

# Parents Protest as Dream of Bilingual Hebrew-Arabic Education in Israel Turns Sour

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*Families threaten to pull children from Jaffa's first mixed Arab-Jewish school, accusing Tel Aviv officials of breaking promises*

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It is a rare scene: in a classroom on the southern outskirts of Tel Aviv, young Israeli children – Jewish and Palestinian – play and study together, casually chatting and joking in a mix of Hebrew and Arabic.

The opening of the first bilingual classrooms in Israel's largest city was celebrated with great excitement by parents and teachers last September. It broke with a decades-old model of strict segregation between the country's Jewish and Palestinian pupils.

Israel includes a large and often-overlooked minority of 1.7 million Palestinian citizens, a fifth of the population.

Only months into the educational experiment, however, the mood has soured. Hundreds of parents [staged a protes](#) in central Tel Aviv this month, chanting "All children are equal" and "We demand bilingual education."

They accuse the municipality and education ministry – both of which officially support the project – of betraying the ideals of bilingualism, and have threatened to pull their children out of the school.

"We held a vote and 80 percent of parents agreed that they would not let their children continue at the school if things stay as they are," Assaf Ronel, a spokesman for the parents, told Middle East Eye.

We have demanded that the municipality commit to our vision in writing, and provide a proper space for a Palestinian identity in the school.

## Fierce backlash

Shuli Dichter, director of Hand in Hand, an organisation that promotes bilingual education in Israel, calls the 170 families taking part in its Jaffa project "pioneers".

Hand in Hand [operates](#) four bilingual schools across Israel and two kindergartens. Jaffa's primary school classes are the most recent addition.

The idea of children from different cultural backgrounds learning together and speaking each other's language may seem uncontroversial. But it has prompted a fierce backlash from right-wing Jewish groups in Israel.

In late 2014 Hand in Hand's flagship school in Jerusalem was [torched](#) by activists from Lehava, an organisation that opposes integration between Jewish and Palestinian citizens. Graffiti daubed on the walls read "Death to the Arabs" and "There can be no coexistence with cancer".

Three of the group's members were jailed last year. In January Israel's high court [increased the sentences](#) of two brothers involved in the arson attack.

Although Lehava is a fringe group, it draws on ideas that have found favour with much larger numbers of Israeli Jews, especially over the past 15 years as the country has lurched to the right.

A survey by the Pew polling organisation this month [found](#) that half of Israeli Jews wanted Arabs expelled from the state, and 79 percent believed Jews should have more rights than their Palestinian compatriots.

In the current climate, Dichter told MEE, Jaffa's Jewish and Palestinian parents were a "revolutionary group, determined to break down the walls between them".

"The families want to build a shared community around these schools based on the principle of equality," he said. "That goes against official policy. It can be viewed as deeply subversive."

## **Drop in the ocean**

According to Hand in Hand, interest among parents has rocketed following the arson attack in Jerusalem, with the publicity alerting many parents to the existence of bilingual education for the first time.

"In many areas, we have 20 children for every available place, and demand is growing especially fast among Jewish parents," Dichter said. "It is only a shortage of financial resources that prevents us from opening more schools."

The numbers participating so far, however, are a drop in the ocean: 1,350 children are currently in bilingual education, out of a total Israeli school population of some 1.5 million children.

The Jaffa parents argue that their coastal city of 50,000 residents, which is incorporated into the Tel Aviv municipal area, is the natural location for a bilingual school.

A third of Jaffa's residents are Palestinian, reflecting the fact that, before Israel's creation in 1948, it was Palestine's commercial centre.

Although Israelis mostly live in separate communities, based on their ethnicity, Jaffa is one

of half a dozen urban areas where Jewish and Palestinian citizens live close to each other.

### **Pressure for change**

The story of bilingual education began in Jaffa three years ago when the municipality agreed, under mounting pressure from dozens of local parents, to allow Hand in Hand to take over a disused kindergarten.

It was such a success that the parents demanded the city allow their children to continue on into elementary school, said Mohammed Marzouk, who coordinates between the parents and the municipality on behalf of Hand in Hand.

But rather than provide them with a new school, Tel Aviv officials agreed only to incorporate the children into a failing Jewish school, one that was due to close because of falling enrolment.

The situation was far from ideal, Marzouk told MEE, but the parents were persuaded that the school would gradually become bilingual as the children in the project rose up through the grades.

“Bilingual schools have a different DNA,” said Marzouk. “And it’s very difficult to achieve that when the existing culture is entirely Jewish.”

It was vital, he said, that books were in both Arabic and Hebrew, that signs around the school were in the two languages, and that the holidays of the three religions represented in class – Jewish, Muslim and Christian – were respected and celebrated by all children.

Ronel said of the municipality’s position: “We received many promises, but in practice most of them were not kept.”

### **Row over holidays**

Within days of the bilingual first-grade classes opening last year, parents hit a crisis when school administrators refused to let the children take off the Muslim feast of Eid al-Adha.

When the parents rebelled and kept their children home, the management “flipped out”, said Ronel. “Now the trust has gone and we are demanding that they make commitments in writing that things will be different.”

Marzouk said the biggest challenge to founding bilingual schools was “breaking the resistance of officials. Without pressure from the parents, it won’t happen.”

A spokeswoman for the Tel Aviv municipality said this was the first year the two bilingual classes had operated. Municipal and education ministry officials, she added, would be “at hand to assist and solve problems that might come up during the year”.

### **Solution to conflict**

Advocates for bilingual education argue that it is the key to reversing increasing social polarisation in Israel and ending a seemingly intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Earlier this month, a few hundred metres from Jaffa’s bilingual school, a Palestinian from the West Bank went on a [stabbing spree](#) that killed an American tourist and wounded nearly a

dozen Israelis.

Ronel, an Israeli Jewish journalist, said he had long been pessimistic about the region's future and had contemplated leaving Israel with his family, taking advantage of his wife's German passport. But that changed once his daughter, Ruth, began at the bilingual kindergarten.

"I have become evangelical about it," he said. "I see how her knowledge of Palestinian identity and the Arabic language has made her own identity much stronger."

He said knowing the other side was essential to strengthening Israelis' sense of security and reducing their fears. "This is the model for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict too. I am sure this is what a solution will look like."

Marzouk agreed. "When the conflict isn't being solved on the macro-level, people start to look for solutions on the micro-level."

According to Dichter, bilingual schools are proving particularly popular in Israel's mixed cities. Next year Hand in Hand will open the first bilingual elementary school in Haifa, Israel's third largest city, following the success of a bilingual kindergarten there.

A new generation of widely travelled parents are demanding an educational model based on equal citizenship, he said. "They have experienced social diversity outside Israel, they have seen colourful, inclusive societies, and they want to live that way themselves."

### **Deeper segregation**

However, the movement for change is not all in one direction, even in Jaffa.

Far-right Jewish religious groups, ideologically close to the settlers, have set up seminaries and exclusive housing areas in Jaffa and other mixed cities. "They are going the other way: they want even deeper segregation," said Dichter.

Hassan Agbaria, principal of the only bilingual school in a Palestinian community in Israel, located in the northern town of Kafr Karia, said there were problems in more rural areas too.

This month the gated Jewish community of Katzir, close to his school, refused to allow Hand in Hand organisers in for a parents' registration meeting, accusing the group of "political activity".

"It is a big psychological hurdle for some of them," he told MEE. "Some think you must be crazy to send your young children into an Arab community every day."

Another of Hand in Hand's rural schools - in the gated Jewish community of Ashbal in the Galilee - has seen enrolment from Jewish parents fall sharply in recent years.

Dichter admitted: "The challenge is to attract these families out from behind their gates, and it can only be done by offering them an excellent education programme."

Marzouk said it had also proven difficult to take the bilingual model beyond elementary level. So far, only the Jerusalem school, founded in 1998, offers a secondary education.

Many Jewish parents, he noted, were concerned about how, in the context of bilingual

education, their children would cope with the preparation for compulsory military service when they finish high school.

And given the dominant climate of opinion in both Jewish and Palestinian society, opposition to teenagers dating across the ethnic divide could not be ignored.

“These obstacles aren’t insurmountable but they are major challenges,” said Marzouk. “As we get more experienced, we are finding better ways to deal with these complexities.”

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