

Israel's plan to wipe Arabic names off the map

New battleground over road signs

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Global Research, July 17, 2009

17 July 2009

Nazareth. Thousands of road signs are the latest front in Israel's battle to erase Arab heritage from much of the Holy Land.

Israel Katz, the transport minister, announced this week that signs on all major roads in Israel, East Jerusalem and possibly parts of the West Bank would be "standardised", converting English and Arabic place names into straight transliterations of the Hebrew name.

Currently, road signs include the place name as it is traditionally rendered in all three languages.

Under the new scheme, the Arab identity of important Palestinian communities will be obscured: Jerusalem, or "al Quds" in Arabic, will be Hebraised to "Yerushalayim"; Nazareth, or "al Nasra" in Arabic, the city of Jesus's childhood, will become "Natzrat"; and Jaffa, the port city after which Palestine's oranges were named, will be "Yafo".

Arab leaders are concerned that Mr Katz's plan offers a foretaste of the demand by Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, that the Palestinians recognise Israel as a Jewish state.

On Wednesday, Mohammed Sabih, a senior official at the Arab League, called the initiative "racist and dangerous".

"This decision comes in the framework of a series of steps in Israel aimed at implementing the 'Jewish State' slogan on the ground."

Palestinians in Israel and Jerusalem, meanwhile, have responded with alarm to a policy they believe is designed to make them ever less visible.

Ahmed Tibi, an Arab legislator in the Israeli parliament, said: "Minister Katz is mistaken if he thinks that changing a few words can erase the existence of the Arab people or their connection to Israel."

The transport ministry has made little effort to conceal the political motivation behind its policy of Hebraising road signs.

In announcing the move on Monday, Mr Katz, a hawkish member of Likud, Mr Netanyahu's right-wing party, said he objected to Palestinians using the names of communities that existed before Israel's establishment in 1948.

“I will not allow that on our signs,” he said. “This government, and certainly this minister, will not allow anyone to turn Jewish Jerusalem into Palestinian al Quds.”

Other Israeli officials have played down the political significance of Mr Katz’s decision. A transport department spokesman, Yeshaayahu Ronen, said: “The lack of uniform spelling on signs has been a problem for those speaking foreign languages, citizens and tourists alike.”

“That’s ridiculous,” responded Tareq Shehadeh, head of the Nazareth Cultural and Tourism Association. “Does the ministry really think it’s helping tourists by renaming Nazareth, one of the most famous places in the world, ‘Natzrat’, a Hebrew name only Israeli Jews recognise?”

Meron Benvenisti, a former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, said Israel had begun interfering with the Arabic on the signs for East Jerusalem as soon as it occupied the city in 1967. It invented a new word, “Urshalim”, that was supposed to be the Arabic form of the Hebrew word for Jerusalem, “Yerushalayim”.

“I was among those who intervened at the time to get the word ‘al Quds’ placed on signs, too, after ‘Urshalim’ and separated by a hyphen. But over the years ‘al Quds’ was demoted to brackets and nowadays it’s not included on new signs at all.”

He said Mr Katz’s scheme would push this process even further by requiring not only the Arabic equivalent of the Hebrew word for Jerusalem, but the replication of the Hebrew spelling as well. “It’s completely chauvinistic and an insult,” he said.

Meir Margalit, a former Jerusalem councillor, said official policy was to make the Palestinian population in East Jerusalem as invisible as possible, including by ignoring their neighbourhoods on many signs.

The transport ministry’s plans for the West Bank are less clear. In his announcement Mr Katz said Palestinian-controlled areas of the territory would still be free to use proper Arabic place names. But he hinted that signs in the 60 per cent of the West Bank under Israeli military rule would be Hebraised, too.

That could mean Palestinians driving across parts of the West Bank to the Palestinian city of Nablus, for example, will have to look for the Hebrew name “Shechem” spelt out in Arabic.

Mr Benvenisti said that, after Israel’s establishment in 1948, a naming committee was given the task of erasing thousands of Arab place names, including those of hills, valleys and springs, and creating Hebrew names. The country’s first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, told the committee: “We are obliged to remove the Arabic names for reasons of state.”

In addition, the Arabic names of more than 400 Palestinian villages destroyed by Israel during and after the 1948 war were lost as Jewish communities took their place.

Israel’s surviving Palestinian minority, today one-fifth of the population, have had to battle in the courts for the inclusion of Arabic on road signs, despite Arabic being an official language.

Many signs on national highways were provided only in Hebrew and English until the courts in 1999 insisted Arabic be included. Three years later the courts ruled that Arabic must also

be included on signs in cities where a significant number of Arabs live.

However, as the political climate has shifted rightward in Israel, there has been a backlash, including an unsuccessful bid by legislators to end Arabic's status as an official language last year.

Recently the Israeli media revealed that nationalist groups have been spraying over Arabic names on road signs, especially in the Jerusalem area.

Israel has also antagonised Palestinians in both Israel and the West Bank by naming roads after right-wing figures.

The main highway in the Jordan Valley, which runs through Palestinian territory but is used by Israelis to drive between northern Israel and Jerusalem, is named "Gandhi's Road" - not for the Indian spiritual leader but after the nickname of an Israeli general, Rehavam Zeevi, who called for the expulsion of Palestinians from Greater Israel.

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.

A version of this article originally appeared in The National (www.thenational.ae), published in Abu Dhabi.

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