

CHAPTER 4

POLICY AND TEACHING ARABIC AS A MOTHER TONGUE

1. A HISTORICAL REVIEW

1.1 The Ottoman Period¹ until 1917

Teaching of Classical Arabic in the 19th century was limited. Robinson (1841) estimated that no more than 3% of the Arab population was literate. There were in Jerusalem in 1846 seven Muslim *maktab* (elementary schools attached to mosques) and a secondary *madrassa* adjoining *Al-Haram Al-Sharif* (Noble Sanctuary) (Spolsky and Cooper 1991:42). In the late 1870s, there were reported to be 341 pupils in Muslim schools. The schools started by the various Christian churches generally taught Classical Arabic alongside their favored metropolitan language.

Government teaching of Arabic in Palestine started in the second half of the 19th century when the Ottoman government passed a law for elementary and high school education (Yousuf, 1956: 93). Study in the elementary schools lasted four years. The language of instruction for the Muslim population was Turkish, the

¹ The Ottoman period in the Arab countries began in 1518 when the Turkish Ottoman under the Sultan Selim I conquered all the Arab countries. During the Ottoman period Palestine was the southern part of the province of Syria. The Ottoman period in the Arab countries was characterized by stagnation, ignorance, and backwardness. The Ottoman period lasted four centuries till 1918 with the defeat of the Ottoman Turkish Empire at the hands of the Allies in the First World War. Palestine then was put under the British Mandate.

student's second language (Al-'Amaira, 1976; Al-Amir 1997: 46).² At the beginning of the 20th century, Arab intellectuals in the country protested against this policy and demanded that Arabic be taught. After demonstrations and strikes, the government agreed in 1913 to make substantial changes in the program in the elementary schools. The principal change was to make Arabic the language of instruction on condition that Turkish would remain the second language (Al-Haj, 1996: 31). It was agreed to set up new high schools in which the language of instruction was Arabic. Turkish remained as the official language (Al-Haj, *ibid.*). To do this, textbooks had to be translated from Turkish to Arabic, or imported.

Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire had a status of protected minorities (*ahl al-dhimah*), and were permitted to establish private schools, and choose their own language of instruction. Almost none of them used Turkish (Al-Husri, 1946: 13). The Jewish schools taught originally in Yiddish and later some started to teach in Hebrew. Many Christian schools taught in Arabic, and a good proportion of their pupils were Muslims. The institutions that taught Arabic made an important contribution to the revitalization of Arabic and to the maintenance of its existence during the period of Ottoman rule in the country.

In Ottoman Palestine in 1914 Tibawi (1956: 235) reports that there were three types of schools. There were 95 Government schools in which the language of instruction was Turkish and study was free of charge. There were 379 Muslim Arab schools in which the teaching was done in Arabic but for which parents had to pay tuition. Many of the 170 foreign missionary schools also taught Arabic as well as using it as medium of instruction.

In the four hundred years of Turkish rule in the country, the policy pursued had the effect of turning Arabic into a marginal language. This policy was disastrous for Arabic, and it reached in this period the lowest point ever known in the history of the Arabs. Many words of Turkish origin entered Arabic and the vast majority of the people were illiterate (Al-Amir, 1997: 45).

1.2 The Mandate Period (1917-1948)

When the British established Mandatory rule in Palestine, its educational policy was dominated by two principles. First, it wished to make the Mandate self-funding, and keep expenditure on matters such as education to a minimum. Second, it accepted the language policy laid down by the League of Nations whereby English, Arabic and Hebrew were recognized as official languages.

²Al-'Amaira (*Ibid.*) points out that in 1869 the Ottoman government passed the law of education with the following principal articles: Turkish is the official language of instruction in the government schools; high school students are required to study French; the educational council is responsible for examining the competence of the teachers.

With the paucity of Government support for Arab schools (there was no secondary education in the villages, and few girls were educated), the position of Arabic improved considerably during the period of British rule. Applying a policy used in other colonies, the British were satisfied with primary education in the local language, only expecting the elite who reached secondary education to gain enough English to serve as junior government officials. The Mandatory establishment did not relate to education as a means for social and political change. Its policy was based on maintaining the status quo (Al-Haj 1996: 38). The British were satisfied that education for the Arab population stressed religious studies and universal values as long as it avoided any nationalism (Miller, 1985: 93).

The study of Arabic during the period of the Mandate was similar to the study of Arabic in neighboring Arab countries. The principle that guided the teachers in teaching it was that Arabic is a diglossic language and requires as many lessons as possible (Al-'Amaira, 1976: 24.) The teaching did not focus on reading books and newspapers or on writing letters, but rather on the teaching of calligraphic writing, learned expression and rhetoric. In this view the classical language is an ornament to be proud of and not an effective tool for communication between people.

The teachers of Arabic were for the most part men of religion or pupils in the conservative religious school, forbidden to stray from the ways of teaching accepted since the Middle Ages. There was no balance in the program between the literary courses and modern secular studies (Shalmon, 1968: 703).

From an examination of the textbooks up till the 1920s it appears that readings were based on classical literary texts in which rhetoric and elaborate style were dominant. Other books dealt with the teaching of the composition and grammar. Special attention was given to studying the Koran and to memorizing chapters from it.

After the 1920s, textbooks started to show Western influence. A reader *Al-Jadid* (The New) was published which included, among other things, pieces that were light in content and suitable for students at the various levels from the linguistic point of view. For literature in the elementary school, schools used books that were published in Egypt and included in addition to classical literature, modern literature, Arab history, and selections from the fields of science and theology.³ In the high schools the students used a reader *Al-Wasit* (The Mediator) that included an abridged history of Arabic literature and selections of poetry and prose.

In the final years of the Mandate, a group of Palestinian teachers wrote a series of readers for the elementary school under the title *Mukhtarat Al-Nusus Al-'Arabiyya* (A Selection of Arabic Texts) that contained poetry and prose of all the periods. The linguistic material is simple and graded, the poems included in

³ For example, the series *Al-Mutala'a Al-'Arabiyya* (The Arabic Reader).

it are written in a language suitable to the ages of the children. The prose is phrased in the ordinary modern language, which does not require excessive explanations.⁴

In the high schools the teachers used texts from the reader *Mukhtarat al-Nusus al-'Arabiyya* (a selection of Arabic texts) designated for high school students and in which a clear preference was given to prose over poetry; it also includes academic texts. Another popular book was the Egyptian anthology *Al-Muntakhab min Adab al-'Arab* (a selection from Arabic literature), edited by two preeminent Arab authors Taha Hussein and Ahmad Amin with an emphasis on poetry.

Most of the textbooks of teaching Arabic used during the period were conservative, focusing on the classical language, with little regards for the needs of modern life and the problems of diglossia.

2. AFTER THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ISRAEL

In a memorandum that was sent by the education department to the Jewish Agency and to the National Council the problem of organizing education in the Arab sector during the transition period was raised. The memorandum summarizes debate in the years 1944-1946, presents issues to be discussed at a committee meeting on the problems of education in the anticipated State on January 5, 1948 (Labor Party Archives, 1948). Two central issues concerned language policy. It was proposed that the language of instruction in the Arab primary school would be Arabic, and permission would be given to each school to add one more language, either Hebrew or English. In Arab high schools and in Arab teacher training institutes the language of instruction would be Arabic, and in addition to this written Arabic and English would be studied in them. A second question was about the expression of nationalist and anti-Jewish sentiment in the textbooks (mainly Arabic and history). The memorandum said that despite the desire not to touch the existing situation nor to introduce radical changes in the transition period, it was unthinkable that in the Jewish state there would be textbooks written in an anti-Jewish sentiment. The common textbooks must therefore be checked immediately. To do this, it was appropriate that Jewish educators supervise the Arab education during the transition period in order to remove any anti-state elements. Jewish inspectors were to be brought

⁴ In addition to this reader the teachers had available readers from Egypt and Lebanon, considerable parts of which were devoted to a description of the homeland and encouraging pride in the Arab nation. These readers described life in the city and village which is not relevant to the conventional patterns of life in Palestine.

into the Arab schools and the Arabic elements that are close to Jews were to be strengthened.

In the session of the committee for education problems of January 26, 1948 the language of instruction in schools was discussed again (Labor Party Archives, 1948: 31-33). The following policy was passed: "In every school in which the majority of the children are Arab the language of instruction will be Arabic. And vice versa- in every school in which the majority of the children are Jewish the language of instruction will be Hebrew. One of the two languages is a required course."

In another session of the committee on February 2, 1948 (ibid. 34), an alternative formulation was proposed: "The right of Arabic as the language of instruction will be assured in schools in which the Arab parents call for it." In this session the following decision was passed: "In every school in which the majority of the children are Arab the language of instruction is Arabic, and there is a requirement to study Hebrew, which is the language of the State and vice versa, wherever the majority of the children are Jewish and the language of instruction is Hebrew, there is a requirement to study Arabic." There is no reference to the concept of mother tongue in the discussions of the committee.

The final version of the policy was adopted a day before the establishment of the State. The agreed language, submitted by Y. Gurfinkel, chairman of the committee for education problems, on May 13, 1948 (ibid. 36) was as follows:

The government will guarantee sufficient primary and high school education for the Arab minorities and the Jews (in the Jewish and Arab State – Y. Gurfinkel) to everyone in his language and in accordance with his cultural tradition. The right of every minority to maintain its schools for the study of its language, while fulfilling the requirements for general education as would be set by the government, without being negated or cancelled; foreign educational institutions would continue in their activities on the basis of existing rights.

These decisions assured the right of the mother tongue of every minority to serve in instruction in the schools. At its moment of birth, then, the Jewish State proclaimed the right of the Arabic-speaking minorities to education in its own language.

The rest of this chapter traces the development of the Arabic curriculum over the next half-century.

2.1 The Old Curriculum (1948-1967)

After the establishment of Israel in 1948 there was no new curriculum or textbooks for teaching Arabic to Arab students for at least two years, and teachers continued to teach using the textbooks from the Mandate period (Shalmon, 1968: 720; Al-Haj 1996: 100f.). In January 1949 the Ministry of

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