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Israel’s De-Palestinianization of Jerusalem through Education

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As of the beginning of January 2020, Israeli news reported that Israel’s Jerusalem municipality has decided to establish a school complex run by the Israeli Ministry of Education in occupied East Jerusalem. According to news sources, the plan will be implemented in East Jerusalem’s Shu’fat refugee camp and Anata neighbourhoods, behind the Annexation Wall, indicating that these schools are seen as an alternative for schools run by the United Nations (UN) Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which will be closed down. This plan, part of Israel’s campaign to end UNRWA operations, particularly in occupied East Jerusalem, was initiated two years ago and was reflected in the policies and practices of Israel’s former Jerusalem mayor, Nir Barkat. Israeli media has indicated that the main driver of the long-term scheme by the Jerusalem municipality, entitled “the plan of action to eliminate the refugee problem in the city,”¹ was greenlighted by the policies of the United States (US) administration for the liquidation of the Palestine question, including the defunding of UNRWA and the unlawful recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, in violation of the city’s status under international law and the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.²

Israel’s War on Education in Occupied East Jerusalem

In November 2019, a bill to ban UNRWA activities in Jerusalem was signed by the heads of Israel’s parliamentary blocs of the Likud party, to prohibit UNRWA activities in Jerusalem as of the beginning of 2020. In his presentation of the bill, Member of Knesset Nir Barkat claimed that it will aim to “implement Israeli sovereignty” over occupied East Jerusalem, in accordance with Israel’s racist Jewish Nation-State Basic Law, adopted by the Israeli Parliament in July 2018.³

¹ Middle East Monitor, “Israel targets UNRWA in occupied Jerusalem,” 29 November 2019, available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20191129-israel-targets-unrwa-in-occupied-jerusalem/>.

² See Al-Haq, “Documents from Diplomatic Briefing ‘Emboldening Full Annexation: Three Months Since the Trump Declaration on Jerusalem’,” 19 March 2018, available at: <http://www.alhaq.org/advocacy/6255.html>.

³ Middle East Monitor, “Israel targets UNRWA in occupied Jerusalem,” 29 November 2019, available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20191129-israel-targets-unrwa-in-occupied-jerusalem/>. See also Adalah, “Adalah to UN Committee: Proclaim that the Jewish Nation-State Basic Law is a racist law, violates the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and must be repealed,” 4 December 2019, available at: <https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/9862>.

However, Israel's war on education – part and parcel of its institutionalised regime of systematic racial domination and oppression over all Palestinians,⁴ including the systematic plan to forcibly transfer Palestinians from Jerusalem – has not been limited to the closure of UNRWA schools. It has also included the six-months closure of the *waqf* education directorate's offices in the Old City of Jerusalem by Israel's Minister of Public Security, Gilad Erdan, as of 20 November 2019, when the *waqf* offices were raided by the Israeli occupying forces and searched, including their computers and files, and school director Samir Jibril was arrested by the Israeli police.

The closure of the *waqf* education directorate's offices has put 35 Palestinian schools in Jerusalem at risk of closing down, jeopardizing access to education to 11,411 Palestinian children. Moreover, some five thousand Palestinian students in their final school year, preparing to take their final matriculation "Tawjihi" exam in June 2020, are at risk of not being able to take the exam. "A fierce battle is under way for the future and identity of Jerusalem, and every step should be taken to thwart the [Palestinian Authority's] attempts to incite residents of east Jerusalem against Israel," said Israeli Public Security Minister, Gilad Erdan, recognising the plan's intention to unlawfully alter the character of Jerusalem and to pursue the city's de-Palestinianization.⁵

The De-Palestinianization of Education in Jerusalem: A Threat to Palestinian Identity

The escalation in Israel's plans to terminate UNRWA operations in Jerusalem comes in the aftermath of the US decision, in September 2018, to cut UNRWA funding by nearly USD 300 million,⁶ and is in line with Israel's policy to liquidate the Palestinian refugee question and deny Palestinian refugees their inalienable right to return to their homes, lands, and property, as mandated by international law since the Nakba.

However, Israel's plans for the de-Palestinianization of education in Jerusalem have already been in place for decades.⁷ In May 2018, the Israeli cabinet approved a five-year education plan allocating USD 200 million to schools teaching the Israeli curriculum in Jerusalem, to compel Palestinian schools, through financial incentives, to adopt the Israeli curriculum.⁸ For the academic year 2013-2014, Israel's Jerusalem municipality and Ministry of Education had

⁴ See Al-Haq, "Palestinian, regional, and international groups submit report on Israeli apartheid to UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination," 12 November 2019, available at: <http://www.alhaq.org/advocacy/16183.html>.

⁵ Tzvi Joffe, "Israel Police shutter multiple Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem," The Jerusalem Post, 20 November 2019, available at: <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/IDF-shutters-multiple-Palestinian-institutions-in-Jerusalem-608417>.

⁶ Hady Amr, "In one move, Trump eliminated US funding for UNRWA and the US role as Mideast peacemaker," 7 September 2018, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/09/07/in-one-move-trump-eliminated-us-funding-for-unrwa-and-the-us-role-as-mideast-peacemaker/>.

⁷ See, e.g., The Civic Council for Education in Jerusalem, De-Palestinization of Education in Jerusalem: Education challenges pose threat to Palestinian national identity, 2017, available at: http://www.civiccoalition-jerusalem.org/uploads/9/3/6/8/93682182/fact_sheet_education_in_jerusalem_2017.pdf.

⁸ Omri Zerachovitz and Amiram Barkat, "Israeli cabinet approves NIS 2b for East Jerusalem Arabs," 13 May 2018, available at: <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-israeli-cabinet-approves-nis-2b-for-east-jerusalem-arabs-1001235799>.

introduced a plan to force East Jerusalem schools to adopt the Israeli education system and curriculum in an ongoing attempt to de-Palestinianize East Jerusalem schools, altering Palestinian history, narrative, culture, and national identity. Israeli textbooks do not recognize Palestinians as a people, referred to as others or minorities, use transliterated Hebrew terms to change place names and alter their character, and contain factual mistakes.⁹

The de-Palestinianization of East Jerusalem through education, implemented since the start of Israel's occupation and illegal annexation of East Jerusalem in 1967, is motivated by Israel's systematic attempt to alter Jerusalem's character, legal status, and demographic composition. Israel's Minister of Education confirmed the intention to undermine Palestinian identity, culture, and heritage in Jerusalem when he stated the motive behind this new plan as seeking to facilitate the process of "Israelization" of education in the city.¹⁰

The Israeli plan to close UNRWA schools in occupied East Jerusalem and the closure of the *waqf* education directorate's offices in the Old City is part of a systematic Israeli Government-led policy to rid Jerusalem of its indigenous Palestinian people and identity, including through:

- i. Control over Palestinian education;
- ii. The underfunding of Palestinian schools;
- iii. Discriminatory planning and zoning, including restrictions on building schools, which has caused a shortage of classrooms for Palestinian children, as well as the denial of permits for construction and development of school facilities;
- iv. The closure of Jerusalem for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, resulting in a lack of qualified teachers, and the restriction of access for students; and
- v. Censorship of Palestinian textbooks, as part of a longer-term policy of replacing the Palestinian curriculum, including textbooks and matriculation exams, with an Israeli system.

Israel's discriminatory policies and practices have severely undermined the right of Palestinian children and youth to education in Jerusalem. This has resulted in a high drop-out rate amongst Palestinian students, with 33 per cent who do not complete 12 years of schooling. Israel's de-Palestinianization of education in occupied East Jerusalem forms part and parcel of Israel's permanent annexation regime over the city of Jerusalem, which has severely deprived Palestinians of their inalienable and collective right to self-determination in their capital, including the right to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.¹¹ By undermining the work of local educational institutions

⁹ Jack Houry, "Israel's Textbooks in Arabic Are Full of Mistakes, Study Finds," 9 May 2011, available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5009724>.

¹⁰ Or Kashti and Nir Hasson, "Israel's Education Ministry to Pay East Jerusalem Schools to 'Israelize' Curriculum," Haaretz, 29 January 2016, available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-israel-to-pay-e-jlem-schools-to-israelize-curriculum-1.5397288>.

¹¹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 1(1).

and by imposing its own education system, curriculum, and textbooks, which do not benefit – and are rejected by – the Palestinian people in Jerusalem, Israel, the occupying power, violates its obligations toward the protected population under international humanitarian law.¹²

Conclusions and Recommendations

In light of the recently-announced US-Israel plan for the liquidation of the Palestine question and the denial of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people,¹³ UN Member States must cooperate to bring to an end the illegal situation and adopt effective measures to oppose further threatened annexation, population transfer, and colonisation, including Israel’s systematic fragmentation of the Palestinian people, which amounts to an apartheid regime, and its alteration of Palestine’s legal status, character, and demographic composition. Third States have an obligation to ensure respect for international humanitarian law in occupied East Jerusalem, and the rest of the occupied Palestinian territory, and must take decisive action to prevent Israel, the occupying power, from imposing its education system over Palestinian schools to alter the identity and culture of the Arab Palestinian people.

¹² Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 47.

¹³ See White House, “Peace to Prosperity,” announced on 28 January 2020, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/peacetoprosperty/>.