

The Saudi Vision Progress: Toward Peace and Tolerance In School Curricula

Viewpoint 2026



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Summary

Saudi Arabia is currently undergoing one of the world's most ambitious education transformations. The National Education & Training Strategy 2035 (NETS 2035) aims to position the Kingdom among the top 10 G20 countries in education performance by cultivating globally competitive learners equipped with strong values, higher-order thinking, and digital fluency. Guided by Vision 2030, the Kingdom has successfully transitioned from an insular and isolationist pedagogical model to one of global integration.

This *Viewpoint* paper analyzes the systematic and strategic engineering of “Globally Competitive Citizens” who are prepared to become leaders in a meritocratic and diversified economy. By harmonizing religious tradition with international standards of peace and tolerance, Saudi Arabia is securing its future as a modern and enlightened global power. The school system reforms undertaken by the Kingdom aim to cultivate nine globally competitive citizen characteristics or learner profiles set forth by NETS 2035: Proactive Learner, Creative Thinker, Analytical Thinker, Tech Savvy, Financially Savvy, Healthy and Fit, Socially Responsible, Team Player & Communicator, and Disciplined & Persistent.

Monitor Impact, in partnership with IMPACT-se—a global research and policy think tank and a leader in textbook review grounded in UNESCO standards on peace and tolerance in education—has reviewed Saudi curricula from 2019 to 2026, covering over 370 textbooks. The reviews find structural modernization, removal of exclusionary narratives and inflammatory rhetoric, the promotion of interfaith tolerance, and alignment with UNESCO peace education and global citizenship standards.

The IMPACT-se review of Saudi Arabia's 2023–24 school textbooks finds that the country's textbooks further reflect the country's broader shift toward openness and modernization under Vision 2030. The report further identifies substantial progress toward UNESCO-aligned standards of peace and tolerance. Unlike a decade ago, when the glorification of jihad and demonization of “others” were present across the curriculum, today's textbooks have removed or revised the most extreme content. Key findings include the removal of anti-Christian/Jewish slurs and anti-LGBTQ language, the abolition of violent jihadist examples, and a more restrained discourse on Israel and regional politics. These changes, though incomplete, align closely with Saudi Arabia's official goals of openness and global integration. As IMPACT-se CEO Marcus Sheff observes, the new curriculum “increasingly embraces tolerance and moderation,” a critical step toward “an educational framework which encourages tolerance, peace and greater equality.”

This piece demonstrates how Saudi Arabia has cultivated a system-wide school transformation that strengthens national identity while preparing students for global engagement.



Introduction

A- The Vision 2030 Education Mandate

Education in Saudi Arabia is increasingly positioned not only as a foundation for preserving cultural values, but also as a dynamic driver of economic growth and national prosperity. The transition from an oil-dependent economy to a diversified knowledge-hub requires a workforce that is not only technically skilled but mentally resilient and socially open. Education reform is central to Vision 2030, which recognizes that long-term prosperity and global integration depend on cultivating critical thinking, tolerance, and civic responsibility. Since the early 2000s, Saudi Arabia has adopted a gradual, evidence-based approach to curriculum reform, balancing religious tradition with modern imperatives.



Under the leadership of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Ministry of Education has executed a comprehensive review of textbooks, replacing dogmatic and fractious narratives with pragmatic enlightenment. This reform acknowledges that the Kingdom's greatest resource is its human capital, which must be nurtured through an education system that values moderation and innovation over radicalism. The ultimate goal is to foster a sense of national pride that is compatible with global citizenship, ensuring that Saudi youth are as comfortable in the boardrooms of London or New York as they are in the historical sites of Al-Ula.

B- The NETS 2035 Strategic Pillar

The National Education & Training Strategy (NETS) 2035 serves as the blueprint for the Saudi student's journey. It defines success through three specific domains designed to produce a well-rounded, "Globally Competitive Citizen." This strategy is deeply integrated with the Vision Realization Program of the Ministry of Education, Human Capability Development Program (HCDP), ensuring that educational outcomes match the evolving needs of the global labor market. The NETS 2035 provides the strategic mandate to modernize K–12 education, update pedagogy, and align values with moderation and openness. It defines the "Target Student" across cognitive, social-emotional, and practical dimensions. The target student characteristics will frame graduate students who are: higher-order thinkers, analytical and creative thinkers, financially and technologically literate, socially responsible, globally minded, disciplined, resilient, and collaborative. This framework aligns with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Economic Forum (WEF) competency models and is reinforced progressively across grade levels. The key student characteristic domains are outlined as follows:

- **Higher Order Thinkers:** this domain shifts the focus from rote learning to **Analytical and Creative Thinking**. Students are encouraged to be **Proactive Learners** who can navigate the complexities of a fast-changing world. The curriculum now incorporates "Critical Thinking" as a standalone subject, teaching students how to evaluate evidence and resist manipulative rhetoric.
- **Physical and Practical:** in a push for self-sufficiency, students are trained to be **Financially Savvy, Tech Savvy, and Healthy**. These practical skills ensure that the next generation can manage personal wealth and leverage emerging technologies—such as AI and green energy—to drive the private sector.
- **Social and Emotional:** the curriculum cultivates **Socially Responsible** citizens who are **Team Players** and **Disciplined**. These traits are essential for a cohesive society that values cooperation, emotional regulation, and professional ethics.

Curricula Modernization: Religious Moderation, Tolerance, and Removal of Extremism

The IMPACT-se textbook reviews have been carried out across Grades 1-12 of Islamic Studies, Social Studies, Arabic, Geography, History, Life Skills, and Critical Thinking. Findings confirm that curricular improvements are structural, cumulative, and system-wide, based on: (a) UNESCO-aligned peace and tolerance recommendations and standards, (b) longitudinal tracking across editions, and (c) the identification of removals, revisions, and newly introduced content. The analysis has also found that Saudi Arabia introduced standalone Critical Thinking textbooks and embedded inquiry-based learning across subjects that allowed students to distinguish fact from opinion, evaluate evidence, engage in respectful dialogue, and resolve disagreements through non-violent means. These reforms directly support NETS goals for Analytical and Creative Thinkers. Digital literacy content has expanded, aligning with personalized learning models and future-skills requirements.

A- Historic Shift in Interfaith Relations

The textbook review also demonstrates that the current curriculum has achieved a near total reduction of disparaging content regarding Christians and Jews. Historical narratives that once labeled these groups as “enemies” or “liars” have been replaced with a respectful acknowledgement of their shared Abrahamic origins.

By refining how other faith traditions are presented, the curriculum contributes to promoting mutual respect and reducing potential sources of misunderstanding. The textbooks emphasize that respect for the “People of the Book” is a religious and civic duty. This shift is not merely defensive; it represents a deliberate effort to align Saudi society with the pluralistic values essential for attracting global talent and investment. The curriculum now highlights common values such as charity, honesty, and justice, shared across all major faiths, fostering an environment of mutual dignity. Examples of reforms in Islamic Studies textbooks include:

- The removal of hostile depictions of Jews, Christians, and other groups
- Moderation of language surrounding unbelief and polytheism
- Reduced graphic depictions of divine punishment
- Balanced treatment of Shi'a and Sufi practices
- Reframing jihad as spiritual self-improvement rather than violent militancy
- Explicit condemnation of extremist groups such as ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood

B- Reframing *Jihad*: From Conflict to Character Development

In a shift of profound theological significance, Saudi textbooks now focus on jihad as an inward pursuit of self-discipline and personal excellence rather than outward combat. Saudi textbooks place increased emphasis on the inward dimensions of jihad – such as self-discipline, personal development, and ethical conduct – which are well-established within Islamic teachings. By reinforcing the distinction between religious teachings and unlawful acts, the curriculum supports a clear understanding of civic responsibility and the role of legitimate institutions. This approach helps ensure that students engage with religious concepts in a structured and socially responsible manner.



C- The Educational Firewall: Countering Extremism

The curriculum now serves as an intellectual immune system. It explicitly identifies the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah as terrorist entities with harmful ideologies that distort faith for political gain. Through the introduction of “Critical Thinking” and “Applications of Law” subjects, students are taught to deconstruct extremist recruitment narratives and understand the severe legal consequences of radicalization. This educational firewall is essential for maintaining the internal security required to achieve the ambitious milestones of Vision 2030. By fostering “Open-Mindedness”—a key NETS competency—the system ensures that students are resistant to the echo chambers of radicalization and are instead open to diverse perspectives and constructive dialogue.

Gender Evolution, Inclusion, and Social Responsibility

The textbooks also reflect contemporary Saudi society and workforce realities. The removal of mandates for “absolute obedience,” alongside the celebration of women as part of the civil service, in leadership roles and in acquiring professional development, reflect a commitment to a meritocratic society. Textbooks depict women in leadership roles across all sectors, signaling to young girls that their ambitions have no barriers in the new Saudi Arabia. This is not merely a social reform; it is an economic imperative aimed at fully utilizing the nation’s human capital. The curriculum now emphasizes the empowered and ambitious female worker as a central figure in the Kingdom’s future prosperity. Students are encouraged to develop civic responsibility, ethical reasoning, and community engagement—core NETS competencies from gender equality to national productivity and social inclusion.

Diplomacy and Global Citizenship



Saudi textbooks maintain support for the Palestinian cause but now present Israel and Zionism with greater nuance, consistent with evolving alignment with UNESCO guidelines. The reduction of collective and stereotypical portrayals related to Zionism, along with the removal of generalized “enemy” labeling, reflects a shift toward more balanced and pragmatic framing. Saudi students are being prepared for a world where regional stability is achieved through dialogue and shared interests. For example, Social Studies textbooks emphasize and foster a confident, outward-looking national identity focused around national pride, Saudi Arabia’s G20

leadership, humanitarian contributions, and global cooperation.

The Vision 2030 “Global Citizen” pillar’s alignment with UNESCO-based Recommendations of Peace and Global Citizenship Education signals that Saudi Arabia is ready to lead as a responsible, global-minded power. By focusing on “Global Citizenship,” the NETS strategy ensures that Saudi graduates are prepared to collaborate on international issues like climate change and global health, viewing themselves as vital members of the global community.

Conclusion:

Measuring Progress Toward 2035

Saudi Arabia's K–12 curriculum reforms demonstrate strong strategic coherence and effective, well-coordinated implementation. The system is transitioning from rote learning to higher-order thinking, from exclusionary narratives to global citizenship, and from traditional pedagogy to future-skills readiness. These reforms strengthen national identity while preparing students to thrive in a complex, interconnected world—positioning Saudi Arabia to achieve the ambitions of NETS 2035 and Vision 2030.

Today, the Saudi student is trained to be **analytical, socially responsible, and globally competitive**. The Kingdom is no longer merely changing its textbooks; it is rewriting its destiny. By fostering an environment of moderation, intellectual curiosity, and inclusivity, Saudi Arabia is ensuring that the next generation is not only equipped to handle the challenges of the future but is also committed to a legacy of regional peace and global cooperation.

Despite this strong progress, some opportunities for further enhancement remain, which represent opportunities for deeper alignment with NETS 2035. Areas of concern include:

- Peace and conflict resolution education
- Human rights literacy
- Religious and cultural diversity
- Gender equality as a rights-based principle
- AI literacy, entrepreneurship, and adaptability
- Project-based and competency-based learning

To seize these opportunities for enhancement and complete the curricular reform lifecycle, this paper recommends a systemic transformation of the educational system, with the Ministry of Education supporting the Saudi National Curriculum Center (SNCC) to **design and implement a comprehensive UNESCO-aligned curricula development and review framework**. This framework would serve as a foundational blueprint, meticulously mapping all instructional content to ensure that cognitive development is coupled with functional digital fluency. Within this architecture, the curriculum must define a sophisticated progression for peace, cultural tolerance, coexistence, and Global Citizenship Education (GCED)—moving from basic awareness in primary years to complex ethical reasoning in secondary education. This structural overhaul is incomplete without the **integration of “Future-of-Jobs Competencies”** (World Economic Forum Report 2025); the modern textbooks must transcend traditional subjects to embed AI literacy, digital citizenship, and entrepreneurship as core threads. By prioritizing creativity and non-linear problem-solving, the system prepares students not just to participate in the workforce, but to disrupt and lead it.



To ensure social cohesion in an increasingly globalized world, the reform must also **strengthen diversity and intercultural competence**. This involves a deliberate expansion of content regarding world religions and cultures, moving beyond superficial surveys towards the embedding of interfaith dialogue principles that foster genuine empathy. A critical component of this cultural shift is the mandate for gender-balanced representation, dismantling stereotypes within illustrations, case studies, and historical narratives. However, content alone is insufficient without a parallel effort to **modernize pedagogy and assessment**. The move away from rote memorization towards project-based learning and performance-weighted

tasks allows for a more personalized, digital-first learning experience that mirrors real-world challenges. This shift recognizes **that the ways in which students learn are** often as important as the content they study.

However, the driving force behind this reform is the **scaling of teacher capacity in peace and tolerance in education**. Recognizing the central role of educators, strengthening teacher training – through national modules focused on peace education, cultural understanding and interfaith dialogue – would further support the successful implementation of the curriculum. The system allows educators to share best practices in real-time, ensuring that the transition from traditional to modernized instruction is supported by a peer-led ecosystem rather than a top-down mandate. Finally, the sustainability of these initiatives can be guaranteed through the **creation of a dedicated Textbook Reform Monitoring Unit (TRMU)** that provides the necessary oversight to conduct annual audits and ensure cross-sector alignment. By bridging the gap between the classroom, the labor market, and the Research, Development, and Innovation (RDI) sectors, this governance structure ensures that the curriculum remains a living document—one that evolves at the speed of global change while remaining anchored in national values.

The ongoing transformation of Saudi Arabia's education system reflects a thoughtful approach to balancing strong cultural foundations with the evolving demands of a modern, globalized world. It proves that with visionary leadership and a commitment to "Human Capability Development," it is possible to turn the classroom into a powerful engine for peace, progress, and prosperity. This Viewpoint paper affirms that the current educational trajectory is the single most important long-term investment in the Kingdom's sovereignty, stability, and civilizational contribution to the modern world. Saudi Arabia is leading by example, **showing** that the path to a brighter future is paved with the values of tolerance, excellence, and reason.

About Monitor Impact

Established in 2025, Monitor Impact is a research and policy institute focusing on regional education policy, educational services and partnerships. Monitor Impact operates across the Middle East and North Africa region, Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Our work examines how educational content is developed, structured, and implemented across Grades 1–12, identifying trends, strengths, and gaps in relation to UNESCO-derived standards and guidelines. Through curriculum analysis, policy research, and engagement with international partners, Monitor Impact informs constructive education policy dialogue across a range of education stakeholders. These include Ministries of Education, international organizations, universities and civil society partners. Based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Monitor Impact harnesses the country's commitment towards tolerance, peace and educational innovation, to help create content and develop curricula which promote these values and integrate new technologies.



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