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One-way bilingualism

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Israel is an ethnic nation state, with a clear and profound connection to one of its national-ethnic communities. Israel is a rare example of a country that in spite of being an ethnic nation-state grants the language of a minority community, Arabic, legal status, which is ostensibly a status of equality and even partnership. The two languages, Hebrew and Arabic, are called the country's "official languages."

But the legal status has had almost no influence on the sociopolitical status of Arabic. In other words, Hebrew is the dominant language in the public sphere, and Arabic is absent or marginal.

The reason for this is the significant gaps in power between the two national groups, and the decision of the Jewish majority to turn Hebrew into the dominant language in the public sphere.

Hebrew is in effect the exclusive language of society as a whole: It is the language of the government bureaucracy (with the exception of the Arab local councils) and of higher education, the language of most of the public electronic media in Israel and most of the job market.

The main importance of the status of Arabic is to be found only in the internal life of the minority, which is why this minority is forced to adopt Arabic-Hebrew bilingualism. At the same time, the sociopolitical situation in Israel has eliminated almost any incentive for the majority community to adopt bilingualism. That is the reason for the development of the one-way bilingualism of the minority.

The gap between the sociopolitical and legal status of Arabic has been perpetuated for decades because the unilingual practice was not sufficiently challenged either by the Arab minority or by other groups in society, although this practice, at least in part, is clearly in contradiction to the legal status of Arabic. The absence of any legal challenge is due to a belated appearance of legal organizations with Arab leadership whose agenda includes a desire to change Israeli society, and the minority's fear of a direct clash with the Jewish-Zionist nature of the country.

This fear is justified because an important part of the present legal status of Arabic is not constitutionally protected; therefore the present situation is liable to change with relative ease if it is perceived as a threat to the majority group.

Since the second half of the 1990s there has been a certain change in the status of Arabic. There is judicial activism, led by the human rights organizations, in an attempt to exploit the legal status of Arabic to achieve a significant change in its sociopolitical status. There is no

question that this activism has reaped considerable success in Supreme Court decisions, in procedures of secondary legislation in government ministries and in the instructions of the attorney general.

When it comes to legal leverage, the power to change anything in the realm of the language situation is very limited in Israel. The sociopolitical status of Arabic cannot undergo a radical change in Israel's present legal and political framework. Especially not at a time when the government system has become more radical, and even threatens the legal status of Arabic.

Marginalizing Arabic has many implications. It means giving up the linguistic asset of a national and indigenous minority that constitutes about one-fifth of the total population, and a language that is the heritage of Jews of Middle Eastern origin. It also means giving up Arabic as a regional language and a failure to recognize it as one of the ancient and important languages that are among the official languages in international organizations like the United Nations.

The perception of Arabic as a problem and as a threat to Jewish hegemony in the country, the absence of a widespread use of the language in the public sphere, and a failure to create two-way bilingualism, prevent the opportunity to create a linguistic mosaic that would contribute to building genuine bridges between the groups in Israel and abroad.

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