

Seeking Truth in the Social Studies Classroom: Media Literacy, Critical Thinking and Teaching about the Middle East

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In June 2003, I gave my tenth grade students the New York State Regents Exam in Global Studies for the first time in 25 years. During the previous decade, my small alternative school in Ithaca, New York, had received a waiver and been allowed to pioneer alternative assessments to the Regents; but that year the waiver had expired and all of our appeals to renew it had failed. My colleagues and I were then faced with the question of how to prepare our students for the statewide exams. Although I had a number of high skilled students from educated families who would likely have done well on the exam without any preparation, about one-third of the students were low skilled in reading and writing, received special educational services or spoke English as a second language.

With the support of my students and their families, I took a risk and did not change my curriculum to “teach to the test.” We continued to spend three months studying the Holocaust and human nature using the *Facing History* curriculum.¹ We continued following the international news every day through our local paper thanks to the Newspapers in Education program.² And we continued to focus on developing students’ critical thinking skills through media literacy activities and materials. Although the students studied little of the specific content from

the New York State World History curriculum, they were intensely engaged in the material and asked meaningful questions about history and the world. Their Velcro buds were fully activated and their learning stuck. When they took the exam in June, the lowest score was 77 percent and the average was 85 percent. My subsequent classes produced similar results over the next two years.

As social studies teachers we have an understandable need to get through the material in order to prepare our students for standardized tests. But this drive can undermine their motivation to truly engage with history. Most importantly, it diverts us from the real prize. For the tenth grade students that I teach, their personal curriculum is identity development. They want my help in figuring out what they believe and why they believe it. When we tie the study of history to this driving force, we can teach them to think rigorously, deeply, and independently; we can help them to develop life-long skills and attitudes for global citizenship; we can facilitate their growth as academic students; and we can prepare them well for the Regents test. Engaging adolescents in an authentic search to develop their own understanding of what is true about history and the world requires that the teacher make thinking an imperative. The students must share their ideas publicly;

their views should be well reasoned; and they must back up their statements with credible evidence. Teachers must give them no option but to use their intellect, their emotions and their experience to figure things out.

I would like to believe that the information I teach in class has a deep and far reaching impact on my students, but I suspect that they are learning far more historical facts outside of class than inside. Our students are bombarded daily with a ceaseless barrage of media messages, many of them with historical content. It is no longer possible, if it ever was, for me to fill them up with accurate information. In order to teach them to understand history, I must honestly and energetically address the primary sources of their knowledge. If I am going to help my students to become educated, reflective and informed seekers of truth, I must help them to think deeply and critically about the messages they receive through the media.

Integrating Media Analysis into the Curriculum

A National Constitution Center study showed that more American teenagers could name the Three Stooges (59 percent) than the three branches of government (41 percent). The recent Kaiser Family Foundation study, “Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8 to 18 Year-

Average Time Spent Daily with Each Medium (15 to 18 year olds):

Hr./Min.

Screen media:

TV 2:36

Videos/DVDs 0:44

Movies 0:21

Print media:

Books 0:24

Magazines 0:13

Newspapers 0:07

Audio media:

Radio 1:15

CDs/tapes/MP3s 1:09

Computer:

Computer games 0:19

Web sites 0:19

Chat room 0:03

E-mail 0:06

Instant messaging 0:27

Graphics 0:05

Video games:

Console games 0:23

Handheld game 0:10

olds,” shows that our students spend an average of six and a half hours a day using media.³ They are engaged with screen media (TV, video, DVD, and movies) for more than three and a half hours daily, but spend only 44 minutes reading books, magazines or newspapers other than for schoolwork. I suspect that a majority of high school students use Google as their sole research tool for gathering historical information. Yet few incoming college students report having had any formal high school training in assessing the credibility of websites on the internet.⁴ Michael Deaver, Ronald Reagan’s press secretary, once said, “People take in impressions rather than substance.” It is our job as teachers of history to counter this tendency and to facilitate our students’ search for reasoned, reflective and informed truths. We can do this work while teaching core social studies content by integrating document-based media analysis into our curriculum.

Media literacy teaches students to access, analyze, evaluate and produce media in all of its forms. Nearly all history teachers already incorporate some media literacy into their curriculum. It can appear as a study of Hitler’s propaganda techniques or as an analysis

of political campaign ads. But media literacy, like print literacy, needs to be incorporated throughout the curriculum and throughout the year. We do not expect students to learn to read or write through an occasional lesson. These essential skills require constant reinforcement in multiple subject areas. Our charge should be to train our students to think critically about all media messages, especially the messages they receive in the six and a half hours of media consumption that occurs outside of our classrooms every day. Through consistent integration of media analysis approaches and materials, students can be trained to ask a consistent set of questions that apply not only to film clips and posters but to paintings, photographs, songs, maps, encyclopedia articles, websites, and textbooks (*see the box: Basic Questions to Ask about Any Media Message*).

In my work with history teachers I regularly hear the refrain, “I just don’t have time to add anything new to my curriculum.” I empathize with the struggle but disagree with the conclusion. Using carefully selected media documents for classroom decoding has helped me to teach the core content I already embrace more effectively than

Basic Questions to Ask about Any Media Message

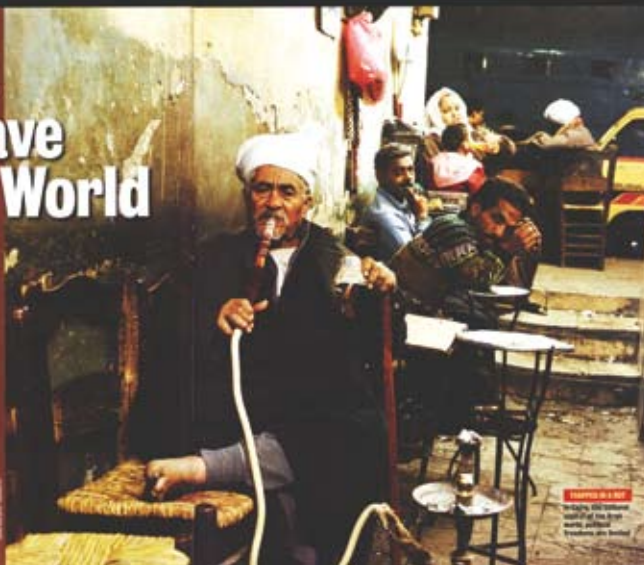
1. Who made—and who sponsored—this message? What is their purpose?
2. Who is the target audience? And how is the message tailored to that audience?
3. What techniques are used to inform, persuade, entertain, and attract attention?
4. What messages are communicated (or implied) about certain people, places, events behaviors, lifestyles, etc.?
5. How current, accurate, and credible is the information in this message?
6. What is left out of this message that might be important to know?

Washington's hands-off approach must go. The first step to undermining extremism is to prod regimes into economic reform. BY FARIED ZAKARIA

How to Save The Arab World

IT IS ALREADY THE SAME OLD-NEW SETTING—AND the same old story. A senior American diplomat is one of the great presidential policies in the region, the neighborhood of Cairo from which President Hosni Mubarak looks over Egypt. Walking through banks of mud-brick and silk, passing towers of smoking minarets at a formal evening event where he is received with great courtesy by the Egyptian president. The two men talk amiably about U.S. Egyptian relations, regional matters and the state of the power struggle between Israel and the Palestinians. Then the American gently raises the issue of human rights and suggests that Egypt's government might step up its political dissent, allow more press freedoms and stop jailing intellectuals. Mubarak smiles, up and down. "If I were to do what you ask, the world would be a better place. In that, what you want?" The diplomat smiles and the conversation moves back to the latest market in the power process.

Over the last decade, Americans and Arabs have had many such exchanges. When President Bill Clinton signed the final peace treaty with the Camp David peace plan in July 2000, Mubarak is reported to have responded with words to the effect, "If I do what you want, Hamas will be my personal nemesis." The Israeli reaction was a more extreme one. Prime Minister Ehud Barak often reminds American officials that if they press for government reform, the likely alternative to the regime is not John



What are the messages about the Arab world and about the U.S. role in the world communicated in the headline and photo?

What is your evidence?

Newsweek magazine (December 24, 2001)

my previous approaches (readings, lectures, films). For example, I cover the history of the U.S. wars in Vietnam, the Persian Gulf (1991) and Afghanistan, all in three class periods, through media decoding.⁵ Students start by reading short histories of each conflict written for the activity. I then lead the class through a fast-paced collective decoding of a dozen *Newsweek* covers from each war. Students apply the information from the written histories as I ask them to identify the messages about the war communicated in each cover. Although I encourage varied interpretations, they must provide evidence from the cover to back up their position. I use the carefully selected documents to teach and reinforce core vocabulary and content. In leading students through a decoding of the *Newsweek* spread, "How to Save the Arab World," (above) from December 24, 2001, I can teach them that Afghanistan is not an Arab state, a brief history of Bin Laden's relationship to the Taliban, and about the Arab connection to September 11th. Through a collective reading of the document, students can identify how the image and title construct an editorial position on the future war in Iraq. This process trains students to ask key media literacy questions and helps them to articulate, clarify, and defend their own interpreta-

tions. The intellectual work involved is far more rigorous, more effective, and more efficient in teaching core skills and content than my previous approaches ever were.

One of my students, Mac, was a bright kid who hated school and had failed most standardized tests. He rarely contributed during book discussions except as the class clown. But when we analyzed *Newsweek* covers, Mac became engaged and reflective, demonstrating sophisticated thinking skills and an excellent memory for historical details. He gave insightful interpretations, asked key questions, identified bias, and backed up his comments with relevant details from the visual and written text. Long after we completed the activity he continued to reference the documents and connect the analysis to new content. Not surprisingly, the range of student participation in the collective reading of media documents is much wider than when we analyze print media. It is often the visual learner, the ESL student, and the special education student who jumps in with her or his analysis, pointing out critical details in the document to back up a conclusion. These students are often sharp thinkers, but have problems with traditional print decoding. Media literacy allows them to show their intellectual capabilities

to the class, to the teacher and to themselves. I have also seen it motivate them to tackle their blocks to print literacy.

Integrating media analysis into the high school social studies curriculum is often dependent on finding the right texts to decode. Whether written, visual or audible, the documents should be provocative and engaging, written at the appropriate level, and must focus students on the core knowledge and concepts we need to teach. The internet is an unprecedented tool for helping teachers find the right documents, and sometimes the complete lessons, for integrating document-based decoding into the curriculum. Librarians are often key allies in this work. But even with help, teachers rarely have the time to put together the documents, the background information and the key questions needed to fully integrate media analysis into a particular historical unit. This is why Project Look Sharp, the media literacy integration organization at Ithaca College that I co-direct, began producing kits for high school social studies. We found that teachers were particularly interested in using conflicting media constructions to teach about the most controversial and polarized issues of our time. In response, Project Look Sharp recently released *Media Construction of the Middle East: A*

“Oh, I come from a land, from a faraway place, where the caravan camels roam, where they cut off your ear if they don’t like your face, it’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.”—From the original sound track to Disney’s *Aladdin*.

What messages about Arab people are communicated in the two-minute introduction to the Disney film *Aladdin*? What is your evidence?



Which of these images is from the Middle East?



courtesy of Karen Tonso



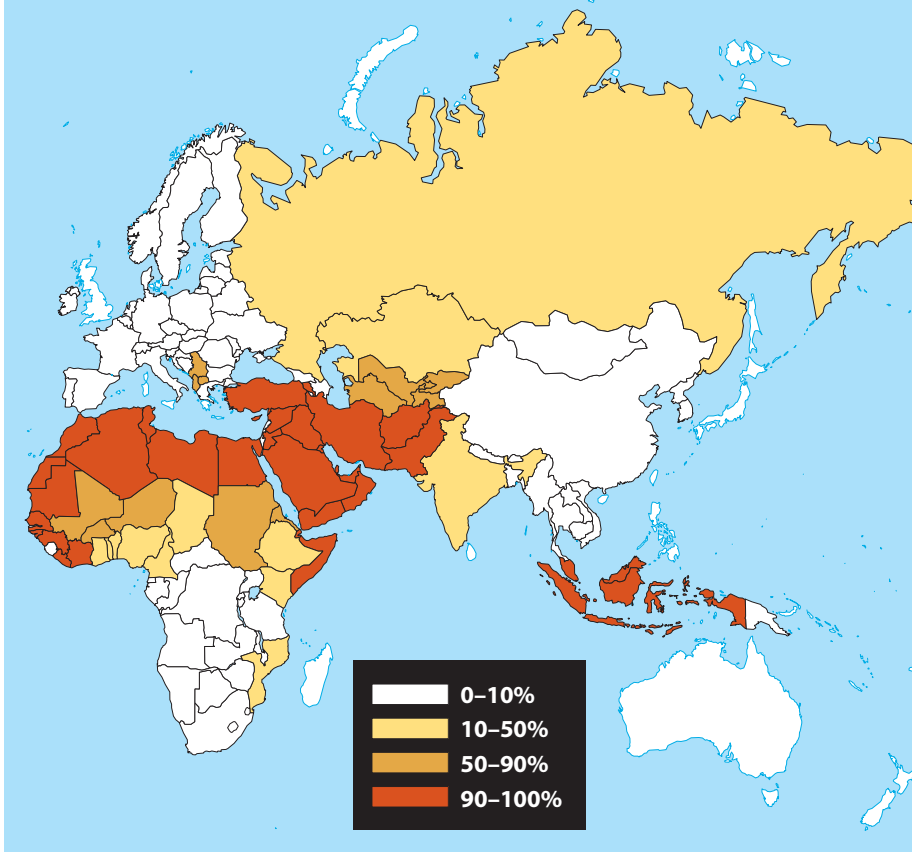
Digital Curriculum Kit. The documents mentioned in the remainder of this article come from lessons in the kit. It is available for free at www.projectlooksharp.org.

Questioning Preconceived Notions

Events such as September 11th, the rise of militant Muslim movements, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the War in Iraq, all elicit deep emotions and passionate positions. We cannot avoid dealing with these topics if we are to make the study of the Middle East relevant to our students. They want to understand; yet the truths are complex and challenging. Media decoding can engage all our students in an intellectually rigorous, emotionally honest and politically balanced exploration of these controversial issues and events.

A first step when teaching about the Middle East is to have students (and teachers) unearth and question their own preconceived notions about the region and people. When asked to identify a series of photographs as: a) *from* the Middle East, or b) *not* from the Middle East, most students identify the mosque in Dearborn, Michigan, as *from* the Middle East, but the Saudi shopping mall as *not* from the Middle East. Critical analysis of popular culture representations of Arab and Muslim people, such as the introduction to Disney’s *Aladdin*, can help students to further reflect on the sources of stereotypical thinking, but these should be used carefully, particularly with younger students. Even with the best of intentions, we risk reinforcing the very stereotypes we intend to critique. We need to expose our students to diverse images that counter the stereotypes and give them a more complex view of “other” people. We need to continually probe to understand how our students are making meaning of these media messages. The majority of 10th grade students enter my class assuming that most of the world’s Muslims live in the Middle East (they do not) and that all Arabs are Muslim (they are not). With help, students not only recognize the inaccurate beliefs they hold, but they can begin to reflect on the source of their (mis) information. I can then use media literacy activities to teach accurate information about the most challenging and controversial aspects of the contemporary Middle East.

THE MUSLIM WORLD



Where do most Muslims live? What makes someone Arab? Why is it called the “Middle East”?

Indonesia	181 million Muslims
Pakistan	142 million Muslims
India	124 million Muslims
Bangladesh	110 million Muslims
Turkey	65 million Muslims
Iran	65 million Muslims
Nigeria	63 million Muslims
Egypt	53 million Muslims
China	38 million Muslims

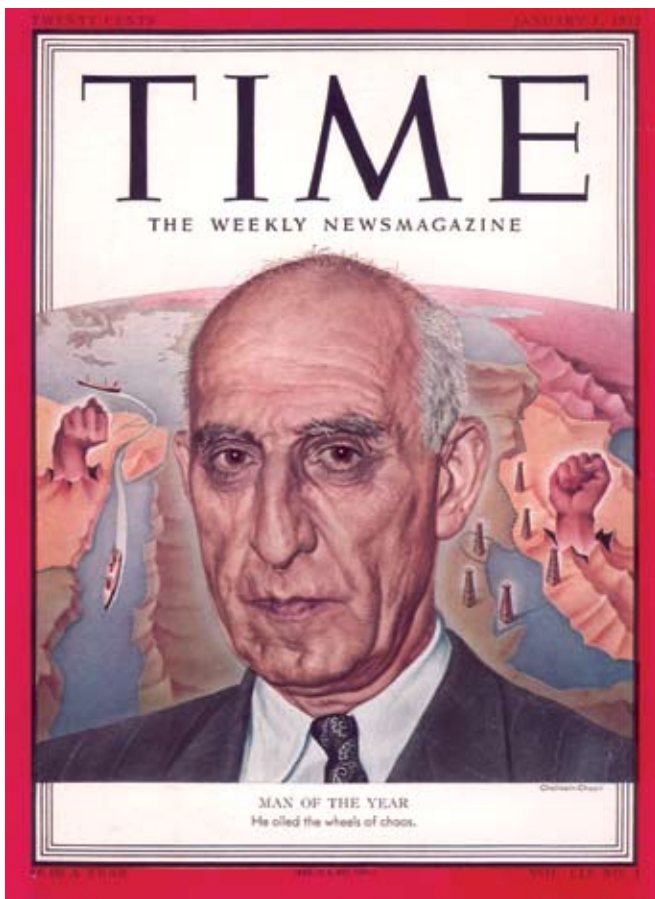
Source: National Geographic and the CIA *World Factbook 2004*

When students contrast a Palestinian website describing “the Great Catastrophe” of 1948 with an Israeli website celebrating the rebirth of Israel, they can begin to understand conflicting truths. Students apply their knowledge and defend their interpretations as they debate the authorship and perspective behind different encyclopedia articles, textbook excerpts and popular songs. Students can understand and discuss security issues from Israeli and Palestinian perspectives after analyzing short clips from two documentary films about the Intifada. And students can demonstrate their knowledge of history as they identify the themes communicated through a series of maps—some created by Israeli sources and others by Palestinian sources. What point is made in a map detailing the routes of six Arab armies in 1948 or in a map that shows Arab and Jewish land ownership in Palestine in 1945? What bias is reflected in a map detailing “Major Terrorist Attacks” against Israelis or in

a map showing “Palestinian Villages Depopulated” by Israel? These lessons help student begin to grapple with the subjectivity of history.

Many students assume that history is objective if it sticks to the so-called facts. But when they compare the facts used in a timeline about the history of modern Iraq produced by the U.S. State Department with the facts in a timeline from www.peoplejudgebush.org, they begin to recognize how the decision to include or exclude certain facts reflects the bias of the author. Students can learn the history of major events related to the war in Iraq through reading the images and headlines from newspapers. When they compare front-page coverage of the same event from different newspapers, they can also begin to recognize how words and images are used to give very different impressions. Internet sources such as www.newseum.org give teachers quick access to these conflicting newspaper constructions. Yet TV remains the chief news source for a majority of

Americans and therefore it is important that students critically analyze television news as well. A CBS report from April 4, 2003, showed a group of irate Iraqis (that the report described as “crowds celebrating outside of the tomb of Ali Mosque”) after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Students can compare that report with a German broadcast that used the same footage but claimed that the Iraqis were “demonstrating against U.S. soldiers approaching their [mosque].” Students inevitably search for truth in the seemingly contradictory accounts. They ask about the source of the footage, the proximity of the reporter and the bias of each station. They identify whose voices and whose stories are heard and whose are not, what images and sounds are used, what facts are added or omitted, and the power of words to direct meaning and define an event. This can lead to broader conversations about how we know what we know, how to find credible and accurate sources of information



What messages are communicated about the Iranian leader, Mohammed Mossadegh, in this 1952 cover? What is your evidence?



What messages are communicated about the Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, in this 1979 cover? What is your evidence?

and the importance of seeking multiple perspectives.

A 2004 Pew Research Center study of media and politics showed that 21 percent of 18 to 29 year olds reported learning about candidates and campaigns through comedy TV shows compared with 3 percent of people over 50. It is essential that our students learn to ask questions about the credibility of information in the media and the often-blurry difference between news and entertainment. Where would our students go to get accurate information about the rescue of Jessica Lynch: from the report on Armed Forces TV, from the ABC news magazine Primetime, from the documentary *War Spin*, or from the made-for-TV movie, *Saving Jessica Lynch*? By comparing excerpts from these different sources and genres students can learn to distinguish between different types of TV programming and to question the credibility and the accu-

racy of the information they receive in the two and a half hours a day that they tune in.

Media decoding can also help us to teach difficult concepts such as historical context. An excerpt from the 1987 CBS documentary, *A Battle for Afghanistan*, shows the Mujahidin as devoted Islamic believers in a noble fight against Soviet domination. A clip from *Operation Enduring Freedom: America Fights Back*, a 2002 film made by the U.S. Department of Defense, presents the same fighters as brutal terrorists and fundamentalist zealots. Students can identify September 11th as the pivotal point that shifted U.S. historical perspective on the Mujahidin. This approach can teach all students to understand the changing nature of historical perspective much more effectively than hearing a lecture or reading a passage in a textbook. By examining history from different historical,

cultural, and political points of view, students can be challenged to develop and defend their own views based on academic study, critical analysis and self-reflection on their own values and beliefs. This work can be both liberating and painful for students.

During the end of the year check-in with my English/global studies class, one 10th grade student commented that the curriculum had been very difficult for her. She said that all the media analysis work led her to question everything and lose her idealistic innocence. But she was grateful because she now believed that she had a more accurate view of reality and was prepared to make the world a better place. She was followed by a self-described cynic who said that the practice of critical thinking had the opposite effect on her. She said that it had forced her to reject the simplistic notion that everything is screwed up and manipulated and that there is

nothing you can do about it. She named the power of informed and reasoned thought to identify better and worse decisions. I beamed as both these students described the impact of our media literacy work. By demanding that students confront fundamental questions of what to believe, we travel beyond the traditional boundaries of the history class. If our classrooms are going to tap into the very real and alive interests of our students, if our approaches are going to engage all students, and if our curriculum is going to teach students to be deeply reflective and critical participants in the civics of democracy, then media literacy has a key place.

More than 200 years ago Thomas Jefferson wrote that our experiment in democracy is dependent upon the education of a literate citizenship. Today that literacy must include consistent and critical classroom decoding of contemporary media messages about the most pressing issues of our time. This is not an add-on to our curriculum but core to our task of developing democratic citizens who are prepared to make informed and reasoned judgments. They need to understand multiple perspectives, to recognize bias, to assess credibility, to probe for accuracy, and to be self-reflective about their own beliefs. We need to teach our students how to think. Anything less risks undermining the very foundation of our democracy. 📖

Notes

1. Information about the Facing History curriculum can be accessed at www.facinghistory.org.
2. See www.nieonline.com for more information on the Newspaper in Education Program.
3. Kaiser Family Foundation study, "Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8 to 18 Year-olds" (www.kff.org/entmedia/index.cfm).
4. Cindy Scheibe, "Assessments From a Curriculum-driven Media Literacy Approach" (Paper presented at the annual conference of the International Communication Association, Washington, D.C., May 2001).
5. See information about the curriculum kit *Media Construction of War: a Critical Reading of History* at www.projectlooksharp.org.
6. The answer to Passage 1 is box 3: The Ministry of Education for the Palestinian National Authority.

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How Americans learn about the candidates and campaigns

Media	Age Group		
	18-29	30-49	50+
Local TV news	29%	42%	49%
Nightly network news	23%	32%	46%
Daily newspaper	23%	27%	40%
Internet	20%	16%	7%
Websites and news orgs	15%	13%	8%
ISP news pages (i.e., AOL, Yahoo)	15%	13%	5%
Comedy TV shows	21%	6%	3%
Late night TV shows	13%	7%	8%

excerpt from Pew Research Center study, Jan. 11, 2004

Passage 1

“The Canaanite Arabs were the most ancient people that dwelt in Palestine. Many peoples and invaders later ruled it and built many places, which have become in time ancient monuments that still exist to this day. The Romans ruled Palestine for a long time. (One) of their monuments is the (archeological) site of Sebastia Village near Nablus. Then the Muslims conquered the land in the reign of Caliph Umar Bin al-Khattab. With the conquest of Palestine by the Muslims it became Muslim and it still is... The Franks (i.e., the Crusaders) occupied it until it was liberated from them by the hero Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi (Saladin). Then the Ottomans ruled it. Palestine is still under Israeli occupation.”

Check which text book you think this passage is from.⁶

- Encarta Encyclopedia (online) entry for “Arab-Israeli Conflict”
- Israeli religious text, *On The High Places of the Land*
- 4th grade text from the Ministry of Education for the Palestinian National Authority.

Give your evidence for your choice:

Media Construction of the Middle East: A Digital Curriculum Kit includes 22 lessons, a comprehensive teachers guide and dozens of media documents. It is available free of charge at www.projectlooksharp.org, where teachers can order a free copy of the CD/DVD materials for higher quality classroom projection.