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Teaching the Others' History in an Arab National Context Comparing Emirati to Syrian School Textbooks

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Abstract

This study examines the way world history is taught in two Arab states of diverse backgrounds and international statuses, i.e., the Syrian Arab Republic before the fall of Bashar al-Assad and the United Arab Emirates. Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) is applied to analyze extracts taken from each country's history textbooks, highlighting the commonalities and differences between them. More specifically, historical narratives are juxtaposed and various insights into the interplay between state ideology and international relations are provided. Findings reveal the relevance of domestic politics and regional geopolitics in determining Syrian and Emirati views of other Arab peoples, colonialism, the Ottomans, and the Western and non-Western worlds alike. More importantly, the study sheds light on what these societies consider important to be taught as part of their building and indexing of national identity, amidst turbulent times in the entire region.

Keywords: world history; regional history; school textbooks; Syria; United Arab Emirates; school curricula

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Objectives

The essay's aim is to explore the dynamics affecting the teaching of world history in anti-Western Syria under the embattled regime of the former president Bashar al-Assad (2001–2024) and the economically prosperous and rigorously pro-Western United Arab Emirates. By comparatively examining the different worldviews that dominate both Arab countries' curricula, the study proposes a new approach in our understanding of identity politics and international relations in the Middle East; at the same time, it aspires to contribute to the existing body of literature on the teaching of world history in non-Western cultural and sociopolitical settings. Before presenting a comparative overview of the two Arab countries in question, we need to first revisit the theoretical background our research draws upon.

Scholars have always been interested in the nation-states' political–ideological construction of the so-called 'Others', i.e., ethnoreligious core groups vis-à-vis their respective minorities, historical empires vis-à-vis their ancient foes, colonial powers vis-à-vis their subaltern peoples and vice versa, as the reflexive images of their own 'national selves'. Bentley defined world history as "representing (among other things) a dialogue between the past and the present, in that it seeks to establish a historical context for the integrated and interdependent world of modern times" (as cited in Mazlish 1998, p. 386). In that sense, 'their' history becomes 'ours' due to the pervasiveness of ethnocentrism, that permeates

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state-controlled educational institutions and discourses. Berghahn and Schissler (1987) were pioneers in demonstrating how the global and the national intertwine, by drawing comparisons between the German, British, and US perceptions of 'Others'; the same applies to the Japanese schools' forging of national identity, that is "the anti-image of foreignness and, as such, can only be affirmed by formulating the images of the Other, namely the West" (Yoshino, as cited in Schneer et al. 2007, p. 602). History textbooks, of course, are the indispensable tools for constructing identities and perpetuating power relations among the nations on students' minds (Ahier 1988; Fuchs and Bock 2018). Ingrao (2009) describes them as "weapons of mass instruction, that provide the first imprint on our memory at a time when we are least capable of distinguishing fact from fiction" (p. 181). According to Carrier (2018), textbooks contain depictions of nations, nationhood, and nationalism that encompass the process of historicizing, contrasting, and dismantling national narratives, images, and semantics contributing to the formation of national knowledge.

Since its very inception, the concept of national education has been a by-product of the late 19th century nation-state; it goes without saying, then, that the first to teach world history as part of the official school curricula were the Europeans, in line with the orientalist intellectual traditions of that age, which went hand in hand with imperialism and colonialist domination over two-thirds of the globe (Bell et al. 1996). Yet, the teaching of world history ceased to be the white man's privilege (our emphasis), as soon as former regional powers stood back on their feet, like Japan after the 1940s, and former colonies and protectorates gained independence, like India (1947) and Egypt (1952), that adopted world history as a "standard topic of instruction" from the 1950s, thus challenging their erstwhile rulers' monopoly on the narrative (Lovorn et al. 2017, p. 322).

Accordingly, scholarship on the teaching of world history focused on how several Western educational systems pivoted towards a less ethnocentric and/or Eurocentric perspective. Disillusioned by the so-called "common European traditions" after the horrors of WWII, Barraclough was perhaps the first, who "saw a need for more recognition of the influence of non-western history on the West" (Douthit 1991, p. 295). Likewise, Stavrianos defined the teaching of world history in the US as "the history of the West and its world relationships" (Stavrianos 1969, p. 20) rather than real world history, while indicating the necessity to reform history textbooks so as to become more inclusive "as regards the achievements of Negroes and other minorities" (Ibid., p. 23). By the early 1980s, public secondary schools in New York and Texas required students to take one year of world history or world geography (Gowaskie 1985, p. 365) and other states followed suit (Don 2003); as explained by Marino in his thorough research on American high school world history textbooks, while approximately 40 percent of their contents covered the non-Western world, their chronological approach remained Eurocentric, given that "the ebb and flow of historical time is the product of events occurring in Europe" (Marino 2011, p. 436). In the meantime, Waldman (2009) and Pennell (2016) stressed that while they revised their teaching programs, schools in France and the UK were still unable to address their countries' colonial legacies.

Later studies raised academic awareness of how world history is taught in other regions away from its Western cradle, echoing the broader theoretical discussions of the late 20th century on center–periphery relations, postcolonial critique, and subaltern studies. To mention but a few publications, Wang (2003), Xu (2007), and Liu (2012) traced the changes implemented in the Chinese world history textbooks, reflecting China's role in global politics; Battacharya demonstrated how India decolonized its world history instruction by looking at the way "different regions have participated in the making of the modern world as it is today" (Battacharaya 2009, p. 106); Schissler and Soysal (2015) discussed the

periphery's perceptions of [Western] Europe in a collective volume encompassing Spanish, Greek, Turkish, Bulgarian, and Russian textbooks, among others.

In spite of this recent rise in interest on the teaching of world history outside Europe and the US, the Arab countries constitute a rather uncharted field of research, and this is exactly the gap the present study aspires to fill. Prior research focused on national and not on world history instruction, ergo lacking the global–local intersection in which this essay is theoretically grounded. For instance, Bolliger (2011) and Makar and Abdou (2021) examined the modifications made to the curricula between the administrations of Hafez al-Assad in Syria (1970–2000) and his son, Bashar, and that of Nasser and Sadat in Egypt (1952–1980), respectively; other researchers have paid attention to how religious identities are deployed in school textbooks to serve nationalist agendas in Saudi Arabia (Alhussein 2019), Jordan (Edres 2021; Rawadieh 2022), Syria (Kourgiotis 2023), as well as the United Arab Emirates (Al-Mutawa n.d.; Ozgen and Hassan 2021).

None of the aforementioned studies though, touched upon the presentation of non-Arabs in the classroom and its geopolitical and ideological underpinnings. Notable exceptions are Fakhri's (2014) and Kariman's (2021) contributions, concentrating on the inclusion of world history in the Jordanian curricula, in addition to Podeh's (2003) illuminating study on the Egyptian textbooks' perceptions of the Israeli 'Other' after the 1979 Camp David Accords. The present study builds on their findings, albeit adopts a comparative approach between two Arab states, that have not been examined from this perspective before. Other comparative works, which this survey expands on, are Labidi's (2010) discussion of the anti-Western attitudes shared by several Arabic textbooks; nevertheless, the fact that his research was based solely on secondary rather than primary sources poses a serious limitation, which our research attempts to address. Faour (2013) provided an account of the civic education in eleven Arab states; however, neither did the subject of his research fall within the scope of world history nor did it include Syria. Abushouk's (2017) comparison of world history instruction in six Gulf universities (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Oman) remains among the most relevant works to our topic; still, the current essay diverges significantly, first, because it concerns tertiary education, which is crucial for shaping the future citizens' national consciousness and worldviews, and second, for choosing Syria and the UAE as the most appropriate case studies for meeting its objectives.

1.2. Syria and the UAE: A Comparative Overview

But why Syria and the UAE in particular? As discussed already, the way the 'Others' and their history are presented in the school curricula is, first and foremost, a manifestation of state-defined national interests and ideologies; therefore, this study suggests that the more divergent the case studies involved, the more insightful the comparisons could be, due to the diverse historical, ideological, and geopolitical factors at play. In this regard, pairing Syria with the UAE might be more informative about the politics of school textbooks in the Arab context than comparing countries of more or less similar historical, socioeconomic, demographic, and diplomatic statuses, e.g., Saudi Arabia and UAE, Morocco and Tunisia, or Assad's Syria and Qaddafi's Libya. Irrespective of their common cultural heritage, our case studies are different in many respects, and this divergence is translated into the content and priorities of their regional and world history instruction.

Neither Syria, nor the Emirates were colonies in the strict sense; after WWI, the former was assigned to France as a mandate (1920–1946) under the League of Nations (Longrigg 1958) and the latter was an integral part of the British sphere of influence in the Persian Gulf from 1820 to 1971 (Onley 2009). The fact, that Syria gained its independence through a combination of domestic resistance and international pressure, whereas the Federation of Arab Emirates, as the UAE was initially called, including Qatar and Bahrain, was actually

proposed by the British based on their troops' unilateral withdrawal, which impacted both countries' political systems and constitutive narratives (Rogan 2017). In fact, legitimizing the decades-long rule of their regimes has always been at stake, considering their authoritarian and largely undemocratic power structures. Under the leadership of the pan-Arab Baath ('renaissance' in Arabic) Party, Syria would become the unquestionable and—after Egypt's U-turn in the late 1970s and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq—last stronghold of Arab nationalism (Dawisha 2002; Galvani 1974). Hence, although pan-Arabism's appeal receded a long time ago, reproducing the rhetoric of Arab solidarity and anticolonial struggle in educational discourses remained a convenient mechanism at the hands of the Baathist regime (1963–2024) for boosting its waning legitimacy (Ajami 1987; Lesch 2005). On the opposite side, the confederated families that, after 1971, would be collectively called the 'United Arab Emirates', with al-Nahyan (Abu Dhabi) and al-Maktoum (Dubai) at their forefront, assumed power under the protection of British guns, and for this reason they sought alternative sources of national pride (Halliday 1975). In the eyes of both regimes, later developments vindicated their—diametrically opposite with regard to the West—foreign policy orientations: while Syria would witness violent civil strife and foreign interventions that ultimately led to the collapse of Baathist rule, the UAE emerged as a beacon of prosperity and stability in a war-torn Middle East.

The rationale for focusing on these two particular Arab countries instead of others lies in other factors as well. With a GDP—per capita on a par with, or even superior to, that of most Western nations, in addition to a percentage of citizens that barely exceeds 11 percent of the overall population, the UAE is a typical case of a wealthy Gulf 'rentier state'. Relying on the exploitation of its rich natural resources, it is fully integrated in the global market economy, and it keeps its nationals satisfied, while attempting to gradually diversify its economy (Eno et al. 2016; Noreng 2004). Syria contrariwise, is endowed with neither gas nor oil, nor has it expatriate workers; worse still, for many decades it has been an isolated state economy, often targeted by Western sanctions in retaliation to Assad's policies, both father and son, prior to and after the eruption of the civil war in 2011 (Perthes 1995; Tabler and Zweig 2023). As a matter of fact, geoeconomics and demography dramatically affect the two Arab countries' place in the contemporary globalized world and definitely shape their views of other nations, whether in Europe, Asia, Africa, or the Americas.

Finally, a general comment on both countries' curricula. During the many decades of Baathist rule (and up to the present until further notice), Syrian history textbooks had been following a chronological curriculum progressing from ancient to current times, with the sixth grade serving as the starting point and ending with the ninth. As Wattar (2014) demonstrated in her enlightening thesis, only Arab history had been taught up until that point. If students continued on to secondary school, they either selected the natural sciences or the humanities as their final two years of study. Quite interestingly for our purposes, they studied modern European history and more recent Arab history in the humanities, while they were taught the history of European industrialization in the natural sciences (Bolliger 2011; Gordon and Mouhiddin 2020). Contrary to Syria, in the United Arab Emirates, history class is fused with that of national education; non-Arab references remain a substantial part of its curriculum of which the goal is to foster a new type of patriotism and allegiance to the rulers. As we will see in the discussion section, this is possible through the students' understanding of their own country and its position in the world (General Framework for Curriculum KPI's 2014, as cited in Al-Mutawa n.d.).

2. Materials and Methods

Research data were retrieved from two Emirati (Social Studies and National Education 2021a, 2021b) and two Syrian history school textbooks (Modern and Contemporary World

History 2017). These books were singled out since they, for the most part, deal with the teaching of regional and global history, while offering critical insights into the dominant ideologies of each regime in question. Methodologically speaking, Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) was chosen due to its adaptability and flexibility in providing researchers with a comprehensive understanding of verbal and visual, non-numerical data, in our case, textual passages (Creswell 2014; Denzin and Lincoln 2017). According to Krippendorff (2018), making reproducible and reliable inferences from texts to the sociopolitical, cultural, and geopolitical contexts of their use is the goal of this kind of research.

There are no established guidelines for data analysis; rather, its main characteristic is the division of the large number of words into much smaller content categories (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). Current uses of QCA demonstrate three unique approaches: conventional, directed, and summative (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). All three methods follow the naturalistic paradigm because they attempt to deduce meaning from the textual data's substance. Coding conventions, the history of codes and reliability threats are where the techniques diverge most. Coding categories are derived directly from the text data in conventional content analysis. When using a directed approach, starting codes for the analysis are guided by a theory or pertinent research findings. Following the comparison and counting of keywords or other content, normally a summative content analysis interprets the underlying context.

As far as this essay is concerned, what enabled the assignment of textual passages to thematic categories lies in its main research question regarding the historical, ideological, and geopolitical factors that dictate the way world history is taught in Syria and the United Arab Emirates. Analysis was carried out manually without resorting to any sort of relevant software. First of all, thematic categories were generated in advance, drawing upon the researchers' background knowledge on the history and international relations of Syria and the United Arab Emirates as well as the content of our material. The following four were selected as the most useful for our purposes: (a) references to the other Arab peoples, (b) references to the Ottomans, (c) references to the West, (d) references to the non-Western world. More specifically, the first is applicable to the intersection of each country's national and regional histories, including representations of the Israeli 'Other'; the second and the third are informative about the two Arab nations' perception of their Ottoman and colonialist 'Other', who have dominated both countries for hundreds of years; as for the third and the fourth, they are illuminating inasmuch as they help researchers investigate both countries' views of watershed moments and inventions that changed the face of the world. These include, for example, geographical discoveries, the French Revolution and the Internet and issues of international and regional interest, e.g., the Vietnam War and the emergence of the European Union. After the creation of the thematic categories, a deductive technique was adopted to undertake content analysis with the help of a classification matrix. Among the three approaches in applying QCA, the current research adopted the directed one as the most methodologically appropriate; it depended on the four pre-existing axes, which facilitated the coding scheme and the examination of the textual data in light of the existing literature on Middle East politics combined with up-to-date developments. Finally, in the reporting phase, 28 extracts from the Emirati and 32 from the Syrian textbooks were isolated and thematically distributed. Upon their translation from Arabic into English, these are comparatively discussed in the lines that follow in line with the study's objectives.

3. Discussion

3.1. References to Other Arab Peoples

A general remark in relation to the first category, is the tendency demonstrated by both countries to view the Arab world in which they belong from an ethnocentric perspective

that conforms to dominant state ideologies and each country's interpretation of its national interest. The Emirati textbooks mention the major challenges the Arab world faces at present, attributing them to "confessional bigotry and spreading hate speech" as well as to "regional threats to national Arab security", "attempts to thwart Arab economic and political projects", and "weakness of information and communication technology-based knowledge" (Social Studies and National Education 2021b). The blame is mostly placed on the Arabs for their inaction and inefficiency and not on external plots orchestrated by the West, whereas by "confessional bigotry" and "regional threats" the UAE refer indirectly to Islamist movements and Iran, which are identified as the monarchy's existential threats (Al-Sawafi 2014).

Syrian textbooks, on the contrary, narrate the Arabs' plight through the prism of anticolonialism and anti-imperialism, starting from the 19th century British "hypocritic protection" of the Arab Gulf to "the increase in national consciousness in Egypt and the July Revolution of 1952, which pursued a nationalist policy that pushed the colonial countries to the tripartite aggression of 1956" and "the division of spheres of influence in North Africa" with special reference to France's occupation of Algeria in 1830 and its attempts "to separate Algeria's land and people", and using words and phrases such as "brutality" and "France's deepening of her racism" (Modern and Contemporary World History 2017). The same rhetoric applies to Syrian attitudes on the 2003 US invasion of Iraq: "Syria stood against the American occupation to Iraq, and stood by the Iraqi people in their ordeal. It received hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees. It demanded the withdrawal of the occupying forces from Iraq" (Ibid., p. 106). Both countries' narratives make sense considering their recent history and international relations. Since Bin Zayed's al-Nahyan assumption of the presidency (2004–present), Emirati public diplomacy has been striving to reinforce Western perceptions of the country as a haven of moderation, tolerance, and modernization in a turbulent region (Kourgiotis 2020). Likewise, the Syrian textbooks' references to the other Arabs, underscored the ruling Baathist regime's (1963–2024) commitment to the ideology of pan-Arabism (Van Dam 1996), accompanied by a deep resentment against the West and particularly France and the US, the former for occupying Syria after WWI (1920–1946), the latter for its overall biased stance against the former President Bashar al-Asad prior to and after the 2011 civil war (Sharp and Blanchard 2011).

As far as the Arab–Israeli conflict is concerned, differences in the content of the two countries' textbooks stem from the normalization of UAE–Israeli relations in the aftermath of the Abraham Accords in 2020 (Dazi-Héni 2020), in sharp contrast with Syria, whose relations with Israel remain at their lowest ebb due to the continuous occupation (and, since 1981, annexation) of the Syrian Golan Heights despite some ephemeral US-sponsored attempts for a diplomatic breakthrough by the late 20th century (Zisser 2001). The Syrian textbooks refer to the "1948 establishment of the Zionist entity in Palestine", calling it "a catastrophe that befell the Palestinian people, who were displaced from their land to the neighboring countries" and that "pursues aggression as a means of expansion with the support of the imperialist powers"; in the meantime, the 1980 Iraq–Iran war is described as "a service to Zionist and Israeli colonial interests" (Modern and Contemporary World History 2017), whereas the Emirati textbooks use the passive voice to avoid outright accusing Israel of occupying Arab territory: "to free the lands that were occupied in the June War of 1967" (Social Studies and National Education 2021b). Contrary to the Syrian textbooks, the term 'Zionism' is mentioned by the Emiratis only twice and only in relation to the Suez Canal, totally disassociating it from the Palestinian misfortunes: "and what followed it in the form of the tripartite aggression of the British, the French and Zionism in 1956, and the aggression of Zionism in the June War of 1967" (Ibid., p. 73). The Emirati textbooks offset their country's rather neutral stance on the Palestinian issue (Pollock 2023)

at least symbolically, by keeping the term Palestine on all maps of the region and omitting mentioning Israel (Social Studies and National Education 2021b), notwithstanding the Emirati official recognition of the Jewish state five years ago and the exchange of embassies that ensued. At the same time, the UAE have gone so far as to announce their intention to become the first Arab country to teach the Holocaust in its school curriculum (Jerusalem Post 2023); such critical additions, however, have yet to be incorporated into the textbooks and are susceptible to Israeli policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians.

Finaly, Emirati and Syrian textbooks alike utilize the teaching of modern Middle Eastern history in their bid to project their respective countries as the champions of "Arab solidarity"; this concept is being taught as one of the values that characterize Emirati citizenship today (Social Studies and National Education 2021b, while the 1973 Arab–Israeli War is presented as an Arab victory in regaining territory for Syria and Egypt thanks to Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, i.e., the nation's 'founding father', who "decided to cut off Arab oil and made his timeless statement: Arab oil is not worth more than Arab blood" (Ibid., p. 29). Moreover, invoking Arab solidarity serves as an alibi for military interventions in neighboring countries that roused controversy. In the case of Syria, her involvement in the 1975–1990 Lebanese Civil War was decided on 'common security grounds' according to President Hafez al-Asad (Pipes 1990), ergo portrayed as a gesture of brotherly assistance: "Syria sent its forces into Lebanon to stop the bloodshed between the Lebanese brothers, out of its [pan-Arab] national obligation and in response to the Lebanese government's request. [It did so after] the Arab League decided to send the Arab Deterrent Force, its mainstay being the Syrian Arab Army" (Modern and Contemporary World History 2017).

However, Asad's collaboration with the Bush administration against Sadam Hussain during the 1990–91 Gulf War (Drysdale 1992) is not mentioned out of fear of calling Baathist pan-Arab commitments into question, presenting instead "the invasion of Iraq into Kuwait" as "a weakening of Arab solidarity, and an opportunity for foreign intervention" (Modern and Contemporary World History 2017). In a similar manner, the UAE frame their projection of military force on behalf of the—nearly deposed—al-Khalifa ruling dynasty in Bahrain in 2011 and the overthrown government of Yemen in 2015 after the Houthi takeover of the capital Sanaa (Ramani 2019) within their commitment to "Arab solidarity" and "maintenance of regional stability" (Social Studies and National Education 2021b). Furthermore, the Emirati textbook invokes the terms of "honor" (sharaf) and "dignity" (karama), which strike a sensitive chord with the Arab audiences, to justify the operation 'Decisive Storm', i.e., the Saudi–Emirati campaign in Yemen (Ibid., p. 30). Needless to say, neither the Syrian nor the Emirati textbooks make any references to the pro-democratic wave of protests, known as the Arab Spring, that swept the region more than a decade ago (Bayat 2017).

3.2. References to the Ottomans

Given that the Ottoman period comprises a great deal of modern Arab history (16th–20th century), it could not have been omitted from the UAE and Syrian textbooks. Nevertheless, presentations of the Ottoman Turks are more affected by the state of Arab–Turkish relations at present rather than by the actual account of historical events. This fact manifests itself especially in the Emirati case. After the 2010–11 Arab Spring upheavals, there have been persistent tensions between Turkey and the UAE, which supported opposite sides in several countries under political transition, e.g., Libya and Egypt (Bianco and Stansfield 2018). Since 2017, relations have worsened over the Emirati–Saudi–Egyptian–Bahraini blockade of Qatar and President Erdogan's subsequent siding with Al-Thani, the tiny sheikhdom's emir (Habibi 2019).

It is against such geopolitical backdrop that the Emirati textbooks were revised in the academic year 2021–22, echoing similar initiatives undertaken by Saudi Arabia (Middle East Monitor 2019). Hence, an entire chapter in National and Social Studies, Grade 9, is dedicated to the Ottomans' "covetous ambitions in the Arab Homeland" (p. 100), narrating the problematic relations between the two countries in retrospect. The Ottoman era by and large is portrayed as "a bloody period of deep darkness" and the Empire is regarded as an authoritarian, illegitimate state that "ravaged the land, and left ruins in their wake" and also "exploited the Arabs' wealth for many centuries and impoverished its peoples" (Ibid., p. 109). Moreover, a poster detailing alleged Ottoman murders of Arabs, including the killing of Shiite Muslims in Karbala, is displayed in a lesson, using words and phrases that carry negative connotations, such as "Ottoman massacres against the Arabs" and "decimation of thousands of Syrians in Aleppo"; for instance, the word "massacres" is repeated five times within the same extract (Ibid., p. 109). Instead of being venerated Muslim conquerors (fātiḥūn), the Ottomans are depicted as a colonial force: "the four centuries of Ottoman rule of most Arab states were an invasion and an occupation. The Ottomans were invaders and colonizers who occupied Arab countries, no better than French and British colonialism. They exploited the wealth of the Arabs and left them weak and backward. The Ottoman sultan was a colonial ruler, and Arab countries under his reign suffered from being subjugated to a colonial center" (Ibid, p. 114). Even worse, the Ottomans are to blame for "the subjugation of the Arab Homeland by western colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries" (Ibid, p. 115). It is worth mentioning though, that in sharp contrast with Erdogan's alleged 'Neo-Ottomanism' of the present-day (Torelli 2018), Mustafa Kemal Atatürk is presented as an inspiring leader, who had "the opportunity to implement what he aspired to, which in essence meant reorganizing the country's regime and making it catch up with modern civilization. Atatürk introduced reforms that are responsible for moving his country into the heart of the 20th century" (Social Studies and National Education 2021b, p. 115). The criterion for such discrimination is the latter's concentration on his country's affairs.

The Syrian anti-Ottoman references are not on par with the Emirati textbooks' outspoken criticism, focusing on the lack of progress in the literature "as a result of the Ottoman state's failure to encourage literary innovations, intellectual life became stagnant" (Modern and Contemporary World History 2017, 2017–18 Grade 12, p. 53) and attributing the end of the Arab countries' economic prosperity to "the loss of Ottoman control over the Mediterranean trade and the collapse of the Ottoman economy, as a result of the influx of silver from the American continent, and the control of England and the Netherlands over global trade made. . ." (Modern and Contemporary World History 2017, 2017–18 Grade 12, p. 37). According to the same textbook, "the Ottoman occupation did not change the structure of Arab society and its cultural foundations. The influence of Turkish life did not extend beyond the level of the aristocratic class participating in governance, nor was it present among other classes of the people" (Ibid, p. 53). This rather mild rhetoric towards the Ottomans can be explained by taking into account the cordial relations between Bashar al-Assad and Erdogan during the 2000s and the deepening of Turkish–Syrian cooperation in almost every field after decades of open hostility throughout most of the 20th century (Altunışık 2006; Tür 2016). Quite surprisingly, these references remained in place despite the breakup of relations after the eruption of the Syrian Civil War in 2011–12 and Ankara's active backing of the anti-Assad opposition (Hinnebusch 2015). It remains to be seen whether anti-Ottoman references will be further ameliorated in future revisions of the textbooks in light of the ongoing political transition in Syria and the consolidation of its most pro-Turkish regime ever (Farhan 2025).

3.3. References to the West

The two Arab countries' narratives on the modern and contemporary history of the West are shaped by three factors: (a) their encounters with several European colonial powers, (b) the ideological imperatives and political priorities of their respective regimes, and (c) their current international relations. The same of course applies to the history of the non-Western peoples as we will see in the next section. For instance, although the various Gulf sheikhdoms, that would become the United Arab Emirates after 1971, had experienced both Portuguese (16th–early 17th) and British (early 19th–late 20th centuries) encroachment on their independence (Shoup 2021; Onley 2004), only the former is painted with the darkest of colors, characterized "by brutality and crusader fanaticism towards the population" (Social Studies and National Education 2021b); meanwhile the latter is simply presented as an "occupation", with few adjectives carrying negative connotations and, even then, only in relation to a third Arab country, Egypt, and not the Emirates per se (Ibid, pp. 120–21). According to the same narrative, the Portuguese "used to set fires and tortured sailors, in addition to killing and exterminating them without discrimination, among them women, elderly and children" (Social Studies and National Education 2021b), whereas the British just "imposed protection treaties on the rulers of the Gulf Arabs in the early nineteenth century" (Ibid, pp. 120–21).

In a way, while the Portuguese serve as the colonialist 'Other' against which the nation shapes its constitutive myths and identity, the neutral reception of the British echoes the al-Nahyan and al-Maktoum dynasties' concomitant pro-Westernism. This emanates from their collaboration with their protectors and the lack of an anticolonial struggle, despite nationalist claims of the opposite (Bristol-Rhys 2009; Zahlan 1978). Fluctuation in the emphasis put on the negative presentation of some Western colonialist schemes instead of others reflects the versatility of Emirati national interests. Thus, while the Italians in Libya, with whom there is no diplomatic normalization process at stake, are castigated for "killing and displacing the indigenous population, while confiscating their lands, and distributing them to the settlers" (Social Studies and National Education 2021b), the European Jewish colonization of Palestine is deliberately overlooked. As we saw in the first section, the new facts created by the Abraham Accords are to explain for the new curriculum policy considerations; little wonder, then, that time and again the Israeli press has praised the Emirati textbooks' "promotion of peace and tolerance", even if they—in the words of Israeli officials—still "leave Israel off maps" (Berman 2022; Sheff 2022).

Overall, the Emirati textbooks' references to pivotal moments of modern European history are virtually non-existent or less elaborate than the Syrian ones, which discuss them at length, albeit through an anti-Western and Marxist-leaning lens, consistent with the Third-Worldist outlook of the Baath Party, at least until the demise of Hafez al-Assad in 2000 (The Party of the Arab Ba'th 1962; Owen 1992). Many things still remained unchanged after Bashar's ascent to power, despite some attempts to adjust Baathist ideology to the spirit of the age, as the 2012 amendment to Syria's 1973 constitution and the modifications of its preamble indicate (Leverett 2005; Moubayed 2025).

In what appears as a simplified, 'school edition' of Emanuel Wallerstein's thought, European geographical discoveries which "were new scientific achievements that aroused people's amazement and curiosity (. . .) motivated by economic and political reasons (Modern and Contemporary World History 2017) and the Industrial Revolution that "grew as a result of the advancement of science and the emergence of inventions" (Ibid., p. 84) are inextricably linked to "the flow of wealth into Europe, the shift of the center of commercial activity to the Atlantic Ocean, and the emergence of European colonialism and racism in Europe and America, whose aim was to exploit the people's wealth of raw materials needed by industry and find new markets for the disposal of European products" (Ibid.,

pp. 12, 24, 29; Wallerstein 2011). Colonialism in turn "had a severe and harsh impact on the New World. The introduction of European crops and livestock destroyed the interior life of the Indians, ruptured the environmental balance in central Mexico, and with the disappearance of ancient tribal divisions led to the collapse of Aztec society" (Modern and Contemporary World History 2017). In a similar fashion, the Enlightenment "changed the ideas of the Middle Ages, thus leading to the emergence of the movement of Humanism, according to which Man is the center of life, who seeks creativity and glory, searching for scientific thinking and rushing towards research, study, and writing with nationalist aspirations" (Ibid., p. 10) and the French Revolution "put an end to the absolute monarchy, the privileges and feudalism of the aristocracy, while establishing a new socio-political system in Europe based on liberty, fraternity, and equality, that led to radical changes through the adoption of democracy and the rights of the people" (Ibid., p. 95).

In the end, however, it was Napoleon's campaign to Egypt and the Levant that triggered Europe's intervention in the Arab countries (Choueiri 2016), while "France was determined to divide the Arab world into spheres of influence and kept the most influential areas for herself, in order to expand her colonialist empire to the rest of the Arab region" (Modern and Contemporary World History 2017). All in all, it is suggested, that the Baathist regime deployed such references strategically to remind pupils of the former mandatory power's duplicity; by denying Syrians their right to the abovementioned "nationalist aspirations", France contradicted the very essence of her own "Mission Civilisatrice" vis-à-vis the subordinate peoples of her empire (Barrows 1986). In short, Syrians sought to decolonize the narrative, much like the Indians, the Chinese, and others (Lovorn et al. 2017).

Apart from a brief reference to the geographical discoveries as "one of the most important features of the fifteenth century AD, which was carried out by a group of colonial countries, led by Portugal and Spain, as it changed the map of the world" (Social Studies and National Education 2021a), the Emirati textbooks seem disinterested in any discussion of the sociopolitical and intellectual revolutions of the West and their repercussions for the non-European worlds, the Arabs, and the Middle East. On the contrary, the UAE's educational curriculum policies are geared towards introducing the country's youth to the scientific and economic achievements of the West.

First of all, Emirati narratives on Western history do not miss the opportunity to exalt capitalism "as an economic system in which individuals or groups have private ownership of productive resources and use them as they see fit" (Ibid., p. 110). After all, the UAE have always opted for a market economy as opposed to socialist-oriented Syria which started to gradually ease state control and liberalize its economy (the so-called infitāḥ policies) only after the late 1980s (Issawi [1982] 2006). In the same vein, "countries that have currency that is generally accepted by countries around the world, such as the US dollar, the European euro, and the British pound" are praised for facilitating "the ease of movement" of products and international trade, as does E-commerce, which "is a type of buying and selling process between producers and consumers or between institutions through the use of the Internet" (Social Studies and National Education 2021b). Furthermore, the Emirati textbook endorses the creation of economic blocs "among the developed countries aiming at achieving complete economic development between member states, and facilitating trade transactions among them" referring to the example of the European Union as "one of the most important contemporary economic blocs and a model to be emulated, due to the large number of member countries that expands the areas of a country's relations with its member countries" (Ibid., pp. 145, 149).

Such focus on the Western financial–economic domain speaks volumes for the Emirati rulers' constant priority to integrate themselves into the current system of global economy, power, and policymaking, while leaving the domestic political realm untouched (Ulrichsen

2016). In other words, they want to be part of the new—Western dominated—world order, though without letting anyone in Europe or the US question the democratic deficiencies in their political structures and practices. In this, they have succeeded by virtue of their global footprint in trade, financial flows, aviation, tourism, and logistics in tandem with their generous donor diplomacy, unlike Bashar al-Assad's mediocre adoption of the 'Chinese model', that is based on economic liberalization without a corresponding political strand (Cochrane 2021; Lust-Okar 2006).

Finally, yet importantly, positive views of the United States lie at the heart of the whole Emirati ideological edifice since the very inception of the nascent Gulf nation. This can be attributed to the readiness of the Americans to replace the British as protectors, the common security concerns, e.g., Iran and al-Qaeda, and the close military cooperation that followed suit (Sirriyeh 1984; Young 2013). Nonetheless, as the Emirati textbooks imply, the USA could not serve as a model for other countries solely in terms of 'hard power'. Judging by the relevant references, the Emirati leadership has invested in public diplomacy by teaching students Joseph Nye's well-known concept of 'soft power' (al-qūa al-nā'ima) as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment. That is why the major countries resorted to adopting a strategy of soft power by influencing the lives and style of others to attract them and convince them to want what you want. When your policy is legitimate in the eyes of others, it expands your soft power" (Social Studies and National Education 2021a).

It becomes obvious that along with the military buildup that the country is witnessing during the last decade, the UAE are at pains to reap the benefits of 'soft power' the same way the US are doing: "the source of America's power is not only the army, but rather a group of support for this force. . .The United States attracts the largest percentage of immigrants. The students who study among them will carry many American values and principles, and they can be ambassadors of American culture and occupy decision-making positions in their countries" (Social Studies and National Education 2021a). Similarities with the UAE, where almost 90 percent of their population are expatriates, can hardly escape our notice. Also, "the United States ranks first in winning Nobel prizes in physics, chemistry and economics, and its sales of musical compositions are twice as high as Japan, which ranks second" (Ibid). Similarly, the criteria for measuring 'soft power' are mentioned on the same page, including culture, education, and technological education; the reference concludes as follows: "the United Arab Emirates, according to these criteria, are ranked first". 'Soft power' in return allows both the UAE and the US to sell—in Nye's words—"an unpopular product" (Nye 2019, p. 13) to world audiences, i.e., to whitewash alleged war crimes in the Yemen campaign and/or human rights abuses at home, by improving the country's public image via initiatives, such as the establishment of the ministries of Happiness, Tolerance, Youth, and Future, coupled with organizing the Sheikh Zayed Book Award on a yearly basis (Abu Dhabi Media Office 2025; Kourgiotis 2020).

3.4. References to the Non-Western World

It is the final thematic category where the Emirati and the Syrian textbooks hold the most opposing positions. The scant and usually degrading remarks on non-Western countries and their economic structures on the part of the UAE is indicative of the wealthy Arab nation's desire to distance itself from the so-called 'Third World' and pose as part of the West, regardless of its geographic position in the Persian Gulf. This is particularly true in respect to the definition of socialism as the economic model where "the state owns the combined factors of production and makes all economic decisions through the planning apparatus" stating that "despite its application for a long period in some countries, it has proven to be a failure. It does not apply except for limited countries in the world, such as

Cuba and North Korea" (Social Studies and National Education 2021a). The fact that the Emirati textbook mentions two historic foes of the US by their names is not irrelevant at this point, but rather underlines the pro-Western and, more specifically, pro-US trends in the UAE foreign policy described above. Meanwhile, countries like India, the Philippines, and Syria are dismissed as backward due to their "weak currencies" compared to the Japanese yen, the US dollar, and the EU euro (Social Studies and National Education 2021b). It should be noted, that by the time their textbooks underwent their latest revision, the UAE had not yet applied to join the BRICS group, consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa; henceforward, it is interesting to see whether their recent friendly overtures towards the 'Global South' (Emirates News Agency 2024) will culminate in a curriculum amendment in this respect.

As for Syria, neither Bashar al-Assad's increased contacts with Western leaders, such as Nicolas Sarkozy, by the late 2000s, nor the changes in the 2012 constitution's preamble that eased the tensity of the 1970s anticolonial rhetoric (Heller 1974; Syrian Arab Republic Constitution 2012) precipitated a reorientation of Syrian curriculum policies towards the West. Quite the opposite in fact. As the country was sinking into chaos, the US and the EU rapidly isolated the Syrian government accusing it of war crimes (Black 2013). Consequently, any prospects of reconciliation between the Baathist regime and the West, even if they seemed possible before 2011, faded out quickly in the midst of the turmoil, while Damascus' traditional alliances with Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing came to the fore once again. Ideological realignment with the 'Global South' resulting from deep disappointment with the West manifested itself in the last history curriculum revision that took place under Baathist rule in 2017–18; ironically, at that juncture it was widely believed that Bashar al-Assad had prevailed over his domestic rivals thanks to the support of his non-Western allies, notably Russia and Iran (Karlin 2018). Under such circumstances, it comes as no surprise that many Assad loyalists were naming their newborn children 'Putin' in honor of Syria's self-acclaimed savior, the Russian President (Rice-Oxley 2017).

To begin with, although acknowledging, that "the West has become a pioneer in the field of science and technology as a result of its use of reason in explaining all phenomena logically, in accordance with the scientific method that Europe has adopted since Renaissance", the Modern and Contemporary World History textbook stresses that it actually "benefited from the foundations laid by the ancient Arabs, Muslims, Greeks, Chinese, and Indians" (2017–18 Grade 12, p. 210). Moving to the 20th century, all references to non-European peoples exclusively concern their political history and, more specifically, their struggles against colonialism and imperialism. Several excerpts are dedicated to the emergence of new political systems, such as "socialism in Russia and communism in China" (Ibid., p. 157). Unlike the UAE's praise for Western capitalism and silence on the revolutionary processes in Russia and China, the Syrian textbooks put these events at the core of their worldview for obvious reasons: Syria remained Russia's military client from the 1950s and was the first Arab state to sign a treaty of friendship and alliance with the Soviet Union (Lesch 1992; Phillips 2020); China, in the meantime, apart from being Syria's major trade partner, used its UN Security Council veto powers in favor of Assad at least eight times amid his struggle for survival (Foot 2020). After arguing that "the socialist revolution took place in Russia in order to confront the imperialist system. It declared the establishment of the first socialist state in 1917 AD. It relied on the authority of the breadwinners and the farmers. It had a global impact as it supported the national liberation movements" (Modern and Contemporary World History 2017), Syrian textbooks highlight "revolutionary communism" for making China "a developed country that achieved the improvement of its political, economic, social and cultural living conditions" (Ibid., p. 172). This last reference is in line with Assad's continuous admiration for the 'Chinese model',

which he exalted once again during his official visit to China "cautioning against the failure of many countries that attempted to adopt the Western model with adverse outcomes" (Al Mayadeen English 2023).

The Modern and Contemporary World History textbook continues with extensive references to the "multiple national liberation struggles against colonial control, in Spain, Africa and Latin America. Some of these revolutions moved from the struggle for national liberation to the struggle to achieve democratic, economic and social transformations, during which they would end exploitation" (2017–18 Grade 12, p. 183). The transition from national liberation to socioeconomic emancipation draws an interesting parallel between the pan-Arab socialist ideology of the Baath Party and other Third-Worldist 'pan-nationalisms', in the like of pan-Americanism and pan-Africanism (Tibi 1997; Torrey 1969). Regarding the War in Vietnam, the textbook mentions that "at the beginning of the twentieth century, signs of nationalist awareness began to strengthen the Vietnamese patriotic movement, demanding independence. France confronted it with iron and fire, until the end of World War II and the United States entered the circle of conflict over Vietnam. The country showed violent resistance, which led to its independence" (Modern and Contemporary World History 2017). Once more, European colonialism is severely criticized over its deeds in Africa: "in response to this colonial policy, the African continent witnessed great activity of the national liberation movement in South Africa and the Congo" (Ibid., p. 188). Special reference is made to Cuba, using sentiment-laden words, like "struggle", "heroism", "sacrifice", and "freedom": "Cuba's geographical location and its richness in the cultivation of sugar cane are cited as among the reasons for the colonial struggle over it, but its defense rose, and established a record of heroism, sacrifice and struggle for freedom and independence" (Ibid., p. 201). Via exposing the bitter defeats of its foes whether in Asia, Africa, or the Americas, the Baathist regime reaffirmed Syria's anti-imperialist and 'Global South' alignments (Bolliger 2011), at a time when it had literally no one to talk to in the Western capitals. Time will tell, if the new Syrian administration will be on the same wavelength with its predecessor in teaching the history of the 'Third World' from such a perspective.

Last but not least, the Emirati and Syrian textbooks' views on Iran represent the highest degree of divergence between the two countries for geopolitical reasons and reasons of national interest as well. As we have seen in the first section, the UAE remain among the most skeptical Arab states vis-à-vis Iran due to its allegedly destabilizing role in the area, its meddling in Arab affairs and, most importantly, its continuous occupation of three tiny islands in the Gulf, which Abu Dhabi perceives as its own territory. Emirati–Iranian relations remain rather cool, even after the—Chinese-brokered—détente between the Islamic Republic and her erstwhile regional archenemy, Saudi Arabia, which is always presented as a country connected to the UAE "through brotherly ties and leadership" (Cafiero 2024; Social Studies and National Education 2021b). Thus, references to the "Iranian interference in the affairs of Bahrain" (Ibid., p. 56) and to the "Iranian occupation of the Emirati islands", which is repeated ten times in both Grade 8 and 9 texts (Ibid., pp. 55–56, 67; Social Studies and National Education 2021b), are not likely to be considered for revision, at least for the foreseeable future, despite some recent attempts by the two neighbors to bring about a diplomatic thaw (Hamud 2025). It goes without saying, that the Emirati textbooks contain no discussion of the revolution that dethroned the Shah and brought the Islamic Republic to power either.

Contrariwise, Baathist Syria until its collapse used to hold the most favorable views on Iran among all the other Arab states, calling the Iranian Islamic Revolution "one of the important events that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century in the southwest Asia region, as it liberated Iranian people from oppression and injustice, from external forces

and opened in front of it wide horizons for development and progress, while it constituted a turning point on the intellectual and political levels" (Modern and Contemporary World History 2017), and not unjustifiably. Syria had been a longstanding ally of the Islamic Republic since its establishment in 1979 and, owing to the convergence of their interests, it had been Iran's only supporter during a period of war and increased international isolation (Seal 1989). Almost thirty years later, Iran repaid the favor by intervening in the Syrian Civil War on Assad's request and keeping him afloat (Robinson 2023). The Syrian textbook continues by portraying pre-revolutionary Iran as a victim of "the American intervention which has reached the stage of dominance. There were fifty thousand American advisors who receive four thousand billion dollars annually from the state budget, in addition to the American immunity law" (Modern and Contemporary World History 2017), thus proposing that the independence of both nations was targeted by imperialism and foreign plots at different times in their history. Pro-Iranian references conclude by stating, that "the Islamic Iranian revolution confirmed that if the peoples possess the will and go to the battlefields of jihad, sacrificing their lives, they will undoubtedly win. The Zionist entity is not more powerful than the Shah's regime. It is thus possible to eliminate it" (Ibid., p. 208), in an attempt to distract pupils away from the civil war their country was going through and boost the Syrian regime's nationalist credentials. There is no doubt that as soon as the new textbooks find their way to the country's classrooms, all such references will be erased, or substituted, given the present (temporary) cabinet's reservations against Syria's former ally (Goldbaum 2025).

4. Conclusions

This study comparatively examined the major historical, ideological, and geopolitical drivers behind the teaching of regional and world history in two diverse Arab nations. Hence, it contributes to the comparative scholarship on school textbooks globally and Middle East international relations and identity politics by and large. The choice of Syria and the UAE was deliberate to reach more enlightening results, considering the different sociopolitical and international status of the countries involved. Meanwhile, regime change in Syria was on its way by the time our survey had already been completed; therefore, analysis of the Syrian textbooks covered exclusively the Baathist era (1963–2024). The four thematic categories which facilitated the coding of the textual data enabled us to understand which factors dictate what is taught, how, and why. Findings revealed the interplay between state ideologies and the existing climate of each country's international relations in shaping world history instruction in Syria and the UAE. The study concludes that teaching world history should, on no account, be considered a 'non-national' issue in a strict sense. On the contrary, teaching the Others' history is always a reflection of national priorities, traumas, and constitutive myths, while serving as a means to index national identities as well.

Our research expanded on the findings of previous studies, like Labidi's (2010) on anti-Westernism in Arabic textbooks, though this study did not use primary sources, and Faour's (2013); the latter remains perhaps the most impressive comparative research on civic textbooks in the Arab world to this day. Findings from the first and second thematic category could be clustered under the label of 'regional history', offering critical insights on the construction of the Israeli and the Ottoman 'Other'. The Emiratis' conciliatory tone vis-à-vis Israel, after Abu Dhabi's joining of the Abraham Accords, stands in stark contrast to the Syrians' presentation of the 'Zionist entity' as an existential threat to the entire Arab world, on behalf of which the Baath Party claimed to speak for several decades.

Findings on Syria confirm the works of previous scholars, who traced nationalism in the history textbooks during Bashar al-Asad's presidency (Bolliger 2011; Pardo and

Jacobi 2018). Meanwhile, tracing revisions in the Emirati textbooks in response to the deterioration of relations with Turkey, resulting from the two regional powers' conflicting views on the future of the Middle East after the 2010–11 revolts, foregrounded the geopolitical aspect of curricula policies, which is absent from other studies (Al-Mutawa n.d.; Ozgen and Hassan 2021).

Other findings pinpointed the invoking of Arab solidarity; if, for the isolated regime of Bashar al-Assad, Arab solidarity constituted its last resort of legitimacy, for the ruling families in the UAE it continues to serve as a pretext for building its status as a regional power and forging alliances against Iran, which, contrary to Baathist Syria, is the country's traditional foe according to its textbooks. Also, results from the first thematic category highlighted the absence of the Arab Spring from both regimes' curricula, which can be easily attributed to their intolerance towards political discontent at home.

The findings of the other two thematic categories are the most informative about the two countries' views of the world. The results provide new angles on the study of the international relations of Baathist Syria and the UAE, while enriching the literature on world history instruction in the Arab world, where relevant studies are lacking or where they do exist, do not adopt comparative approaches like Fakhri (2014) and Kariman (2021), who concentrated only on the Jordanian curricula. Both UAE and Syria are attracted by the policies of different major world powers, which they are keen on adapting to their own realities: while Syria, unsuccessfully, sought guidance in the 'Chinese model' to reform itself, the UAE tends to view their diplomacy as the Middle Eastern edition of the US-inspired concept of 'soft power'.

Partly driven by its Third-Worldist ideological input and partly responding to Western criticisms, the Baathist regime divided world history into two periods: world history being the history of European capitalist and colonial exploitation of the rest of the world up until WWII and then switching to the history of decolonization in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. It might be inferred that the Syrian government decolonized the Eurocentric chronological approach in world history, as discussed by Marino (2011), to meet its own propaganda ends.

Contrastingly, the pro-Western leadership of the UAE seems more eager to whitewash Western colonialism and military interventions, e.g., the American war on Vietnam, by paying attention to the post-WWII achievements of Europe and the US, while being remarkably indifferent towards developments in the 'Third World'. There are limits though in the Emirati admiration of the West; their focus remains strictly within the realm of economics, public diplomacy, and technology, while purposefully overlooking the history of Western democratic movements and institutions, whose inclusion might undermine the values upon which their notion of 'patriotic citizenship' is based (Al-Qatawneh et al. 2019). These findings in particular offer alternative glimpses of the Emiratis' identity formation and nation-building projects, which have been of particular interest to several researchers recently (Baycar 2023; Kourgiotis 2020).

Overall, significant implications might be drawn out of the study's findings for Arab education policy makers and future research. Given the absence of independent research centers in charge of implementing curricula policies in Syria and the UAE, the content and objectives of their history textbooks are decided by the top echelons of the Ministry of Education, echoing the interests of their autocratic rulers. Therefore, it could be argued that the state control over the curricula lies, first and foremost, at the core of the democratic deficit most Arab countries are suffering from, although even Western democracies cannot escape from the burden of ethnocentrism that encompasses their education systems (Hildebrandt-Wypych 2017; Pennell 2016; Soper and Fetzer 2018; Waldman 2009). Developments in the Palestinian domain will determine whether the embracement of Israel and

issues relevant to Jewish history, e.g., the Holocaust, will dramatically reshape the teaching of Middle Eastern history in the UAE, as indicated by Pollock (2023), or backfire and lead to a replication of Egypt's rather cool presentation of its historical archenemy in the official curricula, as demonstrated by Podeh (2003). The same applies to post-Assad Syria regarding its 'reacceptance' by the international community along with the tremendous shift in its alliances from Russia and Iran to Turkey and Saudi Arabia. In that sense, the present study's results are generalizable, setting the tone for future studies on Middle Eastern history textbooks that should definitely take into account the changing geopolitical landscape, especially ahead of a potential normalization agreement between Damascus and Tel Aviv, which some analysts deem likely (Vij 2025). Last but not least, this research aims at making inroads into the post-Arab Spring education literature, preparing the ground for cross-national comparisons between countries that underwent political change, e.g., Tunisia and Egypt (Bampanis 2024; Eid et al. 2016), and, quite recently, Syria itself, and those whose power structures were not affected, like the Gulf nations, Jordan, and Morocco.

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