



Arab Pedagogical Council



Follow-Up Committee on
Arab Education



Dirasat - Arab Center
for Law and Policy

Arabic Language in Israel: Vision and Challenges

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2013



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Introduction

In this document, you will find suggested guidelines for policy development in relation to Arabic in Israel. It outlines our thoughts and assumptions concerning language, identity and cultural rights while also taking into account previous vision documents developed collectively by our community which deal more generally with Arab-Palestinian's status as a national minority in Israel. Our vision and conclusions are informed by our professional activities and by the socio-political context in which we find ourselves.

In this document, we view and analyze language and its importance in the broadest sense. Sociologically, it is regarded as the ultimate and fullest expression of our community's multi-dimensional character. Arabic is as deeply entwined with our identity, history, culture and collective memory. No less important, Arabic continues to be a living language in which we conduct our daily affairs and, in this context, is the primary medium for expressing our collective norms, expectations and values and as a society. All of these aspects of Arabic, and our relationship to it, inform the general principles outlined here.

As Arab-Palestinians citizens of Israel, the Arabic language is not

■ Arabic Language: Vision and Challenges ■

only our mother tongue but the vehicle which drives our culture, identity and sense of belonging. It is our Arab space and home with its national, cultural and religious components. Arabic, as an expression of our entire identity, distinguishes us as a separate and distinctive group and grants us strength and vitality. Thus, it is a fundamental aspect of our lives as individuals and an indigenous collective which is living with a sense of alienation in our homeland.

Today, in the wake of the *Nakba* [Palestinian catastrophe of 1948], our community and our language are challenged in a number of ways. While Arabic is an official language under Israeli law, as it was during the British mandate period, the State of Israel has adopted an unequivocal policy of giving preference to Hebrew over Arabic. Hebrew not only holds a dominant – and, indeed, exclusive position in the public sphere – it is also used strategically to strengthen the foundations of the State as the homeland of the Jews. Simultaneously, the State and its institutions have systematically attempted to suppress Arabic and weaken its standing. The many political restrictions on the Arabic language are an on-going obstacle which hinders our ability to form a healthy and meaningful relationship with our language. This unofficial policy of suppression violates the basic rights of indigenous peoples to use their own language. Arabic in Israel is relegated to an inferior position due to the dominant ideological

position of the State.

Furthermore, Arabic is weakened by the general linguistic, social and political contexts in which we live. On the practical level, Arabic faces stiff competition from both Hebrew, as the language of socio-economic mobility, daily communication and public life, and from English, as the dominant language in an increasingly globalized and technologically-driven world. While Arabic has the potential to evolve to encompass all aspects of daily life and express the most complex and profound levels of human knowledge, political, historical, linguistic and psychological factors are preventing this from taking place.

Despite these varied and seemingly insurmountable challenges, we are committed to strengthening and promoting our mother tongue and ensuring that Arabic not only survives but thrives. This is essential in order for us to live productive and meaningful lives individually and collectively, now and in the future.

Therefore, we advocate for the creation of a truly multilingual society; we envision Arabic which will serve as a vehicle for the enrichment of our own society while also creating a channel of authentic dialogue with other cultural and linguistic groups.

As an indigenous and national group, we are increasingly aware of the importance of language – and specifically Arabic – in

■ **Arabic Language:** Vision and Challenges ■

promoting communal growth and development. However, sadly, our relationship with our mother tongue has been primarily instrumental in nature. Within our community, we have focused either on the technicalities of how to teach it, or, alternatively, romantic notions which revel in its beauty, rhetorical richness and past glories. In other words, the way in which we have related to our language has been incompatible with our understanding of the obstacles which prevent it from evolving and flourishing, and its role in our lives today. Similarly, we may also lack the necessary expertise to manage, protect, strengthen and develop a dialogue with Arabic. Attitudes of our community towards the language may have contributed to its decline and current stagnation.

This misguided approach to Arabic takes place against the backdrop of the general context in which we live. The Arabic language has languished in all Arab societies while, simultaneously, Arab countries and governments have failed to promote its vitality in line with rapid changes in information acquisition and technological advances in the modern world. Furthermore, as noted previously, social and political conditions in Israel have had a tremendously negative impact on the state of Arabic – and our relationship to it – while pressure from both Hebrew and English are encroaching on its usage and development. It has been further weakened by its own internal structures, especially its diglossic division into standard and colloquial forms. The challenges – both external

and internal – are many.

The projects and policies we propose here have been developed in light of our view of Arabic as both an existential issue and an essential element of our national identity. Revitalizing Arabic, and creating a new relationship with it, will be a key strategy for developing as a national group with its own sense of time and place. Examining Arabic as a native language is integrally connected to our vision for our future, along with our collective identity within our native land. Realizing this vision requires reevaluating our previous approach and creating a new set of guidelines for the future.

We believe that success in this endeavor, to large degree, will require liberating our mother tongue from deeply-ingrained habits, clannishness and the paralysis in which it is currently mired. Therefore, we also approach this endeavor from the perspective of openness and dialogue. The proposed programs and proposals are intended to be triggers for ideas which other individuals and institutions can adopt and modify in the context of their own initiatives and in implementation of their own programs.

Our Objectives

As an indigenous national minority, we are concerned about the state of Arabic in Israel. Unfortunately, to date, there has been virtually no serious work done regarding this issue. As a collection of individuals and institutions, we hope to begin the important process of both increasing the functionality of Arabic and making it a tool for communal growth and development. This document is meant to support the planning and implementation of initiatives which can appropriately deal with the myriad of external, internal and inherent challenges to Arabic.

We have created both a linguistic vision along with practical steps and recommendations for realizing this vision. While the steps outlined here vary in character and intensity, together they form an integrated series of activities, practices and initiatives, both individual and collective, which aim to promote the standing of Arabic.

Our recommendations can be roughly divided into three different categories and broad frameworks for action, as outlined below:

Reinvigorating Standard Arabic: We believe that revitalizing Standard Arabic within Arab-Palestinian society is an essential

first step. Today, much of the Arabic public holds a negative conception of Arabic; this must change to become more positive. Indeed, Arabic is believed to be impractical and, at times, an obstacle to advancement; it is either seen as superfluous and useless or as a relic of the past and nothing more than a source of verbal pride. Instead, we posit that Arabic can be seen as a vehicle of modernism capable of growing and evolving in order to meet the needs of fluid identities, ways of life and scientific knowledge. To bring about this transformation, our language must become our present as well as our past, a language that is intertwined with our identity and existence and is viewed as a vital, active and dynamic component of our lives.

Structurally, we believe that both the colloquial and standard varieties of Arabic complement each other. Instead of engaging in destructive comparisons which can result in the weakening of both, they should both be valued equally and in their own right. The next generation should be competent in the colloquial and standard languages and use them as they believe to be relevant. By making both the standard and colloquial permissible, we can avoid the issue of diglossia, ensure that Arabic meets the needs of people in their daily lives and also reflect the linguistic variation within the Arabic language itself.

■ Arabic Language: Vision and Challenges ■

Advocating for Arabic in Israel: The second avenue for change involves working with the Jewish public, along with local and national organizations and government, to realize Arabic as a language which is equal to Hebrew in status and functionality in the public sphere. This aim is integrally connected to our indigenusness and our position as a national minority. Indeed, linguistic rights are one of the most central cultural rights such groups strive to achieve. This is not by accident; language preservation and maintenance can help minorities stave off assimilation and preserve their identities in the face of pressure exerted by majority groups. The same is true for the Arab-Palestinian minority; the community sees Arabic as a prominent collective right worthy of advocacy and believes that the issue of the Arabic language must be given priority in our efforts to live free and honorable lives as a distinct minority with national, cultural and historical ties to this region.

To achieve this aim, we must engage in a concerted campaign within academia and in other official institutions within the State to raise the profile of Arabic and enhance its presence as an official language. Some promising steps have already been taken by our community and its institutions. However, much more needs to be done to maintain these gains and to continue to advance. Indeed, our struggle for substantive equality in all realms requires that we persist until we realize this vision.

Arabic Education: Finally, we advocate for completely reconstructing the policies of teaching the Arabic language and Arabic literature. Arabic education should present Arabic as a language of identity, belonging and interconnection, and as a medium of cultural and scientific creativity. We realize that this would necessitate major changes in curricular content, a reassessment of working assumptions, the introduction of innovative new teaching methods, and a retraining of language teachers. Importantly, educational institutions, which are primary socializing agencies, play a key role in enhancing the Arabic language and its status. This includes recognized academic and semi-academic institutions along with institutions that focus on research and study both within the Arab community and generally. These organizations are important in creating new language education policies. No less importantly, Arab organizations can spearhead collective community efforts and activities to promote Arabic as a vital and interactive force.

A long-term and comprehensive linguistic project of this nature would require tremendous investment and commitment by numerous institutions and bodies. The success of such an endeavor, and the realization of the principles outlined here, requires coordination, cooperation and partnership. Accordingly, we call on governmental and civil organizations to join in this vision and participate in this vital project. This endeavor will

■ **Arabic Language:** Vision and Challenges ■

empower our society, strengthen our language, and enrich Arab and Palestinian identity and culture in the country. In this light, we welcome creative and original thinking and seek out constructive debate and critiques of our proposal. We also welcome concrete ideas for implementing this vision. In the spirit of cooperation and communal advancement, we hope this document will represent a starting point for bringing about the realization of this vision for Arabic and the attendant advancement of our community.