

FILE: EDUCATION IN
JERUSALEM

Education in Jerusalem: A Tool of Soft Colonialism

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Perhaps the most burning question in Jerusalem today is the question about the immense escalation in the Israelization and Judaization of the city on all fronts – the long game that has been neglected, sidelined, and constrained for decades – and how to explain the immense Israeli governmental spending and investment in the eastern part of the city today, especially in the education sector. In addition to the recent international and regional changes and normalization with the Arab world, the most important factor remains to be the change in the Israeli approach to the city and its residents.

In 2021, Ze'ev Elkin, minister of Jerusalem Affairs, boasted: “All along, the left said, ‘We’ll give it [East Jerusalem] back anyway, so it’s a pity to invest,’ and the right said, ‘Arabs – it’s a pity to invest in them,’ and I broke that paradigm.” He added: “It is precisely because I don’t see Jerusalem being divided in the future that we must invest. It’s our duty to invest in the city’s eastern part, otherwise Jerusalem will not be able to function as a city.”¹

Ofer Or, former Shin Bet intelligence commander of Jerusalem, explained the unrest in Jerusalem in 2014 by saying: “You can say, ‘I am not developing East Jerusalem, because my point of departure is that they will eventually leave here by themselves. But if your premise is that they are not going anywhere, you understand that they will constantly feel that the Jews are out to get them. They see the public parks in West Jerusalem and they know they are paying municipal taxes just like we do.’”²

Thus, spending has become associated with consolidating Israeli sovereignty. The five-year plan for



Figure 1. Eleventh-grade students in the Arab Evangelical Episcopal School carry out an awareness campaign to explain to students from first through twelfth grades the Israeli policies and the persistent attempts to Israelize the curricula and Palestine identity. This activity was part of the social studies class with teacher N.B. (Ramallah 2022).

Jerusalem allegedly aims to promote welfare and equality between the two parts of the city, but in reality, it serves the goals of the radical right: “Judaization,” which means fewer Palestinians and more settlers. Hence, only Palestinians who conform to the standards of the Zionist institution will live in the city. To achieve this, then Israeli education minister (and later prime minister) Naftali Bennett announced, “The time has come that also in East Jerusalem [students] will learn the Israeli curriculum from first grade. Jerusalem must be united in actions and not [just in] words. The deeper the learning based on the Israeli curriculum, the more we will continue to strengthen the education system in East Jerusalem, because this is how we build a future.”³

The effort to undermine and Israelize the Palestinian school curricula has taken place in several phases: The first started immediately after the occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967, when East Jerusalem schools were placed under the jurisdiction of the occupation’s municipality and the Israeli curricula was forcibly introduced. However, these measures failed drastically, confronted by Jerusalemites’ resistance and their refusal to enroll their children in al-Ma’arif (Israeli Ministry of Education) schools affiliated with the municipality of Jerusalem. This forced the occupation authorities to yield and reinstate the Jordanian curriculum, but only after removing

all elements that promoted national or patriotic sentiments, or religious ones that encouraged jihad and liberation.

The Oslo accords paved the way for the second phase. Occupation authorities sought to take a proactive step to hinder any potential Palestinian plan to develop a national curriculum that awakens historic memory and deepens national identity. The agreement thus required that educational curricula promote peace between Israel and the Palestinian people and regionally. Each party was also required to strengthen mutual understanding and tolerance, and refrain from incitement, including using hostile propaganda against each other.⁴ Although these terms may seem broad and loose, they were adapted by the occupation's skillful communication and institutional channels to impose relentless pressure on the Palestinian Authority (PA) to change its curricula, interpreting the provisions according to the whims of the occupation and its long-term goals and giving the Israeli narrative dominance once more.

The third phase of Israelizing the Palestinian curriculum began with the introduction of a new Palestinian curriculum in 2000. Occupation authorities viewed this new curriculum with doubt and suspicion, and Zionist organizations were mandated or established to study and analyze curricular content. International organizations were also pressed into this effort – the Georg Eckert Institute, based in Germany, for example, undertook a project in 2021 to analyze Palestinian textbooks. Israeli political decision-making circles use these studies to support claims about Palestinian curricula undermining the peace process and inciting violence to turn international public opinion against Palestinians.⁵ Israel submitted reports to the U.S. Congress and the European Union pushing them to condemn the Palestinian curricula and cut off financial support, and encouraging representatives to raise the issue of Palestinian curricula in their parliaments.

Since 2010, the Israeli Knesset's Sports, Culture, and Education Committee has held several sessions to discuss Palestinian curricula. Committee members asked how it was possible to allow such textbooks in schools operating under Israeli jurisdiction and funded by Israeli taxpayers. Consequently, the Ministry of Education in Jerusalem hired a private Israeli company to review the Palestinian curriculum and remove anything that could be perceived as “incitement” against the occupation, Israeli, or Jews, or that referred to Palestinian political identity. New revised and manipulated textbooks were then printed and distributed to schools affiliated with the ministry.

Manipulation of the curricula took four forms: substitution, erasure, changing the substance, and distortion. These changes targeted anything that reinforces Palestinian national identity, such as songs and poetry about the homeland, intifada, martyrdom, and sacrifice. They also aimed to erase terms such as Nakba, Naksa, al-Buraq Wall, and al-Aqsa Mosque, and replace them with names consistent with the Zionist narrative, like Independence, the Six-Day War, the Wailing Wall, and the Temple Mount. The name *Filastin* (Palestine) is replaced with *Balastina* (Palaestina). The texts are scrubbed of all references to refugees, refugee camps, the right of return, or even the nostalgia for return. They also omit anything to do with the history of Jews during the time of Prophet Muhammad, like the Jews of Banu Qurayza and Banu al-

Nadir. A new revised edition appeared in 2022, using language that reinforces the Israeli narrative – for example, “Israel” appears next to “Palestine” – and adding passages described as promoting coexistence between Jews and Arabs. The pictures above (figure 1) show a page from the sixth-grade social studies book titled *Palestine: The Land of Canaan*.

In the 2011 academic year, the revised curriculum was introduced not only in all schools under the jurisdiction of the Israeli municipality, but also in private Palestinian schools that began receiving Israeli funding at the turn of the millennium, and thereby lost their independence. More recently, six private schools – al-Iman Schools and the Ibrahimiyya College – were threatened with closure in the 2023–24 academic years if they do not agree to use the Israeli textbooks.⁶

Israel considers the use of the revised curricula a temporary phase, meant to prepare Palestinian Jerusalemite society for the reintroduction of the Israeli curricula – an effort that failed when it was first attempted in 1967. To this end, in 2013–14, the Israeli Ministry of Education introduced the cluster system, opening branches that teach the Israeli curricula in five schools in occupied Jerusalem, located in Bayt Hanina, Sur Bahir, and Shaykh Jarrah. These areas were considered weak links, where educational performance is substandard and student achievement rates are quite low. These branches tried to sway some Palestinian parents and convince them that the Israeli curricula is best for their children, as it is easier and caters to market needs.

Naftali Bennett served as minister of education from 2015 to 2019, marking a turning point in the ministry’s attempt to Israelize the city through education. As



Figure 2. The original (top) and “revised” (bottom) texts from *Palestine: The Land of Canaan*. Images courtesy of the Faisal Hussein Foundation. The original text reads, “Palestine was called the land of Canaan, as is mentioned in the letters of Tall al-‘Amarna, about 1500 BC. Canaanites were Arab tribes that migrated from the Arabian Peninsula and settled in the Levant [*bilad al-Sham*].” The revised text reads: “Palestine and Israel were called the Land of Canaan. The Canaanites were a Semitic ethnic group that is likely to have included elements from Arab tribes from the Arabian Peninsula, and they were united by the Canaanite languages, of which the Hebrew language remained, circulating in Palestine and Israel at that time, as the language of the children of Israel [*Bani Isra’il*].”

funds were allocated to schools that teach the Israeli curriculum, the number of Jerusalemites that sat for the *bagrut* (Israel's high school matriculation exam) and enrolled in relevant prep programs multiplied. Further, using Israeli textbooks became a prerequisite for funding during Bennett's term as minister of education.⁷ These efforts were crowned with the launch in 2018 of a five-year plan for East Jerusalem that clearly focused on education: of the total budget of at least 445 million shekels, some 200 million were earmarked for promoting the Israeli curriculum in schools, teaching Hebrew, technological education, and extra-curricular programming, among other educational goals.⁸

Beyond the massive funds spent on Israelizing the curriculum, Israeli authorities also took advantage of the crises it created in the education sector in Jerusalem. Israel addressed the problem of the sector's multiple administrative authorities in Jerusalem by closing the Palestinian Directorate of Education and waging war on any Palestinian Authority jurisdiction in Jerusalem. Further, it announced several times that it intends to shut down UNRWA and its institutions in Jerusalem, thus becoming the only authority for the education sector, free to develop a philosophical vision and educational policies consistent with the Zionist vision. The Jerusalem municipality also took advantage of the problem of rundown school buildings in Jerusalem, most of which are in rented residential buildings, offering to build new modular schools and kindergartens affiliated with the Israeli Ministry of Education – in other words, schools that teach Israeli textbooks.

This same approach is also used to take advantage of other problems that Palestinian schools face in Jerusalem. For example, Jerusalem Awqaf administration schools and some private schools face a teacher shortage, especially in scientific subjects. This problem arose after the separation wall's construction, which prevented West Bank teachers from commuting to Jerusalem, and was exacerbated by the inability of Awqaf and private schools to match the salaries and benefits paid by the Israeli Ministry of Education. The economic factor thus made al-Ma'arif schools the preferred choice for many teachers in Jerusalem because of the better salaries they offer. The Ministry of Education also refused to recognize some degrees from Palestinian universities. This forces many Palestinian teachers to re-enroll in specific colleges and programs to accredit their qualifications according to Israeli specifications, a step that costs additional years and money. This sums up the reality of the city today: if you want to find a job in Israel, where Israeli law presides, it is preferable to have a degree from an Israeli university and speak Hebrew instead of the headache associated with Palestinian universities. And your chances of getting into an Israeli college increase if you graduate from a school that teaches the Israeli curricula!

Whichever way one reads the sad reality of the education sector in Jerusalem, one finds the same vicious circle of Israelization and dominance of the Israeli narrative. Yet, the written narrative, although important, is persistently being defied by lived reality: even a child in kindergarten, whatever their curriculum, can recognize a heavily armed soldier as a foreign entity and a symbol of oppression and terror.

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Endnotes

- 1 Nir Hasson, “The Unexpected Reason Israel Is Improving Conditions for Jerusalem Palestinians,” *Haaretz*, 9 September 2021, online at (haaretz.com) bit.ly/3SfLi9I (accessed 6 October 2023).
- 2 Hasson, “Unexpected Reason.”
- 3 Lidar Gravé-Lazi, “Israel to Expand Education Curriculum in East Jerusalem: Israel Plan Seeks to Increasingly Replace Palestinian Syllabus,” *Jerusalem Post*, 30 May 2017, online at www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/israel-to-introduce-education-curriculum-in-east-jerusalem-494235 (accessed 6 October 2023).
- 4 See Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Oslo II), chapter 4, article 22, online at peacemaker.un.org/israelopt-osloII95 (accessed 6 October 2023).
- 5 See Georg Eckert Institute, “Report on Palestinian Textbooks” (2021), online at owncloud.gei.de/index.php/s/FwkMw8NZgCA-JgPW (accessed 6 October 2023). Among the most important organizations pushing the Israeli agenda in this regard is IMPACT-se.
- 6 There are five al-Iman schools: al-Iman kindergarten; al-Iman primary schools for boys; al-Iman primary school for girls; al-Iman secondary schools for boys; and al-Iman secondary schools for girls.
- 7 Nigel Wilson, “Israel Tells Palestinians: Our Textbooks or No Funding,” *al-Jazeera*, 1 September 2016, online at www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/9/1/israel-tells-palestinians-our-textbooks-or-no-funding (accessed 6 October 2023).
- 8 See “Appendix C: The Five-year Plan,” in International Crisis Group, *Reversing Israel’s Deepening Annexation of Occupied East Jerusalem* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2019), 33–36, online at www.jstor.org/stable/resrep31385.13 (accessed 6 October 2023).