. The next lesson deals exclusively with the two most momentous and exceedingly controversial agreements that would forever refashion the Middle East map: the Balfour Declaration and the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement. Through Lessons Twenty-Nine to Thirty-Three we study postwar settlement in Syria, via the French occupation up to independence. Thirty-Four deals with the ascent of Hafez al-Asad and the consolidation of Baathist rule until present time.

We then move to Lesson Twenty-Seven and the narration of developments in Palestine under British rule. The state Israel is instituted in Lesson Twenty-Nine immediately followed by the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. In the final lesson covered by the selection, Lesson Forty, we hastily cover the birth of the PLO[6], the intifadas[7], and all major wars and agreements met from Nakba Day to the Oslo Agreement in the case of Palestine.

A complete register of the chapters, lessons and subheadings covered by this study is featured in Annex I: *Chapter Overview of Sample*.

4.2. STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

Three aspects have been chosen for the structural analysis. The first section below deals with text outline and structure, namely the *use of bullet points*, the second is concerned with how the textbook teaches students critical analysis through *study questions and assignments*, and the last with source critique, a review of *works cited and further reading lists*.

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[5] The whole community of Muslims bound together by ties of religion, alternatively used to denote a spiritual, social, cultural and/or geographic belonging.
[6] Palestinian Liberation Organization.
[7] Palestinian popular uprisings against the Israeli occupation in the years 1987-1993 and then again in 2000-2005.

4.2.1. Use of bullet points

One of the striking features of *History of the Arabs* as a textbook is that its authors rely excessively on bullet point information. Throughout the pages it is evident that large bulks of information is conveyed this way. Numbered, lettered or plain bullets are used to transmit important historical developments and trends, to summarize events, treaties and wars. In fact, when first reading through the material, it became clear that the structural analysis would not be complete unless this had been accounted for it in detail.

In order to efficiently deal with bullet point use in *History of the Arabs*, a record was kept in a spreadsheet of instances of bullet point lines of text to total lines of text per chapter. In this way a ratio and corresponding percentage was created in the course of reading, the results of which are exhibited in Table 4.1. It should be mentioned that the analysis is based on a stringent threshold for inclusion to the benefit of the textbook. For instance, anything but the actual bullet points has been omitted in the calculation although the one or sometimes several lines of text introducing the bulleted list often is no more informative than the bullet points themselves:

Science declined generally and the scientific movement and Arabic language was weakened for the following reasons: (19)

The interests of the Zionist Movement converged during the First World War with the British colonial interests, which saw that allowing Zionists the erection of a national home for them in Palestine would realize the following interests: (168)

The Great Arab Revolt is considered among the most prominent manifestations of the rebirth and national awakening, and it was the culmination of the Arab's bloody struggle against the Ottoman occupation, and their desire to attain their freedom and independence:

First – the causes for the Revolt:

A – the indirect causes: (154)

As a rule, they do not offer the student an overview, nor make the necessary connections between events for the students to make inferences of their own. As such, they offer little in terms of added analytical value. In some cases, such as in the listing of all minor and major popular revolts in Syria during the interwar years (184-186), I have treated actual bullet points as narrative text although the paragraphs simply offer a chronological inventory of who revolted, when and where, and the immediate underlying causes and outcomes. A more permissive approach would decidedly have worsened the outlook on the text from a critical thinking perspective.

Lesson	Bullet lines	Total lines	Percentage
1	23	122	18.85%
2	62	109	56.88%
3	38	82	46.34%
4	38	98	38.78%
25	11	63	17.46%
26	51	115	44.35%
27	12	88	13.64%
28	31	97	31.96%
29	27	102	26.47%
30	48	99	48.48%
31	44	148	29.73%
32	16	101	15.84%
33	60	117	51.28%
34	30	127	23.62%
37	22	85	25.88%
38	46	109	42.20%
39	74	129	57.36%
40	4	95	4.21%
TOTAL	637	1886	33.78%

Table 4.1. Ratio and Percentage of Bullet Points Used

As can readily be established from the table, slightly more than one-third (33.8%) of the cross-section of *History of the Arabs* covered by this study consists of bullet point information. Remarkably, in seven lessons out of eighteen – note: almost 39 percent of the instances – bullet points are used in between 40 to 60 percent, or around *half the body text*. Again, the reader is asked to remember that this is a moderated count, and that the figures, if anything, need to be adjusted upwards. The notable exception is Lesson Forty with only 4.21% bullet points. Because of the many events covered in the lesson (see 4.1. above), however, storytelling is tremendously abridged and the text is limited to one or two paragraphs per episode. The narrative is therefore equally poor in detail, sequentiality (bridging events) and internal consistency (interlinking the information to coherent and comprehensible causes and effects).

A few notes should be said on language and communication, and specifically the role of bullet points in text. The core purpose of communication through language is to *cohere*, that is, to merge complex and perhaps loose fragments of information and turn them into intelligible understandings. As a contrast, the purpose of a bullet point is to effectively present a single, secluded piece of important information. Bullet points are excellent when, for instance, one wants to reduce a book of several hundred pages into its main ideas or present key information to an audience at a seminar. By default, however, bullet points treat segments of information about complex phenomena as isolated and self-contained facts:

> Bullet points can do many things, but they do not cohere information. In fact, they do the opposite – they fragment understanding into little pieces. Break any topic into a title, sub-headings and bullet points, and you're de-communicating, because you're not helping to bring a single idea together (Atkinson, 2003).

So what does it mean to have nearly half a chapter in bullet points from a critical thinking perspective? First of all, that the knowledge transmitted is very poor in terms of presenting matters in depth so necessary for *understanding* complex structures and processes, creating *meaning*, as opposed to merely knowing of phenomena and facts. Using bullet points as a way to transmit knowledge promotes sequential and detached learning, and cramming of data, over whole and integrated knowledge on a subject. In our case, students are thereby less equipped to make their own inferences and create independent and perhaps divergent understandings of the world. This is akin to what Richard Paul has termed "lower order learning" (1992b). In the past, Paul asserts, the rationale of educators and education systems has unreflectively assumed that the process of education is, in essence, the process of storing content in the head like data in a computer;

> Both within and between subject areas there is a dearth of connection and depth. Atomized lists dominate curricula, atomized teaching dominates instruction, and atomized recall dominates learning. What is learned are superficial fragments, typically soon forgotten. What is missing is coherence, connection, and depth of understanding (ibid. 293).

The predominance of bullet point instruction in *History of the Arabs* starkly contrasts with the authors' ambitions to "stimulate [students'] mental capabilities in explaining, memorizing, testing, inductive reasoning, and drawing conclusions" set out in the preamble (3). No work should be valued on one quality alone, and we continue by examining other structural features if the book.

4.2.2. Study questions and assignments

4.2.2.1 Description of structure, type and the logic of questions and answering

Textbooks commonly include in each chapter a few study questions to bring attention to core ideas of the section, to facilitate learning through repetition, and perhaps stimulate discussion on related topics and encourage the student to explore alternative sources and explanations. Each chapter of *History of the Arabs* ends with a number of questions, varying from six to thirteen (averaging at 9.6 in the sample). These invariably follow the pattern of:

- One or two question asking the student to "order the following events (*rattib al-aḥdāṯ al-ātiya*) according to their historical succession, starting with the oldest/most recent"

- Several (usually three or more) "explain the following" (*'allil mā ya'tī*) questions

- Several (usually three or more) "choose the right answer" (*ixtar al-ijāba aṣ-ṣaḥīḥa*) questions (or "underline the right expression in the following")

- Some direct questions: "answer the following questions" (*ajib 'an al-as'ila al-ātiya*)

In addition to these, the textbook includes several short interjections such as "discuss this!" (*nāqiš ḏālika*[8]) or "explain this!" (*'allil/fassir/'išraḥ ḏālika*) or "explain this in a conversation!" (*'allil/'išraḥ ḏālika fī ḥiwār*) or "why?" (*limāḏa*) in red typesetting in the body text.

Study questions in *History of the Arabs* are typically unanalytical in the sense that they require little creativity for the respondent in answering. Questions 4:1–4:3 in Lesson Two, "answer the following" (18), all refer to bullet points in the text, as this example shows:

4:1 – What were the authorities that the Ottoman sultan **enjoyed**? (18)	*The Political Situation: 1 – The Central Administration:* Headed by the sultan who had full mandatory power, and **enjoyed**: [followed by three bullets mentioning secular–absolute, religious, and military powers] (13).
4:2 – What are the reasons for the **slowness** of the industry in the Arab homeland under the Ottoman occupation? (18)	*The Economic Situation: 3 – The industrial sector:* The industry in the Arab homeland was **slowed down** during the Ottoman rule and lost its global superiority for the following reasons: [succeeded by four bullets, lettered A to D] (16).
4:3 – What are the **characteristics** of the Ottoman ruling system? (18)	*The Political Situation: 5 – The **Characteristics** of the Ottoman Ruling System:* Among the most prominent are: [again four bullets, A to D] (15)

Note how questions and answers are formulated close to verbatim (marked in bold letters). A student can easily, once accustomed to the logic, screen the text for these keywords. Question two, fourth sub-question[9] of Lesson Twenty-Seven, may serve as another example: "Explain the following: England's choice to join alliance with al-Hussein" (159). Two pages previously, this passage is found: "England found the Sharif of Mecca al-Hussein bin Ali to

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[8] The word *ḏālika*, literarily meaning "that," translates better into "this" in this context.
[9] The book alternates between numbering, lettering and unspecified bullets for sub-questions; there is no coherent design even within one and the same chapter.

be the best person [10] to join alliance with because of the following reasons" (157), accompanied by four one-line bullet points. Questions referring to bullet points are found throughout the book, in every lesson but two of the sample (page 12, question 2; 23–q.2; 29–q.4; 153–q.2; 159–q.2; 164–q.2; 170–q.3; 176–q.4; 182–q.3; 190–q.5; 203–q.3; 211–q.3; 235–q.3; 242–q.2).

Correct answers are found, in this manner, in one location, in a specific sentence or passage of the textbook. The student never faces the trouble of having to go through the text a second time to compare, interject or draw his or her own conclusions to reply; simply identifying and regurgitating the correct answer precludes any further mental activity. To further underscore this, on one occasion the textbook literally invites the student to "choose the right answer and *copy* it to your notebook" (159; emphasis added) (the Arabic word used here in the imperative, *unqul*, means to "move," "transfer" or "copy").

4.2.2.2 *Leading questions*

Analytical assignments are rare, and opinions are hardly ever asked for. On the few occasions that they are, the language or the subject matter itself tampers them. Questions may be inherently biased, such as: "What do you conclude from the destruction of the city Quneitra by the Zionist enemy during its withdrawal from it?" (211). War narratives as these, where historical losses and atrocities are revisited, usually serve to aggrandize your enemy's "evilness" by way of highlighting his transgressions. They invoke feelings of injustice for crimes perpetrated by a "ruthless" opponent against a presumably innocent home team (whose wrongdoings are typically downplayed). In short, they teach us who the "good" and "bad" guys are[11]. If the student has any doubts in this particular case, the "correct" answer is conveniently provided on page 208: the Israelis demolish Quneitra because of their "savageness, brutality and racism." However, the tone and the type of question itself already curtail the list of possible answers. The value-laden language (*Zionist enemy*) and culturally subjective (and sensitive!) topic effectively prevents unbiased thinking on the matter. A similar question is found on page 177: "What do you think about this imperialistic bargaining and the artificial borders between the Arabic lands?" Another example is the assignment in Chapter Thirty to copy (again) the lamenting *qaṣīda*[12] about the death of Yūsuf al-ʿUḍma to

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[10] The actual word used here, *šaxṣīya*, meaning "personality" or "character" translates poorly to English in this case.

[11] See *Psychologists for Social Responsibility* (PsySR) (n.d.:20-21) on the psychological impact of enemy images, cognitive biases such as negative stereotyping and in-group aggrandizement.

[12] Poetic form developed in pre-Islamic Arabia and perpetuated throughout Islamic literature into the present.

one's notebook and extract the three main ideas. The task is superficially analytical since it relates entirely to literature studies; it does not deepen students' understanding of history.

A single, positive exception to this rule exists. Page 206 begins with summary of one of the premises for "the Party's" (read: Baathist) theory as a bloc quote:

> "Verily, the complete exercise of people's democracy will continue to be curtailed as long as women[13] are remote from the public life in society. Therefore, liberating the Arabic woman is a democratic necessity, in addition to being a humanitarian necessity." What do you think? (206)

The question is adequately open-ended to inspire more personalized and independent responses on the face of it. After all, what is asked for are students' opinions. These views, in turn, need to be substantiated by creating coherent and logical arguments out of available facts and experiences. This of course presumes that teaching and teachers in general are nonjudgmental and accommodating of students' different analyses.

4.2.2.3. *Non-sequentiality and inconsistencies*

Sometimes questions are simply illogical. View for instance: "Compare between the Frenchification politics that France employed in both Syria and Algeria" (190). Note that "the Frenchification politics" (*as-siyāsa al-farnasa*) is here in the singular. The question therefore reminds me rather much of a joke from my childhood: "What is the difference between a crocodile?"[14]. Of course what is intended is a comparison between the effects of this political program in the two countries. The problem here is that the French incursion in Algeria is not presented for another hundred and twenty pages, in Chapter Fifty-Two. Given that teachers regularly guide students through textbooks in a chronological order, the question sits rather awkwardly here. Unless simultaneous study of several chapters is employed, students would have no way of making an informed assessment like this.

Another example is found in the opening chapter. The very first lines of the book read: "The Arabic-Islamic State wished to safeguard Arabic control over world trade, whether in the form of materials, trade routes, harbors, merchants or officials, in all its different eras … (try to explain this wish)" (6). How do we – let alone a high school student – provide a meaningful explanation on such sparse background information? The question, furthermore, contains several inconsistencies. What can reasonably be said about this assumed unanimous wish of empires as far-reaching in time and space as those of the Ottomans, Abbasids and Fatimids? How does this desire differ from that of any other nation's self-interest? Can one

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[13] Note: "the woman" is translated as "women" for sake of adaptation to English.
[14] The answer to this leap of logic is naturally "None of them knows how to ride a bicycle."

even talk logically of such an entity as a coherent "Arabic State"? (The textbook asserts that the wish existed "through the eras" of the Turkish Mamluks and Kurdish Ayoubis – where did the *Arabic* State reside during their reign? More on this in section 4.3.1.) More questions are generated by this task than resolved. It is clear we will not know the answer to any of them unless we ask the authors about their intentions. Similar examples from these in-text questions and assignments are nevertheless abundant so we move on.

4.2.3. Works cited and further reading lists

History of the Arabs contains no catalogue of literature cited, nor does it recommend any further readings to students. It does, however, on one occasion in the 111-page sample ask its readers to write a small passage "using one of the references" (*mustaʿīnan bi aḥad al-murāji*ʿ), which here translates better to "using a reference" (159). Whether the authors have their own work (the textbook) in mind or mean that students should consult a*nother* source is not clear from the context. Both interpretations are valid. As for referencing, it occurs occasionally throughout the text. For example, out of the eighteen lessons covered by the study, nine contain a few lines of "historic reading" (*qirāʾa tārīxīya*) in the end. Of these, one is a quotation from the Syrian Constitution, one is an excerpt from an epic poem (for "the Hero Martyr Yūsuf al-ʿUḍma"), two are taken from the book "*Thus Spoke the Lion*" (*hākaḏā qāla al-asad*) – the "lion" being Hafez al-Asad, the former president. In terms of balanced and neutral sources, this book does not offer any precedents. Neither does it sufficiently inspire its young readers to consider using any secondary sources, whether electronic or hardcopies.

Although it is far exceeding the scope of this essay to present a full account, a contrasting example from an equivalent Swedish schoolbook may be illustrative in this regard. The very first chapter entitled "How It Really Was" in *Alla tiders historia B*, a history textbook for upper secondary school, is dedicated to source critique. It encourages students not to accept anything at face value – differences in historical narratives and in modern interpretations of history, the authors claim, demand a more reflexive stance. The book begins with the following passage:

> The word history really has two meanings:
> - That which happened in the past.
> - The description of that which has happened and how that description came to be.
>
> What is important? What is it that makes history move forward? When one studies history it is useful to be aware that there are different ways to view what has happened in the past. (Almgren et al. 1997:8; own translation)

Source critique is, furthermore, said to be the "watchword of the B-course[15] in history" (*Preamble*, ibid. 3). This is not to say that Swedish history education is less biased than its Syrian counterpart. In fact, Swedish schools may be as influenced by dominant political ideologies as Syrian are (see Larsson 2006, Skolverket 2006). Without a proper comparative study we can only speculate. The point here is simply that in terms of opening up the discussion and preparing students for critical examination of source material the Syrian textbook does a much less satisfactory job.

4.3. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

We have already hinted at some of the inconsistencies and the, at times, strongly value-laden language in *History of the Arabs*. In the following textual analysis this will be dealt with in detail. For the sake of maintaining a certain contextual structure, I have divided the section into a number of conceptual subheadings based on the categories arrived at through the use of grounded theory (as explained in 3.1.) starting with 1) overarching *normative opinions and ethnocentrism*, and its corollary in the form of *victimization* and *tautological reasoning*. The later part deals specifically with elements that 2) create *identity and enemies*, where *Arab nationalism* and *enemy images* are constituent factors.

4.3.1 *Normative opinions and ethnocentrism*

This section deals with two sociological concepts that may need some clarification before we continue. I have chosen to define the notion "normative opinion" as an unsubstantiated, value-based opinion, which favors a certain perception and works to promote that particular view as norm[16]. Normative assumptions, when sufficiently embedded and disseminated, create "truths" about the world that can be hard to challenge. (Of course it is much better to buy *organic* bananas although they are flown several thousand miles across the globe to be sold in your closest convenient store than *regular* ones…?) Normative opinions can be hard to spot from within a social grouping since they often appear "mundane" and "commonsensical" to its members. Related to this is ethnocentrism. Taken for granted ideas of one's own and other's culture easily manifest themselves as normative assumptions and wording. "Ethnocentrism" in social studies (especially anthropology) can mean one of two things: either the belief in one's own culture's superiority over other cultures, or the tendency to view

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[15] This is the second of three levels of history for Swedish upper secondary school.
[16] Compare with the two dictionary entries of "normative" as "expressing value judgments or prescriptions rather than stating facts" and "implying, creating, or prescribing a norm or standard."

and interpret other groups, cultures and phenomena from the vantage point of one' own. *History of the Arabs*, as we shall see, contains both forms.

4.3.1.1 *"Foreign" versus "Arabic" in the case of the Ottomans*

The treatment of "foreign" as opposed to "Arabic" in the opening chapter of the textbook (Lessons 1-4) is telling, because it sets also the standard for how these things are discussed in later chapters. View, for instance, the chapter and lesson headings (Annex II): the phrase "Ottoman Occupation" appears in all of them. The Ottoman entity is occasionally mentioned as "the Ottoman rule" (*al-ḥukm al-ʿuṯmānī*) and "the Ottoman State" (*ad-dawla al-ʿuṯmānīya*) in the text. The "Ottoman State" appears on the map portraying "the Arab Homeland prior to the Ottoman Occupation" (10), where it occupies a modest portion of Anatolia, the Balkans and Greece (roughly the borders of the old Byzantine Empire). Neighboring states are "Greater Syria and the Mamluk State" (*bilād aš-šām wa dawla al-mamālīk*), the "Safavid State" (*ad-dawla aṣ-ṣafawīya*), and the "Arabic Peninsula" (*šibh al-jazīra al-ʿarabīya*). It is not clear, apart from the Arabic Gulf perhaps, how this vast geographical space at this point in time is distinctly "Arabic."

My argument is that nowhere in the text – in this or subsequent chapters – is the more than six-hundred-year-long reign[17] of Ottomans in western Asia, the Maghreb and Eastern Europe treated as anything but an *alien occupation*. Although this perception can be defended wearing a certain pair of spectacles, it is arguably a viewpoint that is, if not ahistorical, then at least very culturally subjective and myopic. For the thirty or so generations of Arabs living and toiling under Turkish rule within the borders of the *Sublime Ottoman State* (*ad-dawla al-ʿilya al-ʿuṯmānīya*) this way of reasoning would seem rather fruitless. Because as far as states go, the Ottoman Empire – extending, as it were, across more than a half millennia – must be considered a tremendously stable and long-lasting one[18]. In fact, Arabic primacy in the Muslim Ummah had already started to deteriorate during the Abbasids, and determinately so with the 945 Buyid takeover of Baghdad, after which time decision-making authority in the empire fell in the hands of an Iranian, and later Turkish Saljuq, elite (Cleveland & Bunton 2009:19; Hodgson 1977:495; Hourani 2002:38-39, 84). Using the same logic and this date as

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[17] The precise starting point of Ottoman rule is disputed, some tend to view the 1453 takeover of Constantinople as a decisive moment; I rely on Albert Hourani's generally accepted dates (Hourani 2002:216).

[18] Compared with modern "empires" such as the United States with its 235 years to date and Russia's 290, if one allows the country to be part of a continuum stretching from the formation of the Russian Empire, through the Soviet Union to its modern nationstate form. To talk of a distinctly British, French, or even Indo-American State existing underneath the U.S. façade would seem rather absurd to a contemporary observer. This is precisely what *History of the Arabs* does, however.

our point of departure, Arabs in Syria had lived under foreign occupation for one thousand and one years (!) when they gained independence in 1946[19].

What is noted here is a, subtle or not, antagonism against the former non-Arabic influence in the Middle East. It is engrained in the very words used to talk of this epoch. This is also reflective of how European states are portrayed throughout the textbook. Ethnocentric and normative statements are commonplace. For instance:

> Contrary to [developments in] the Arab homeland, the advancing factors in Europe, of course depending on the contributions of the Arabic civilization *at all levels* (explain this in a conversation), were continuously rising until they encompassed all of social, material and spiritual reality. (7; emphasis added)

There is some chauvinism about the own culture in this statement. Not only do we learn that Europe has the Arabic civilization to thank for its many advancements (which is certainly true in many respects), but there is matter-of-factness about this ("of course"). Students are further asked to talk about the Arabic contributions and explain how they contributed to European growth without prior reference and having read only one page of the textbook. This is an exception to the otherwise straightforward and self-evident way questions are asked and answered in the material, as we have seen (section 4.2.2.1.). Perhaps the authors know that this has already been studied elsewhere, why the students would know the answer.

4.3.1.2. *Victimization (Clash of civilizations?)*

Embedded in the above statement we find another, subtler theme, that of polarization and Huntingtonian *Realpolitik*. We learn that European development is *contrary* to Arabic. Not only did Europeans exploit Arabic technical, scientific and cultural innovations to gain supremacy, but perhaps their achievement was even the reason for the Arab world falling behind students may be lead to believe. If this is only hinted at in this stage, later chapters will rid students of any doubt, as the next example from the opening of Lesson Two illustrates:

> The Ottoman occupation was an important factor causing the backwardness of the Arab homeland primarily because the Ottoman State lacked the civilizational qualifications that the Arabs had at all levels (explain this in a conversation). It was also an agent of fragmentation; despite most countries dependency on its singular rule, its political unity yielded to one leader and it was the sultan. Hence the Ottomans did not try to practice any form of cooperation between themselves, and so they distanced themselves from each other instead of uniting. Their

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[19] Given that Syria was governed as a province in the Roman Empire until 637, the heydays of Arab rule lasted only 308 years by this reckoning.

backward politics in all areas, as we shall see, was a fundamental reason for the Arabic underdevelopment. (13)

In this passage, we are informed that if the Ottoman State was unresponsive and incompetent in ruling it was due to their lack of "civilizational qualifications." Arabs, however, already possessed these qualities "at all levels." Which way the dependency tilts is easy to distinguish. What is more, centuries of Ottoman rule is quite bluntly blamed for causing underdevelopment among Arabs. How? –Through autocratic leadership. This simply defies logic. How one can claim that a dynasty that took Arabic (and hundreds of non-Arabic!) peoples through six hundred years of scientific, technical, philosophical and intellectual development, through the Empire's expansion over the Mediterranean and into Europe, through the Enlightenment and the Military-Industrial Revolution, caused retardation for its Arabic subjects is mindboggling. If anything, it brought them to the 20th century. Secondly, in which way overbearing rule of the sultans and the ensuing fragmentation of the empire caused this demands an explanation on its own. The internal logic behind this claim is not self-evident or decidedly factual[20].

4.3.1.3. *Tautological reasoning and reiterating opinions*

If we look at Ottoman politics described later in the Lesson Two, these include theocratic rule, absolutism, and division of the populace into rulers and subjects. Clearly these principles do not differ substantially from conditions under Umayyad and Abbasid governments, and, as a result, merit the pejorative "backward" in their own right. Bullet point d) is interesting, however. It states that the Ottoman politics were "based on isolation, backwardness and fear of intellectual currents that spread awareness" (ibid. 15). To stress this view further, students are immediately asked to "try to show the results of this in a conversation" (15). Hence, no substantiation or examples are offered to support the normative view that Ottoman politics were "backward in all areas" expressed in the opening paragraph of the lesson. One opinion is simply defended by another similar opinion. The page is concluded with this short summary:

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[20] A grand mufti was appointed in ruling over sharia, and an imperial council of advisors and ministers, a *divan*, led by a grand vizier, wielding absolute power under the sultan-caliph, was instituted to assist in the increasingly difficult task of administering the Empire as it expanded was refined (Cleveland & Bunton 2009:45). In addition, an elaborate bureaucracy of officials, the *kalimeye*, developed in the sixteenth century (Hourani 2002:216). Ottoman leaders exhibited more of a multiparty rule, at times, than did their predecessors. At any rate, during the more than half millennia of Ottoman reign the empire underwent different periods of intensified or diminishing autocratic rule.

> The Ottoman State was not a nation of science and knowledge, but a nation of wars. It was not a nation of renewal and planning, but a nation of inertia and chaos. For these many reasons, the Arabic economy fell into stagnation and decay (15).

Ottoman backwardness is then triply emphasized in study question 2.4 "Correct the mistakes in the following thoughts: The Ottoman State was a nation of science, knowledge, renewal and planning" (18). Later we learn how such a primitive (and hostile to progress and enlightenment) people as the Ottomans managed to overpower the superior Arabs was as a combination of Arabic war fatigue due to constant protection of the their empire's borders and the "infiltration of foreign peoples in their ranks" (22).

4.3.2. Identity and enemies

4.3.2.1. Arab nationalism

Until now in this textual analysis, we have dealt primarily with examples from the first chapter of *History of the Arabs*. This is not to say that the fourth chapter is void of ethnocentric or normative ideas. To the contrary, these persist throughout the textbook. In the lessons of Chapter Four, however, the tone is decidedly more nationalistic and pan-Arabist (for a review how these logically fit together see e.g. Choueiri 2000: Chapters 4-6). It contains several typically Baathist slogans, such as "The Arabic Baath Party, Leader of the State and Society" (*qā'id li ad-dawla wa al-mujtama'*) (205), empowering or freeing "the Arabic Energies"[21] (*aṭ-ṭāqāt al-'arabīya*) (206, 207), and some very colorful language like Prince Faisal's[22] war cry after Jamal Pasha's mass execution of Arab Liberals in 1915: "Now it's worth dying, Arabs!" (*ṭāba al-mawt ya 'arab!*), literally meaning: "Death has become delicious[23], Arabs!" (152). Later in the same lesson, we learn that the Arab's "true goal"[24] is the creation of a unified and independent state (158). With the above discussion concerning the subjectivity of the book in mind, the increasing nationalism is perhaps understandable: we are approaching the time in history for Syrian independence and the rise of Baathism under Hafez al-Asad. Syria, the book self-assertively claims, has a special role in the Arab pursuit for independence:

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[21] Reference to mobilizing the Arabic youth.
[22] Sharif Hussein of Mecca's son, who led the Arabic Revolt against the Ottomans on the side of Britain and the Allied Forces during WWI and later crowned King Faisal I of Iraq.
[23] Alternative translations are "delightful" or "pleasant."
[24] *Hadaf al-'arab al-manšūd*, literally "the Arab's desired goal," here better translates to "real, or true goal."

> It is unsurprising that Greater Syria has a distinguished position in the rebirth of Arab nationalism. For it witnessed the start of the Arabic Awakening, which its pioneers and thinkers participated in by putting an end to the Ottoman occupation with the Great Arab Revolt (173).

We can note some distinctly nationstate-nationalistic notions side by side, and as opposed to, the more inclusive pan-Arabism normally implied by "Arab nationalism."

4.3.2.2.   Making enemies (enemy imagery)

In terms of establishing a strong sense for the self so vital for creating a national identity, few methods are as effective as defining who we are not (cf. PsySR "Enemy Images and Identity Formation" n.d.:12-16). The continuous victimization of Arabs noted in *History of the Arabs* has a twin phenomenon: enemy imagery. In Chapter One, the enemy is primarily the Ottoman State although several references to Europe exist[25] (e.g. the "French-Portuguese threat," page 22). A fascinating passage is found already in Lesson One, dealing with the medieval power struggle in the Mediterranean:

> A maritime *resistance movement* appeared on the shores of the Maghreb against attacks on Arabic seamen by Spaniards and Europeans that *these enemies* named "piracy," unaware that this was a kind of *national Jihad* at sea (11; emphasis added).

It is interesting because it problematizes different conceptions of "resistance" versus "piracy" (comparable to contemporary discussions concerning resistance vs. terrorism for instance). This is certainly a relevant discussion to be held in all classrooms. However, the importance of this lesson is immediately obscured by the blunt name-calling ("these enemies") and the implication that they drew the first blood. The "national Jihad" that the European aggressors failed to see is, one is tempted to believe, a post-construction in order to heighten the students' sense of righteousness about the Arabic counterattacks. In either case, using heavily value-laden and religious terminology so unreflectively should always be treated with skepticism. The Arabic seamen's leader, Captain ʿArūj, later "martyrs himself"[26] (11).

4.3.2.3.   Shifting enemies: colonial conspiracies on the rise

In Lesson Twenty-Seven, the former Ottoman enemy is explicitly replaced with a European one:

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[25] Chapter Two, as noted previously, is named "The European Invasion of the Arab Homeland" (*al-ġazw al-ūrubī li al-watan al-ʿarabī*).

[26] No equivalent to the Arabic verb *istašhada* exists in the English language that suggests the same active involvement in "becoming a martyr."

> Turkey accepted its defeat and surrendered … and thus the Ottoman presence in Greater Syria ended after almost four centuries, 1516-1918[27], and started a phase of struggle between Arabs and the ambitions of the European Colonial States (164).

Hence, in the overall narrative of Arab, and particularly Syrian, victimization, one tyrant is simply substituted by another. The two colonial states that dominate the subsequent sections of the book are England and France.

Most strikingly with regards to European presence in the Middle East from the nineteenth century onwards, is how it is repeatedly being associated with secret plotting and deceitfulness (all emphases added):

> Greater Syria saw the peak of struggle between the Arabs and the Unionist Turks during the years of the First World War, as well as it witnessed *the peak of the colonial conspiracy* represented by the two countries England and France (150).

> France and England incited the Arabs to revolt against the Ottomans, and *seduced them with promises* to grant them freedom and independence (154).

> These promises and agreements went against what the Brits had promised Sharif Hussein in their correspondence, and so *their treachery … was plain and obvious* (165).

> As for the Allies, they denounced the Arabic government in Damascus and rejected its administrational measures, because it was an obstacle for *their schemes and their colonial conspiracies* (171).

In the fourteen lessons covered of Chapter Four, the word "conspiracy" (either as *ta'āmur* or *mu'āmara*) is used no less than nineteen times (!) (150, 154, 157, 158, 163, 165, 167, 171, 177, twice on 191, twice on 192, 193, 225, 229, 231, 242 & 247). The conspiracies in these sections concern both Turkish-Ottoman and European plotting against "the Arabs" (referred to as a collective). There are several ways one can view such frequent use of the term. In Arabic, as in English, the word has a strong negative connotation. Nevertheless, we must agree that at times the term is correctly and justly applied:

> The Sykes-Picot agreement is considered one of the most serious colonial agreements against the Arabs, and the gravest conspiracy in modern Arab history. It embodied the colonialist ambitions that both France and England had pursued since time immemorial, and it created the bitter fragmentation that the Arabic Ummah continues to suffer from to this day (167).

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[27] The starting point of Ottoman rule in Syria here coincides with the overthrow of the Mamluk Sultanate by Ottomans under Sultan Selim I (Cleveland & Bunton 2009:40-41). With regards to the above discussion on foreign rule in the Levant, sixteenth-century Syrian Arabs had been ruled by Egyptian Fatimids, Kurdish Ayoubis and Turkish Mamluks since the fall of the Abbasids.

Few other secret agreements have had such profound impact on the way that an entire region is being chartered as the Sykes-Picot (to be compared with the more overt but equally significant colonial partition of the African continent). Except for some smaller embellishments and the somewhat perplexing term "*Arabic* Ummah" in the second clause, its factuality need not be questioned. Likewise, on page 157-8 we are dealing with a very real form of conspiracy against Sharif Hussein of Mecca, namely that which aimed to take his life.

In the textbook, the term "colonial conspiracy" (alternatively translated as "imperialistic conspiracy") is so broadly used, however, that it almost takes on a life of its own. As with other normative ideas promulgated in the book, it is used most casually, without ever pinpointing – except for the two examples just mentioned – what exactly is meant by this term. At times, it is hard to tell who the conspirator is, leaders in England, France, Germany, Russia or a combination thereof? What is the result the conspiracy aims to achieve? How well articulated is this goal? To qualify as a conspiracy, an event needs to involve at least three elements: two or more actors, a secret plan with an articulated outcome or aim, and, finally, the intent to do whatever is necessary to achieve that outcome or aim to the detriment of a third party. Without specifying the actors and plan, the ostensible conspiracy is reduced to an undefined, malevolent intent. Consequently, the "colonial conspiracy" in *History of the Arabs* is elusive and takes the shape of a metaphysical and ominous presence in the pages. Again, we must ask ourselves: to what purpose? It is clear that the authors wish to accentuate European malice in order to win student sympathy for the "Arab cause." This is why we may term its usage as *enemy imagery* (constructing enemies). A study question in Lesson Thirty-Seven may underscore my point. Having just outlined the Balfour Declaration (and next to a colored box saying: "It is said of the Balfour Declaration: 'Verily, those who do not own have given to those who do not deserve'"), the book rhetorically asks: "Is it possible to trust colonial states' promises? And why?" (228). Note that is written not in past, but present tense.

4.3.2.4. *Zionism and the wonders of martyrdom*

In the final part of the sample (lessons 37-40), the nemesis is unsurprisingly "Jewish" or "Zionist." Although some effort is initially made to differentiate "integrated" and "local" from "Zionist" Jews (226-7), this distinction is soon lost to the reader. Increasingly, Jews and Zionist become synonymous, and are equated to the Anglo-American conspiracy against the Arabs (242). Wording in these sections is intensely politicized and strong. When treating second intifada suicide attacks, the authors do not save their breath: "This [intifada] was distinguished by martyr operations, which is considered *a wonderful innovation* in the

resistance against the usurping occupant" (247; emphasis added). The lesson ends with the student assignment to distinguish between terrorism and "legitimate national resistance" (248). As so often noted in this analysis, students are continuously asked to confirm the ideas held by the authors of the textbook – even if this means siding with, or at least being apologetic towards, suicide bombers. Rather than training analytical and humanistic qualities demanding forbearing, impartiality and discernment, children are taught mistrust, hostility and hatred. As Groiss concludes in the CMIP study:

> [T]he reference to the Arab-Israeli conflict in Syrian textbooks is not occasional or marginal, but rather extensive and central, and at times even obsessive. Instilling this issue into the minds of young Syrians appears to be a major objective of the textbooks (2001:14).

To ask of teenage students to rise above the thick, ideological depictions in their textbooks when no alternatives or precedents are offered, is a poor prospect to say the least.

4.4. SUMMARY: THE WORLDVIEW, ITS UNDERPINNINGS AND IMPLICATIONS ON CRITICAL THINKING

We do not need to refute the different claims of *History of the Arabs* through logical deconstruction or by offering counter-facts, because clearly (as long as they remain unsupported by facts or reasoning) what we are dealing with are *opinions*. These are the result of a particular historic reading, which is promoted, and then tediously repeated, through the pages of the textbook. It is the voice of history's subjugated glossing over long-ago losses and shortcomings with glorifying descriptions of their own "true" past and place in destiny, adorning themselves as brave and honorable, but wronged victims. It is a subjective interpretation that for obvious reasons sits well with national curriculum goals to create a student body "filled with the spirit of struggle to achieve its nation's objectives of unity" (see 2.3. above). We have reason to question whether the ideologically spun presentation of modern history in the textbook can establish the skilled and "fair-minded critical thinking" promulgated by Richard Paul, which:

> "...demonstrates the commitment to entertain all viewpoints sympathetically and to assess them with the same intellectual standards, without reference to one's own feelings or vested interests, or the feelings or vested interests of one's friends, community or nation" (1992a:47).

Tautological justifications (the Ottomans adopted backward politics because their politics were backward) surely do not contribute to students thinking critically and objectively about

these matters. It does not open up for constructive skepticism or thinking that is "clear, precise, accurate, relevant, consistent, and fair," simply because the textbook reasoning itself is not.

Results

5.1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The following are the key findings of the analysis:

- Slightly more than one-third (33.8%) of the cross-section of *History of the Arabs* covered by this study consists of bullet point line information on a moderate count

- In 7 out of 18 lessons covered, bullet point lines constitute roughly half the body text (between 40-60%) on a moderate count

- The predominance of bullet point information may negatively affect critical thinking because it creates a fragmented, atomistic mode of learning, mainly concerned with recalling bits of information, over integrated knowledge that requires coherence, connection and depth of understanding

- Study questions are typically unanalytical because the answers are readily available verbatim in the text, often in the form of existing arrangements of the required information in bullet point form; this, in turn, creates a logic of learning that is most conducive to unreflective copying and repeating of information

- Study questions and assignments asking students to critically assess events or make value judgments further suffer from an inherent bias with regards to subject (culturally subjective) and language (value-laden); open-ended questions are rare (only one was found); student responses may also be confused by poor wording, or illogical or inconsistent reasoning in questions

- The textbook contains no catalogue of literature cited, nor does it recommend any further readings to students; on the few occasions that an external reference is mentioned in the sample it is invariably a non-neutral source (excerpt from the Syrian Constitution, a heroic poem, two quotes by the former president); nowhere does the book encourage or mention practices of source critique, <u>negatively affecting</u> "the art of constructive skepticism"

- The textbook contains strong value statements and ideologically spun material, which are continuously emphasized through repetitions and asking students to analyze along the same lines (repeating ideas of the authors), or through the omission to mention any contrasting ideas, <u>negatively affecting</u> "the art of identifying and removing bias, prejudice, and one-sidedness of thought"

- The twin-phenomena victimization (internal identification) and enemy imagery (external projection), and the protruding Arabist and Arab nationalist element in the narration work to solidify a strong sense of the "self" among students, <u>negatively affecting</u> "the art of self-directed, in-depth, rational learning"; furthermore, it may heighten student xenophobia and hostility toward "the other"

- Poor and tautological reasoning by the textbook authors may be counter-inductive to independent, objective and critical thinking that is "clear, precise, accurate, relevant, consistent, and fair"

5.2 RESULTS

With reference to the research questions (section 1.4.), below are the results of this inquiry:

1. Both textbook structure and content is counterproductive to critical thinking, *because* the mode of learning created by excessive bullet point use, typically unanalytical and leading questions and discussion topics, lack of references and source critique, is fragmented, one-sided and atomistic, and contrary to integrated knowledge; *and because*;

2. The book contains several instances of value-laden language (strong wording, ideological and religious terms), themes (Arabism, Arab nationalism, victimization), and imagery ("we-and-them" dichotomy, enemy images) that negatively affect student opportunities to rid themselves of biases, prejudices and create independent, self-directed and critical thinking; *and because*;

3. The worldview presented in *History of the Arabs* is a subjective and self-sufficient interpretation. Language, themes and imagery are mutually reinforcing and leave little room for alternative views.

Conclusion

6.1   CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The story that unfolds in *History of the Arabs* is not a moderate account. The particular worldview promoted through the narration; in accentuation, repetition of key points, in value-laden and culturally embedded wording and imagery; through selective factuality and occasional rhetorical lapses; is a compelling story of the Arabic peoples' age-old sufferance under foreign occupation. We learn how Arabs have been deceived and outmaneuvered at different times through modern history, but never beaten. As such, it is a heroic and invigorating account aiming to instill a particular sociocultural and political belonging and pride of one's ancestry. Or in the words of the authors:

> And with these new directions it is our hope that we may shift the focus of history education
> from a subject that depends on memorizing and stuffing the mind with information to a pleasant
> and lively subject that develops [students'] intellectual skills and faculties, and patriotic,
> nationalistic and humanistic values (*Preamble*, 4).

I have sought to demonstrate how the way that the authors pursue this ambition involves both victimization of the own ethos and projecting enemy imagery onto present and former rivals, notably Israel, France and England, but likewise against the more distant Turkish Ottomans. The book, moreover, implies that the threat of the European, or Western, powers in no way has diminished, but rather is real and imminent. I have indicated how the prevalence of ethnocentric, ideological and value-laden language, themes and imagery – predominantly in the form of normative ideas and assumptions – congests and obscures opportunities to critical evaluation that is free from biases, cultural relativity and one-sidedness of thought.

Throughout the analysis we have seen how structural features of the book, against the stated wish of the authors, render it quite successful in "stuffing of the mind with information." The detached and sequential learning imposed by excessive bullet point use, the typically unanalytical and leading questions and discussion topics, and the general lack of references and introduction to critical source examination, create an atomistic mode of learning which is counterproductive to integrated, reflexive, and analytical knowledge. This condition is worsened since no precedent in argumentative and factual reasoning is offered by

the text itself that would present the students with an opportunity to at least intuitively learn the basics of rational (or scientific) analysis, or the means to question the underpinnings and logic of any statement. For the book, as we have seen, contains a plethora of normative ideas and assumptions that, by the internal logic of such statements, cancel needs for substantiation (and therefore may remain unchallenged). What is more, the authors repeatedly ask the students to confirm precisely these ideas through interjections in the text or study questions at the end of each lesson.

History of the Arabs does not provide students with the necessary tools for developing thinking that is clear, inquisitive, balanced and self-aware. To the contrary, the knowledge transmitted is rather dull in analytical precision and full of inconsistencies and biases that are hard for students to refute. As such, the textbook is more successful in instilling patriotic values and pride of one's national belonging than training students in critical thinking.

6.2 Epilogue

In this essay we have seen how Syrian history education, through one of its textbooks, embraces a worldview that is highly ethnocentric and victimizing with regards to Arab suffering in modern time. The impact of this viewpoint on Syrian students remains to be examined; this study has only touched upon the subject. Some individuals may be naturally predisposed to question some or all elements of the book, whereas others more inclined to accept and conform. Knowing many young Syrians personally, some of which I consider my best friends, I've seen that Syria is certainly not without critical voices! Future studies could involve tracing the impact of Syrian education on students' attitudes towards Israel, the U.S., and Europe, or the extent to which they have accepted the nationalistic and Arab-centric historical reading described in this study. The findings of such research could bring insights on the link between public education and regime stability in some MENA countries such as Syria, Iraq, Egypt or Libya (beside censorship, militarism and state repression common for authoritarian states), that are all nominal democratic republics but have been ruled by the same political elite for three decades or more. Such research would indeed be relevant today as these countries may be forced to restructure their education systems thoroughly in the face of late political upheaval.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW WITH HEADINGS AND SUBHEADINGS OF THE SAMPLE ENCOMPASSED BY THE STUDY

Translations are the work of the author.

Chapter One: The Ottoman Occupation of the Arab Homeland

Lesson 1: The Arab Homeland and the Beginning of its Modern History of Foreign Occupation

1. The situation in the Arab homeland before the Ottoman occupation
2. The transformations/changes and the beginning of the modern Arab history – the foreign occupation
3. Reasons for the Ottoman occupation of the Arab homeland
4. Occupation of Iraq
5. Occupation of Greater Syria and Egypt
6. The Ottomans and the Arabic Peninsula (the Gulf)
7. The Ottomans and the Maghreb states

Lesson 2: The Political and Economic Situation in the Arab Homeland Under the Supremacy/Reign of the Ottoman Occupation

8. The political situation
9. The economic situation

Lesson 3: The Cultural and Social Situation in the Arab Homeland Under the Supremacy of the Ottoman Occupation

10. The cultural situation
11. The social situation
12. The Arabs and the Ottoman bond/connection (or union, confederation)

Lesson 4: The Resistance and the Independence Movements against the Ottoman Occupation in Greater Syria and Egypt and Iraq

13. Reasons for the Arabic resistance against the Ottoman rule
14. Most important resistance movements and attempts to independence in Greater Syria
15. The resistance and movements for independence in Egypt
16. The resistance in Iraq

Chapter Four: The Arab Homeland during World War I until Present Time

Lesson 25: The Situation in Greater Syria (Bilād aš-Šam) during the First World War

17. The Turkist politics in Greater Syria
18. The Suez Canal military campaign
19. Execution of the Martyrs

20. Sharif Hussein's position on the execution of martyrs
21. The economic and social situation in Sham during the First World War

Lesson 26: The Great Arab Revolt 1916 AD (1)

22. First: Reasons for the revolt
23. Second: The Arabs, the Ottomans and WWI
24. Third: The Arabs and the Allied
25. Fourth: The Turks and Hussein
26. Fifth: England and al-Hussein
27. Sixth: The Arab organizations and al-Hussein
28. Seventh: the Arab Associations Treaty (the Arabic Note) or the Damascus Treaty

Lesson 27: The Great Arab Revolt 1916 AD (2)

29. Eighth: The al-Hussein-McMahon Correspondence
30. Ninth: Preparation for the Revolt
31. Tenth: The announcement (call) of Arab Revolt 1916 AD
32. Eleventh: The events of the Revolt
33. Twelfth: Freeing of Greater Syria
34. Thirteenth: Entering Damascus and the Freeing of the remainder of Greater Syria

Lesson 28: The Allies' Conspiracy against the Arab situation

35. First: The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 16 May 1916
36. Second: The Balfour Declaration of 2 November 1917
37. Third: Attitudes of the Allied towards the secret agreements

Lesson 29: The Arab State in Greater Syria 1918-1920

38. The first Arabic government in Syria
39. Attitudes towards the Arabic rule in Damascus
40. The peace conference and decisions concerning the Arabic situation
41. The Nationalist Movement in Greater Syria
   a. The reborn activities of the associations
   b. The Syrian General Conference and its decisions
   c. The King-Crane delegation

Lesson 30: The French Occupation of Syria

42. The Lloyd George-Clemenceau Agreement
43. The plan of the Faysal-Clemenceau Agreement and the people's attitudes towards it
44. Attitudes of the Allied towards the decisions of the Syrian Conference and the Saint Remo Conference in 1920
45. The French occupation of Syria

Lesson 31: The French Colonization of Syria and the National Resistance 1920-1939

46. The French colonial politics in Syria
47. National revolutions and the resistance movement
48. The French crisis because of the constitution
49. The 60 strike in 1936
50. The creation of national rule

ANNEX II: TRANSLITERATION KEY

DIN 31635 Transliteration key (with International Phonetic Alphabet)

Arabic letters	ا	ب	ت	ث	ج	ح	خ	د	ذ	ر	ز	س	ش	ص	ض	ط	ظ	ع	غ	ف	ق	ك	ل	م	ن	ه	و	ي/ی
DIN 31635	ʾ/ā	b	t	ṯ	ǧ,j	ḥ	ḥ,x	d	ḏ	r	z	s	š	ṣ	ḍ	ṭ	ẓ	ʿ	ġ	f	q	k	l	m	n	h	w / ū	y / ī
Phonetic	ʔ, æ	b	t	θ	dʒ, g, ʒ	ħ	x	d	ð	r	z	s	ʃ	sˤ	dˤ	tˤ	ðˤ, zˤ	ʕ	ɣ	f	q	k	l	m	n	h	w, uː	j, iː