

How Does a Nation Remember What Cannot be Forgotten and Forget What Cannot Be Remembered? - The Case of Arabic Language in Israel

Rishon Letsion, a suburban city in the center of Israel, is called by Israelis “Rashen Letzion,” referring to the large Russian-speaking Jewish population that immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Block, and who now live in the city. When walking through the streets of Rishon, say native-born Israelis, one feels as though walking through a Russian city. Russian is the predominant spoken language, and many shop signs are posted exclusively in Russian instead of Hebrew, the first official language of the country. In Rishon, Jewish Russian immigrants, over a million of whom immigrated since the 1980's, can easily find Russian speaking schools to which to send their children. In contrast to Rishon, in another Israeli city, Nazerat Ilit, which is cohabited by Jewish and Arab Israelis, the local municipality had to be repeatedly forced by court orders to write street names both in Hebrew and Arabic in the Arab neighborhoods, although Arabic is the second official language in the country.¹

The case of the Arabic language in Israel presents a unique situation, in which the second official language of the state is also the language of its largest ethnic minority. While the Israeli-Arab population has been officially granted equal rights in Israel, and constitutes today roughly 20% of the population, the state is highly suspicious of this predominately Muslim society.²

When Israel was formed in 1948, it was decided that the legal apparatus of the British Mandate, which was the entity that controlled the area until then, would remain in effect until amended by the

¹ The Arab Israeli population, consisting of Muslim and Christian Arabs who have Israeli citizenship, is roughly about 1.5 million. Russian Jews have been estimated to be 1 million. The total population of Israel has reached 7.5 million citizens in 2009. The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics: http://www.cbs.gov.il/reader/?MIval=cw_usr_view_SHTML&ID=389

² When using the term “Israeli-Arabs,” I refer to Muslim and Christian Arabs who have Israeli citizenship, versus the Palestinian population who live in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and do not have Israeli citizenship. .

newly established state.³ Following, the law that regulated the official languages used in the country, *The King's Order in Council, 1922*, which at the time included English, Arabic and Hebrew, was revised by the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament), to maintain only Hebrew and Arabic, as the official languages of the country, while English was dropped.⁴ The meaning of “official,” however, was never legally defined, and was therefore left to the interpretation of the state and consequentially, the changing regimes in the country and the local municipalities.

In reality, the policies and practices of the Israeli state towards the Arabic language have been inconsistent, thus showing great ambivalence towards the country's second official language. While Arabic did not lose its status as the official second language, no law mandating its use or instruction was legislated.⁵ As a result, historically, the Israeli language policy has been determined either at the local level by the local municipalities, or by the inconsistent application and interpretation of the law by various state bureaucracies: in 1989, for example, post office signs were written both in Hebrew and Arabic, while the police used only Hebrew and English on its signs, thus dropping Arabic altogether.⁶

This confusion extends to other spheres in Israeli society. To begin, Israeli Arabs are taught Arabic at their schools, which constitute a separate state-run educational system.⁷ The study of Hebrew is mandatory in the Arab school system, and for practical reasons Israeli-Arabs need to speak the language if they want to study or work in the predominately Hebrew speaking Jewish Israeli society. In parallel, in the Jewish Israeli education system, the instruction of Arabic is not compulsory, and very few Israeli-Jews can speak or read fluent Arabic. At the state level, however, there is a government sponsored Arabic speaking radio station, and Channel 1, the official Israeli television station broadcasts

³ Shamir, Ronen, *The Colonies of Law: Colonialism, Zionism & Law in Early Mandate Palestine* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴ Bernard Spolsky and Elena Shohamy, *The Languages of Israel: Policy, Ideology and Practice* (England: Multilingual Matters, 1999), P. 25.

⁵ Uzi Benziman and Atalla Mansour, *Subtenants* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1992), P. 156.

⁶ Spolsky and Shohamy, P. 25.

⁷ Written Arabic has one official version, uniformly used by the entire Arab population. Spoken Arabic, however, has got many dialects, which vary according to country and region.

in Arabic several hours daily. Lawyers can argue in Arabic in court, and the language can be used in the Knesset and to communicate with the local municipalities. The acknowledgement and recognition of the status of the Arabic language takes also a symbolic form, when state stamps, money bills and street signs have Arabic as well as Hebrew written on them.⁸

One of the latest incidents in which the ambivalence towards the status of Arabic manifested, took place in 2008, this time under the regime of a right wing government elected in 2006, from which a group of Israeli Parliament members suggested omitting Arabic as the second official language of the state. Later in 2009, Israel Katz, the Transport Minister, announced that signs along all major roads in Israel, within East Jerusalem and possibly parts of the West Bank would be amended, replacing English and Arabic site names with direct transliterations of the Hebrew name. This came in complete contrast to a decision of the Israeli Supreme Court given in 2,000, which mandated the state to write Arabic as well as in Hebrew on all signs where the majority of the population is Israeli-Arab.⁹

Returning to the discussion which began the paper, the difference between the state's treatment of the Jewish Russian population and Arab-Israelis points to a paradox, when viewing the situation through a multicultural paradigm. According to the latter, the state accepts the minority group's unique linguistic and cultural traits, either to allow diversity or for practical reasons, thus allowing them to sustain their own unique identity.¹⁰ When applied to the Russian Jewish population in Israel, the state shows tolerance in permitting them to use their own language at school even though the language is not an official one in Israel. This tolerance is even more surprising when remembering that Israel is a country comprised of different Jewish immigrant groups with unique cultural identities, who moved there from all over the world, and that the state's historical objective has been to incorporate them into one hegemonic Israeli culture through a uniform use of the Hebrew language, and via cultural

8 Benziman and Mansour, P. 155-156. And Spolsky and Shohamy, P. 120.

9 Adalla vs. The State of Israel, procedure number 4112/99, 11.10.2000

10 Amy Gutman, ed, Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition, (New Jersey: Princeton University press,1994)

immersion efforts.¹¹ Allowing Russian-speaking immigrants to have predominantly Russian speaking schools represents a reversal of this policy of active cultural absorption of the immigrant population, yet it is permitted for practical reasons, namely short term acceptance of their unique Russian-Jewish culture, with the hope of long term immersion into the dominant Israeli one. This paradigm of acceptance for the sake of future cultural and national uniformity is not applied, however, towards the Israeli Arab population nor is it implemented towards the use of Arabic, as there is no real attempt to integrate the Israeli-Arab population into the Israeli hegemonic culture.

The ambivalence regarding the use of Arabic in the public sphere, I claim, goes beyond the debate regarding multiculturalism. To begin, Israel is ambivalent towards its own identity, namely, whether it is a primarily Jewish state or a democratic one. This tension could be traced back to the Israeli Declaration of Independence, the constituting document that states the main values of the country, and is perceived to be the closest legal document Israel has to a constitution. The Declaration asserts that Israel is both a Jewish and a democratic state. Despite the fact that the country is predominantly secular, a close affinity exists between the Jewish religion and the country's national identity, as the state is perceived both by its leaders and its people as the “home of the Jewish people.”¹² Going back to the case of the Russian Jews, although their integration into Israeli society was not an easy process, the fact that they are Jewish allows them to be perceived as an integral part of the state. Therefore, the country accepts their unique cultural identity, since it does not threaten the definition of Israel as a Jewish state.¹³ Tolerating the Arab minority, on the other hand, evokes the tension between Jewish and democratic more directly. Israel perceives itself to be a democracy, therefore it is accepting of this minority as it would of any other. At the same time, not only is the Arab minority a rather large one, constituting one fifth of the general population, it is a minority with a much

11 Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million, The Israelis and the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing).

12 Yossi Yona and Yehuda Shenhav, *What is Multiculturalism, The Politics of Difference in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Bavel, 2005).

13 The Jewish Russian population has encountered problems in Israel when one has a Jewish father rather than a Jewish mother. In these cases they are considered to be Jewish by the state but not by the religious authorities. Discussing this

higher procreation rate than that of the Jewish majority. Therefore, it represents the demographic threat of becoming the future majority. Should this happen, not only will the main identity of the country completely change, but so will one of its main goals, namely, it being a home to the Jewish people.¹⁴

The ambivalence surrounding the Arabic language reflects, however, a much deeper anxiety, one that has to do with history and trauma, and with the (in)ability to accept the other's traumatic historical narrative, which is relevant to both the majority and the minority groups. To better understand this dynamic, a brief historical overview of the Zionist national movement and of the formation of the Israeli state is imperative.

The Zionist national movement rose at the end of the 19th century, with the aspiration of creating a home to the Jewish people as a solution to the repetitive historical persecution the Jews have suffered from throughout history. Despite some debate, a general agreement was reached regarding the location of this national home, namely the territory that was known then as Palestine, which is about the same area of the state of Israel today, including the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.¹⁵

Before the formation of the state of Israel in 1948, between 600,000 to 800,000 Palestinians lived on the land, most of whom were Muslim farmers. Following, and, some assert, in direct response to the Nazi's attempt of the complete annihilation of the Jewish people, on May 14, 1948, the United Nations declared Israel to be the home to the Jewish people. The following morning, the newborn state was attacked by the surrounding Arab countries, and many of the Palestinians living in the country joined the attacks against the Jewish population from within. As to what happened to the Palestinians during that time there are contesting narratives and contesting historiographies, yet the end result was that 60%-80% of the ones who then lived in Israel left the country and became refugees. It is not clear how many left due to calls and encouragement of Arab leaders. Nor is it clear if the Israeli army had

matter at greater length, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

14 This view has been contested, asserting that even with an Arab majority Israel could still be a safe home for the Jewish people, yet the majority in Israel does not believe that this would be the case.

actually killed Palestinians, or if these supposed killings were solely intentional rumors spread by the Israeli security services to encourage the Palestinians to flee. According to progressive Israeli historians (known in Israel as the “new historians”), who are taking a critical look at the past, thus contesting the popular Israeli historiography, about half of the Palestinians who left did so because of Israeli military attacks, while the rest were forcefully evacuated.¹⁶ Regardless of the reasons, however, by 1949 over 400,000 of the Palestinians who previously lived in Palestine fled their homes. Almost none were allowed to return and all of their property, land and houses were confiscated by the state.¹⁷ The empty villages and homes of the Palestinian refugees were either completely destroyed, or resettled by the state with the newly arrived European Jewish immigrants, who themselves were refugees in the process recovering from their own trauma. As mentioned before, however, not all the Palestinians fled Israel. Some remained in their hometowns and villages, while others became internal refugees, living outside of their original villages and towns but still within the country. Roughly 20% of the original Palestinian population remained in the country, estimated between 100,000 and 150,000 people at the time.¹⁸

Due to the attacks on Israel by the surrounding Arab countries, following the creation of the state, the country was highly suspicious of the Israeli Arab minority as being dangerous because of their assumed identification and loyalty to their “Arab brothers,” either in other Arab countries, or later with the Palestinian population in the occupied territories. In reality, however, the Palestinians who stayed and did not run away represented the weakest echelons of society, as anyone who had the resources and could arrange for an escape did so.¹⁹ This deep suspicion against the Israeli Arab population manifested in the decision to place them under a military regime, which restricted their

15 Tom Segev, *Palestine Under the British* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1999).

16 Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1991, P. 397-399

17 Noga Kadman, *Erased From Space and Consciousness: Depopulated Palestinian Villages in the Israeli Zionist Discourse* (Jerusalem: November Books), P. 16-17.

18 Beziman and Mansour, P. 13.

19 Benziman and Mansour, P. 16-17.

movement within and outside of Israel, as well as their right to own land.²⁰ Under the military regime, Israeli security services monitored all movements and activities of the Israeli-Arab minority. This regime, however, existed only as a temporary measure, and was eventually annulled in 1966, when the state felt safe enough due to the advanced security apparatus it developed over the years, that allowed it to stop fearing an internal revolt by the Arab population living in the country.²¹

Israel and the Palestinian people (both within the country as well as those living the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) have contesting historical accounts as part of their nation building process, which ignore the more “problematic” events that challenge these narratives.²² The Jewish-Israeli-Zionist history emphasizes the 2,000 years old longing of the Jews to their Biblical home, thus assuming one uniform narrative to the many groups that constituted the “Jewish people,” which while shared the same religion, were also influenced by the different surrounding cultures. Further, this historical account overlooks not only the existence of Palestinians in the land prior to 1948, before the creation of the Israeli state, but has also never acknowledged Israel's part in the Palestinians' “Nakba,” or the catastrophe, they underwent in 1948. The Palestinians, on the other hand, have romanticized their lost Palestinian “Eden,” and in part have refused to acknowledge the trauma the Jews underwent during the Second World War. Additionally, many Palestinians will not acknowledge the fact that these days Israel is populated by millions of Jews who have created a vibrant new society on the ruins of the Palestinian land, and that expecting them to leave their country is an unrealistic assumption. The two histories are in such complete negation to one another, that any reconciliation seems almost impossible.

Going back to the case of the Arabic language in Israel and the continuous attempts to erase its visual presentations from the public gaze, attests, I claim, to an impossibility on the Israeli side to

20 Banziman and Mansour, P. 103-104.

21 Banziman and Mansour, P. 113.

22 Vast literature has been written about the relationship between national building and historiographies, See Hobsbawm, Halbwachs, Anderson and more. This paper, however, does not attempt to provide an overview of this literature.

acknowledge the trauma of the Palestinian “other.” The most significant example of this can be seen in the treatment of the names of the places where Palestinian villages used to exist before 1948, and are now either empty of their original inhabitants or have been resettled by Israeli-Jews. In most cases, these villages have been given new Jewish names by the state. These names are either Biblical ones, thus re-establishing a historical and a geographical lineage between the current state and ancient Jewish society, or they are new Hebrew names, thus signifying the rejuvenation of the Hebrew language and consequentially strengthening the national identity. This attempt to re-territorialize the land, I claim, is in fact an attempt to re-territorialize memory and history.

To conclude, going back once again to the multi-cultural paradigm, Israeli Arabs are not an ethnic minority but rather a national one, and are perceived as such by the Jewish majority in Israel. The attempts to include the Arab Muslim and Arab Christian minorities utilizing a multicultural model prove to be futile, as they touch on anxieties that have to do with contesting histories and parallel traumas. The Jewish Russian population, on the other hand, while encountering great difficulties initially, especially surrounding issues of cultural and religious practices, was able to better assimilate and consequentially find greater mobility within Jewish Israeli society. Being an ethnic rather than a national minority, the multicultural model has proved to be relatively successful in their case. The multicultural model, therefore, proves to be much more limited in both explaining and addressing minority issues within a state in which the minorities have a contesting national identities, whether those are explicit or implied.