



# The Study of Arabic in Jewish Schools

From Barriers to Opportunities –  
Policy Paper No. 6

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Arabic is an official language in Israel, and the first language of about one-fifth of the citizenry.<sup>1</sup> For the Jewish majority, an adequate working knowledge of the language of their Arab fellow citizens is crucial – and is necessary for building a foundation for a sustainable social fabric and creating egalitarian shared public spaces for Arabs and Jews in diverse realms of society, the economy, and culture.

The overwhelming majority of Israelis whose first language is Hebrew are unable to express themselves or communicate in Arabic at even the most basic level, despite the fact that generations of Israeli students are supposed to have learned Arabic as a required subject in the country's public schools, both secular and religious. In 1996, Arabic was declared the second foreign language (after English) to be taught as compulsory in grades 7 to 10. Nevertheless, the great majority of Hebrew-speaking students, those who have attended Arabic language classes and those who have not – still finish high school without even a minimal knowledge of Arabic.

This document, written by Sikkuy, provides a comprehensive policy analysis of the problems and barriers that limit the scope of Arabic language instruction and reduce the number of students of Arabic. The document has two goals:

**To describe systematically** and comprehensively the barriers to the study of Arabic in the Jewish school system: barriers in terms of policies affecting language study and its supervision and monitoring in the Ministry of Education, and barriers reflecting a lack of motivation, which are not solely caused by education policy, and could be overcome through supportive policies at other government ministries.

**To recommend policy steps** that will bring about an increase in the number of students of Arabic in the Jewish school system and to a substantial increase in the number of Jewish public school graduates able to communicate in Arabic.

## Main findings

Examining the data at our disposal shows that the number of students studying Arabic is low throughout all grades of the Jewish school system and is far from actualizing the policy

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1. Based on Central Bureau of Statistics data, 20.9% of Israel's residents are Arabs, but 400,000 of them who live in East Jerusalem do not have Israeli citizenship, hence the proportion of Arab citizens of Israel is 16.36%.

of the Ministry of Education or the declarations and aspirations of public representatives and policy makers.

Arabic is studied in Jewish schools as a second foreign language, in addition to English. Comparing mastery of Arabic and English as a foreign language reveals that some 60% of all Jews<sup>2</sup> in Israel aged 20 and up know English, compared with 8.6% of all Jews who describe themselves as having knowledge of Arabic. Of the latter, only 18.6% reported that their knowledge of Arabic as a foreign language was acquired at school, compared with 68% of those speaking English as a foreign language. In other words, those reporting a knowledge of Arabic learned at school are only 1.6% of the entire Jewish population aged 20 and up, compared with speakers of English as a foreign language – 40.5% of the Jewish population aged 20 and up know English and learned it at school. As we attempted to collect current data from the Ministry of Education, we have learned that the Ministry of Education does not monitor the number of schools teaching Arabic, the number of students studying Arabic, or the outcomes. This in and of itself represents a significant barrier to furthering the studying of Arabic. Despite limited data, the picture that emerges from the available data as presented by the Ministry of Education to the Knesset is grim:

**In elementary schools:** Over the last decade, there was a gradual increase in the number of students learning spoken Arabic in elementary grades, and the Minister of Education announced an intention to make the study of Arabic in the elementary grades (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>) compulsory.

**In middle schools:** Despite the status of Arabic as a compulsory subject in middle schools, over the last two decades fewer students have been studying Arabic.

**In high schools:** In 2014, after compulsory study of Arabic in 10th grade was made elective, there was a sharp decline of about two-thirds in the number of students learning Arabic in high schools. Additionally, following a reform in matriculation exams (*Bagrut*) led by Minister Shai Piron, we witnessed a decrease of 70% in the number of those studying Arabic as part of their matriculations

## Principal barriers and recommendations for policy change

Two deep-seated barriers are at the root of the shaky standing of Arabic studies in Jewish schools: the undermining of the status of Arabic in Israel, and the continuing deliberations

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2. Including "others" – i.e., those who, as defined by the Central Bureau of Statistics, are neither Jews nor Arabs.

around the unresolved question of who decides what the core curriculum consists of, and how. This involves two very weighty political/social issues which Israeli society has yet to agree on, and in any case they are beyond the scope of this document. In this document we argue that despite these deep-seated barriers, the Ministry of Education at present already has the ability to act to remove the barriers we describe herein, with the aim of substantially broadening the number of students learning Arabic in the Jewish school system and improving the efficacy of that study. The principal barriers are described below.

## **Barriers arising from language education policy**

**1. Two of the three weekly hours for the study of Arabic are not designated specifically for Arabic language learning.** Approval for use of the third (subject-designated) hour is contingent on also allocating the other two hours for Arabic study. Meantime, school principals in need of additional hours for scheduling something else can make use of those two non-designated hours for some other purpose. The upshot is that while the Ministry of Education seeks to pursue a policy of incentives via the designated additional third hour, enforcement of that policy is ineffective because the first two hours are not designated hours.

**2. Arabic is not defined as a core language but rather as a second compulsory foreign language.** Arabic is defined as compulsory in grades 7 – 9, with three weekly hours. In practice, this status enables a series of ways to escape the obligation for Arabic study under cover of Ministry of Education policy:

**(a) Sitting for a matriculation exam (Bagrut) in Arabic is not compulsory;** earning a matriculation certificate is not contingent on a passing grade in Arabic.

**(b) The director-general's official notice of Arabic as a compulsory subject** also allows for an alternative choice – French.

**(c) As per an official notice by the Education Ministry's supervisor for Arabic,** Ministry policy is to allow students with learning disabilities an exemption from Arabic study starting in the 8th grade. Moreover, students who need special help in other subjects often receive it at the expense of Arabic study. The impact of this policy is two-fold: numerically – in that there are fewer students learning Arabic; and symbolically – by sending a message that disparages the importance of the subject for all students, not just those who are actually absented from Arabic class to receive help with other subjects.

## **Barriers and problems of an organizational nature: Supervision in general, pedagogical supervision, and staffing**

**3. There is no organized monitoring of the number of students of Arabic.** The Ministry of Education does not monitor the number of Jewish schools where Arabic is taught or the number of students learning Arabic in each school. This makes it impossible to set goals for increasing the number of learners, to monitor progress toward such goals and to develop an effective policy for augmenting the numbers. Nor is it possible to set objectives for training the appropriate teaching staff, that will meet the accurate demand.

**4. No evaluation system has been put in place** regarding the level of knowledge and competence in the language, there is no monitoring of student achievement in terms of the desirable level of competence or otherwise, and it is impossible to develop an effective policy for improving the level of Arabic study or to set defined objectives for what graduates of the education system are expected to have achieved in terms of their competence in Arabic.

## **Motivation-related barriers to the study of arabic**

Learning any language demands the investment of time and effort and thus, ideally, students will be strongly motivated to make the investment. The research literature cites four sources of motivation in this regard: **the individual's aspiration** to integrate into the relevant language community (an integrative orientation); viewing the language as a means to access higher education or a better salary (instrumental orientation); **the quality of instruction** and the perception that it will indeed contribute to achieving a knowledge of the language, plus the **quality of the curriculum** and the teaching, which this document does not address.

**5. Absence of an integrative orientation:** the absence of a desire to become acquainted with or draw closer culturally to Arab society.

**6. A limited instrumental orientation.** The Jewish majority in Israel has few reasons to use Arabic, in contrast to Arabs in Israel, who need Hebrew for better integration into higher education and the job market. Existential economic considerations have nearly no influence on Hebrew speakers in terms of the study of Arabic.

**7. An ineffective learning process.** Most graduates of Jewish schools who have studied Arabic, including the high achievers, are unable to communicate in Arabic when they complete those studies. This fosters a sense that there's no point in studying Arabic, further reducing the motivation to do so.

## Recommendations for policy change

This section offers detailed recommendations emerging directly from our mapping of barriers based on the research findings. As noted in the section on barriers, despite the deep-rooted barriers the removal of which requires far-reaching change in the existing social and political reality, the other barriers we have enumerated can be removed right now. **The recommendations below are concrete, some lending themselves to implementation immediately and others in the longer term. Their implementation, even if gradual, can create a breakthrough in the extent of the study of Arabic** and will lead the Ministry of Education to stand by its declarations concerning the importance of knowing Arabic.

### Language education policy

- 1. Adding a booster hour** (*sha'at idud*) (in addition to the existing designated hour, as described in Section 2.3) for Arabic studies. Thus, middle schools that allot two hours to Arabic study will be entitled to another two additional (designated) weekly hours.
  - 2. Allocating budgets**, alongside an increase in the hours (see Recommendation No. 1), to enable the creation of interesting learning materials, field trips, in-person encounters and enrichment programming that will boost motivation among both students and teachers.
  - 3. Extending the time frame for Arabic studies to include the elementary grades.** The Ministry of Education must implement the declarations made two years ago concerning the intention to have students begin their study of Arabic earlier, and thereby expose learners to the language over a longer period of time.
  - 4. Initiating a process that will culminate in the inclusion of Arabic as a compulsory subject for a matriculation certificate.** To begin with, we recommend setting a minimal bar for knowledge of Arabic as a condition for receiving a matriculation certificate, so that a passing grade in that subject will be one of the conditions for earning the *Bagrut*, like the 10th grade study of Science & Technology in Society (*MUTAV*).
  - 5. Eliminating any alternative to the study of Arabic as a second foreign language** (e.g., studying French instead), institutionalizing the exclusive status of Arabic as the only second foreign language.
  - 6. Actively working to reduce the number of students exempted from the study of Arabic**, by stricter enforcement and more careful supervision of the adaptations required for students with learning disabilities. In those cases where an exemption from the study
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of Arabic is given, the Ministry must insure that those students will study alternative content affording an acquaintance with the Arab world and Islam rather than waiving any learning about this area altogether.

7. Schools with outstanding achievement by students completing 9th grade **will receive booster hours** (*sha'ot idud*) for the study of Arabic in high school.

8. Arabic is already considered part of the schools' store of scientific/technological resources. To this classification must be added **an incentive for increasing the hours for each student** (just as an additional half-hour is given for each student in technological subjects), in order to expand the number of those studying Arabic in school and going on to sit for a matriculation exam in Arabic.

9. **Anchoring the study of Arabic through national legislation.** We attribute great importance to preserving the flexibility of the educational system and the curricula, but we argue that given the importance of studying Arabic as noted throughout this document and the supportive stance of the Ministry of Education and public representatives from the entire political spectrum, there should be an effort made to anchor the study of Arabic in legislation at the national level.

## **Recommendations of an organizational nature: supervision in general, pedagogical supervision, and staffing**

### **Supervision and monitoring systems**

To advance the study of Arabic, it is critical that the **Division of Languages systematically monitor the extent of Arabic study** (schools and students) and **publish its findings**. Orderly monitoring of the numbers of learners is a necessary step for the Division of Languages and other Ministry of Education units in order to find out what the results of policy are, to make adaptations as may be required, to set new objectives as to the scope of studies and to expand the number of students learning Arabic.

Setting an objective, monitoring results and scrutinizing student achievements and their level of knowledge of the language:

1. **Developing a uniform measure** for evaluating the level of knowledge and mastery of Arabic, following the example of the European standard (CEFR – Common European Framework of Reference) for language learning.

2. **Setting objectives and a scale of achievement is required** for each year of study of the language, along with monitoring of how well the objectives are met, using the tools of supervision at the disposal of the Ministry.

## Training and workforce

1. The Ministry of Education will carry out a **comprehensive check of the number of teachers** trained to teach Arabic as a foreign language, and will make the necessary changes to the Planning and Budgeting Committee for Higher Education (Vatat) policy so as to insure appropriate training and meet future demand in accordance with objectives.
2. The Ministry of Education will set **an objective for provision of inservice professional development training for Arabic teachers**, to assure appropriate training for the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language.
3. **The Ministry of Education will develop a detailed multi-year plan to integrate Arab teachers into Jewish schools**, including plans for professional career-change options for the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language, as a solution to the chronic shortage of teachers of Arabic as well as to realize the structural advantage of adding teachers whose mother tongue is Arabic.

## Increasing motivation and creating new motivational tools

1. Using **training programs and inservice training for school principals**, the Ministry of Education can strengthen its stance on the importance of the study of Arabic and existing programs, and increase principals' motivation and commitment to the matter.
  2. **Public outreach: The Ministry of Education will initiate a broad-based public campaign to encourage the study of Arabic**, as it did for encouraging students to undertake 5 units of mathematics.
  3. **The Pedagogical Executive Committee** will act to see that Arabic language and culture are duly referenced and addressed in the curricula for other, relevant fields of study, such as Hebrew language, geography, Land of Israel studies, mathematics, literature, Jewish studies, Jewish thought, etc.
  4. **The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture will create and fund platforms for study, cultural events and national days** (e.g., introducing an Arabic Language Day in the educational system), revolving around the place of Arabic as a language in a shared space, a legacy language, and the mother tongue of the grandparents of nearly half the Jewish population in Israel.
  5. Other government ministries and branches of local government will act **to increase the exposure of Hebrew speakers to the Arabic language** by expanding its presence in public spaces, in several ways:
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- (a) Arabic captions and public announcements in Arabic in public places, in public transportation, in commercial centers, at airports and in other public institutions.
- (b) Encouraging the production of popular television programs for children and adults in Arabic.
- (c) The Public Service Commission will **demand a knowledge of Arabic as a significant advantage for receiving employment in the public sector** and possibly even as a precondition for jobs that involve providing services to the entire population, as well as for positions in the higher echelons of public service.

## Summing up and looking ahead

In recent years there have been increasingly vocal and widespread demands in the political and public sectors about the need to strengthen the study of Arabic, and to amplify the ability of Jewish citizens to speak Arabic and to understand Arab citizens speaking their mother tongue. The gap between this noteworthy, positive rhetoric and the policy situation and concomitant barriers demands immediate intervention – to remove the barriers and to embrace a new policy that will assure that more Jewish Israelis are learning Arabic. The recommendations in the final section of this document reflect the barriers map, these recommendations are concrete and we believe that they can be implemented, some immediately, some more gradually. Their implementation, even if phased, can create a breakthrough to help the Ministry of Education walk its talk regarding the importance of Arabic.

We must seize this moment of opportunity before us, given the current public support and political backing for the importance of the study of Arabic. Now is the time to leverage these opportunities and forge ahead to advance the necessary changes. We call on the Ministry of Education to promote the processes we have outlined in the section on policy recommendations, to set clear objectives and to act to achieve them in the coming years.