**Characteristics and Challenges of Arabic Instruction in Israeli-Jewish Society:**

**On the Need for a Radical Educational Policy for Arabic Studies in Israel**

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**Abstract**

Arabic in Israel has undergone many vicissitudes. From being the language of the majority prior to the state’s establishment in 1948 to being the language of the Palestinian-Arab minority in the shadow of the Arab-Israeli conflict, it has changed from being the language of the neighbor to the language of the enemy. With the establishment of the state, Arabic was designated as an official language alongside Hebrew, but in reality its status has been inferior to that of Hebrew in every way. The July 2018 Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, declared that “[t]he Arabic language has a special status in the state; Regulating the use of Arabic in state institutions or by them will be set in law.” This law has essentially revoked the status of Arabic as an official language in Israel, despite the country’s location in the heart of the predominantly Arab Middle East, where Arabic is the lingua franca.

In this article I will examine the general contours of Arabic instruction in Israeli-Hebrew schools with regard to the political, social, cultural, historical and pedagogical issues which shape it. Using this framework, I will examine the challenges that Arabic instruction faces in the Israeli education system, and I will emphasize the potential benefits of studying Arabic for Israeli society in general, as well as the dissonance between these benefits for Israeli Jews and the marginalized place the language currently holds among Jews in Israel, reflected by its marginal place in schools and Israeli civil society. An analysis of the challenges facing Arabic instruction in Israel shows that the main factor shaping the teaching of the subject since the state’s founding has been security, i.e. Arabic is studied as the language of the enemy and not of the neighbor. In light of this ongoing situation, a revolutionary educational policy is required in order “to civilianize” Arabic instruction and transform it into a genuine bridge for understanding and communication between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel, as well as Israel’s neighbors elsewhere in the Middle East.

**Introduction**

Teaching a language is not a simple task, especially a foreign or second language which is taught under complicated social and political conditions, as is the case for Arabic in Israel.[[1]](#footnote-2) Many variables influence the way language is taught and acquired; some of these are internal, such as the student’s learning motivation, the effort required and the effort put in, as well as the student’s abilities. Other variables are external, such as study conditions, the chosen pedagogical approach, and the political atmosphere in which the language is learned (see for example: Dubiner, 2012; Shohamy & Tannenbaum 2018).

Arabic instruction in Israel is a special and complicated case that is unparalleled around the world. Arabic in Israel has undergone many vicissitudes. From being the language of the majority prior to the establishment in 1948 to being the language of the Palestinian-Arab minority in the shadow of the Arab-Israeli conflict, it has gone from being the language of the neighbor to the language of the enemy. With the establishment of the state, Arabic was designated as an official language alongside Hebrew, but in reality its status has been inferior to that of Hebrew in every way. The July 2018 Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, declared that “[t]he Arabic language has a special status in the state; Regulating the use of Arabic in state institutions or by them will be set in law.” This law has essentially revoked the status of Arabic as an official language in Israel, despite the country’s location in the heart of the predominantly Arab Middle East, where Arabic is the lingua franca. In addition, Arabic is the native language of a large portion of the Jews in Israel, and there is an important relationship between Hebrew and Arabic.

However, when one examines students’ educational achievements and ability to use the language, despite the fact that Arabic is obligatory in middle schools and thousands of students choose to study Arabic for their matriculation (known as the Bagrut), it is overwhelmingly clear that the Jewish population in Israel does not speak Arabic, that Arabic is at the margins of public life, and that graduates of the Hebrew education system are not capable of making substantial use of it (see for example: Landau-Tasseron et al, 2012; Shenhav et al, 2015). A 2015 study regarding knowledge of Arabic among Israeli Jews found that only 10 percent of participants claimed to have fluency in Arabic or to speak it well. This rate plummets even further with regard to basic reading skills (2.6 percent) and drops down to 1.4 percent for basic writing skills, with only 0.4 percent reporting advanced writing skills. In addition, a 2011 survey by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics found that only 1.6 percent of Jewish Israeli citizens (age 20 and over) who studied Arabic in school are capable of holding a conversation in Arabic, as opposed to 40.5 percent of the same age who are capable of holding a conversation in English (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Only 8.6 percent are capable of managing day-to-day conversation in Arabic, as opposed to 59.5 percent in English (Shenhav et al, 2015). Arabic holds an inferior place in the public space; its precarious status reflects the power relations between the Arab minority and the Jewish majority in Israel, as well as attitudes toward the language’s speakers (see for example: Belikoff, 2018; Detel, 2018).

Israeli Jews are ambivalent towards Arabic and its place in Israeli-Jewish society. It is approached as a “problem” (Amara, Donitsa-Schmidt & Mar’i, 2016), and Arabs are viewed as a “problem” in Israeli society. The use of Arabic in the public space is not encouraged, nor are Jews encouraged to study the language, and the language therefore carries relatively little symbolic power in the public space. According to Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1991), Hebrew speakers have more cultural capital in the language market than Arabic speakers. Hebrew is the dominant language in Israel, while Arabic is used solely by Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel (Saban & Amara, 2002). It is important to emphasize that, due to the the Arab-Israeli conflict, knowledge of Arabic is considered important primarily because of security issues (Mendel, 2014). As a result, it is no wonder that the teaching of Arabic to Jews is mainly driven by security considerations (Him-Younes and Malka, 2006).

For these reasons, the main motivator for Jews studying Arabic is a desire to join the military intelligence corps (Him-Younes and Malka, 2006; Mendel, 2020). This has generated a closed Israeli-Jewish discourse regarding Arabic teaching, led by figures from the fields of education and security (Mendel, 2014). In addition, the roots of Arabic instruction pedagogy in Israel have always been philological and Western – it has always been seen as a foreign language that should be taught in Hebrew, with an emphasis on translation, syntax and grammar (Mendel, 2020; Uhlmann, 2017). This has resulted in a language that is disconnected from its natural surroundings and fails to form a bridge between cultures.

I will now describe the state of Arabic instruction in Israeli public Hebrew schools with regard to the political, social, cultural, historical and pedagogical issues which shape it. I will look at the challenges facing Arabic teaching in the Israeli education system, and I will explain the potential benefits of studying Arabic for Israeli society and the dissonance between these potential benefits and the language’s place on the margins of the Israeli education system and civil society.

**Arabic’s Importance for Jewish Society in Israel**

Is Arabic truly essential for Jews in Israel? In this article, I will argue that Arabic is essential for Jews and that it should be viewed as a second language and not as a foreign language as is the case in Israel today. Knowledge of Arabic is an existential necessity for Israeli-Jewish society, in the sociocultural and not just the linguistic arena (on these issues see: Abu Rass and Maayan, 2014; Amara, Donitsa-Schmidt & Mar’i, 2016; Amara, Azaizah, Hertz-Lazarovich & Mor-Sommerfeld, 2008; Levin, 1992; Spolsky, Shohamy & Donitsa-Schmidt, 1995). Arabic’s cultural, social and civic capital has great potential for strengthening the fabric of life in Israel, both for the native Arab population in the Arabic-speaking sphere and for speakers of the Hebrew language, Arabic’s Semitic cousin. The following are a number of the reasons as to why the study of Arabic can be of great benefit to Israeli society:

1. Arabs make up 20 percent of Israel’s population. A genuine exposure to the culture of Arab citizens of Israel requires familiarity with Arabic (Mar’i, 2016). According to this persective, language is a bridge between peoples and cultures. Therefore, knowledge of Arabic is important because it can make a contribution to the creation of direct, equal and mutual familiarity between Jews and Arabs in Israel. Likewise, by demonstrating respect to Arabic, the state can show that it takes Arabs’ culture seriously and that it truly wants to promote equality and peace between citizens.

2. Israel is a linguistic island inside an ocean where Arabic dominates every area of life. Israel is a Middle Eastern country which is separated from its neighbors religiously, nationally and linguistically in a space where Arabic is the dominant language. For Israel to become part of the region, and to enjoy peaceful and positive relations with its neighbors, it must undergo a process of geographical reconsideration and examination, and first and foremost it must enable its entire population to learn Arabic.

3. A significant portion of the Israeli-Jewish population (Mizrahi Jews) has its origins in Arab and Islamic countries, where the dominant language and culture were Arabic. Studying Arabic is vital for preserving the important historic and cultural wellspring of Jews from these lands.

4. Learning to communicate in Arabic as well as English and other languages as part of a policy for promoting a multilingual education: a multilingual education policy has many advantages, including cognitive, economic, social (encouragement of tolerance and openness), cultural and emotional development (Shohamy & Tannenbaum, 2018).

5. Arabic is a Semitic language that has been spoken continuously and has never needed “resurrecting.” Knowledge of Arabic will thus also strengthen knowledge of Hebrew, another Semitic language. There are similarities in expression, vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax; this means that Arabic study has the potential to deepen one’s understanding of Hebrew.

Therefore, learning Arabic has great potential benefit for Israeli-Jewish society, both in order to deepen knowledge and to promote an equal civil society which honors the two local languages. Given all this, if Arabic is so crucial for Israeli society, why does it have a relatively marginal place in Hebrew schools? Why is it not an obligatory subject? Why is there a focus on abilities related to translation and grammar? And how can it be that a significant portion of Israeli Jews have never been exposed to Arabic study, and those who have studied are mostly improficient in the language?

**Teaching Arabic in Hebrew Schools: Contexts, Characteristics and Challenges**

In the following section I will examine the environment in which Arabic is taught in Israel, and the way in which Israeli political discourse influences and frames the manner in which the language is taught. I will then present the key features which characterize Arabic instruction in Israel. Finally, I will look at the challenges which face Arabic teaching in the country.

**The Context in which Arabic is Taught: Between Civic and Security Motivations**

The Arab-Israeli conflict has transformed the study of Arabic in Israel into something which stands apart from all other subjects taught in Israeli schools (Mendel, 2020). It deals directly with the language of the Arabs – Israeli citizens, Palestinians, and Arabs elsewhere in the Middle East – and is a channel for knowledge of the Arab world. Since the 1950s, the main motivation for Arabic study in Israel has been nationalist-security-intelligence-related: as a result, the discourse regarding Arabic study has been led solely by Jews. At the same time, Hebrew became the dominant language and has remained so ever since (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999). This process reached its peak in July 2018 with the passing of the Nation-State Law, which left Hebrew as the sole official language in the country.

In addition, the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the violence, distancing and suspicion it entails—especially during tense periods—often transforms Arabic speakers into “immediately suspect,” while Arabic suffers from negative associations among many Israeli Jews. As a result, many Jews are afraid of Arabic and those who speak it.[[2]](#footnote-3) Because of this, most Israelis think that Arabic should be studied first and foremost for “security needs” and so as to “know the enemy” (Shenhav et. al., 2015). Either way, and despite the security motivations for studying the language, very few Jews in Israel know Arabic. This demonstrates a failure in thinking about Arabic, both inside and outside of schools. Yonatan Mendel (Mendel, 2014) describes the structuring of the field of Arabic in Israel as a process which has created a sociolect of “Israeli Arabic” that exists solely in Israeli-Jewish society. This sociolect is drawn from the philological elements which characterize Arabic study in Israel – primarily knowledge of syntax and grammar (he refers to this critically as the “Latinization of Arabic”) and from the security motivations mentioned above. As a result, Arabic in Israel has become an artificial, limited and passive language which exists almost without relation to the traditions, cultures and people who use it in a civic and positive way (Mendel, 2014). In short, this sociolect is for Israeli Jews, exists mainly for security purposes, and is not an authentic language spoken by locals.

Arabic has become a language that Jews hardly use in public, a language which frightens the authorities, who have now revoked its official status. This reality shows the jarring absence of other considerations—civic, social, and cultural—on the basis of which teaching Arabic in Israel is a worthy endeavor. It also explains the jarring absence of Arab decision-makers shaping Arabic education policy, and the lack of cooperation between the Education Ministry and civil society organizations, institutions, schools, community centers, municipalities and other bodies representing Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel.

The attempt to reframe Arabic study on the basis of civic and social considerations—a process I have previously labeled the **“civilianization of the Arabic language”**—has faced difficulties arising from the prevailing political climate in Israel. This makes it challenging to depict Arabic positively as a civic and cultural language (Amara et. al., 2008). This is an issue which pertains to the entire political system in Israel, and not just the field of education. Israel is a country in which the Prime Minister refers to Arab citizens “galloping to the polls” who need to be combated quickly, and which passes the Nation-State Law, creating a new situation which labels Arab citizens as outsiders in the Jewish State. In this context, it is impossible to separate Israeli Jews’ attitude to Arabs from their attitude to the Arabic language (Amara, 2018). The influence of the political climate in Israel also permeates into classrooms (Bar-Tal, 1999) and plays its part in framing how people perceive Arabic.

As a result, attempts by the Ministry of Education to improve Arabic teaching in Jewish schools through structural or organizational reforms have not been effective in the face of continued hostility towards Arabic culture, which is common in the Israeli education system and is influenced by the political atmosphere in Israel (for more see Dror, 2004, Elazar-Halevi, 2014).

In light of all of the above, it is clear that the **political environment** in which Arabic is studied in Israel is the main challenge facing Arabic instruction in the country. As long as the cultural and civic aspects of the language do not find expression in Israeli-Jewish schools, there will be no substantial change to the way the language is taught or to students’ achievements.

**Characteristics of Arabic Instruction in Hebrew Schools: On Translation and Grammar**

Over the last few years the Ministry of Education has introduced a number of innovations to Arabic study in Hebrew schools, including, for example, learning about the world of Islam.[[3]](#footnote-4)Despite this, the teaching of Arabic in Israel still emphasizes skills in grammar, translation and memorization (Pragman, 2006). A significant portion of the time is devoted to studying linguistic characteristics of literary Arabic and translating texts, mainly from newspapers. Hardly any time is devoted to acquiring speaking skills, the lessons are not delivered in Arabic (literary or spoken) and many of the teachers in the Jewish school system say are incapable of doing so (Uhlmann, 2017). In other words, Arabic is taught as a dead language, like Latin. It is taught for the purpose of reading but not for speech and communication, and not as a broad, living language. Even in Israeli universities and colleges, Arabic is usually taught in Hebrew (Amara, Donitsa-Schmidt & Mar’i, 2016). This approach apparently stems from a colonialist-imperialist orientation, common in the Israeli academy, which views Arabic as an inferior language.

An exception to this can be found in two pioneering programs for teaching Arabic with advanced methods that were introduced in two different universities in 1991. The Department of Islamic and Middle East Studies at the Hebrew University teaches literary Arabic *in* literary Arabic and is taught by teachers whose mother tongue is Arabic or who speak it fluently. The students study Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and follow the approach of the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). After a grounding in the standard language they begin to practice spoken Arabic in and out of class.[[4]](#footnote-5) The Department of Middle East Studies at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev takes an integrative approach to Arabic instruction, combining literary and spoken Arabic as two complementary parts of the same whole. This is enriched by a teaching method developed by Dr. Mundar Younes (Younes, 2014) from Cornell University in the United States: one that simultaneously teaches the two varieties of the language. From the very first lesson, students study **Arabic in Arabic –** spoken Arabic for speech and literary Arabic for reading and writing. As at the Hebrew University, all the teachers and instructors speak Arabic as a mother tongue or equivalent level.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Most Israeli educational institutions, however, follow the ‘translation-grammar in its philological contexts’ approach (Uhlmann, 2017). This is in contrast to the communicative approach, which emphasizes the equal importance of all four language skills – reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

It is important to emphasize that the question of whether to begin Arabic study with literary or spoken Arabic has always been a matter of debate (Brosh, 1992; Or, 2011). A concept which constantly arises in this context (in my opinion, far too frequently) is that of diglossia: the distinction between the ‘high’, written (literary) Arabic and the ‘low’ Arabic which is spoken in its different dialects (Ferguson, 1959). However, scholars have shown that the picture is more complicated than the dichotomy between ‘high’ and ‘low’ language. Take, for example, the research by the Egyptian scholar El-Said Mahmed Bedoui (1973), which described five levels of the Arabic language, while other researchers have shown that spoken and literary Arabic exist on a single plain and are not two separate languages (Hary, 1996).

Even more important in this context are the studies which advocate for learning spoken and literary Arabic in a way that recognizes how they complement one another, and that this is much more efficient than merely learning literary Arabic (Huntley, 2014; Featherstone, 2017; Younes, 2006; Palmer, 2007; Kassem & Mansour , 2017). In my view, the integrative method is far preferable to the single-stage dichotomous method, since it deals far more effectively with the reality – that the language combines different elements – and it prepares the student in the best way possible for learning Arabic (Younes, 2014). Therefore, I agree that spoken and literary Arabic complement and feed into one another, and that they exist on one continuous plain. The dichotomous approach, according to which literary and spoken Arabic should be taught separately and not together, does not advance the skills that we seek to promote, namely being able to communicate in Arabic, to express oneself in speech and writing, and normalizing Arabic in the education system, so that it can taught in the same civic way that English and French are taught.

Moreover, when weighing up which form of Arabic to teach, one has to think about the resources which are available. The weekly hours and academic years allocated to Arabic are insufficient to learn all the required skills. In the current format the learning is structured in a way that two years of studying spoken Arabic in fifth and sixth grade are supposed to interact with what is studied in seventh to ninth grade and contribute to studies in tenth-to-twelfth grades for those who choose to take the language as an elective, however this structure is lacking.In the existing structure,there is no chance that students will understand Arabic as a single language, because in middle school they only study literary Arabic: Most teachers in Israeli-Jewish schools only know literary Arabic, so that is what is taught.

There is a massive gap between Arabic teaching methods in Israel and those in the rest of the world. The leading programs at American and British universities do not distinguish between literary and spoken Arabic, treating them as different registers on a single linguistic plane (for more see Younes, 2014; Ryding, 2018). Moreover, they are built by teams in which Arab researchers played a key role. These programs are founded on political-social knowledge from the Arab world and place at their center young Arab figures who are incorporated into modern texts. These programs provide students with deep, humane, and stimulating educational experiences (Younes, 2014).

In shaping Arabic study programs in Israeli-Jewish schools, much can be learned from these programs. As already mentioned, Arabic teaching in Israel is still based on the philological method, which focuses on translation and grammar: these are the skills which are assessed for matriculation. The students almost exclusively learn literary Arabic. Study materials are taken from newspapers and television news. Unlike textbooks used in other Western countries (the updated edition of *Al-Kitāb* and the groundbreaking *Arabiyyat al-Nās*), the textbooks used in Israeli schools and universities do not feature real, human Arab figures who might provide students with the opportunity of identifying with the material they are studying. This is a result of the security-intelligence paradigm. There is a closed discourse regarding the study of Arabic in Israel, mostly led by Jewish experts in Arab affairs (known as *mizraḥanim* in Hebrew). Unlike in most Arabic programs in the world, native speakers do not play a key role (Mendel, 2020).

**Challenges Facing Arabic Instruction in Israel**

Research shows that Jewish students who study Arabic for matriculation have a very low level of competence in the language (Belikoff, 2018; Landau-Tesseron et al, 2012). Even students who study for all five matriculation units and who are capable of reading texts and conjugating verbs do not have other basic language skills, whether active (speaking and writing) or passive (listening and reading). This trend is heavily influenced by the major challenges facing the field of Arabic instruction in Israel, which I will now describe.

The **first challenge** is fear of the other and the marking of him as an enemy: this is a major issue which has permeated everything connected to teaching Arabic in Israel. As already mentioned, the environment in which Arabic is taught in Israel is influenced by the Israeli-Arab conflict in general and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular. In addition, language is a significant roadblock when it comes to solving the conflict (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2010). Fear of Arabic speakers shapes students’ fear of everything connected to the Arab, including the language itself. It also impacts opportunities for encounters between Jews and Arabs in Israel. Such encounters are essential for engendering an appreciation for the civil (and not military or security-related) purposes of language acquisition. While there are encounters between Jewish and Arab students, generally under the banner of “coexistence,” these are limited, short-term, and, if the aim is for the students to teach one another their language, they are run in a way which holds no benefit for either side (Amara et al, 2008). In practice, the Arab students—who themselves often struggle with Hebrew—need to act as teachers and speak mostly in Hebrew, as the Jewish students lack even basic Arabic skills. These encounters are not structured and do not reflect long-term planning or policies. Mutual exchanges, in which each side meets the other in a civilian environment and not a security one, have the potential to reduce tension, alienation and fear, and to reframe the civic importance of studying Arabic. Therefore, it is important that strategic policy planning incorporate encounters and facilitators.

In Israeli daily life most people do not feel a need to learn Arabic, because most Arab citizens speak Hebrew—and therefore Jewish citizens can get by without knowing Arabic. The Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel, whose inferior position is also reflected in language policy, needs to learn Hebrew in order to advance in every area of life. Despite this, Jews are not required to learn Arabic or even to consider studying Arabic for reasons of communication or consideration towards the Arab minority in Israel. For its part, the state, instead of encouraging the use of Arabic as a civic language, seeks to harm its prestige and make it disappear from public view, for example through canceling its status as an official language in the framework of the Nation-State Law. The goal of this law is to weaken the legal status of Arabic and to narrow its social standing. Moreover, through this political act of degrading the status of Arabic, legislators seek to harm the position of Arabic speakers and to erase their identity and presence in Israel, as well as their calls for equality.[[6]](#footnote-7)

**Second challenge:** The Education Ministry has reduced the number of hours and academic years devoted to Arabic study. A 1994 report by Bar-Ilan University’s Language Policy Research Center (LPRC) found that 400 hours of study per year are necessary for learning a foreign language, defined as the amount needed to function as a tourist in a foreign country (Serrano, 2010).[[7]](#footnote-8) In 1995 the Education Ministry introduced a program which allocated three weekly hours of obligatory Arabic study in junior high; as a result, up to the end of the eighth grade in Israeli-Jewish schools, pupils study only 300 hours of Arabic in total.[[8]](#footnote-9) And, despite supposedly being obligatory, in practice many pupils do not study it, either because they are offered a choice between Arabic and French in middle school, or because study of Arabic is enforced less than, for example, English (according to some publications, exemptions from studying Arabic in middle school are far more common than for other subjects). In addition, aside from the time spent learning Arabic, one also has to take into account the teaching quality, methods, and the teachers’ abilities (Duvinir, 2012).

**Third Challenge:** The low numbers of Jewish students who study Arabic. Despite Arabic being a compulsory subject in middle school, only between two and four percent of students choose to study it for matriculation. In elementary school the situation is even worse: there are only a few schools where Arabic is taught in fifth and sixth grades (Belikoff, 2018). It could be that these tiny numbers reflect a lack of motivation which comes from knowing that, even after years of study, some students lack basic mastery of the language. In other words, the conditions necessary for studying Arabic as a second language and not a foreign language – sufficient hours of study, social context, and the potential to succeed – do not exist in Israel. The students do not acquire language skills and as a result suffer from frustration.

**Fourth challenge:** A major shortage in teachers with sufficient Arabic ability and teacher training (Uhlmann, 2017). There are a number of reasons for this, including unsuitable training for both Arabic-speaking teachers and teachers whose native language is not Arabic. Many of the lecturers in Arabic teacher training programs are not capable of lecturing in Arabic or even understanding a lecture in Arabic; they cannot write fluently in Arabic or understand sophisticated texts like novels or plays. They are trained to teach Arabic in Hebrew and are only really capable of teaching grammar and syntax. It naturally follows that graduates of these programs are not able to teach their students to communicate in Arabic (Amara, Donitsa-Schmidt and Mar’i, 2016). The attempt to overcome this problem by recruiting teachers with mother-tongue Arabic has not been successful. The numbers remain small, and they also receive unsuitable training. They have to deal with difficulties in adjusting to working in Jewish schools, which are sometimes exacerbated by cultural differences and the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and which sometimes influences their relations with pupils, parents, and Jewish teachers (Brosh, 1995; Pragman, 2014).[[9]](#footnote-10)

**Fifth challenge:** The textbooks used for teaching Arabic. Most of Arabic textbooks used in Israeli-Jewish schools do not fulfill the official Education Ministry goals—namely, the acquisition of linguistic and cultural knowledge as a tool for understanding the other and one’s neighbor (Israeli Education Ministry, 2014). This is not simply because they focus on grammar, but primarily because some of them still include texts dealing with subjects of state and security that do not promote these goals. Why, for example, does Arabic study need to use sentences with political content, and why is a “journalism unit” necessary? Students of English are not required to learn about “senior officers” or the “visit of the Defense Minister” or “submarines” or “missiles” to name but a few examples, and there is no “journalism unit” for that language. These subjects are not relevant to students’ daily lives and typically do not inspire great interest.

This is not a new reality. The Education Ministry claims that it is important to teach cultural content, precisely because of the Israeli-Arab conflict, in order to gain a better understanding of the Arab nation and its culture, but there is a large gap between this declaration and the classroom reality (Brosh, 1994). Many of the textbooks are not suitable for this task, and the teachers—who are supposed to be a source of both linguistic and cultural knowledge—lack the relevant training. The learning methods, aids and ethos do not match Education Ministry claims that Arabic study will be oriented towards cultural knowledge that will increase understanding of the neighbor. Arabic study in Israel is not geared towards a great understanding of Arab citizens, whom one meets in formal and informal situations in daily life, or their culture. From the start, Arabic study in Israel was designed to understand the language of the enemy, primarily serving as preparation for service in military intelligence (Mar’i, 2020:81). The conception of Arabic as the language of the enemy is strongly instilled among students (Zalburg & Ben-Israel, 2015).

**The sixth and final challenge** which makes it difficult to teach Arabic in Israel is the fact that the field of Arabic education—included but not limited to decision-making—is often a closed club for Jews only. In the Education Ministry, most positions related to teaching Arabic in the Jewish education system are filled by non-Arabic-speaking Jews. The experts in the field, the supervisors, the textbook authors and even most of the teachers are Jews. The chairman of the professional committee, the supervisors (both past and present), and a solid majority of the committee members are Jews,[[10]](#footnote-11) as are most of the decision-makers in the field. Over the years, policies regarding the teaching of Arabic have been designed by members of this club of Israeli-Jewish experts who taught and researched Arabic from a point of view external to the language—sometimes even orientalist in nature (Uhlmann, 2017; Mendel, 2014). Conversely, the voices of Arab experts are not considered, even though Arabic is their mother tongue. This creates an absurd situation in which native speakers are seen as less suitable to participate in discussions about their own language. There are few exceptions to this rule, and many of them face difficulties in doing their jobs.

As noted, a significant number of Israeli Jews—nearly half—have their family origins in Arab and Islamic lands. For generations, Arabic language and culture played an integral part in shaping their identity (Shenhav, 2003). When they reached Israel, however, there was a turnaround in how they were viewed. Among other reasons, this was because their Arabic identity was connected to the enemy. Few of the Jews from Arab and Islamic land continued using Arabic, so they would not be identified with the enemy and would be integrated into the newly consolidated Israeli society. They distanced themselves from anything that was thought of as Arabic, especially the Arabic language, and many of them began to adopt the view of Arabic as the language of the enemy (Elazar-Halevi, 2014; Suleiman, 2017). The lack of encouragement to learn their heritage language, which was the result of an inability to see Arabic as part of the identity of Israeli Jews, distanced and alienated them from the language, and led to a neglect of the heritage of many Jewish citizens of Israel. When the second and third generations began to study Arabic, they did so for security reasons, so as to know the language of the ‘enemy’, severed from personal connections and the language which shaped the culture of their forebears. There were some who called themselves Jewish-Arabs (Hever & Shenhav, 1959), but this a phenomenon that does not receive significant attention Israeli school curricula.

**Conclusion**: **On the Need for a Revolutionary Policy for Teaching Arabic in Israel**

From Israel’s founding to the present day, there is one key factor which has influenced Arabic instruction in the country’s Jewish schools: security. A revolutionary language policy shift is required in order to “civilianize” Arabic instruction in Israel and to transform it into a true bridge for understanding and communication, not just with Arab citizens of the state but also with Israel’s neighbors elsewhere in the Middle East. In this essay I have discussed the importance of the Arabic language for Israeli Jews, not just for instrumental reasons but for constructive reasons as well. It is unfortunate that many Jews do not know Arabic, and even more regretful that, when they do study Arabic, they learn it in a dry, philological context shaped by security and military intelligence needs. There is a direct connection between one’s attitude to a language and one’s attitude to its speakers; in my opinion, in Israel, Arabic is not taught in order to know the neighbor or become closer to him, to understand him and to communicate with him.

Instead of relating to Arabic as a problem threatening Jewish hegemony in Israel, it should be viewed as a gateway to increased familiarity with Palestinian-Arab citizens of the state and Arabs elsewhere in the Middle East. The day Arabic loses its negative and threatening image, and becomes a regular language used by every citizen of the state, will be the day when truly mutual relations can be built between Jews and Arabs inside and outside of Israel. When Israel revolutionizes the field of Arabic study in the country, a tolerant civil society will arise whose citizens understand and respect one another.

Jewish students in Israel today are forced to struggle learning grammar and syntactic form for three to eight years, at the end of which they are not able to hold a conversation in Arabic, read a book, or write a letter. In order to change this, and to actually provide students with useful skills, a truly revolutionary educational policy shift is required. Such a transformation requires a change in conception, and the consolidation of new study programs which can teach communication skills in the Arabic language. The benefits of this step will find expression not just in improved relations between Jews and Arabs but also in the benefits that come from multilingualism and multiculturalism, both of which strengthen cognitive abilities. A revolution in the field of Arabic study in Israel will strengthen the feeling of equality among Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel (one-fifth of the population), whose language has been frequently pushed to the margins, and will assist in bridging the cultural and social gaps which characterize Israeli-Jewish society today.

1. I want to thank Dr. Abd al-Rahman Mar’i and Dr. Yoni Mendel for reading the first draft of this article and for their useful comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Sometimes Arabic letters are used in Hebrew in order to instill this fear. For more see: Amit Levi, *Haaretz,* 2.1.2018: https://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/the-edge/1.5579505 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Additional changes were made, for example the directive to teach grammar in way that connects to texts and not as a separate subject, or the recommendation to connect Arabic and Hebrew through the shared lexicon during the early stages of learning. For more see Yitzhaki Vackermeski (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The Department of Islamic and Middle East Studies at the Hebrew University decided to gradually introduce the new Arabic program, in parallel to the traditional program. The Language Studies Unit that was established at the Hebrew University works in order to rejuvenate teaching of eight modern languages, and to transition from a translation-grammar approach to a communication capabilities approach using the CEFR, For more on these projects see the website of the Language Studies Unit: <https://languages.huji.ac.il/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. See Yonatan Mendel, “Everything you wanted to know and were afraid to ask about why you don’t know Arabic,” Ben-Gurion University website, 17.12.19; and also see the site of Ben-Gurion University’s Department of Middle East Studies. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. It is important to note that even when Arabic was an official language in Israel, the state did not encourage its use. This was expressed, for example, in street signs, as well as government ministries and websites, which were not made accessible to Arabic speakers. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. In the case of Arabic, much more time is needed, because of the diglossia and the sociolinguistic gaps between the spoken and written language. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Elana Shohamy and Bernard Spolsky wrote the first language educational policy for Israel in 1996. For more on their research, see Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. On a personal note, this also happened to me. During my university studies I had an interview to teach Arabic at one of the state-religious schools. At the end of the interview they said that I could have the job, but I would need to wear a *kippah* and change my name. I turned down this tempting offer! [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. The names of the key figures at the Ministry of Education can be seen on the “Supervision of Arabic Instruction” page on their website. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)