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Israel's Arab schoolchildren get first booklet explaining Palestinian history

By: Ilam Media Center for Arab Palestinians in Israel

A booklet explaining key terms in Palestinian history from 1948 onwards is being distributed among Arab schoolchildren in Israel for the first time. "We are trying to break the stranglehold of the Education Ministry on the information given to our children, which is always presented from a Zionist perspective," said Asad Ghanem, head of political science at Haifa University and one of several academics behind the initiative.

Called "Belonging and Identity", the booklet includes entries on 99 major personalities, places and landmarks in the Palestinian story, as well as explanations of the most important concepts employed in political debates about the region's future. There are entries, for example, on "Yasser Arafat", "Ahmed Yassin", "Emile Habibi", "Edward Said", "nakba", "massacre", "democracy", "PLO", and "apartheid wall".

Dr Ghanem said an initial print-run of 72,000 copies was being sent to Arab homes rather than schools because of problems getting approval from the Education Ministry. The Ibn Khaldun Association, which Ghanem heads, and the Center Against Racism devised the booklet, asking a panel of some 20 leading academics and intellectuals to contribute entries. It has won the backing of the monitoring committee for Arab education, the heads of Arab municipalities and the national Arab parents' association.

"Since 1948 Israel has been producing school books that simply ignore the fact that another people, Palestinians, live here" said Dr Ghanem. "It is important that students know what happened on Land Day [the killing by the security forces of six unarmed Arab protesters in 1976] or during the nakba [the "catastrophe" of Palestinian dispossession in 1948]. They cannot know who they really are and where they live unless they are offered this kind of information."

The idea for the booklet came in response to increasing efforts by the Education Minister, Limor Livnat, to force schools to emphasise Jewish heritage and Zionism in the national curriculum. One of her first acts on joining the government in 2001 was to threaten Arab schools with financial penalties if they failed to fly the Israeli flag or play the national anthem during morning services, ignoring arguments that the anthem's words and the symbol of the Star of David excluded Arab citizens.

In September 2003 she launched a new initiative, requiring all schools to participate in a weekly study program based on "100 terms in Jewish Heritage, Zionism and Democracy". In particular, all pupils were expected to learn about important Jewish figures, including Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Rabin and Baron Edmond de Rothschild, as well as to memorise entries on 33 terms considered basic to Zionist history, such as "Jewish democratic state", "the War of Independence", "the Law of Return", and "Jewish National Fund".

"Not only did much of the curriculum have no relevance to Arab schoolchildren, but it was designed to exclude their history and narrative," said Dr Ghanem. "Our booklet is trying to rectify that." He added that Arab education had also been damaged after decades of interference from the domestic security service, the Shin Bet, which has been vetting Arab teachers since Israel's creation in 1948.

There are plans to distribute the booklet in areas of the West Bank too, and Dr Ghanem would like to see it translated into Hebrew. "We know the Zionist narrative very well but it is important that Jewish students learn about our narrative and learn that we have leaders, intellectuals and institutions too."

On hearing of the booklet's publication, Livnat said: "The Education Ministry is the only body authorized to determine the content of the education system, and no other body, including the monitoring committee, has the authority to distribute any materials in schools in the Arab sector." She said she would be seeking the attorney general's advice about whether publication of the booklet was legal.

Meanwhile, the Education Ministry has issued an instruction to all schools, including Arab ones, to begin teaching the "legacy" of Rehavam Ze'evi, the leader of the extreme-right Moledet party who was assassinated by Palestinian gunmen in October 2001. Ze'evi had repeatedly called for the "transfer - or expulsion - of Palestinians from the occupied territories and "inducements" to "encourage" Arab citizens to leave the region.

A law passed in July created a state-funded Ze'evi Heritage Centre and requires schools to establish a curriculum to "honour" Zeev' memory. The drafters of the legislation argued that they were not interested in his political views but wanted only to teach children about his "love of the land".