3 Recruiting Arabic for War

The Influence of the 1967 and 1973 Wars on Arabic Studies in Jewish-Israeli Schools

Wars do breakout sometimes, don’t they?
For us they go with the seasons:
Winter, spring, summer, war.

Hanoch Levin, playwright

The Jewish-Israeli school system: in the aftermath of the 1967 War

The 1967 War had a tremendous influence on the geopolitical and social life of millions of people in the Middle East. Much has been written about the impact of the war on Israeli society and the way in which it was perceived by Arab countries. During the war, Israel occupied vast territories, including the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights, and when those six fateful days in June were over, the area under Israel’s jurisdiction had tripled.

Interestingly, the war and its aftermath were also influential in the teaching of Arabic in Jewish-Israeli schools. In fact, the importance of Arabic studies was clear within a matter of days following the war; military battles ended on 10 June and by 29 June, steps had already been taken to increase the number of pupils studying Arabic in a direct connection to postwar Israel. At that time, the Ministry of Education released an announcement that was published in national newspapers and also distributed personally to all head teachers of Jewish-Israeli high schools. It read as follows:

A Call to High School Head Teachers Regarding Arabic Studies

The Ministry of Education is calling on all high school head teachers whose schools are not teaching Arabic to systematically increase
efforts to teach the language during the next school year. According to a special announcement by Dr Ziv, the Director of the Department for High Schools in the Ministry, the new reality requires a new examination of our hitherto insufficient efforts to teach Arabic in our schools. There is no doubt that the need for people with general education in and proper knowledge of Arabic is now of paramount importance. These people are needed to act in all walks of life. Therefore, the high schools are instructed to do their utmost to help train the reserves [of Arabic-speakers] needed [for the country] as soon as possible and with the maximum efficiency. The Ministry of Education will support any institution that decides to teach Arabic, and will help it find knowledgeable teachers with proper pedagogic training.3

This announcement and the decision to publish it in national newspapers indicated the importance that the developers of this document gave to the subject. It also exposed the extent of the decline of Arabic language teaching in Israel on the eve of June 1967. While not spelled out directly, ‘the new reality’ referred to in the document most likely related to the new geopolitical situation whereby Israel controlled and occupied hundreds of thousands of Arabic-speaking communities, such as the Syrian Druze community in the occupied Golan Heights and the Palestinian community in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. This set off warning bells and renewed the Israeli decision-makers’ determination to ensure that they had access to the appropriate manpower required in order to manage and administrate these vast new territories and the Arabic-speakers who lived in them.

Indeed, the goal of ensuring that there was a sufficient pool of Arabic-speakers was now elevated to the level of a national mission. This is indicated by the urgent tone in the announcement, the decision to publish it widely and its timing. The announcement entreated Israelis to study Arabic in order to serve the state and to contribute to its national interests. It can be argued that, in postwar Israel, Arabic was viewed as a national priority – and even necessity – with widespread implications for Jewish-Israeli society as a whole, and was no longer regarded as the exclusive province of a select group of educators, scholars and security experts.

It is important to note that the call was positively received in Israel. Figures released during the initial postwar years point to an increase in the number of pupils learning Arabic. In parallel, the rejection of Arabic by parents, teachers and pupils that had been so pronounced during the years 1948–67, declined significantly following the war. The increased motivation to study Arabic along with more willingness to embrace