

## Arabic Language in the Public Sphere in Israel: The Academic Campus and Beyond

اللغة العربية في الحيز الأكاديمي في إسرائيل / השפה הערבית במרחב האקדמי בישראל

### PROGRAM INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Currently there is an intense debate surrounding the use of Arabic in Israel. Some are trying to weaken Arabic's status as an official language (alongside Hebrew) and to establish Hebrew as the supreme and exclusive official language of Israel. Others, including the partners to this project, believe that Arabic's official status should be used as a springboard to create a more democratic and inclusive society which respects and values Arabic language and culture. Accordingly, Arabic serves as a proxy for social conflicts and competing values and visions within the state.

Recently attempts have been made to revoke Arabic's status as an official language<sup>1</sup> and various studies show that in the last decade the status of Arabic as an official language of Israel has been challenged in an unprecedented way. One of the studies, for example, demonstrated that official state institutions have neglected Arabic such that it has become, de facto, a non-official language and concluded, therefore, that its legal status as an official language should be revoked.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, native speakers of Arabic in Israel – some 1.5 million Palestinian citizens – suffer from marginalization and discrimination linguistically and otherwise.

This situation is reflected in the university setting where Hebrew and English dominate and Arabic is nearly non-existent thus reinforcing Hebrew's hegemony over the public space. Furthermore the almost complete absence of Arabic on campus – in signage, in courses and conferences and in terms of services offered – alienates Arab-Palestinian students and faculty alike linguistically, culturally and individually.<sup>3</sup>

Dirasat, the Arab Center for Law and Policy (an Arab organization), The Van Leer Institute (a Jewish organization) and Sikkuy: The Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality (an Arab-Jewish organization) have established a strategic partnership in order to rectify some of these deficiencies and expand the presence of Arabic language in the academic public space shared by Arabs and Jews. Through work in this influential setting we will reach two key target groups (Arabs and Jews) and will also be well placed to expand this model to other public spaces in Israel. The initial two and a half year phase of the project will primarily target four universities however some of the activities will extend to Israel's entire system of higher education.

Importantly, the project will strengthen and build on targets set by Israel's Council for Higher Education (CHE) to promote Arab integration into higher education as a key strategy for advancing economic development nationally. Elements of this plan, which is accompanied by generous government funding allocations, include translation of websites into Arabic, the appointment of dedicated faculty members at each institution who serve as points of contact for Arab students and Arab issues on campus and other forms of economic and academic support. Our *Arabic Language in the Public Sphere in Israel* project will strengthen and enhance such efforts

<sup>1</sup> See the following link for more: <http://www.acri.org.il/en/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Basic-Law-Jewish-State-ACRI-position-ENG.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Aviad Bakshi (in Hebrew) "Is Arabic an Official Language in Israel?", *The Institute for Zionist Strategies*, November 2011: <http://izsvideo.org/papers/bakshi2011.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> In a relevant and important development, the University of Haifa recently approved changes to its academic calendar in favor of Arab students. See: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/haifa-university-to-mark-christian-arab-holidays/> and <http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/israeli-university-adds-christian-and-muslim-holidays-to-vacation-calendar-for-first-time.premium-1.526231>



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with a particular focus on Arabic visibility. We hope and believe that a campus environment which respects Arabic will positively influence a new generation of Arab and Jewish youth.

### PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

This program aims to promote peace and equality within Israel by increasing the presence and visibility of Arabic – and Arabs – on campus – both linguistically and culturally. As such, it will advance policies and practices which are sensitive to Arab-Palestinian's unique linguistic and cultural needs. Jews will benefit from this project as the academic space becomes more open to diversity and the principles of shared society. Accordingly, we will implement the following activities:

- Arabic Language Conferences: Each university will conduct a conference held exclusively in Arabic with Hebrew translation on a topic of their choice. They will be offered support in content development (including the recruitment of high profile speakers) and assistance to widely publicize these events.
- Academic Courses in Arabic: Each university will offer at least one academic course exclusively in Arabic. We will assist them in creating the syllabus and locating/developing supplementary materials. We will also develop a general research skills course designed to meet the needs of Arab students which will be marketed to all universities in Israel.
- Student Forum: We will recruit a group of some 16-20 Arab and Jewish student leaders on each campus. During the first year of activity, they will benefit from speakers who will educate them about Arabic's importance in higher education and will also participate in group dynamics facilitation. The second year will be devoted to implementing projects which promote Arabic and/or Arab interests on campus.
- Advocacy Activities: We will undertake intensive and targeted advocacy with the four institutions and Israel's Council for Higher Education. Specifically, we will map barriers to Arab integration on a number of levels: human resources, financial resources, cultural and religious atmosphere, linguistic presence and more. We will also map and monitor implementation of policy recommendations by governmental bodies. On the basis of this mapping and the development of a position paper summarizing our findings and suggesting next steps, we will employ 'soft advocacy' which, in part, relies on our extensive contacts within institutions of higher education. Accordingly, we will encourage the universities – and relevant governmental bodies – to implement policy change in line with their own established goals.
- Forum for the Advancement of Arabic in Higher Education: We will establish a forum consisting of a very diverse group of some 15-20 individuals (Arab and Jewish) including central figures in higher education, representatives from universities and the CHE, the partner organizations and relevant civil society figures. The forum, which will meet three times a year, will serve as a steering committee and consulting body. It will also leverage members' backgrounds' in contacts with universities and serve as an advocacy body, as relevant. Furthermore, it will guide the creation of a policy paper which will examine the project's impact and present suggestions for further action. The final document will be published, distributed to key stakeholders, and introduced at a press conference marking the project's conclusion.

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