"Identity and Belonging"

A Pioneering Project, Which Must Be the Starting Point for an Alternative, Comprehensive Educational Plan

By Dr. As'ad Ghanem[1]

In the last year, the Israeli Ministry of Education prepared a list of 100 "terms" which all seventh to ninth-grade students in Israel must study and be tested on. More than half of these terms refer to Judaism or Zionism, and terms related to Arabs exclusively address culture and heritage. That is, there is a clear and deliberate omission of fundamental issues which bind the Arab Palestinian to this country. In response, Ibn Khaldun – The Arab Association for Research and Development and the Center to Combat Racism initiated a project to produce an alternative list of terms, under the title of "Identity and Belonging."

The need for an alternative list of terms comes not only from the disregard by state institutions for the history and culture of Palestinian citizens of Israel, but also because of the deep crisis through which Palestinians in Israel are living, a crisis which involves various aspects of their existence. Any national minority in an ethnocratic system, constructed on the basis of preserving the ethnic ascendancy of the majority, faces political and existential ambiguities emanating from the basic structure of the state. For the state, by definition, excludes ethnic and national groups which do not belong to the dominant ethnic group from all of the state's national goals, and singles out the dominant group for preferential treatment, which the state's legal system affirms. The source of the harsh situation which ensues from discrimination against an ethnic group is the state's strategic refusal to respond to demands for equality and belonging derived through the framework of the state's institutions. Every ethnic group aspires to be a part of the state and naturally demands equality, belonging and identity as basic, non-negotiable human needs which cannot be ignored or continually suppressed. However, due to the nature of the regime and state policy in Israel, which denies, through the Basic Laws, the realization of equality, the Palestinian minority in Israel confronts existential ambiguity which penetrates into other fields. This ambiguity encompasses various aspects of the development of the Palestinian minority and applies, likewise, to its relations with the state and the Palestinian people. It also pushes the minority to critically examine the status which it ought to enjoy and the structure of its relationships with the state.

Additionally, as a result of the policy and basic structure of the state, as well as the predominant fundamental ethnic structure, younger generations of Palestinians in Israel suffer, in general, from a weak national identity, politically and culturally, to the point of the loss of national strength. The manifestations of this weakness today are many; indeed, innumerable. We need only observe the rise in popularity of Zionist political parties on the Arab street, in spite of the oppression, injustice and killing, or the phenomenon of vote-buying by the Arab parties during the recent elections to the Knesset. This is basically attributable, among other reasons, to the success with which the ruling Israeli establishment has employed the Arab school as a means of taming, "Israelizing," disciplining and controlling Palestinian citizens, and of imparting ideas aimed at programming the agenda of Palestinian society according to criteria viewed appropriate by the Israeli authorities. Hence, these authorities have striven to create an Arab

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Palestinian who differs from the Palestinian in the Occupied Territories, in refuge or in the diaspora.

An examination of the Arab educational system in Israel must begin with the fact that the resources which are allocated to and invested in the Arab educational system are meager in comparison with what is designated to the Hebrew-language educational system. This fact is acknowledged even by officials within the educational system, whether at the highest level of policy- and decision-makers, or at the level of policy-implementers, and inheres in the nature of this system as one which operates in the absence of equality (with regard to investment, treatment and attention). Furthermore, the policies which determine educational content and syllabi are set without the participation of Arab citizens or teachers. This matter is evidenced by the low level of students' educational attainment in the Arab educational system, by the lack of satisfaction among the Arab public in the course of the work of this system, and by the Arab public's sense of isolation from it.

It is relevant here to note the important aspects of the construction of an Arab school graduate's personality. The educational system, in addition to teaching basic and advanced skills, such as knowledge of and proficiency in languages, music, computer technology, etc., is one of the most important molders of the personality, including the cultural, national, religious and universal dimensions, and other basic aspects of the personality. From here, one can identify fundamental challenges facing the educational system, which can be referred to on two levels:

1. The Level of Structure

The Arab educational system is constructed as a part of the general educational system of the state. The control exercised by the official educational establishment, and even some components of the state's security apparatus, over Arab education has led to popular demands for a transformation in the structure of the Arab educational system. Over the last three years, The Follow-Up Committee on Arab Education has requested before various public fora, including the former Minister of Education, Limor Livnat and the senior administration of the Ministry of Education, as well as the Knesset's Education Committee, "the introduction of an separate, self-sufficient, Arab educational administration, which still operates as a part of the general educational system, with Arab control over practical educational matters (the appointment of teachers, the setting of educational programs, monitoring of the system, etc.)."[2] This request calls for sustained political effort and popular will, and its success is conditional, essentially, on our ability to impose deep structural change, which in turn requires our dedicated efforts.

2. The Level of Content

Since 1948, the General Security Services (GSS or the *Shabak*) has exercised control over the Arab educational system by intervening in the appointment of teachers and principals, and initiating and imposing of a single set of educational curricula for the Arab community. Political considerations also arise on many occasions, for example the directives introduced by the Israeli Ministry of Education in February 2006 banning "Identity and Belonging" from schools[3]. In short, Israel has and continues to develop a major scheme to "Israelize" Palestinian citizens of Israel. At the same time, our political parties and national representative institutions have generally remained unable to move beyond the language of slogans, protest and passing reaction, which often amount to empty words or placations.

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[2] Abu Asba Khaled, *Education in Israel*. Ramallah: Madar, 2006. [Arabic]
[3] In a letter sent in February 2006, the Commissioner of Arab Education in the Ministry of Education demanded that the principles of Arab schools not allow the booklet in schools under their authority.

Accordingly, in order to save the younger generation from the loss of national identity and from their negative assimilation into Israeli society to an extremely concerning and dangerous degree, a visionary long-term national plan is required. A practical work program should be derived from such a plan in order to counter programs aimed at the colonialist eradication of identity, and to place the historical Palestinian narrative in the hands of our children and nourish them from the springs of Arab culture.

Palestinian Arabs in Israel can be differentiated from other groups in the state in many spheres of life. Perhaps the most important distinction which can be drawn between the Palestinian and Jewish peoples is their respective historical narratives, in particular those relating to land and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Issues of identity are controversial, and the Israeli Ministry of Education to date has not worked on a plan which takes such issues into account. In fact, its efforts have mostly been made in the opposite direction.

The Israeli Ministry of Education's published "List of Terms" does not engage with Palestinian history or memory; rather, it is aimed at anchoring Jewish history and its symbols. Therefore, Ibn Khaldun – The Arab Association for Research and Development and the Center to Combat Racism decided that it is our duty take a stand and formulate a responsible response to the forced obliteration of the history and struggle of the Palestinian people, and to the right of our children to know their history and cultural heritage. From here, the organizations developed the concept of a project to produce alternative terms under the title, "Identity and Belonging."

Specifically, the project aims to:

- Raise the level of knowledge of the cultural icons, symbols and institutions of the Palestinian people.
- Deepen and reinforce the link between our children and the Palestinian people's history and struggle.
- Create a dialogue with the Israeli authorities over the importance of our cultural characteristics and collective identity.
- Expose the approach of Israel's educational system, which endeavors to emphasize the "Jewishness" of the state, to the exclusion of 20% of the citizens of the state.

The project aims to provide our students with an alternative set of basic terms that relate to the central spheres of their belonging (religious, civil, national and universal human belonging). Thus we can offer our students the opportunity to come to know their culture and the spheres of their belonging more deeply and more broadly, and enable them to know and respect the other, and to respect the universal heritage of mankind.

Those who undertook and contributed to this project decided that the set of terms should be presented in considered, scientific, unexaggerated manner, without omission or effacement, and in a way which presents historical facts as accurately as possible, given that no one can claim complete possession of the truth. We also determined that we would add a set of related terms, to make them the basis for educational activities in classes in the hope that this would to lead an expanded body of knowledge, which cannot be achieved by a single project.

It is important to indicate at this point that we do not claim to have listed and presented all of the fundamental and significant terms for Arab students, but rather to have laid a foundation that must be built upon in the future. Further, we followed a number of guiding principles in our work, the most important of which was the non-exclusion of the other, the Jewish Israeli. Instead, we

presented some of his symbols from our own standpoint. In the field of personalities, we dealt only with figures who died before this project was initiated, in order, essentially, to avoid any sensitivities which should not be contended with here.

The booklet's contents are divided to five subjects: historical events, locations (including settlements), institutions (Palestinian, Israeli and international), renowned individuals (Arab, Palestinian and Israeli), and symbols. In each area, approximately twenty terms were introduced. Each term was accompanied by a half-page definition, and the margins of every page included terms related to the main subject. These items should act as a guide to students, teachers and parents in forming their own conceptions of each term.[4]

As well as printing and distributing over 65,000 copies of the booklet, with the support of the Welfare Association, I must mention that over twenty-five Arab academics participated on a voluntary basis in the project's formulation. They also continue to contribute to the project's implementation by partaking in regional workshops for parents and teachers, held with the goal of introducing the project and its mechanisms of implementation. It remains for me to add that the Israeli Ministry of Education announced in March 2006 that it had halted the implementation of its aforementioned plan in response to the pressures it had faced following the publication of "Identity and Belonging."[5] Therefore, the achievements of the project are unprecedented and the experience must be taken as an exemplar of what must be done in terms of national intervention by our society regarding educational structure and content. Beyond that, this work must be seen as proof of our power to act to engender radical change in the structure and content of the Arab educational system.

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[4] The booklet and the terms included in it are available in Arabic on the website of Ibn Khaldun – The Arab Association for Research and Development's website: www.ibn-khaldun.org.
[5] A comprehensive report on this decision was published in the Arab weekly newspaper "Kul al-Arab" on 10 March 2006.