

15 August

Roundtable with a presentation by Dr. Ibrahim Abu Lughod, Head of the Palestinian Curriculum Development Center, Ramallah

Topic: Education Strategies and the Future Needs of a Palestinian Curriculum

Participants: PASSIA Staff; Dr. Riad Malki, Panorama/Birzeit University; Kai Boeckmann, German Representative Office; Walid Salem, Panorama, Jerusalem; Giries Khoury, Ex-Chairman, Jordanian Bar Association; L. Fay Kristensen, Writer/Canadian Foreign Affairs; Ahlam Abbasi, Orient House; Dr. Ziad Abdeen, Al-Quds University; Dr. Marwan Darwish, IPCRI, Jerusalem; Hania Bitar, The Jerusalem Times; Maria Luz Jarufe, Teacher, Chile; Zahira Kamal, MOPIC; and Amal Kawar, UNDP.

SUMMARY

Dr. Ibrahim Abu Lughod: I am glad to be back here in Jerusalem; it is important to keep struggling for Jerusalem. Our center, together with Birzeit University, will hold a conference on Palestinian education in Jerusalem.

This is the first time we have spoken about a Palestinian curriculum in public. We have almost completed the curriculum and expect to finish in about three weeks time. Palestinian education has been important since the 1920's, but we have never had control over education or over the curriculum. This move of developing a curriculum (since 1994) is a large step. Education was the first authority transferred from the Israelis to the Palestinians. Some 600,000 people including 28,000 teachers were able to get things started within two months of the transfer. Already key changes have occurred and we hope to totally revamp the curriculum.

All states need a good education system in order to address problems and form a national identity. Since the time of the British, we have been working on education. The British used education to build cadres that would serve the Mandate. It had some good elements, but was totally imposed. The education system had a purpose, as it does now. Palestinian educators rebelled against the British system to get one reflecting Arab Palestine and its needs.

Between 1948 and 1967, Jordan and Egypt ruled and introduced their own curricula, much of which is still in use, except for what has been changed by Israel according to its interests. After 1967, the education system was frozen. It did not develop according to the growth in population so that many schools have to work on a two-shift basis: many facilities need to be improved. Oslo had many bad points, but we did get total control over education and the curriculum is a crucial factor for a society.

In 1948, Arab-Israelis were taught a Zionist curriculum. By the 1960s and the emergence of the PLO, a real interest in education developed. The PLO had a department that was responsible for building schools in the Diaspora, i.e. Kuwait and Lebanon, etc. It also provided scholarships

to enable students to study in other countries.

In the early 1970s, the PLO had already formed a committee on curricular issues in response to the fact that Palestinian children had no chance to learn about Palestinian culture and history elsewhere. Even in Lebanon and Syria, Palestinians didn't study about Palestinian history but were trained for the interests of local powers.

Knowledge, skills, and values were the things that Palestinians learned about in the UNRWA seminars in the 70's, as the Palestinians started dealing with the curriculum.

UNESCO has long been a key supporter of the Palestinians and the PLO. In 1990, it organized, in cooperation with the PLO, the first seminar on Palestinian elementary curriculum: fifteen Palestinian and ten international experts participated and came up with the following three conclusions:

1. UNESCO should address Palestinian curriculum.
2. There is a need to establish a center for curriculum development.
3. There should be a seminar on secondary education.

Another seminar was held in Jerusalem after Oslo. Arafat agreed with the head of UNESCO that UNESCO would help develop the education sector with Italy's financial support (US\$300,000). A curriculum center was established with a one-year mission to evaluate what is in place now, and on the basis of the evaluation, to recommend and draft a plan for the future.

We have understood since the 1970s that the Egyptian and Jordanian curricula are not appropriate. They clearly needed to be thrown out, but on the deeper level - what are their benefits? You'd think it's the same everywhere, but things are always changing. Test results showed that the Palestinian education system was weak. The *Tawjihi* has always been thought of as a means to get into university, but only about 2% of the people enter university. We have been like this since the time of the British. The *Tawjihi* is still just a game of memory, not skills. Students should be taught vocational skills to enable them to use computers and other new inventions.

An analysis of the context and seminars with teachers revealed that the teachers could not get through the material in books except by encouraging memorization. Comparisons between Palestinian and European systems were made to see which systems work best.

The findings of the group were as follows:

- The existing curriculum is not usable. Even Egypt and Jordan are changing theirs. Everyone realizes that this curriculum limits students' achievements.

- Guidelines: basic knowledge in core fields, and some specifically Palestinian fields, taking into consideration that the curriculum is for a specific people (Palestinians), time (now), and place (West Bank and Gaza Strip).
- A need to take into consideration that Palestinians are the people of Palestine, i.e. their identity, is tied up with the land: they are Arabs and belong as such to the Arab world; yet they are also international people affected by the outside world.

Having arrived at their findings the group came to the following conclusions:

- The need to study Arabic and English (from the 5th grade), to enable students to be functional in English by the end of high school. Students should be able to choose Hebrew or French as a third language. These languages are of key importance for regional and international contacts. We want to give people maximum opportunities, thus they need to have choices. This is the key to modern society. We must leave rote learning and short-term knowledge behind. We cannot just channel people.
- The dichotomy of science or humanities is artificial. Certain sciences are not inherently better. We are abandoning this. Now there is an effort to provide basic information and choices. Currently, once you go vocational, you remain so for the rest of your life. The new system will be more flexible.
- There is a need to make people think and solve problems, not simply memorize, be obedient and conform. The aforementioned recommendations will take five years to be implemented. If Palestine is to become modern and unified (overcome tribalism, etc.) we need to revamp the education system. Education is a value and a means to change, as well as to keep people alive.

Geris Khoury: Hebrew and French shouldn't be put on the same level. Is today's curriculum totally worthless or is there something to build on? And what is the role of the Council for Higher Education?

Dr. Abu Lughod: We don't equalize the Hebrew and French languages morally but both are useful. As for the Council for Higher Education, it is a good institution but it is not really related to elementary and high school education.

Hania Bitar: What about methodology?

Dr. Abu Lughod: Curriculum is part of methodology.

Ahlam Abbasi: We have no research skills nor the love to read.

Amal Kawar: And what about Spanish - it is a key language, too, and we have a large Palestinian Spanish-speaking community.

Zahira Kamal: How you teach is more important than what you teach. There is some good material but teachers are not taught how to teach. How do we train teachers? You can do better with this curriculum. We must inculcate the value of discovery: research, reading and composition.

Dr. Abu Lughod: All teachers have to be re-trained. The Ministry has already applied for a grant for this purpose. You also have to test the new material. At Birzeit, I have discovered that people are unable to research or even write. My battle was to make everyone write a thesis.

Dr. Ziad Abdeen: I never felt at a disadvantage as a student, but did as a professor. There are five necessities: availability, affordability, accessibility, ability, and competency in communication, comprehension and conceptualization. Take into consideration that one should be value-driven, not rule-driven. What about the '48 Arabs and the Israeli system?

Dr. Abu Lughod: We talked extensively to those in charge of Arab education in Israel. We also met with directors of Jewish education institutions. Now Arabs have more control in the Arab-Israeli curriculum. Israel teaches students to think.

Dr. Marwan Darwish: What sort of values do you want to convey? How do you tackle the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli conflict?

Dr. Abu Lughod: Our approach must be to tell the truth. Everything else follows. Who knows the outcome? Interpretations vary of course, but we must honor our commitment to the truth and other values like productivity. The issue of religion is tricky - here again truth is the key value.

Kai Boeckmann: What will be offered in the new *Tawjihi*? Is it vocational training? What about teaching German? There are many scholarships from Germany, maybe more than from anywhere else, but they require a good command of the language.

Dr. Abu Lughod: There will be no more *Tawjihi* but a certificate. Why go to school for 12 years just for one test? You should receive a certificate that evaluates you. We might come up with an aptitude test, but not an achievement test. Sectors will give their own tests. Equal value and weight will be given to vocational training. Everyone will do an interdisciplinary course and can choose electives in other fields as well. Society doesn't change itself but rather is changed by people pushing. Yes, there are problems, but this doesn't mean running away from them. Of course you have to be in step with society, but you must also be prepared to take the lead.

L. Fay Kristensen: What about parents?

Dr. Abu Lughod: We are looking into PTA's [Parent-Teacher Associations]. This is not my field but there are efforts to include these

associations, maybe in a kind of town meeting.

Dr. Riad Malki: You said our curriculum is bad, but the new one will come into effect only in 2001. What will we use in the meantime?

Dr. Abu Lughod: There is already a new look on the "National Education" course and books. The Ministry of Education is already plugging holes. We are introducing things by phases which have already begun, everything will be properly in place. So far we have been producing ahead of schedule and we hope to continue along this line.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: We always hear about the Palestinians being more educated than other Arabs, but there are also other voices that say this is not true. On another issue, who writes history, especially Palestinian history?

Dr. Abu Lughod: Well, the history of the Arabs has not really been written. There is no Palestinian history. This is the job of Palestinian academic institutions. Having one book is not enough. We don't want one interpretation - let us rather get the facts at least. Once students are armed with the basic facts, our teaching of how to think will take over.