**Education Policy in Israel and the State of Arab Education from a Historical Perspective**

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Abstract

This article examines policies toward Israel’s Arab education system, the role of the state, and the implications of this role for the status and achievements of the system. On the basis of theoretical background information that describes relations between Israel as a Jewish state and the indigenous Palestinian Arab minority, the study focuses on three historical eras: (1) that of the Military Administration (1948–1966), (2) the “melting pot” period (1967–1991), and (3) the era of peace talks (Oslo Accord, 1992) through 2020.

Predicated on the analytical framework designed by Hodgson and Spours (2006), the findings of the study demonstrate the existence of a relationship between ethnic affiliation in Israel and education policymaking toward the Arab minority. The article offers insights, conclusions, and recommendations going forward.

Keywords: education policy, education system in Israel, ethnicity, Arab minority

Introduction

The Arab education system in Israel operates under conditions of inequality in resources and infrastructure (Abu-Asbe 2013, Blass, 2017), inspection and control of pedagogical contents taught in schools, and the identity of the teachers whom the system employs (Ehrlich & Gindi, 2017; Haj-Yehia & Rudnitzky, 2018; Jabareen & Agbaria, 2014; Al-Haj, 1995; Mar’i, 1978). The state has withheld official recognition of the historical narrative and the cultural characteristics of the Palestinian Arab minority (Jabareen & Agbaria, 2014; Haj-Yehia & Rudnitzky, 2018; Harbon et al., 2013; Abu-Saad, 2016). Furthermore, it has excluded Palestinian-Arab educational leaders from circles in which educational decisions and policies are made. Thus, principals and teachers are unable to discuss issues related to the Palestinian national narrative and are instructed to banish this narrative from educational endeavors in schools (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016).

Even though the Arab education system has existed since 1948, more than thirty years passed before any official statement appeared that would define, explain, or interpret its goals (Al-Haj, 1995).

Several studies have looked into functional and structural issues in the Arab education system in Israel, gaps between the system’s inputs and outputs, and its curricula (\_\_\_\_, 2015; Al-Haj, 2006; Arar & Ibrahim, 2016). Few studies, however, look into the changes in government policy toward the Arab education system, its effects on the system and its achievements (Nasser & Nasser, 2008), and on the training of its teachers (Agbaria, 2013).

This study invokes the qualitative (phenomenological) approach of Hodgson and Spours (2006) to understand the developments in education policy that occurred in the Arab education system in Israel in three main periods of time: (1) military administration (1948–1966), (2) the “melting pot” (1967–1991), and (3) the peace talks (Oslo Accord, 1992) through 2020.

The study examines changes in Israel government policy toward the Arab education system and its implications for the system’s goals, contents, and inputs.

The Nation-State, the Ethnic Minorities, and Education

“Indigenous peoples share the experience of colonial forces erasing and rewriting their history, [determining]what is accepted and common for indigenous peoples as they lay helpless and passive in the process of ‘re-education’ (de-education), or denying them the right to know their history” (Abu-Saad, 2008:17).

Narratives of bringing civilization and progress to wastelands are rife in the national thinking of colonial societies. In Australia, for example, despite the presence of the First Peoples, the British colonial regime declared Australia empty and ownerless (Anderson, 2001). In the United States, settlers on the Western frontier claimed that it was unoccupied territory (Abu-Saad, 2013). In regard to the establishment of the State of Israel, too, Palestine was pronounced “a land without a people for a people without land” (Masalha, 1997), even though the leaders of the Zionist movement knew that Palestinians outnumbered Jews in the country. In 1917, when Britain promised to establish a “national home” for the Jews in Palestine, the ratio of Arabs to Jews was 10:1 (Prior, 1999).

During and pursuant to the war, however, most Palestinians were driven out of the new state to neighboring countries. As a result, the Palestinian Arabs who remained in Israel became a national minority. In addition to the *de jure* de-existence of those who had left the homeland, even temporarily, between 1947 (when the Palestine partition map was approved) and 1950, they were defined as “absentees.” More than half of the Palestinian Arab minority that remained in its homeland came under this definition, causing its property to be seized and transferred to the nascent state. Although the effective implementation of this policy occurred in the past, its effects on the Palestinian Arab minority as “present absentees” persist in various areas of life, foremost education (Lustick, 1980; Abu-Asbe, 2007).

The story of Israel’s educational history demonstrates one of the paths in the development of internal ethno-national relations and the rewriting of the Israeli ethnoscape. Education is used to emphasize the power of the state by means of policies of integration and segregation of fundamentally racial nature (Levy, 2005) that aim overtly to disseminate or fit the preference of certain social connections by applying a dynamic educational policy based on ethnic affiliation. The case of the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel is a close analogue.

A Social, Political, and Educational Snapshot of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel

Ever since the State of Israel was established, Arabs and Jews have been separated geographically and ethnically due to controversies surrounding cardinal issues of identity, nationhood, civil equality, control, and oppression in Israeli society (Ghanem & Rouhana, 2001; Landau, 2015). When the state was established in 1948, a rump of the Palestinian population remained within its borders—156,000 exhausted people, disillusioned by the outcomes of the war and lacking leadership, its elite deported or departed to neighboring Arab countries. This elite had been the social, cultural, and political leadership of the Palestinian people (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016). In the ensuing seventy years, the Palestinian minority has grown more than eleven times over, numbering in 2019 1.95 million persons, 19.6 percent of the total Israeli population (ICBS, 2019). It is religiously diverse: 81 percent Muslim, 10 percent Christian, and 8 percent Druze (ICBS, 2019). Most of the Palestinian minority lives in villages and cities that are separate from the Jewish majority; a small portion dwells in mixed-population cities.

The Palestinian Arabs in Israel have several distinguishing characteristics. **First,** they are an indigenous national minority that wages a protracted struggle for its national identity by force of its being an indigenous minority that lives in a state officially self-defined as Jewish. Most Arabs in Israel define themselves as Palestinian and as inseparable from an Arab world that maintains an ongoing confrontation with the State of Israel (Al-Haj, 2000; Nakhleh, 1979).

**Second,** the Palestinian Arab minority has an identity of its own, composed of several motifs: civic (Israeli), ethnic (Arab), national (Palestinian), and religious (Muslim, Christian, or Druze). Its identity is a combination of these four motifs, either in exact balance or with greater strength and emphasis on one motif than on the others (Smooha, 2002). Its identity crisis persists in a protracted dynamic that varies with the circumstances (Diab & Miari, 2007) and includes several levels related to ethnic democracy and multiculturality (Khoury et al., 2013), Palestinian indigeneity, and the ethnocratic nature of the State of Israel. Accordingly, it is widely thought among the Arab Palestinian minority that Palestinian society is evolving not naturally but as a corollary of crises.

**Third,** the Palestinian Arabs are citizens of a state that self-defines as the state of the Jewish people and not of all its citizens. Accordingly, state institutions treat the Palestinian minority as a hostile one and a “fifth column.” This minority has suffered for decades from underprivilege and deprivation in most respects (Suleiman, 2002). It has not managed to translate its demographic power into political and economic power. Indeed, 47 percent of its members are under the poverty line (National Insurance Institute, 2018), 54 percent do not participate in the civilian labor force, and Arabs account for only 6 percent of civil-service employees. Consequently, the Palestinian Arab minority is a marginal collective that lacks the economic resources that it needs for its development (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016).

The Israeli education system is divided into communities and sectors differentiated by national affiliation and levels of religiosity. There are two school systems for religious Jews (one for the Orthodox, another for the ultra-Orthodox), another for secular Jews, and yet another for Arabs. Each sector comprises public (State) and private schools; some of the latter are state-subventioned. In the Arab education system, public schools cohabit with privatized ones run by churches and public associations. The Jewish and the Arab education systems use different languages—Hebrew and Arabic, respectively. Encounters between Jewish and Arab students are very uncommon (Golan-Agnon, 2006).

**Table 1: Level of Studies among the Palestinian Arab Population of Israel (Selected Years)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Year** | **1961****%** | **1975****%** | **1985****%** | **1994****%** | **2000****%** | **2012****%** | **2018****%** |
| **Years of schooling** | **Type of attainment** |
| **0** | **No studies** | 49.5 | 22.9 | 13.4 | 10.0 | 6.5 | 6.2 |  |
| **1–8** | **Finished primary and junior-high** | 41.4 | 50.9 | 39.7 | 31.0 | 23.7 | 21.3 |  |
| **9–12** | **Finished senior-high** | 7.6 | 21.7 | 38.5 | 46.2 | 48.7 | 53.3 |  |
| **13+** | **Earned academic degree** | 1.5 | 4.5 | 8.4 | 12.7 | 21.1 | 22 |  |
| **Avg. years of schooling** | 1.2 | 6.5 | 8.6 | 10.0 | 11.1 | 11.3 |  |

**Source: ICBS, 2018**

The table above shows that the level of education in Israel’s Arab society has been rising steadily and continually since 1948, at all stages. Nevertheless, the outputs of the Arab education system fall short of those of the Jewish system. The disparity persists at all stages of education and on all national and international exams. In the national achievement test for eighth grade, the average score on the mother-tongue test was 66.2 among Jewish students (in Hebrew) as against 60.2 among Arab students (in Arabic). In English, the averages were 74.1 among Jewish students and 53.9 among their Arab peers. In science and technology, they were 51.4 and 45.7, respectively. In mathematics, the gap was 14 points (Jewish students 60.5, Arab students 46.6) (ICBS, 2018). The disparity between the systems recurred at the secondary level. In 2017, the percent of students eligible for a matriculation certificate in Jewish schools was 79.5 percent, of whom 55.1 percent met the universities’ threshold requirements. In contrast, the corresponding share in Arab schools was 64.2 percent, of whom 43.7 percent satisfied the universities’ threshold requirements (ICBS, 2018). Additional inequalities between the systems were observed on the psychometric exam; in 2017, the gap was estimated at around 100 points (580 vs. 488) in favor of the Jewish education system (National Center for Testing and Evaluation, 2017). As for academic studies, 12.7 percent of holders of university bachelor’s degrees are Arabs; 87.3 percent are Jews. The gap widens at the Master’s level: 8.6 percent vs. 89.8 percent. And at the doctoral level, the representation of Arabs falls to 4.1 percent as against 95.9 percent Jews (ICBS, 2018).

The wide disparity between the Arab and the Jewish education systems is related to the poor socioeconomic situation of the Palestinian Arab population and to changes in government education policy that affect the minority and its educational development—the matter at the heart of this study.

Research Method

This study uses a phenomenological qualitative methodology (Douglas Lee & Tyson, 2006) to analyze changes over a seventy-year period in Israeli governments’ educational policies toward the Palestinian Arabs. This is enough time to evaluate the educational reforms that proposed to introduce fundamental organizational changes or eliminate manifestations of discrimination and social underprivilege. Evaluation of the implications of these reforms may take a long time—a generation or more (Tyack and Cuban, 1995).

To identify directions of action and main guidelines that the state bears in mind when it makes policy toward Arab education, books and documents published by the Israel Ministry of Education since 1948, when the state was established, along with studies about the Israeli education system, were perused.

The qualitative research method was easily adopted due to the declarative rhetorical characteristics of the educational policies and reforms in question. This is because these domains usually operate at different levels and maintain complex relations of dependency. When a critical commentary about certain phenomena is written, for example, one may detect and explain a policy that is supposed to follow along a linear path, such as a national-level reform. It then becomes possible to trace and identify the stakeholders’ main tendencies. This method of interpretation abets a more accurate and thorough analysis of education policy and reveals covert social and political messages and contradictions in the documents and the sources that influence and project onto the education system at large.

Analysis of Data and Documents

Large quantities of documents and data were analyzed (educational policy documents, the 1953 Compulsory Education Law, education committee reports, and relevant publications) by means of the qualitative analysis method proposed by Hodgson and Spours (2006).

First, documents from various historical periods were analyzed and presented in accordance with the educational policy in effect at the time. The policy invoked in each period represented a distinct characteristic, different from that of any other period. Next, the way decisions were made about the goals and curricula devised and applied in each period were presented from a critical perspective. This analytical strategy made it possible to monitor main trends in education policy and identify recent developments in Israel’s Arab education system. It also yielded a critical presentation of the process of making decisions and defining education policy, as well as an assessment of the future challenges that this education system faces.

Findings: Policy and Counter-Policy in the Arab Education System of Israel

The aforementioned analysis of data and documents allowed critical attention to be directed at the political context, scholastic goals and programs, and inputs of the Arab education system in three main periods.

Education during the Military Administration Period (1948–1966), between Division and Dependency

Israel imposed military rule on the Palestinian Arab population during the 1948 war and maintained it for eighteen years afterward. The regime thus created was typified by segregation and dependency that were meant to control the country’s Arab society. The idea behind this segregation was to separate the Palestinian Arab minority from the Jewish majority socially, culturally, economically, and politically. The policy also strove to limit the mobility of the Palestinian Arabs within the country’s borders by defining the Palestinian territories as “closed” and restricting movement in them (Mar’i, 1978: 18). Not only did Israel divide the Palestinian Arab minority into separate geographic regions and restrict movement and communication between them; it even divided them into small groups on the basis of way of life (Bedouin / non-Bedouin) and religion (Muslim, Christian, Druze), adopting a “divide and rule” policy and attempting to create mutually exclusive secondary identities (Abu-Saad, 2006).

Relating to dependency, Mar’i (1978) describes the effects and repercussions of the 1948 war:

The best description of the Palestinian Arabs who remained in the new Israel is that they were emotionally damaged and remained in rural and socially marginal areas, politically scattered, ravaged by economic poverty, and nationally absent, suddenly a minority controlled by a wily, smart, and strong majority that they fought and resisted in order to defend their soil and homeland. This was undoubtedly a painful experience for families that had left some of their members across the border; thus, this minority was bereft of political leadership and its educated elite.

Against this fragile, battered Arab minority, the Government of Israel adopted a strategy of control and accommodation (Al-Haj, 2006). Its control of economic and political resources made the Arab minority totally dependent on the government and on Jewish society. Accommodation found expression in attempts to establish cooperation and build relations between the state and a small number of members of Arab elites by dispensing social and political privileges and paying bribes in order to foment conflict, dispossess the minority of whatever resources it still had, and keep this population under constant and long-term surveillance. These elites were called “collaborationist” (Lustick, 1980: 77). Some of their members were appointed to positions of leadership in Arab society (village mayors, sheikhs, religious leadership, town mayors, local authorities, etc.) or public posts in the separate government systems that interacted with the Palestinian Arab minority (school inspectors, principals, teachers, and so on). In the Military Administration era, no Arab teacher or bureaucrat was hired without the mediation of “collaborators” with the state. Even today, this covert policy influences the way members of Palestinian Arab society view the government institutions and their relations with the Arab minority.

The Military Administration controlled the Arab education system and opposed the idea of giving it administrative authority lest the Palestinian Arab minority demand liberation and self-rule one day. Hence, there was a consensus about the importance of keeping curricula and scholastic contents under state control in order to keep national sentiment from rising. Accordingly, the ruling party, Mapai, proposed that the Arab education system be integrated into the national-level State education system and that an Arab personage be named Deputy Minister of Education (Al-Haj, 2006). Thus the Government’s education policy of integrating the Arab system into the State system, by means of the Military Administration apparatus, was part and parcel of an intent to separate the Arab education system culturally socially, and politically.

The integration in question was for appearances only; the goal was to preserve and maintain constant control and surveillance as part of a de facto policy of segregating the Arab education system on national grounds. Therefore, operating within an education system that catered to the Jewish population and functioned in accordance with an ideology that was neither suited to nor connected with it, the Palestinian Arab minority felt estranged in the best case and like an “enemy” in the worst (Al-Haj, 1995). It was a “present absentee” in all respects, especially in education. Separate education systems for Arabs and Jews were developed. The geographical segregation of the populations during the Military Administration era helped to widen the gap between the education systems. One of the most salient implications of this reality was the adoption of different languages of teaching and learning—Arabic in the Arab education system and Hebrew in the Jewish system—in addition to major differences in curricula and in the allocation of budgets and personnel slots that are crucial for institutions of education (Miari, 2014). Even the education systems of the mixed cities embraced the policy of separation by national background.

The duality of education policy was mirrored in the 1949 Compulsory Education Law. Despite the state’s monopoly on the education system and the dissemination of its policies to the citizenry at large, Arabs and Jews alike, the state kept the education systems separate (Abu-Saad, 2013). The Government introduced compulsory education from age five to thirteen in both systems. It undertook to recruit teachers and write curricula while tasking the local authorities with providing the requisite buildings, equipment, and maintenance. Inadequate school infrastructure in Arab localities, however, impeded the development of the Arab education system, which also suffered under the Military Administration in all areas of life, the education system included (Arar and Abu-Asbe, 2013).

Cohen (1953) described the grave damage that schools in the government education system sustained in the 1948 war: severely impaired infrastructures, crowded classrooms, attendance in shifts, and students sitting on crates or on the ground due to shortages of classrooms and chairs (Al-Haj, 2006). Security considerations were borne in mind in hiring teachers. The situation worsened due to a decrease in the numbers of Arab teachers as the war progressed. In densely populated Galilee, for example, each Arab teacher served sixty-one pupils while each Jewish teacher had thirty-five. Moreover, Arab teachers received roughly half of Jewish teachers’ pay.

It was on the basis of this situation and its impact that the Palestinian Arab minority formed its perception of the Arab education system (Abu-Asbe, 2007).

In the passage that follows, the goal of the Compulsory Education Law that was enacted in 1953 is described:

Education shall be based on Jewish cultural values and scholastic achievements, love of homeland and allegiance to the Jewish state and people, embracing of agricultural labor and crafts within the framework of “pioneering” labor, and aspiring to establish a society based on freedom, equality, mutual tolerance, and love of all humankind (Sarsour, 1999).

The statute was meant to assure freedom for all and to give every child equal opportunity to develop his or her potential. Fundamentally, however, it epitomized a Jewish ethnicity that strives to deny the national identity of the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel and to strengthen the notion that its society had no particular qualities of its own (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016). This underscores Israel’s policy toward the Arab education system, reflected in a hostile attitude that sees the Palestinian Arab minority as a “security risk” and a nationally destabilizing element. Thus, Israel acted to eliminate this menace by imposing full control over the Arab education system and its inspectorate. While attempts to improve the Arab citizens’ standard of living were made (Abu-Saad, 2013), they were notably inconsistent and unharmonized. Davon, the Prime Minister’s Arab Affairs Advisor, spoke about this at a meeting on October 22, 1957, where the state of the Arab education system was discussed:

The main axis around which these clashing efforts revolve is to keep the Arabs’ sentiments of hate from being translated into practical action against Israeli society and, concurrently, to promote processes of conciliation and integration. Namely, security limitations and development and improvement at the same time (Al-Haj, 2006: 76).

Basing himself on this goal, Davon suggested the following:

What is the goal of Arab education? Presumably: education for the benefit of the state and of the Arab citizens themselves, so that they will not become a “fifth column” or an active force in the service of the enemies who surround the state, on the border or far from it. ... Arab society, settling in over a period of more than thirty years, is violent and hostile to our state, which stands at the beginning of its development. The Arab minority needs to compensate us by proving that it is not defined as, or identifies with, the enemy.

The goal of this manner of thinking, born of skepticism and hostility, was to void the Arab education system of its national content at all levels and in all subjects. Government policymakers labored mightily to reinforce the Palestinian Arab minority’s religio-cultural element and its Israeli citizenship in order to redefine its identity in disregard of its national indicators. These efforts were reflected in a secret document sent by the director of the Muslim Affairs Department to the Minister of Religions at the time, Dr. Hirschberg, and afterwards to the Minister of Education:

We need to reconsider our understanding of the Arab minority. It’s preferable for us to define them as Israeli citizens who are differentiated by religion, as Muslims, Christians of various denominations, Druze, Circassians, Greeks, and Armenians, and not only as Arabs. It’s not self-evident that they’ll learn Arabic. ... It’s not that we have a single problem that’s the Arabs; instead, we have a problem of different ethnic and national groups. And we have to solve this problem separately by emphasizing and strengthening the contradictions among these groups in order to weaken their Arab nature and try to eliminate it. Thus they’ll forget that they’re Arabs and begin to know that they’re Israeli citizens of different affiliations and backgrounds (Al-Haj, 2006: 98).

Government policymakers disagreed about what to do about the identity of the Arab education system. Some favored integrating the system into the general State system; others advocated segregation and total control. The inspector of Arab schools, a man named Shalom, backed the integration approach instead of stressing the cultural uniqueness of the Arab minority. In a secret letter to the Minister of Education dated April 20, 1949, he explained his vision:

I explained in detail my opinion about the problem of the Arabs in this state and the attitude to take toward them in the field of education. In my opinion, we may hope that if our disagreements with them can be eliminated or minimized and the severe contradictions that originate in different points of view can be alleviated, we may enjoy a more tranquil life.

The “segregate and rule” principle that has determined the treatment of the Arab education system since Israel was founded finds expression in several matters and domains: the goals of Arab education, the curricula used, and the dearth of approved textbooks relative to those approved for the Jewish education system. The books endorsed for the Arab system totally repudiate the Arabs’ national sentiments and contribution to humanity (Abu-Saad, 2013). The Palestinian poet Rashid Hussein describes the educational implications of this absence of national content:

It’s a well-known fact that someone who doesn’t respect himself won’t respect others, and someone who doesn’t have national sentiments of his own won’t respect other nations. If the Arab pupil is denied the opportunity to learn about his people, nation, and homeland in school, he’ll be sure to make up for it from [sources] at home and in the street. He’ll willingly accept everything he hears or reads in the newspapers and may therefore get a warped and incorrect understanding of his nationhood. A school that denies him the right to know everything that serves others as a source of pride will become an enemy in his own eyes. Instead of learning the true meaning of a nationhood that’s flush with human sentiments, he’ll learn a fake and incorrect formula. What will the school give the children then? And what graduates will emerge from the school into society? (Nasser & Nasser, 2008: 642).

Researchers’ analysis of the goals that the state wishes to attain by means of the Arab education system leads to one outcome: the state wants to raise a submissive generation that accepts its inferiority to the Jews (Nasser & Nasser, 2008). Israel defines the Arab education system as one that provides “education for Arabs,” reflecting a different attitude toward this system, in terms of its goals, than its approach to the Jewish education system. The inconsistency thus evidenced finds clear expression in the goals of the various topics and contents of the literature, particularly those meant to shape the pupils’ identity and tendencies (Miari, 2014).

**Table 2: Percent of Hours Devoted to General History, Jewish History, and Arab History in Arab and Jewish High Schools**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Subject** | **Arab schools (%)** | **Jewish schools (%)** |
| General history | 60.7 | 59.8 |
| Jewish history | 20.2 | 38.8 |
| Arab history | 19.1 | 1.4 |
| Total | 100 | 100 |

**Al-Haj, 2006: 106.**

The textbooks used in Jewish schools describe Arabs in a symbolic manner as did Amos Oz in his story “Vagabonds and a Snake”—as “Bedouin vagabonds”—and depict them as harmful to human civilization by causing damage and destruction. Consequently, the Jewish national identity is shaped on the basis of denying the other’s existence. The main idea of Oz’s story rests on the Holocaust that the Jews had experienced in Europe, leading them to totally deny the existence of the Palestinian people in Israel, as Bar-Tal and Teichman (2005) describe.

Most textbooks in Jewish schools disregard the existence of the Palestinian people and deny the desires of the Palestinian national movement. The Palestinians’ movement of resistance to Zionism is presented without commentary as destructive and hostile to the Jews, who, as victims of persecution, wish to ordain peace upon their return to their land.

This ethnic inequality has made deep inroads into state policy in all fields, including education policymaking and reforms—a policy determined by new political, economic, and industrial needs. Thus, Arab children’s needs are unimportant and not taken into account when education policy is made (Ghanem & Mustafa, 2005).

The Post-Military Administration Period (1967–1991)

In 1966, when the Military Administration was dismantled, the state began to invoke new strategies and tools to control the country’s Palestinian Arab minority. The socioeconomic gap between Arabs and Jews had solidified and widened during the Military Administration era. This ensured the continuation of the policy of separation and-segregation by national background because the Arab minority was economically dependent on the Jewish majority. After the Military Administration concluded its work, the integration policy underwent a very minor change that had no perceptible impact. To this day, even in the mixed cities, full integration of the populations is very hard to find (Abu-Saad, 2013).

A new discourse about integration reform began after the 1967 war and the occupation of the West Bank. Reflecting the melting-pot idea and policy, it sought to mitigate differences and diasporic characteristics among the Jewish immigrant groups that had reached Israel in the country’s first two decades. The social and cultural differences among these groups led to a mordant public discourse that demanded an end to the separation of weak schoolchildren from strong ones (Al-Haj, 2006). As a first step toward effecting this integration and its attendant reforms, the Knesset decided to establish junior-high schools and do away with comprehensive schools (grades 7–12). Essentially, this was a social reform that took no account of the needs of the Palestinian Arab minority. Therefore, neither the Brauer Committee in 1963 nor the Ramlit Committee in 1966 addressed this minority’s needs and offered no recommendations concerning it (Iuval, 2006).

The integration idea was implemented in full during the 1960s. The serving Minister of Education reorganized the array of schools in a way that turned two transitional stages into three: from eight years of primary school and four years of high school to six years at the primary level, three in junior-high, and three in senior-high, in an attempt to require youngsters to stay in school after finishing their primary education. There was also an attempt to fit new integrational content into the structural change in order to do away with ethnic segregation. This policy found expression in remarks by Levy (1987), according to which the integration program was based on the principle of equality and therefore would alleviate difficulties in adapting and devising different courses of study for students from different backgrounds. The integration scheme that the Knesset approved in 1968 was presented as an attempt by the state to cope with “ethnic gaps.” The education policymakers’ discourse on “ethnic” integration reflected opacity and inability to interpret the plan and its goals, resulting in inadequate preparation for restructuring the array of schools (Eshel & Klein, 1984).

The integration program was designed for nation-building purposes and was defined, in terms of its liberal functional content, as composed of an ideology that reflected Zionist values and saw the state as an agent of modernization and a representative of middle-class interests. The scheme revealed the hardships that Arab schools would face in attaining this concept of integration.

At first glance, the integration plan and the reform seem far from developments in the Arab education system. Although the Arab education system and its schools were included in the structural change, they were given no role in planning these reforms (Abu-Asbe, 2007). The process of making education policy turned out to be an internal Jewish matter, in which Arabs, even those in positions of responsibility, had no right to intervene. In addition, the Arab education system was judged in terms of its contribution and efforts to the desired nation-building enterprise. The education reforms, however, went beyond restructuring the Arab education system and included curricular revisions. Education policy at that time did not aspire to be inclusive, let alone universalistic, even though the two reforms (restructuring and integration) were closely related. Realities in the Arab education system were different. Thus, to understand the evasive treatment of the integration policy and the changes that preceded the reform in the Arab schools, separate description and analysis are needed.

In the early 1970s, after the cancellation of military administration and following the 1967 war, the growing estrangement of Arab students from the state prompted the Minister of Education to undertake a review of policy toward Arab education (Al-Haj, 1995). In February 1972, an advisory committee headed by the Deputy Minister of Education, Aharon Yadlin, released a report on “Basic Trends in Arab Education,” which concluded with a recommendation that the Minister agreed to implement. The report spoke of identifying new directions of action and recommended a curricular overhaul that would allow these changes to incentivize the strengthening of the Palestinian Arab minority’s identification with the state.

Yadlin’s document was a milestone in the history of Israeli education policy. As Al-Haj (1995: 140) explained, “The Yadlin document was important because it marked the first time public attention was directed at the singularity of Arab education and the urgent need to rephrase educational goals in a way that would be suited to Arab students.”

Nevertheless, some of the Palestinian Arab leadership criticized the proposed reforms by arguing that they strove to create “a Israeli Arab all by himself, divorced from the national and cultural roots that ineluctably tie him to the Arab and Palestinian world (Mar’i, 1978: 53). Another committee was established on July 1, 1975, to determine the needs of the Arab education system and to make policy for the 1980s. This panel was headed by Matityahu Peled, a retired general and a professor of Arabic literature who later would be known as a political activist for Israel-Palestinian reconciliation.

Elad Peled, former Director-General of the Ministry of Education, offered an explanation for the policy that would be adopted for the Arab education system in the 1980s. As a co-author of this document, he stated, “The goal of State education in Israel’s Arab society is to base education on foundations of Arab culture ... to love the homeland that all citizens of the state share and the allegiance of this society to the State of Israel—to emphasize everyone’s common interests while promoting excellence among Arabs in Israel” (Peled, 1992: 432).

Accordingly, the policy set forth in this document was based on “Arab cultural fundamentals” and “promoting excellence among Arabs in Israel.” However, Arab students were required to display allegiance to and affiliation with the state, whereas Jewish students were given the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging to the state on the basis of their Jewish heritage. This dichotomy re-emphasized the distancing of the Palestinian Arab minority from every integration project. The pairing of integration and discrimination shows that the Arab minority, as defined in state policy, is not only composed of multiple “minorities” but is also, and simply, voided of both its national and its civic identities, rendering it into a collective of Israeli citizens and Arab indigenes (Al-Haj, 2006). This duality was supported by setting different goals for each of the two education systems, the Arab and the Jewish,. The idea behind these goals was to strengthen the Jewish character of the state while solidifying the liberal perception of citizenship (Peled, 1992). In this spirit, the various reforms continued to serve the state’s goals with no attention whatsoever to the singular nature of the country’s Palestinian Arab minority.

The idea of integration was based on the principle of co-optation by accommodating and annexing various social classes so that it should apply to more than just “foreigners” (Sephardic Jews) and “pioneers” (Western Jews) (Levy, 2002). However, the idea of co-opting the Arab minority evolved into co-optation on the basis of talent, the principle of equal opportunity—the essence of liberalism—the legitimacy of the state in implementing this concept, and its implementation in its early stages. When these reforms began, a change in the direction of social marketing began to occur but its fruits appeared only in the 1980s, when a liberal discourse that envisioned the possibility of recognizing the Palestinian Arab minority as a national one began to be heard (Gershon & Yoav, 2001).

The accelerating integration of Arabs into the labor market (since 1959), the dismantlement of the Military Administration (1966), and the self-connection of the Arab minority in Israel with the Palestinians in the West Bank after 1967 influenced the new methods of accommodation and exclusion that were invoked. The strengthening of national sentiments among the Palestinian Arab minority further underscored the difference between Arabs and Jews—foremost Mizrahi Jews—in the labor market and elevated the government’s concern. As the power of the civic aspect of the Arabs’ identity grew, Arabs became increasingly cognizant of Jewish society and concurrently learned to distinguish themselves, in cognitive terms, from the Palestinians in the occupied territories. More important, daily friction with the Jewish population showed the Palestinian Arab minority how different its level of education was relative to that of the Jews. Here the blurring of borders between Arab nationhood and Israeli citizenship came into clearer view.

Separation, Administrative Autonomy, and Education on Hold (1992–2020)

With the onset of peace talks between the Palestinians and Israel in 1992, contradictions in the state’s attitude toward the Palestinian Arab minority began to appear. Israel’s recognition of the PLO and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, along with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, bolstered the civic side of the identity of the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel and weakened its bond with the Palestinians in the territories. Instead of the peace process playing a crucial role in securing fully equal rights for the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel, subsequent years saw the emergence of a phenomenon of “dual marginality” (Al-Haj, 2005). Parties on the Israeli Right began to delegitimize the existence of the country’s Palestinian Arab minority, escalating the minority’s frustration and stressing the contradiction in the self-definition of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state that must maintain full equality between its Arab and Jewish citizens.

Viewing this contradiction, academics probed its characteristics and raised proposals that would redefine Israel as “the state of all its citizens” (Ghanem & Mustafa, 2009). This encouraged the Palestinian Arab minority to demand cultural, educational, institutional, and also national autonomy (Arar and Abu-Asbe, 2007).These demands had effects in various domains, particularly in striving for full independence of the education system in order to strengthen the identity of the Palestinian Arab minority in the sense of national culture. At the Ministry of Education, autonomy was viewed as a way to attain this kind of education (Jabareen and Agbaria, 2011).

In 2000, amid the Al-Aqsa troubles” that saw the killing of thirteen Arab citizens by Israeli police, the gap in relations between Palestinian Arabs and Jews widened and government’s policies of exclusion and underprivilege toward the country’s Palestinian Arab minority worsened. With this in the background, a group of Arab intellectuals convened and wrote a “future vision” document. The paper proposed a binational solution based on four underlying principles: establishment of a broad coalition of political representatives of different nationalities; both sides sharing the power of veto; the Palestinian Arab minority receiving proportional representation in political institutions and economic and social self-administration; and each group enjoying full independence and autonomy in managing its internal institutions and affairs. The Government—only after these events—launched an ILS 4 billion “nurturing” program meant to narrow the disparities between Arabs and Jews in all areas of life. Several initiatives took shape in this context, such as establishing bilingual schools that accelerate educational encounters between the populations. In 2003, however, due to a cutback in the investment part of the state budget, the process of improving and developing the infrastructure of the Arab education system sustained a serious blow.

The Orr Commission, investigating the “Al-Aqsa troubles,” noted the years of discrimination against the Palestinian Arab minority, foremost in land allocation, municipal budgeting, and the Arab education system (infrastructure and employment). In this context, the panel found the Arab education system short of 1,500 classrooms and reported that the share of Arabs holding matriculation certificates in 2005 was 38.8 percent as against 58.4 percent among Jews, even though the rate had been rising. The Arab dropout rate was more than twice as high as the Jewish one and Arabs accounted for 9 percent of higher-education enrollment despite upward movement. The Government took action to thwart the establishment of a separate university for the Palestinian Arab minority, resulting in the rejection of Arab candidates for Israeli universities and colleges and creating a bottleneck. The universities’ rejection rate of Arab candidates was 45 percent as against 15 percent of Jewish candidates (Arar & Mohaned, 2011). This forced Arab students, especially those who wished to major in prestige subjects such as medicine, engineering, and law, by which they could become self-employed, to attend universities abroad (Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2016).

In what was arguably a positive outcome of the Orr Commission report, the role and involvement of the General Security Service in the education system, which had fomented disgruntlement and distrust in the education system among the Palestinian Arab minority, narrowed.

Many reports that focused on the two education systems, the Arab and the Jewish, illuminated disparities between them, poor achievements on international exams, total administrative failure at all levels, inefficient and unequal utilization of allocated education resources, and rising violence in Arab schools (Dovrat, 2005). These reports led to a comprehensive study that tested the path between integrating the two education systems and giving the Arab system administrative autonomy. Many saw the new liberal discourse as speaking in contradictory voices (Khoury, Sayf Al-Din, and Abu-Saad, 2013). In its report, the Dovrat Commission recommended de jure recognition of a specific education “stream” for the Palestinian Arab minority because “there is a nation, a language and, a unique and different way of life.” Concurrently, however, “Despite the contrast between the two, both the separate Arab heritage and the imperative of full loyalty to the State of Israel should find expression” (Dovrat 2005: 208). The commission deferred discussion of the question of the kind of administrative autonomy for the Arab education system that might lead to autonomous collective inspection of the schools. The report issued a clear warning on this topic, headed “The Status of Arab Education within State Education.”

The Dovrat rapporteurs saw no incompatibility between the goals of Arab education and those of general public education as long as certain additions would be incorporated into the law, including “the advancement and consolidation of the Arabs’ personal and collective identity as an educational, spiritual, and social foundation for their full integration into Israeli society and the Jewish and democratic state, [and] recognition of the Arab culture, the Arabic language, and the history of the Palestinian people” (Dovrat, 2005).

Thus the duality was plain: the right of the Palestinian Arab minority to emphasize its characteristics and strengthen its identity in the education system would be recognized but it would have to attain the state’s general educational objectives. The reference to administrative autonomy was essentially symbolic: The recommendation in this regard—naming Arab representatives and advisors to the Minister of Education’s advisory board—did not amount, in practice, to turning a new leaf in relations between the state and the Palestinian Arab minority; instead, it concerned institutional arrangements that were meant to continue applying the principle of control.

In response to the Dovrat report, the Supreme Monitoring Committee for Arab Education Affairs, established in 1980, issued a statement that summed up its remarks on and responses to the report (2005). In its statement, the committee welcomed the Dovrat Commission’s recognition of the differences and disparities between the Arab education system and its Jewish counterpart in terms of inputs and outputs; concurrently, however, it noted that no plan that might narrow these gaps, let alone eliminate them, had been proposed. Furthermore, the Dovrat report made no reference to the implications of the discriminatory policy that had been crippling the Arab education system for decades in terms of paltry investment and contents far removed from national principles. Continuing, the Monitoring Committee presented three basic points that reflect difficulties related to the goals of the Arab education system: (1) the ongoing controversy about formulating education policy in regard to the system, given the view of the Arabs as a hostile minority that must constantly demonstrate its loyalty; (2) linkage of the matter of the Arab public’s “absolute loyalty” to the universal right to education, with the demand for loyalty evoked as a parallel to this right; and (3) as stated in reference to the goals of Arab education and the requirements expressed in the Dovrat report, “The Arab population should participate in improving the status of its education by assuming responsibility for their education” (Abu-Asbe, 2007: 4).

The new liberal discourse reflected in the Dovrat report portrayed the State of Israel in two contrasting forms: a strong country that imposes its control on the Arab schools and holds them responsible for their achievements, the low economic status of the Arab minority, and having to study the trends, perceptions, and national tendencies of the Arab students, and then again as a weak country that privatizes public services and evades its responsibility for social welfare. The Arab minority was handed the burden of both forms of this policy: Israel as a strong country that controls this minority constantly and as a feeble state that shirks responsibility for the status of its Arab minority.

The Dovrat document was greeted with various and clashing voices. Some saw the privatization trend as an opportunity to be rid of state control; others construed it as the abdication of state responsibility for social welfare, aggravating a larger crisis—the dire condition of the local authorities, verging on collapse—that was reflected foremost in education (Arar & Abu-Asbe, 2013).

In the midst of this reality, the Arab minority in Israel tried to put forward alternative proposals and programs that might absolve it of the state’s absolute domination. For example, the Supreme Monitoring Committee for Arab Education Affairs issued recommendations aimed at advancing Arab students’ cultural and national identity. In this context, in 2007, before announcing a strike designed to raise consciousness about the declining state of Arab education, representatives of the committee met with the Minister of Education, Professor Yuli Tamir, and expressed their displeasure with the neglect, exclusion, and ongoing discrimination that they were facing (Kashti, 2008). The meeting led to the formation of several committees composed jointly of representatives of the Monitoring Committee and the Ministry of Education for the purpose of reviewing the status of Arab education and recommending improvements. One of these the committees, the building committee, proposed the construction of 8,600 classrooms by 2012 as a crucial step toward mitigating the deficiencies in the Arab education system and narrowing its gaps relative to the Jewish system. Another panel looked into Arab students’ achievements on national and international exams and found them only half as high as those of their Jewish peers; what is more, the percent entitled to matriculation certificates or graduation diplomas from quality high schools was much lower than among Jewish students, creating a hurdle to university enrollment (see Table 3 below). Accordingly, the committee recommended improving the quality of teaching of Arabic language, Arabic literature, and mathematics, and the creation of a mechanism that would assure the provision of more competent and effective education. Another committee, tasked with examining learning disorders in the Arab education system and finding ways to cope with them, found a shortage of educational counselors, psychologists, and didactic evaluators. The only committee that refused to submit a joint document and recommendations was the one that examined the educational contents of the Arab schools’ curricula.

The Ministry of Education was persuaded to elevate the recommendation calling for improvements in teaching Arabic language and literature to the highest priority, along with improving math teaching and Arab students’ achievements generally. It absolved itself of responsibility for the Monitoring Committee’s other recommendations (2004: 6), realizing that they amounted to explicit recognition of the Arab minority’s historical and cultural narrative and its full and meaningful participation. In this spirit, the Monitoring Committee announced the establishment of a professional educational council that would tackle the problems of the Arab education system including the content of the curricular materials and the need to reorganize the system, formulate a specific educational policy, and tailor curricula to the Arab minority’s aspirations—all of which based on the hoped-for enshrinement of the Arab education system underpinnings in statute. The Minister of Education, now Gideon Saar, disavowed these recommendations, thus leaving Arab education “on hold” (Jabareen & Agbaria, 2011).

In July 2010, the Supreme Monitoring Committee for Arab Education Affairs announced the formation of the Arab Pedagogical Council. In its statement, it expressed the entitlement of the Arab minority, as an indigenous one, to preserve its heritage and its national identity and to determine its education policy and its contents on its own (Jabareen & Agbaria, 2011). Further justification for the creation of the Council was the demand that the Arab education system be equalized in status to the State Religious system and the haredi system, both of which enjoyed curricular autonomy. The Monitoring Committee stressed that setting up an autonomous Arab education system was not a manifestation of separatism but the opposite: integration and expression the collective identity of the Arab minority in an ongoing relationship with the State, emphasizing commonality and aspiring to create an inclusive civic culture in Israel (Harpaz, 2011: 38–43).

In October 2011, the Supreme Monitoring Committee published the goals of the Arab Pedagogical Council in a document titled “Goals of Education and Teaching of the Palestinian Minority in Israel.” The principal aims enumerated in this document included enhancing Arab students’ proficiency in Arabic as a language that expresses identity and belonging and as a vehicle for the creation of communication, culture and research; strengthening national identity among Arab students such that it would be based on “cohesion among members of the Palestinian people, reinforcement of the Palestinian memory and narrative, adherence to the historical and political rights of the Palestinian people, and cultural, religious, and social pluralism”; and encouraging Arab students to maintain a constructive dialogue with the other—the Israeli Jew—from the perspective of shared life in one homeland, cooperation, equality, and mutual respect (Rudnitzky, 2015: 96).

According to the approach adopted by the Ministry of Education, the Arab minority should be integrated and not given educational autonomy. In the case of the Arab Pedagogical Council, even though those behind its establishment stressed that it would operate under the Ministry of Education umbrella, the state has not gone along with the idea and the Ministry has not recognized the council it thus far.

The disparities between the Arab and the Jewish education systems are manifested in shortages of buildings, classrooms, laboratories, and sports facilities. In a report published in 2017 on the basis of Ministry of Education data, the Taub Center for Social Policy Studies noted the persistence of very large budget disparities between the systems (Weiss, 2017). According to a study prepared by the Knesset Research and Information Center in 2015, in the weakest disadvantage group at the primary level of education—the one in which most Arab pupils are placed (62 percent) as against only 6 percent of Jewish pupils—a Jewish pupil receives 24 percent more in annual budgeting than does an Arab pupil (Viniger, 2015: 5–6).

**Table 3: Jewish–Arab Disparities in Education, Preschool through University, Caused by Israel Government Policies, 2016–2019**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Area of comparison** | **Jewish population** | **Arab population** |
| Population under age 17 (2014 statistics) | 2,058,500 | 685,000 |
| Percent of children registered before preschool at age 2 | 61.3 | 13.7 |
| Percent of children enrolled in preschool at age 4 | 93.3 | 82.8 |
| Percent of children enrolled in preschool at age 5 | 97.5 | 94.5 |
| Average class size, primary schools (represented by the number closest to the true figure) | 26.5 | 26.7 |
| Percent of special-needs children who do not receive appropriate medical care | 39 | 71 |
| School dropout rate, age 9–18 | 1.9 | 4.2 |
| School dropout rate, age 6–12 | 2.1 | 3.5 |
| Percent eligible for matriculation certificate that satisfies minimum university admission requirements  | 58.7 | 28.6 |
| Avg. psychometric exam score that satisfies university admission requirements (maximum score: 800) | Males | 599 | 506 |
| Females | 565 | 477 |
| Percent applying for first-year university studies and rejected | 23.4 | 40.9 |
| Percent of population aged 18–39 attending university and going for bachelor’s degree | 3.1 | 1.9 |
| Percent of population aged 18–39 attending all higher-education institutes and going for bachelor’s degree | 7.6 | 5.1 |
| Percent of population aged 18–39 attending university and going for master’s degree | 1.4 | 0.5 |
| Percent of degree-holders from all higher-education institutes | Bachelor’s | 88.0 | 12.0 |
| Master’s | 89.8 | 10.2 |
| Ph.D. | 95.9 | 64.1 |

**Source: ICBS, 2018**

The data in the table above show the results of the state’s policies toward the Arab education system and demonstrate that the system is “on hold.” On the one hand, the Arab system has been waiting for equal attention to that of the Jewish system ever since the State was established in 1948. On the other hand, it is waiting for Arab local authorities and the “third sector” to intervene by providing programs and initiatives that would improve matters. Thus, the Arab education system remains in a situation of accepting the disparities in its affiliation with and inferiority to the Jewish system.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study examined main and basic changes in Israel’s education policy toward the Arab education system since 1948. Despite three major and fundamental changes reviewed above, the Arab education system has remained under full State control for decades and its situation has not improved (Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2016). The policy that underlies this reflects a situation of hostility, discrimination, skepticism, and suspicion toward the country’s Palestinian Arab minority—a policy that has crimped the minority’s role in making its own education policy (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016).

In the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the system operated in accordance with the general educational goals set forth in the Compulsory Education Law. Subsequently, the Dovrat Commission added two reforms that had a reorganizational effect on the Israeli education system at large—“New Horizon,” proposed by the Ministry of Education, and “Courage to Change,” bruited by the National Teachers Organization (Miari, 2014). These reforms were the outcomes of the work of several committees composed of education policymakers and researchers who wished to define the goals of Arab education in Israel (Abu-Saad, 2006).

The Arab minority in Israel has not been given administrative autonomy, control, or even participation in defining its educational goals and the curricula that its schools are to implement (Nasser & Nasser, 2008). The curricula used in the Arab education system remain separate and different from those invoked in the Jewish system. Despite this divide, the Pedagogical Secretariat at the Ministry of Education continues to dictate the Arab system’s contents and curricula, making scanty reference to the Palestinian narrative and preferring the selective and fickle application of a narrative chosen by Jewish educators and researchers. This narrative is often presented such that its goal is to blur the Palestinian identity of the Arab minority and replace it with a general, inchoate, and non-specific international identity (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005).

Dafna Golan-Agnon, chair of the Equal Educational Opportunity Committee at the Ministry of Education in 1999–2001, stated: “The Arab education system lacks not only powers and resources but also adequate representation at meetings of the Pedagogical Secretariat, the body that we call ‘the plant.’ Appointments to this panel are subject to the oversight and decisions of the security apparatus” (Golan-Agnon, 2006: 1080).

As stated, the Israeli policy toward the Arab education system originates in fear, skepticism, distrust, and the underlying assumption that the Arab minority is fundamentally hostile to the State. Israel’s prime goal is to strengthen its Jewishness from the national standpoint, a definition that clashes with its consent to give the Arab minority national and cultural representation, a cause that evokes concern among decision-makers (Gibton, 2011). The result is a policy of marginalization, isolation, and control, reflected in disparities in resource allocation to the Arab and Jewish education systems. In view of this policy, the Arab education system has suffered from a large accretion of adversity, flaws, and deficiencies in all fields since the State was established.

As a consequence of the above, government policies and the value of civic equality—the cornerstone of any democratic system—have been clashing and inconsistent. In addition, there has been no attempt whatsoever to take affirmative action that would compensate society’s vulnerable sectors for some of the injustice that they have faced over the years. By emphasizing positive developments in the Arab education system, one merely presents an optimistic view of the real picture, which reflects the gaps between the school systems, the Arab and the Jewish.

Despite the auspicious developments and trends that it has seen, the Arab education system in Israel still faces many challenges and disparities that need to be narrowed, both relative to the Jewish education system and relative to the needs of the changing and evolving Arab population as reflected in the exigencies of the Israeli economy.

The policy that was introduced to mitigate inequality between the Arab and the Jewish education systems came about in response to, or as the inevitable result of, the existing situation. The effects of this policy have been short-term and confined to limited fields, such as building classrooms. These actions are inadequate; it is urgently necessary to produce a comprehensive policy for several years to come, based on full understanding of the singularity of Israel’s Arab minority in terms of its values, culture, and social problems (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016).

Seventy years after the State of Israel was established, the challenge that it and the Arab education system face concerns not only assuring larger budgets but also the essence and contents of the field. The better attuned the curricula in the Arab system are to the students’ culture, the more Arab society will be able to bring its human resources to fruition—to the benefit not only of the Arab population but to the Israeli economy and society at large.

Therefore, the Arab minority must be a central partner in defining the educational goals of its education system and the scholastic contents that its schools will teach. The system should be given administrative autonomy and equality in resource allocation. A transition is needed from maintaining the policy of exclusion and tyranny, control and exclusion in coping with the Arab education system (Miari, 2014) to optimal integration of the Arab population into the society, employment, and economy of Israel.