

Can an 'Arab soul' yearn for Israel's anthem?

Arab pupils expected to learn Zionist song

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Nazareth. A leading Arab educator in Israel has denounced the decision of Gideon Saar, the education minister, to require schools to study the Israeli national anthem.

Officials announced last week that they were sending out special "national anthem kits" to 8,000 schools, including those in the separate Arab education system, in time for the start of the new academic year in September.

The kits have been designed to be suitable for all age groups and for use across the curriculum, from civics and history classes to music and literature lessons.

The anthem, known as Ha-Tikva, or The Hope, has long been unpopular with Israel's Arab minority because its lyrics refer only to a Jewish historical connection to the land.

Mr Saar's initiative is widely seen among Israel's 1.3 million Arab citizens as a further indication of the rising nationalistic tide sweeping policymakers.

Last week the ministry also announced that textbooks recently issued to Arab schoolchildren would have expunged the word "nakba", or catastrophe, to describe the Palestinians' dispossession at Israel's founding in 1948.

Hala Espanioly, who chairs the education committee of the Arab minority's supreme political body, the Higher Follow-Up Committee, told the Israeli news website Ynet: "If there is an attempt to force the Ha-Tikva anthem on Arab schools and Arab pupils, it will be akin to a kind of attempted rape of their identity."

The issue of the national anthem, based on a 120-year-old poem by Naftali Hertz Imber and an ancient folk melody, has been a running sore between Israel's Jewish and Arab populations for decades.

Arab citizens are unhappy with its heavily Zionist lyrics, which speak of how the "soul of a Jew yearns" to return to Zion, as well as referring to "The hope of two thousand years, To be a free nation in our land".

In 2005 some legislators were outraged when an Israeli parliamentary committee considered, among possible constitution changes, revising the anthem's lyrics from "the soul of a Jew" to "the soul of an Israeli". The change was not approved.

Mr Saar, then an ordinary politician, led the opposition to changing the lyrics: "In two words:

definitely not. I wouldn't make any changes to Ha-Tikva. It would be a compromise on the state's identity."

The refusal of prominent Arabs to sing the anthem in public has provoked several notable controversies.

The most high-profile concerned Raleb Majadele, of the Labor party, who was appointed Israel's first Arab cabinet minister in 2007. In an interview he said that, though he always stood during Ha-Tikva, he drew the line at singing it.

He later defended his position to Israeli radio: "Where is it written that a person appointed to be a cabinet minister in Israel must stop being an Arab, and turn into a member of a different religion and ethnicity?"

Arab players in Israel's national football squad have also admitted being uncomfortable during the playing of the anthem before games. TV broadcasts often zoom in to show that their lips are not moving.

Abir Kupty, today an elected official with the Nazareth municipality, produced one of Israeli TV's most talked-about moments four years ago when she was filmed sitting down when the anthem was played. She was the only Arab contestant in a show to find Israel's future leaders.

Ms Kupty said: "This decision by the education ministry is part of the current hysterical right-wing mood in Israel. They hope they can erase our Palestinian identity by making us love the anthem."

She added that Arab pupils were already deprived of the chance to learn about their own history, culture and identity. "The curriculum in Arab schools is heavily controlled by Jewish officials and by the security services."

Sofia Yoad, the education ministry's director of curriculum development, said the anthem kits included a book and two CDs containing 40 historic recordings of Hatikva, including it being sung in a concentration camp and at the Declaration of Independence.

"It is very important to learn about the national anthem even if pupils are not Jewish," she said. "After all, this is the story of a country's independence."

Astrith Baltsan, a pianist who researched and wrote the book over three years, said she had originally been commissioned to produce it for Israel's 60th anniversary celebrations last year.

But when Mr Saar saw it, she said, he had been keen to use it in all schools. She added that, when she played the anthem at a ministry launch party last week, even the Arab schools inspectors stood. "When you know the story of the anthem, you show it respect," she said.

The Higher Follow-Up Committee, a national political body representing Israel's Arab minority, has staunchly opposed the use of the kits. It wrote last week to Mr Saar, warning that the initiative would "only deepen the alienation of Arab students and teachers".

Figures released by the education ministry this month show that only 32 per cent of Arab students passed their matriculation exam last year, compared to 60 per cent of Jewish students. The pass rate was a dramatic drop from the 50.7 per cent of Arab pupils who matriculated in 2006.

Yousef Jabareen, head of Dirasat, a Nazareth-based organisation monitoring education issues, blamed the poor results on growing cultural bias in the Israeli education system as well as severe budgetary discrimination.

He said the increasing weight placed on Jewish heritage and Judaism lessons put Arab pupils at a severe disadvantage, and that further alienation was caused by the state's refusal to allow the Arab education system any autonomy in selecting its own curriculum.

A report published in March, he added, showed that the government invested \$1,100 in each Jewish pupil's education compared to \$190 for each Arab pupil. There was also a shortfall of more than 1,000 classrooms for Arab students.

Mr Jabareen pointed out that a committee appointed last year by the dovish previous education minister, Yuli Tamir, had recommended curriculum reforms to encourage a "shared life" and common values among pupils, including more frequent encounters between Jewish and Arab students.

In April Mr Saar quashed the committee's report.

Opposition to the study of Ha-Tikva is shared by ultra-religious Jews known as the Haredim. They believe the anthem should include a reference to God in the lyrics, and have proposed an alternative entitled HaEmunah.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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