

Clash of Civilizations: How words turn into wars

By Irene Mylonas, www.thepresident.gr

Culture, ideas, and words are inseparably linked, and history offers many examples of this connection. The line between peace and war is often blurred and fragile. The Middle East is no exception. For decades, a propaganda system in school textbooks in the Palestinian territories has contributed to shaping perceptions of resistance, martyrdom, and justification long before Hamas carried out its terrorist attack on October 7, 2023.

In his book *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington postulated that the fault lines between civilizations would become the battlefronts of the future. The West and the free world remain opposed to hostile civilizations that pursue aggressive approaches to resolving differences—an approach that spreads words and harvests wars.

Arik Agassi, General Manager and Head of Global Partnerships at the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se), analyzed in a discussion with journalists, including *ThePresident*, how Hamas is recruiting future fighters through education.

As the examples show, there is a systematic introduction of violence, martyrdom, and jihad across all grades and subjects. Extreme nationalism and Islamist ideologies are widely disseminated throughout the curriculum, including in science and mathematics textbooks. The possibility of peace with Israel is rejected, while any historical Jewish presence in the lands of modern Israel and the Palestinian Authority is completely omitted from the textbooks.

The two-state solution and peaceful coexistence with Israel are not supported in the schoolbooks. There are no references to, or proposals for, a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

The new schoolbooks show an increasing trend toward incitement to martyrdom through various methods intended to persuade children to sacrifice their lives. The need for continual struggle is emphasized throughout the curriculum with terms such as “revolution,” “uprising,” and “jihad.”

Lessons link the violent early Islamic period to the current “national struggle,” invoking a sense of historical destiny. The rewards of paradise are described, including the promise of virgins. Those who pursue personal success are portrayed as cowards or traitors.

Dalal al-Mughrabi, the perpetrator of the 1978 Coastal Road massacre, is honored in an extensive ten-page text that extols her actions, portraying the attack as “heroism,” while she is described as “immortal” in the “hearts and minds” of Palestinians. Fifth-grade students are urged to follow in her footsteps and regard her as a role model.

Two survivors describe hell

Following the path of Hamas militants, the images we all watched on television or social media take on another dimension—they come alive. It is one thing to watch from the safety of a screen and another to step onto the battlefield, where so many lives were lost. You are no longer a spectator.

First stop: the “Wall of Cars,” a cemetery of destroyed vehicles near the site of the Supernova festival—a monument to Hamas’s terrorist attack, in which over 1,000 people were killed, many of them civilians, and about 250 were taken to Gaza. Visitors are confronted by a pile of burned and twisted cars: stacked jeeps, sedans, and motorcycles destroyed or damaged during the attack, some riddled with bullets, others shattered by anti-tank projectiles. Among the mangled metal frames lies an ambulance in which eight people died.

The second stop is even more difficult: Kibbutz Be’eri. Two years after the attack, behind the bright yellow entrance gates, a new neighborhood is taking shape—reborn from the ashes in one of the communities hit hardest. The guide, Danny Majzner, survived by a miracle; his sister, who lived just 200 meters away, did not. We enter homes with walls pierced by bullets—burned, shattered, destroyed. There is a haunting silence.

“Would you stay here if you knew Hamas is still in Gaza?” he asks. Before the attack, we lived next to Hamas but felt safe, he adds.

The last stop is the site where most civilians were killed—the grounds of the Supernova festival. Wherever you step, the earth still feels heavy with the memory of those murdered. There we meet Mazal Tazazo. That day, she and two friends were attending the Supernova music festival in the Negev desert near the Gaza-Israel border when sirens suddenly wailed and gunfire erupted.

Shortly afterward, the terrorists stormed in, spreading death. “I played dead. My hand was injured, and I was covered in blood. They thought I was dead,” she says, pointing to the scars on her head and hand. Her friends were killed beside her; she was only 23 and 25 years old, she explains. While lying in the bushes, bruised and bleeding, she felt someone trying to tie her feet with rope.

“I kept pretending I was dead. I felt someone touching my feet and starting to tie me up. Then another man came closer to see if I was dead. He probably assumed I was and left me on the ground,” she says.

The ordeal lasted eight hours before she was found and taken to the hospital.

When asked what gives her the strength to speak about what happened, Tazazo answers: “My son. I want to ensure he lives in a safe world. Right now, we do not live in a safe world.”

In the end, what remains is a bitter taste of horror—and many unanswered questions. It is impossible not to wonder how one would react in the midst of such hell. Peace seems more precious and fragile than ever.

This is not only about the conflict between Israel and Hamas. It is a struggle that extends beyond the military battlefield. When a conflict endures across generations, education ceases to be about knowledge and becomes about ideology. Words can be more powerful than weapons. Ideas and writing shape opinions, inspire movements, and build—or destroy—societies more effectively than battles.

The most dangerous propaganda is quiet; it appears normal. Embedded in children’s schoolbooks, it numbs through repetition. As students grow up, the conflict is no longer something they question. It is something they inherit...