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Orienting Language: Reflections on the Study of Arabic in the Yishuv

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PRE-STATE JEWISH PALESTINE, like other emerging national societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was beset by the anxieties of a people seeking to recover its voice. Language was among the most concrete focuses of its energy. Ultimately, Hebrew was crowned the singular language of Zionist discourse and the sole path to the elusive “Hebrew Spirit.” But it achieved its cultural victory amid a constant awareness that the Zionist project was painting only a veneer of homogeneity over the Babel in which its adherents continued to dwell. Through the years between 1910 and 1920 and again in the 1930s German battled with Hebrew but failed to remain a language of high Zionist discourse and academic exchange. Yiddish, the language of Eastern European autonomists and some Zionists, was the mother tongue of most immigrant Zionists but was forcefully and publicly denounced as *zbargon*. The movement to promote Hebrew, though it slowly silenced other voices, could not evade them altogether. Indeed, in an environment where language was existentially significant, the diverse languages of the Yishuv pushed to the fore larger questions of cultural affiliation and national identity.

In this note I would like to discuss a rather neglected chapter in the story of the Yishuv: the study of Arabic. Some Zionist leaders shared a sense, often inchoate, that Arabic—the language of the Arab majority in Palestine and one with its own long and storied Jewish history—was an essential tool for their new society. “Learning Arabic is a *part of Zionism*,” wrote the scholar Shlomo Dov Goitein in a 1946 pamphlet, “a part of the return to the Hebrew language and to the Semitic Orient, which today is completely Arabic-speaking. We desire that our children, when they go out into the world, be able to feel *that they are children of the Orient and able to act within it*, just as we aspire that they do not lose the precious inheritance of European spirituality that we have brought with us.”¹ Educators

1. S. D. Goitein, *On the Teaching of Arabic* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1946), 8 [emphasis original].

and politicians, and not a small number of ordinary Jews, offered variations on this theme, requesting and instituting Arabic-language courses in as many as a third of the secondary schools and in the cities and kibbutzim of the Yishuv. In the process, however, they struggled to articulate a coherent rationale for this undertaking.

Teasing out the logic of Zionist Arabic study requires identifying the various coexisting sets of meanings that Jews in this setting imparted to the Arabic language. Arabic study was a highly charged pursuit, and any discussion of it revealed a complex web of symbolic associations and strategic assessments of the Yishuv's political condition. On one level, Arabic, as the spoken and written language of the modern Middle East, represented contemporary engagement with the Arabs of Palestine and a means of managing an increasingly tense political situation. But Arabic operated on a number of other historical planes as well. Indeed, Jewish interest in Arabic predated the European Jewish encounter with contemporary Palestine. It was, of course, the spoken and written language of medieval Jews in the Islamic world. But it also served as the source of intrigue for modern European Jewish scholars and laymen, for whom it signified cultural achievement and a model of successful integration.

The Yishuv's interest in learning and teaching Arabic had a dual aspect. On the one hand, language education was a strategic response to a set of largely unforeseen political tensions. At the same time, it was an organic product of a centuries-old Jewish engagement with the Orient that had reached a cultural and political crescendo with Zionism's call for a return to the East. Both claims, and their attendant implications for contemporary Jewish identity, inspired passionate discussions that cut across the major political and cultural organizations of the Yishuv.

The Yishuv's history of Arabic study must be located in a narrative about Jews and the Orient that reaches both backward in time and outward in space. Arabic, this narrative begins, had long been a Jewish tongue, and Islam a familiar cultural idiom. In the Middle Ages 90 percent of world Jewry lived under Islam and spoke Arabic. The philosophical and poetic achievements of Jews living under Umayyad rule in Spain are well known; less well documented is the cultural history of the Jews who remained in the Middle East and North Africa into the twentieth century. These Jews composed literature and poetry in Judeo-Arabic, among other languages, and were often more integrated into their surrounding cultures, economically and socially, than their counterparts in Eastern and Central Europe.

Modern European Jews drew selectively from this past. German

Jews, in particular, often idealized Jewish life under medieval Islam, while largely disregarding its contemporary forms. Golden Age Spain—the site of what some considered the first Jewish enlightenment—was a model of cultural integration and served as an object of emulation. The resulting nostalgia for the Muslim Middle Ages both drew from and converged with a growing European fascination with the Orient. Nearly from the moment of their inception, European universities promoted the study of Islam, first out of religious interest in a prime challenge to Christianity and later out of a more secular interest in the civilizations of the Orient. In the nineteenth century, Jews began to be allowed into universities as students in a wide range of disciplines, not merely medicine. Among the disciplines they chose to enter was Oriental studies. Indeed, scholars from Ignaz Goldziher and Abraham Geiger to Eugen Mittwoch, Josef Horowitz, and Gotthold Weil, among others, participated in this field through their contributions to Islamic history and Arabic philology.

Jews may have been drawn to Oriental studies, Martin Kramer suggests, because of the similarities between Judaism and Islam, or out of the belief that a Europe sympathetic to Islam would be more charitable to Islam's Semitic cousin, the Jews. Here the impetus for Jewish Orientalism was less tactical than it was existential: Arabic, a language of important Jewish texts and of modern academic study, offered a path both to cultural distinctiveness and to assimilation, and thus a way for Jews to mediate between two apparently opposed poles of Jewish identity.

Zionism, the most developed form of Jewish nationalism, formulated the Jewish relationship to the Orient in particularly vivid terms: Jews could, for the first time, act both as modernizers of the East and as its native progeny. This reclamation of the Orient, both physically and conceptually, inverted a long-held stigma. Jews were not only interested in the Orient. They themselves were deemed Orientals by the surrounding European culture and were linked linguistically and genetically—and nearly always pejoratively—to Semitic peoples. This pairing was initially a mark of shame for Jews who longed to assimilate into European society and cast off any Oriental vestiges. But, as John Efron and Paul Mendes-Flohr argue, beginning in the late nineteenth century, some Jews began to reclaim the “Oriental” as a badge of honor rather than a mark of shame. Among them were Zionists, who drew from and reconfigured the long history of Jewish engagement with Islam to serve national aims.

Romantic ideas of integration abounded in the first Zionist agricultural colonies in Palestine. The most prominent Zionist ethos in the 1890s was integrationist; relations between Jews and Arabs were sufficiently stable that a vision of coexistence was not pure fantasy; and early settlers—not

yet speaking in terms of a Jewish state—assumed that their settlement project could accommodate both Jews and Arabs. Stories of Jews dressing up in Arab garb were not uncommon in certain circles, notably the defense group Ha-Shomer. Some pre-World War I Zionist thinkers, including Eliahu Sapir, Yitzhak Epstein, and Nissim Malul, promoted a more explicit integrationist ideology, which held that Jews could absorb positive characteristics from Arabs and thereby create a bridge between the Occident and the Orient. The study of Arabic language was a pillar of this work.

But difficulties quickly surfaced. Amid the integrationist chorus, voices warned of the perils of assimilating Oriental attributes and advocated for a purely “Hebrew” identity. Their return to the land, Zionists quickly realized, was hardly the romantic act some of its ideologues had anticipated. The very premise of Jewish affinity with the East was called into question by difficulties adjusting to an agricultural lifestyle and by (at this stage, unorganized) Arab opposition to Zionist immigration. The gravity of what would be widely called the “Arab Question” soon became evident. Arabic knowledge, in this context, became a means to ease Jews’ settlement project and, as importantly, to reassert the viability of an organic return to the Orient.

Calls to reengage the culture of the Orient were renewed following World War I. The period of the British Mandate was a site of intense discussion about the function of Arabic and Oriental studies among Jews. There are a number of reasons for this: the Mandate period was characterized by attempts to institutionalize all aspects of social policy. The educational system, the primary agent of linguistic education, was standardized and centralized. As importantly, political conflicts with Arabs, and between world powers, became more worrisome and influenced major changes in Zionist ideologies—the emergence of new streams such as Revisionism; the Zionist “resort to force,” as Anita Shapira has termed the growth of Zionist militarism²; and, by the 1940s, a consensus in favor of partition. In this age, a number of discrete Arabic programs were created in the Yishuv. The School of Oriental Studies at the Hebrew University was founded in 1927, the second institute created in the Humanities after the Institute of Jewish Studies. The Labor Zionist movement, whose stated aim was joint organization with Arabs, advanced proposals to foster knowledge of Arabic for propaganda and reconciliation purposes. Ben-Gurion suggested in 1923, for example, that

2. Anita Shapira, *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881–1948* (Stanford, Calif., 1992).

Arabic courses should be instituted for Jews and that an Arabic-speaking secretary should be hired to orchestrate labor organizing in the Arab community. Records of the Central Zionist Archives show that by the 1930s, Jewish communities throughout Palestine were contacting the political department of the Jewish Agency (under the leadership of Moshe Shertok) requesting teachers of and funding for local Arabic study. In 1941, members of the Socialist-Zionist movement, Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir, founded an Arab department to promote the study of Arabic.

In each of these settings, pragmatic and pedagogical discussions about the function of Arabic reflected larger, evolving cultural concerns. In retrospect, it appears that Arabic served three major discourses in the Yishuv. First, Arabic was a romantic nationalist tool—a means of connecting the Jewish people more firmly to their Semitic past through familiarity with Semitic grammar (which could be a tool in Hebrew education), Middle Eastern history, and medieval Jewish history. Second, Arabic was a modernizing tool, the most important means by which Zionists could convey the content of their program (in its many ideological varieties) to Arabs. Third, Arabic was a strategic tool—a means to build up a systematic body of information about the Arabs, conduct military intelligence activities, and create an apparatus to identify and predict trends in Arab activity.

The first of these functions and discourses, the romantic nationalist, was most clearly reflected in the ideology of the School of Oriental studies at the Hebrew University and the mainly German scholars who filled its ranks. During a 1922 meeting in Jerusalem to explore the feasibility of an Oriental Studies faculty in a new Jewish university, Zionist intellectuals stressed the importance of Oriental knowledge for Jewish cultivation. Heinrich Loewe, the first librarian of the Jewish National Library, expressed the opinion that such a faculty could “create the opportunity to show the greatness of Judaism and to prove that on the one hand there is an opposition between the Semitic spirit and the European spirit and on the other hand there are similar aspects to Jews and Arabs.”³ Assured that classical Oriental studies were the surest route to uncovering this Jewish greatness rooted in its Semitic-ness, the school focused its studies on medieval Arabic literature and Semitic philology. Quickly, the school earned recognition in various international Orientalist societies. The work of the School of Oriental Studies was not primarily

3. “Protocol: The Session on the Establishment of the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the Hebrew University in Palestine” (Hebrew), April 10, 1922, Central Zionist Archives, folder S2/390.

intended to facilitate interaction with contemporary Palestinian Arabs; in fact, Leo Mayer stressed that knowledge of Palestinian dialect would hinder the acquisition of formal Arabic. Nonetheless, the majority of the school's scholars saw an explicit nationalist purpose in their work. Teaching Oriental knowledge to those "raised in the West and among Slavs,"⁴ as the scholar Levi Billig put it, would give Jews insight into their own past and the foundations of their national identity.

While the esoteric research projects of the university attracted little attention beyond Mount Scopus, the linkages its scholars identified between Oriental Studies and Zionist identity seeped into the Yishuv. Throughout the Mandate period, faculty from the School of Oriental Studies produced Arabic textbooks for use in Jewish secondary schools, offered training courses for Arabic teachers, and sat on committees intended to promote Arabic in the Zionist school system. For educators influenced by German educational theories—particularly those in leftist Labor schools—Arabic instruction seemed an ideal way of developing students' analytical skills, deepening their understanding of Hebrew grammar, and familiarizing them with chapters in medieval Jewish history.

The second, modernizing, discourse connected to Arabic reflected the Zionist goal of encouraging progressive currents in the Arab community in order to bring about Arab cooperation with Zionism. Many of the faculty of Hebrew University, particularly members of the leftist organization Brit Shalom, saw a purpose in Oriental studies beyond pure scholarship: such study could promote positive feelings among Arabs by modeling Zionists' receptivity to Arab culture and history and by encouraging respect for Arabs among Jews. In fact, the same idealized notions of the Orient that had prompted Oriental studies at the outset led many to believe that Arabs were a pliable population that would ultimately be receptive to Zionism's modernizing ideas. Through a combination of goodwill, on the one hand, and propaganda on the other, Arabs and Jews could arrive at mutual understanding, albeit on Zionism's terms. Arabic language, many believed, was a fundamental tool in this modernizing project.

Such knowledge, however, was lacking. Whereas the Old Yishuv has assumed some cultural mixing as a matter of course, the Second Aliyah in particular began to enforce a policy of separation rooted in the idea of "Hebrew Labor" and the "Hebrew spirit." "For the student who is learn-

4. Levi Billig, *Memorandum on Research*, [n.d.], p. 3, Central Archives of the Hebrew University, folder 91, School of Oriental Studies, 1925–1927.

ing Arabic in school there are almost no opportunities to have even a minimal conversation with an Arab in the street," Goitein lamented in 1937.⁵ A number of programs were created to remedy this situation. Kibbutzim organized visits to Arab villages and exchanged pleasantries and food. A member of MAPAI, the main Labor Zionist party, created a textbook for spoken Arabic in 1944 that taught Jews to have simple exchanges with Arab merchants—this well after the Labor movement had expressed the need for a Hebrew society and not long after its statement of support for political partition of Palestine. In this sense, support for Arabic knowledge cut against the prevalent strategy of separation and signaled an effort to persuade Arabs of Zionism's benefits.

More blatant propaganda work was also needed to teach Arabs about Zionism. From 1937 (and through 1960) the Histadrut published a weekly Arabic newspaper called *Haqiqat al-Amr* (The Truth of the Matter). This paper, staffed primarily by Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews, presented Zionism, and particularly its Labor stream, as a benevolent force working for the good of Palestine. Here we can see how the second discourse reflected an altogether distinct perspective about the Orient from the first. If the romantic nationalist discourse on Arabic stemmed from Jews' idealized notions about a return to the Orient, the modernizing discourse encouraged Arabs to abandon what were perceived as backward ways and join in the Europeanizing project of Zionism. These two perspectives on the Orient, the romantic and the modernizing, stood in perennial tension, a tension that could be negotiated, if only imperfectly, through discussions about Arabic.

Both the romantic and the modernizing discourses implied an optimistic belief in Zionism's power to change the terms of the Jews' encounter with the Orient, the first by drawing Jews closer to their Semitic roots, the second, by encouraging Arabs toward modernity. A third discourse, however, stemmed not from faith in positive change but from pragmatic accommodation to a new reality of enmity. Even while Labor groups persisted in seeking "a path to the Arabs," they joined Revisionist Zionists in recognizing a far more evident field of interaction: conflict. Indeed, the further Zionists increased their distance from and their suspicion of Arabs, the more they saw the need for a comprehensive body of knowledge about the Arabs who surrounded them. This knowledge could be derived from two types of sources: scholarly research and Arabic-speak-

5. *Program of Study and Methods of Instruction in Arabic Language in the First Year of Study* (Hebrew), Department of Education, July 3–4, 1939, p. 9, CZA, J17/7236.

ing informers scattered in Palestine and throughout the Arab world. Both positions required knowledge of Arabic, but in different ways. As Gil Eyal has shown, Zionists created an elaborate system of knowledge-gathering that had its beginnings in the intelligence networks of the Palmach and Irgun.⁶ To this day in Israel, the most effective setting for Arabic study is in the intelligence divisions of the Israel Defense Forces.

Zionist intelligence followed colonial models of surveillance common from Africa to India but diverged in at least one important way. The Zionist intelligence arrangements were rooted in an internal Jewish hierarchy that placed European Jews in prestigious analytical positions, and Mizrahi Jews in lower status but more personal intelligence roles. Consequently, attitudes about Arabs were a product not only of “pure” intelligence needs but of intra-Jewish diversity and tension.

The three discourses I have identified—the romantic nationalist, the modernizing, and the strategic—coexisted uneasily. In the aggregate, they reflected Zionists’ inherent ambivalence about their relationship to their new Middle Eastern context. The complexity of this relationship is best exemplified in conversations among educators. Schools, the training grounds for the next generation of Zionists, were the site of the most contested discussion about Arabic, as about nearly every aspect of Zionism. Though planning around Arabic was far less extensive than the debate about promoting Hebrew curricula, the former were also far more fraught with tension than the latter.

As educators debated the extent and focus of Arabic study, they disagreed on a range of matters: whether classical, modern, or colloquial Arabic should be taught; whether grammar or spoken proficiency should be emphasized; and what kinds of textbooks should be used. Theoretically speaking, schools adopted a three-tiered program for Arabic study: students in vocational schools (who composed 80 to 90 percent of the student population) would study colloquial Arabic for quotidian uses; elite students in the gymnasiums would come to “understand the Arab world,” as one educator put it, through exposure to literature and newspapers; and the tiny echelon of students who advanced to university study would obtain proficiency in classical Arabic as well. In practice, educators saw value in all three approaches to Arabic. As I have noted above, spoken language was the means for propaganda work and rapprochement; systematic study of modern Arabic texts provided a path towards a broader strategic understanding of the Middle East; and the study of

6. Gil Eyal, “Dangerous Liaisons between Military Intelligence and Middle Eastern Studies in Israel.” *Theory and Society* 31 (2002): 653–93.

formal grammar and classical texts promised to draw Jews closer to their own Oriental past. Accordingly, textbooks that seemed to offer too much grammatical analysis were critiqued by the Arabic Subcommittee of the Zionist General Council (*Va'ad ha-Le'umi*), which suggested the inclusion of modern literature. Conversely, teachers who relied on spoken proficiency were suspected of methodological laxness regarding the classics. In the end, indecision left educators continually stymied in their policy decisions, generations of students unschooled in Arabic, and a population intrigued by ambitious objectives but uncertain of the place of Arabic in its educational system and the Orient in its collective identity.

The project of Arabic education in the Yishuv was limited, diffuse, and, except in a few corners, unsuccessful. This is even more the case today. Arabic, generally neglected as an academic subject in most Israeli Jewish schools, remains the most evident means of access to places, both geographic and symbolic, which Israelis are not sure they want to enter. A 2001 editorial in *Ha'aretz* admonished Israelis to fulfill their linguistic responsibilities. "Teaching Arabic seriously as a compulsory subject," it said, "sends a message from Jewish citizens to Arab citizens: 'You are here! We respect you, your language, and your culture. We also know that ignorance is a weakness and we do not want to be weak. We are here! Arabic language and culture are a part of our identity and part of the region in which our children will also live.'"⁷ If Israel is to become truly rooted in its Middle Eastern context, the paper seemed to suggest, Arabic knowledge is a requirement. Zionists recognized and struggled with this fact in the past; and, as difficult as it may be, they must continue to do so today.

7. "Learn Arabic Now" (Hebrew), *Ha'aretz*, February 27, 2001.