

The Follow Up Committee on Arab Education
(FUCAE)

**Report on infringements to the rights to education for the Palestinian minority
in Israel**

Presented to the UN Human Rights Council

The International Commission of Inquiry on Palestine/Israel

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Background context

1. The Arab Education System in Israel

Palestinian citizens of Israel (PCI) number just a little over 2 million, representing 21% of the country's total population.

Israel's long-standing discriminatory policies towards PCI have not only impeded their socio-economic development, but also resulted in large gaps between them and their Jewish counterparts, in standard of living, livelihood opportunities, education, healthcare and cultural services.

This fact has been observed by various international institutions, such as the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the CERD. In a 2015 report, the OECD highlighted that PCI are clearly disadvantaged across all wellbeing dimensions for which measures are available: they experience higher rates of poverty, lower levels of labor force participation, educational attainment and health¹.

The Arab Education System in Israel:

- Early education: 117,300 children (22% of total children in early education)
- Regular education, grades 1-12: 450,000 students (23% of total students)
- Higher education: 58,000 students (19% of total students)

Major challenges:

- The Ministry of Education's **problematic approach** defining 'education for Arabs' rather than 'Arab education', an approach of controlled separation and supervision.
- **Discrimination and gaps in allocation of resources** - according to 2021 data, the average Jewish student benefits from a budget of 42,000 NIS per year, while the average Arab student only benefits from a budget of 28,000 NIS, a 33% difference. To illustrate this, in its 2020 Concluding Observations, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination reiterated its concern that "Israeli society continues to be segregated as it maintains Jewish and non-Jewish sectors, including two systems of education with unequal conditions"². A Ynet analysis on 2021 official Ministry of Education data provides an overall picture of the disparities in budget allocation, revealing the average allocation per student in the Jewish education system is about 3 ½ times greater than the allocation in the Arab education system³
- **Educational contents are not relevant to Arab children**, do not arise from the needs of Arab society and are not adapted to its characteristics, while they also do not prepare students towards 21st century skills.
- Arabs living in Israel hold a highly complex set of identities, while Civics education in Arab schools is centered on ignoring these identities, providing a distorted sense of community and belonging.
- Arab students do not sufficiently **master their mother tongue**, causing a negative effect on their ability to think and learn in all subjects and leading to poor academic achievements.
- **Books and study materials are of poor quality**, some simple translation of the Hebrew texts, without adjustments to Arabic language and culture.
- There is no **adequate representation** for Arab educators in senior positions in the Ministry of Education, including in various organizational units and departments that deal with Arab education.

¹ OECD (2015), [Measuring and Assessing Well-being in Israel](#), OECD Publishing, Paris, p.12

² CERD (Jan 2020), [Concluding Observations](#)

³ Ynet (June 2024), [Inequality is Liable of Affecting Social Stability](#) (in Hebrew)

- Problems related to **teachers' and managers' appointments**, training and outdated pedagogical methods.
- **Weaknesses in Arab local governance**: lack of budgets (mainly due to the lack of own revenues) and managerial deficiencies in educational departments and other departments relevant to education.

This overall situation leads to the following setbacks:

(1) Gaps in academic achievements: various studies and reports have underlined this, among them the 2018 PISA exams (OECD's Program for International Student Assessment) which show tremendous gaps in all fields between Jewish and Arab students⁴. Entitlement to matriculation certificates also support these disparities: in 2020, 82% of Jewish students obtained their certificate, and only 69% of Arab students⁵.

(2) High dropout rates: 2017 statistics show that average dropout rate of Jewish students stands at 4.2%, while that of Arab students stands at 8.1% (and 9.6% among Arab Bedouin students). Boys in Arab education considerably dropout more than girls – 11.6% versus 4.7%⁶.

(3) Focus on achievements rather than on the learning process: inadequate and outdated textbooks and curricula leads teachers and students to focus solely on academic grades, leaving out all aspects of education to values, democracy, sense of belonging and personal development. Students who cannot 'compete' disconnect and turn to overt or covert dropout.

(4) Teacher alienation: educators avoid dealing with issues of identity, politics or current affairs, fearing systemic punishment.

(5) Associated negative social phenomena:

- High poverty rates (in 2018, the percentage of Arab families below the poverty line was 45.3%, and among Arab children 57.8%)

- Not in Education, Employment of Training (NEET) levels among Arab youth in Israel are alarmingly high: 12.2% for age group 15-17, 41.9% for age group 18-24 and 40% for age group 25-29 (corresponding figures among Jewish youth are 4.4%, 14.6% and 11.3%). The Israel State Comptroller's Office report analysis raised a positive correlation between NEET and crime levels in Arab society⁷.

- Rampant rates of violence and involvement in organized crime (244 murders in 2023 alone, homicide rates - 11.1 per 100,000 people, and 43.9 per 100,000 people aged 20–34 - position Arab society in Israel in 3rd highest position within OECD countries, trailing only Mexico and Colombia)⁸.

2. Since 2018 (as landmark) – context of ongoing crises

It seems the political and social reality in Israel is often the scene of turmoil and crisis. Over the past years, some major challenges have been affecting life in the country, as well as our work as an organization defending the educational rights of the Arab minority in Israel.

(1) The Nation-State Law In 2018

Since the establishment of the state of Israel, the Palestinian minority has been living in a country that defines itself as 'Jewish and democratic', implying a stratified citizenship regime with inferior status given to non-Jewish citizens. The 'Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People' of 2018 entrenched

⁴ InterAgency Task Force (2019), [Gaps Raise Concern as Arab Students Scores Drop on OECD Test](#)

⁵ Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (2021), [Entitlement to matriculation](#)

⁶ Taub Center (2019), [Trends in the High School Dropout Phenomenon](#)

⁷ Office of the State Comptroller (May 2023), [State Comptroller Report](#)

⁸ Ibid (May 2023)

these exclusionary ethnic elements, allowing a constitutional anchor for explicit discrimination against the Palestinian minority. This has adversely impacted the sense of belonging of this minority, in turn having far reaching implications on the education system as a vector for social cohesion, identity inclusion and historical narratives providing collective meaning.

This 'Nation-State Law' was called out by various international institutions, as the UN's Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stated in its 2019 Concluding Observations: "The Committee urges [Israel] to review the Basic Law with a view to bringing it into line with the Covenant or to repealing it and to step up its efforts to eliminate discrimination faced by non-Jews in their enjoyment of Covenant rights"⁹.

(2) Community violence

As previously mentioned, the exponential rise of community violence within Arab society has impacted almost all aspects of everyday lives for the Arab minority in Israel. While Arab-on-Arab murders claimed 51 lives in 2014, in 2023 the number of murders reached an all-time high of 244. Organized crime culture is taking over our streets. By high school age, most youth in our society have been direct or indirect witnesses to violence or organized crime. The situation is so severe that in many Arab localities children are not allowed to go out on the streets, they are driven to and from school, and general trauma has left them with feelings of social anxiety and fear of public spaces.

(3) The Corona crisis

With the shutdown of the education system in March 2020 as part of the plan to combat the Coronavirus, the majority of Arab students were not part of the education system. Distance learning did not reach more than half of the students due to a severe lack of computers and other end devices, problems related to infrastructure in Arab communities, the lack of training and preparation for educational teams for teaching through electronic tools, a lack of educational content in the Arabic language, little use of the Arabic language in the circulars and instructions distributed to schools, and other problems arising from poverty and difficult socio-economic situations. When return to school was recommended, most students did not return - especially in the Naqab region. Schools in Arab society suffer from sub-standard physical infrastructures, such that in most cases physical conditions did not allow the Ministry of Health's instructions to be followed.

(4) The May 2021 riots

Following protests in Jerusalem surrounding house demolitions and evictions and another round of clashes between Israel and Hamas in the south of the country, widespread protests and riots intensified across Israel. Within a few days, communal violence had been reported from Beersheba in the southern Negev desert to Rahat, Ramla, Lod, Nasiriyah, Tiberias, Jerusalem and Haifa. There have been riots, stabbings, arson, attempted home invasions and shootings, some of it captured in terrifying detail on social media. These circumstances had severe impact on school-age children who witnessed assaults and brutality on their doorsteps, as well as on teachers and their capacity to cope with such events, let alone support their students through the trauma.

⁹ CESCR, [2019 Concluding Observations](#)

(5) October 7th and the ensuing war on Gaza (which now extended to Lebanon)

Whereas the unfolding events since October 7th, 2023 have impacted all levels of life in Israel (and more significantly and devastatingly in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon), they have had various levels of impact on Arab education in the country. Following is an overview of these impacts:

A) School closures

Schools in Israel have closed and turned to distant learning on various times and per different regions according to the unfolding military events since October 2023 up until this day. In this context, the equal right to education for the Arab minority in Israel has been undermined, and this under two main aspects. The first relates to accessibility of Arab students to digital resources and connectivity: gathered data showed that at least a 1 out of 4 Arab students did not have computers or means for distance learning, and that many Arab settlements lack quality internet infrastructures. The second aspect related to security infrastructures (bomb shelters), where mapping revealed that only 11% of educational institutions in Arab society were properly prepared for an emergency situation, whereas in the other 89% the level of readiness was partial and ranged from moderate to low. This means that while in-school learning can be carried out under specific indications by the Home Front Command, many students cannot return to school due to insufficient security infrastructures, therefore falling back on distant learning which largely impedes proper learning opportunities for most children. It is important to underline the fact that data showed large disparities between the Naqab region and the rest of Arab localities on all levels of assessment.

B) Higher education

This new episode in the conflict has represented a major escalation of political repression for PCIs, further entrenching Israel's approach towards them as a 'fifth column' to be controlled and contained. a main area of coercion since October 7th has been Israeli academia. This has included (1) crackdown on academic freedom, (2) incitement campaigns led by right-wing organizations, and (3) disciplinary measures taken against PCI students.

1) Crackdown on academic freedom

While universities and colleges have been making clear their policy of zero tolerance to expressions of 'support to terror', lecturers have been either arrested (Prof. Nadera Shalhoub-Kervokian¹⁰), suspended (Prof. Nurit Peled¹¹), dismissed (Dr. Warda Sa'ada¹²) or have faced backlashes from right-wing students¹³.

** It is worth mentioning that this crackdown has also targeted some Arab teachers in regular education – either teaching in Jewish schools or in Arab schools, while some (very few) students were also the target of intimidation and/or removal from school.

2) Incitement campaigns by right-wing organizations

Various right-wing groups have targeted campuses of higher education as fertile ground for political provocation and censorship. For example, the student group Im Tirtzu organized a campaign at the Technion to review social media posts of PCI and left-leaning Jewish students, presenting their findings of what they claimed were pro-terrorist postings to the disciplinary committee. Operating 15 branches at universities and colleges across the country, the organization Im Tirtzu is known for its campaigns

¹⁰ The Guardian (April 2024), '[Political arrest' of Palestinian academic in Israel marks new civil liberties threat](#)

¹¹ The New York Times (Nov 2023), '[Israel is silencing internal critics](#)

¹² Ha'aretz (Oct 2023), '[Arab Citizens of Israel Face a Cruel Quandary: Our State Is Fighting Our Own People](#)

¹³ Jerusalem Post (April 2024), '[Israeli academics face backlash signing letter accusing Israel of 'plausible genocide'](#)

delegitimizing Israeli left and human-rights groups. Since the start of the war, they have been working closely with student unions on campuses to advance their political agenda¹⁴, an agenda which has led in one incident to an almost violent clash in the student dormitories in the city of Netanya¹⁵.

3) Disciplinary measures against PCI students

36 Israeli universities and colleges have initiated disciplinary proceedings against a total of 160 PCI students for posts published on private social media accounts (prior to the start of the academic year) – at least 66 of these students were expelled or suspended without due process by their institutions. Nearly all cases involved either an expression of solidarity with the people of Gaza or citations from the Quran, both of which are protected by the right to freedom of expression – and the majority (79%) were filed against female students¹⁶. This is not a new phenomenon – resistance to PCI student activism has always existed in the form of preventing ceremonies or gatherings, threats posed at students, but this time the scope is greater. Students are being targeted, and revenge is being sought against them, as soon as they do not expressively support the war and condemn the Hamas attacks of October 7th.

C) Legislation

The overall crackdown on freedom of speech in Israel, since October 7th, has included a plethora of anti-democratic laws, bills and regulations put forth in the Knesset. Among them, at least three relate directly to education:

- The *Teachers' Bill* seeks to grant the government authority to dismiss teachers, refuse or revoke teaching licenses, and suspend, cut, or deny budgets to schools due to suspicion of support for terrorism. The bill additionally proposes using the Shin Bet as a means of monitoring teachers throughout the country. This bill was approved in its first reading in the Knesset and is not being prepared for a second and third reading.
- A bill initiated by the Student Union and presented in the Knesset on May 29th which would enable the Council for Higher Education to instruct academic institutions in Israel to fire professors for making statements that, in its opinion, constitute incitement to or support of terrorism. The bill is being forcefully opposed by Heads of academic institutions, arguing lethal harm to academic independence and freedom of expression. This bill is being prepared for a first reading in the Knesset¹⁷.
- Another bill was proposed on July 2nd seeking to impose restrictions on the existence and activity of student cells that allegedly support terrorism or armed struggle against Israel, as well as to expel students who support terror. This bill is also being prepared for a first reading in the Knesset¹⁸.

D) Budgeting

For decades Arab education has suffered from significant underfunding. According to Education Ministry data, education in Arab society is allocated 20% to 40% less budgets¹⁹ than in Jewish society. This budget

¹⁴ Ha'aretz (Oct 2023), [Universities suspend students whom it is claimed support Hamas](#) (in Hebrew)

¹⁵ Ha'aretz (Oct 2023), ['Death to Arabs': Students Evacuated from Dorms After Hundreds of Rioters Attempt Break-in](#)

¹⁶ Adalah (March 2024), [Persecution of Palestinian Students in Israeli Universities and Colleges during War on Gaza](#)

¹⁷ Ha'aretz (June 2024), [Israeli University Heads Accuses Student Union of 'McCarthyist Incitement' in Proposed Law](#)

¹⁸ Knesset News (July 2024), [Education Committees discusses bill to close student cells that support terror](#) (Hebrew)

¹⁹ The Jerusalem Post, October 2021, [link here](#)

gap is particularly severe in the country's weakest socio-economic clusters (where most Arab localities are situated), and it is exacerbated by fewer investments in education by local authorities, parents and private foundations. Gaps in allocation of resources are reflected in shortages of thousands of classrooms, use of makeshift caravans as classrooms, gaps in study hours, shortages in physical infrastructures such as science lab and libraries, and gaps in teacher training resources.

The leading factor in the distribution of resources for formal education is the Ministry of Education. For some years now, the government has also formulated plans for the economic development of Arab society, plans which have targeted Arab education as a central pillar in reducing gaps and integrating Arabs in Israeli society. These were perceived as positive developments, and we at the FUCEA have played an active role in the design of GR550 education-related directives, monitoring its implementation since its 2021 adoption. Despite these positive developments, the current war has brought the government to orchestrate various budget cuts affecting both special resolutions such as GR550, as well as general budgets in education. The most important budget cuts include:

- A 5% across-the-board cut for all government ministries, including the Ministry of Education
- A 15% budget cut in special programs – such a GR550
- A 200 million ILS budget cut in corrective transfers to local authorities

The particular situation in the Naqab region

Making up 14% of the country's Palestinian citizens, Bedouins mainly reside in the Naqab (or Negev) – a semi-desert region in southern Israel. Prior to the formation of the Israeli state, 80,000 Bedouins lived in the Naqab, while following the 1948-49 war only 13,000 Bedouins remained, subsequently obtaining Israeli citizenship. However, despite Bedouin custom where land ownership was governed by traditional precepts, the state never recognized the Bedouin claims over land. Instead of zoning Bedouin villages as residential areas, since the 1970s the Israeli authorities have zoned villages and lands around them for military, industrial or public use, all the while issuing staggering numbers of demolition orders for houses built without (inaccessible) permits.

In 2019, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics, Bedouins in the Naqab numbered 270,000 – 20% of the southern district's population. They are divided into three groups:

- **7 governmental planned towns** (Rahat, Hura, Tel as-Sabi, Ar'arat an-Naqab, Lakiya, Kuseife and Shaqib al-Salam), housing 160,000 residents. The state's deliberate neglect of these towns resulted in the highest poverty and unemployment rates in the country. Parts of these towns are still not connected to the water and sewage disposal systems, to the electrical power grid or to means of communication.
- **11 recognized villages grouped in 2 councils** (Wahah and al-Qaysum Regional Councils), housing 20,000 residents. In practice, there is no significant difference between recognized and unrecognized villages: most recognized villages still lack approved urban plans, residents cannot obtain building permits and demolitions are ongoing. Infrastructure such as water, electricity and roads is still mostly inaccessible.
- **35 unrecognized villages** home to 90,000 Bedouins. These villages receive few-to-no services such as electricity, water, telephone lines, and educational or health facilities; have no local councils and are excluded from state planning. Their residents live in extreme poverty and have the lowest education levels, alongside the highest infant mortality rate in the country. All 35 villages are subject to forcible relocation and recurring home demolitions.

In its Concluding Observations of 2019²⁰, the UN's **Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** (CESCR) was concerned about:

- 20(c) Reports that Bedouin people in unrecognized villages in the Negev Desert have been evicted from their homes and ancestral lands and forced to relocate to recognized Bedouin townships;
- 20(d) The substandard living conditions in unrecognized and recognized townships, characterized by very limited access to adequate housing, water and sanitation facilities, electricity and public transportation;
- 62 The disproportionately high dropout rates among Bedouin students, the large gaps in educational achievements between Arab and Jewish students, and the classroom shortages in Bedouin neighborhoods.

Bedouins are by far Israel's most disadvantaged community: per capita income is 22% of the national average; unemployment and poverty rates are the highest in Israel, with only 24% of women and 56% of men employed. For the first time in four years, in 2017 the National Insurance Institute published data on Bedouins in its yearly report on poverty. The report stated that poverty rate among Bedouin families was 59%, as compared to 14% among Jewish families living in the south²¹. These alarming figures underestimate poverty levels, since the most impoverished group - Bedouins in unrecognized villages - was not included in the survey, as a matter of policy. In a 2021 report of the Central Bureau of Statistics on the socio-economic level of the population, all 9 Bedouin local authorities are ranked within cluster 1 (the poorest of the ten-point scale)²². Again, the classification does not mention the unrecognized villages.

In the 2020-21 school year, 101,239 Bedouin children attended 703 preschools, 108 primary schools and 44 high schools. The situation in these schools reflects the overall socioeconomic situation of the Naqab's Arab community: Bedouins are the youngest population in Israel – 52% of Bedouins are 17 years and younger – and these children are the poorest population in Israel - 79.6% live under the poverty line²³.

²⁰ CESCR (2019), [Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Israel](#), p.4 and p.10

²¹ National Insurance Institute (2017), [Annual report 2016 – Poverty and Social Gaps](#), p.27

²² Central Bureau of Statistics (2021), [Characterization and Classification of Geographical Units by Socio-Economic Level of the Population](#), pp.57-60

²³ Negev Coexistence Forum (2021), [Violations of Human Rights of the Arab Community in the Naqab during 2021](#), p.51