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Iraqi Kurdistan schools will teach religions other than Islam

By Bobby Caina Calvan | McClatchy Newspapers

SULAIMANIYAH, Iraq — Judged solely by one of the big, bold words on its cover, the book that Fadel Mahmoud clutched in his hands would be considered blasphemous in many parts of the Muslim world.

Most people in Kurdish northern Iraq believe that the Quran, the holy book of Islam, is the final word on religious life. Mahmoud and other teachers, however, are preaching a message of religious tolerance in hopes of preserving the region's relative stability.

The book in his hands is an introduction to Judaism written by an Arab.

Last month, the Kurdish Regional Government's Ministry of Religious Affairs began requiring its 19 campuses, from grade school to college, to broaden their curriculums by including courses on compara-

tive religion that better expose students to other religious thought, including Christianity and in some cases Judaism.

"We're trying to reach the point where all the religions can find common ground. We are not interested in talking about the points of disagreement," said Mahmoud, an instructor at the College of Kurdistan in Sulaimaniyah.

A decade ago, the government of the semiautonomous Kurdistan region shut down the religious madrasas, or schools, run by mosques amid unsettling signs that imams, some from outside the region, were fomenting a brand of Islam that threatened to undo the fragile peace that reigned here after a 1991 U.S.-backed uprising against Saddam Hussein.

Madrasas in Afghanistan and Pakistan that preach a radical form of Islam have been

a huge concern to the United States, which has accused some of stoking anti-Americanism among the poor, who attend for a free education.

"We the Kurdish people, we believe in a peaceful kind of religion. We want to live in peace. We are not going to build a foundation for terrorists," said Sheik Mohamed, the region's minister of religious affairs.

Mohamed said the ministry's introduction of a comparative-religion class was intended to raise broader awareness of the other religions practiced by Kurdistan's ethnic minorities, which account for about 3 percent of the region's roughly 5 million people.

"Islam obligates Muslims to respect other religions," said Najim al Dine Kader Raheem, 47, who's studying at the College of Kurdistan so that he can lead his own mosque one day. "All of the prophets come from the same place — ours is

Arab — and we believe in the same God."

Teaching about Jews in a predominantly Muslim country has its risks, conceded Araz Najmaddin Abdulla, the general director of curriculum for the regional Ministry of Education, which runs the public school system.

A committee formed by the ministry is debating how far schools should go in teaching about other religions, Abdulla said.

"There are people who will probably say, 'No, no, no.' Don't forget that this is still a Muslim area. Right now, it's still just an idea," he said.

Even Abdulla is of two minds, praising the plan's inclusiveness — "We don't want people to forget there are other religions" — but retreating from the idea of teaching about Judaism.

"It is not me who is proposing it," he said.
