

# Toward the Israelization of Education: What are the Implications of Closing the Directorate of Education in Jerusalem?

Zayd al-Qiq

Translated from the Arabic by  
Samira Jabaly

The education sector in Jerusalem has not been spared policies of Israelization and Judaization since the first moment the city was occupied. In fact, education was one of the first sectors the Israeli occupation targeted, seeking to control it by eliminating existing curricula and replacing them with those developed and written by Israel. The aim was to falsify history and alter facts to change the convictions of Palestinian students, eradicating anything that could contribute to their nationalist upbringing.

This paper is not a historical review, but rather an overview of some of the findings from our two-year research about the most important measures taken by the occupation regarding education in Jerusalem. The paper highlights the critical junctures in the history of Jerusalemites' defense of their right to use a curricula that maintains for them and future generations their values and national legacy. This helps us understand the implications of the occupation's decision on 20 November 2019 to close the Palestinian Directorate of Education in the Old City after detaining the director of education, Samir Jibril, who was then placed under house arrest after his release.<sup>1</sup> Jibril and his colleagues in the directorate were banned from doing their job from anywhere within the borders of the "State of Israel."

The first phase of this history commenced with the occupation of the city, manifested in the occupation's attempts to forcibly change and control the education sector. In 1968, occupation forces arrested the Director of Education at the time, Husni al-Ashhab. This step was followed by measures aimed at controlling and changing the entire

education sector in occupied Jerusalem. These attempts, however, were defeated by an epic teachers' strike supported by the parents and families of the students. Consequently, the occupation adopted a policy of negligence and marginalization, resulting in schools under the jurisdiction of the occupation suffering from high dropout rates and insufficient financial and human resources.

The second critical juncture was on 7 March 2011, when the Israeli Ministry of Education made amendments to the content of Palestinian curricula through an "expert" committee assigned with this task.<sup>2</sup> The committee then sent a letter to the schools demanding that they only buy textbooks printed by the Israeli ministry and banning them from procuring textbooks from any other source, alluding to those printed by the Palestinian Ministry of Education. In doing so, the occupation attempted once more to control the schools and to make the Israeli ministry the official authority. The ministry was meant to replace the Directorate of Education in Jerusalem in running public schools, known as endowment or *awqaf* schools, and private schools, meaning private and non-governmental schools also supervised by the Directorate of Education in Jerusalem.

Later, the Israeli Ministry of Education threatened to send inspectors to check the textbooks in students' hands. However, it backed down based on the recommendations of the Israeli security establishment, which warned against any provocation that might push Jerusalemites to engage in resistance against the occupation. The security establishment suggested instead a new plan to improve the economy in East Jerusalem, in an attempt to change living conditions in the city and keep Jerusalemites from engaging in resistance or confrontations with Jewish settlers attempting to desecrate al-Aqsa Mosque. This was to be coupled with changes to the substance of curricula taught in East Jerusalem to influence the position of Jerusalemites and urge them to cooperate with – or at least discourage them from resisting – projects to Judaize the city.

Following the recommendations of the Israeli security establishment, the third phase began, represented by earmarking huge budgets to increase the number of classrooms and schools that teach Israeli curricula in East Jerusalem. Private and endowment schools were left to teach Palestinian curricula, but the ministry tightened the screws on them, subjecting them to financial extortion on the one hand, and interference in their internal affairs on the other. These measures intensified after U.S. president Donald Trump announced the U.S. embassy's relocation to Jerusalem. According to a plan published in *Haaretz* in May 2018, at least two billion shekels were allocated to strengthen Israeli sovereignty over the capital by increasing the number of schools teaching Israeli curricula.<sup>3</sup> Allegedly, these financial incentives aimed to integrate Palestinians in occupied Jerusalem into the Israeli education system, facilitating their assimilation into the Israeli labor market and consequently the state.

The Directorate of Education's closure took place in conjunction with the policies of this third phase, and marked the beginning of a new phase that may be the most dangerous yet, given the symbolic and political significance of the directorate's geographical location and the critical implications of the latest decision. This decision,

which isolates the administrative body of these schools and expels it from Jerusalem, might succeed in undoing Palestinian education in the city. The escalation inherent in the decision, the duration of the closure (which is extendable), and the arrest of the director of education and his placement under house arrest suggest that there will be further consequences that are just as critical. Based on our research, we attempt in this article to offer those interested and invested in education in Jerusalem with a view of what is to come and the repercussions of the directorate of education's closure.

The gravest implication is the increase in the number of classrooms and schools that teach Israeli curricula and repression of schools that teach Palestinian ones. First, it is important to mention that at least 50 percent of Jerusalemite students study the Palestinian curricula in schools administered under the Israeli Jerusalem Municipality.<sup>4</sup> Supported by parents' committees in Jerusalem, these schools are fighting an intense battle to continue teaching Palestinian curricula. Yet parents' committees and volunteers cannot withstand for long a state that is mobilizing administrations, departments, and fulltime employees to control education in Jerusalem. Further, the ability of these schools to resist has become even weaker given that the municipality is the body that appoints principals and inspectors.

During the last decade, specifically since Nir Barkat became mayor of Jerusalem, at least nine new schools were established, all teaching the Israeli curricula.<sup>5</sup> These are in addition to new classrooms added to existing schools to exclusively teach Israeli curricula – classrooms promoted through social media as attractive educational environments. Unfortunately, this managed to convince a significant number of families to enroll their children in these schools.

In contrast to schools affiliated with the Israeli municipality of Jerusalem, there are awqaf schools, private schools, and UNRWA schools. The decision to close the Directorate of Education will have a significant impact on awqaf schools, as stripping their official sponsor of legitimacy will render them even weaker. This new threat may jeopardize their ability to continue to teach Palestinian curricula in their classrooms, especially when added to the low rates of enrollment in some awqaf boys' schools.

Private schools will face similar consequences, as, like the awqaf schools, their official sponsor will be stripped of legitimacy. The next critical challenge is a court decision that these schools receive financial allocations for admitting students that the municipality was not able to accommodate due to the shortage in school buildings. These allocations are conditional on the "unavailability of buildings." The reports of the state comptroller over the past five years mention a shortage of about four thousand classrooms.<sup>6</sup> However, the 2018 report indicates a shortage of only two thousand classrooms, which means that the court-stipulated allocations may no longer be offered if these classrooms were provided by the municipality. Israel seems intent on providing them, as it is building new schools in Bayt Hanina and Shu'fat (North).<sup>7</sup> If the government decides to reduce the allocations granted to private schools, they would face a significant challenge.

As for UNRWA schools, they have been facing serious financial problems since Trump's decision to end financial aid to UNRWA. This decision added new challenges

to existing ones, to say nothing of the occupation's attempts to eliminate any organizations associated with UNRWA or refugees inside the Old City and Jerusalem, even inside Shu'fat refugee camp.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, we cannot do true justice to the problems of Israelization of education by offering a few recommendations here. Nevertheless, it is important to insist on reinstating the Directorate of Education with all its employees in the Old City, and to refuse to relocate it anywhere else. If there is a message to be sent, we say to all those who encourage the adoption of Israeli curricula, under the pretext that the Palestinian ones are weak in comparison, that any educational system has its strengths and weaknesses, and Palestinian curricula are no exception. Yet, it is noteworthy that those who studied using the Palestinian curricula and then enrolled in the college of medicine at al-Quds University passed the medical licensing exam on the very first try.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 Entsar Abu Jahal, "Palestinians Condemn Israeli Closures of Institutions in Jerusalem," *al-Monitor*, 29 November 2019, online at [www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/11/palestine-jerusalem-institution-media-closing-official-tv-pa.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/11/palestine-jerusalem-institution-media-closing-official-tv-pa.html) (accessed 6 October 2023).
- 2 "Jerusalem: Adherence to Palestinian Curriculum," *Wafa: Palestine News & Info Agency*, 22 March 2011, online at [english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/110520](http://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/110520) (accessed 6 October 2023).
- 3 Nir Hasson, "Cabinet Approves Billions to Ramp Up Israeli Sovereignty in East Jerusalem," *Haaretz*, 14 May 2018, online at [www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2018-05-14/ty-article/.premium/cabinet-oks-billions-to-ramp-up-israeli-sovereignty-in-e-jlem/0000017f-f32c-d5bd-a17f-f73e1b8c0000](http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2018-05-14/ty-article/.premium/cabinet-oks-billions-to-ramp-up-israeli-sovereignty-in-e-jlem/0000017f-f32c-d5bd-a17f-f73e1b8c0000) (accessed 6 October 2023).
- 4 "Policy Paper: Preserving the Palestinian Educational System in Jerusalem amidst Israeli Settler-Colonial Policies," *Miftah*, 7 July 2021, online at [www.miftah.org/PrinterF.cfm?DocId=26708](http://www.miftah.org/PrinterF.cfm?DocId=26708) (accessed 6 October 2023).
- 5 Maayan Lubell and Suheir Sheikh, "'Carrot, Not Stick': Israel Pushes Its Curriculum in Palestinian Schools," *Reuters*, 29 June 2017, online at [www.reuters.com/article/uk-israel-palestinians-jerusalem-schools-idUKKBN19K2BK](http://www.reuters.com/article/uk-israel-palestinians-jerusalem-schools-idUKKBN19K2BK) (accessed 6 October 2023).
- 6 Ir Amim, *The State of Education in East Jerusalem: Discrimination against the Backdrop of COVID-19* (Jerusalem: Ir Amim, September 2020), online at [www.ir-amim.org.il/en/node/2593](http://www.ir-amim.org.il/en/node/2593) (accessed 6 October 2023).
- 7 See: Danielle Ziri, "Jerusalem Allocates NIS 80m. for Classroom Renovations as School Year Begins," *Jerusalem Post*, 28 August 2013, online at [www.jpost.com/National-News/Jerusalem-allocates-NIS-80m-for-renovating-classrooms-as-school-year-begins-324567](http://www.jpost.com/National-News/Jerusalem-allocates-NIS-80m-for-renovating-classrooms-as-school-year-begins-324567) (accessed 6 October 2023); and Orly Noy, "East Jerusalem Does Need Schools. But Not on the Ruins of Palestinian Homes," *+972 Magazine*, 26 January 2022, online at [www.972mag.com/schools-jerusalem-salhiyeh/](http://www.972mag.com/schools-jerusalem-salhiyeh/) (accessed 6 October 2023).
- 8 "Israel Attempts to Wipe Out Palestinian Curriculum in Jerusalem," *Middle East Monitor*, 22 October 2022, online at [www.middleeastmonitor.com/20191022-israel-attempts-to-wipe-out-palestinian-curriculum-in-jerusalem/](http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20191022-israel-attempts-to-wipe-out-palestinian-curriculum-in-jerusalem/) (accessed 6 October 2023).