

Church-run Schools in Israel Face 'Death Sentence'

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Community leaders fear that Netanyahu's party is seeking to curb educational opportunities for the Palestinian minority

Israel is seeking to bring dozens of church-run schools under government control, a move that community leaders have warned will curb the last vestiges of educational freedom for the country's large Palestinian minority.

Most of the 47 schools, which are among the highest-achieving in Israel, were established by Christian orders more than 100 years ago, before Israel's creation in 1948.

Today, they are among the few independent schools catering to Israel's community of 1.5 million Palestinian citizens, who make up one-fifth of the population. The schools are attended by about 33,000 children – some 5 percent of the Palestinian school-age population – and employ 3,000 teachers.

Israel segregates the country's education system based on ethnicity.

Palestinian leaders say the church-run schools, which educate Christians and Muslims, are the only hope for most families trying to escape dire conditions in the government-run Arab education system.

Yousef Jabareen, an Arab member of the Knesset, said that unlike the state schools, the church schools had been relatively free of governmental interference that was designed to create "an atmosphere of intimidation and fear".

"In the Arab state schools, Jewish officials appoint the principals, vet the teachers and dictate the curriculum," he said. "Christian schools have the flexibility to choose their staff, and teach pupils about their national identity, Palestinian culture and history, and their rights as citizens. All that is under threat now."

Jabareen added that the new development indicated Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new right-wing coalition was seeking to strengthen its political control over the Palestinian minority.

Naftali Bennett, leader of the settler party Jewish Home, was recently appointed education minister.

Subsidies slashed

Fahim Abdelmasih, principal of the Terra Santa school in Ramle and spokesman for the

church-run schools, said the 47 schools faced a “death sentence” after the education ministry announced last year that it had slashed their long-standing subsidies.

Negotiations with the government recently broke down after education officials suggested that the schools come under government control as a solution.

Traditionally, Israel has funded between 60 and 75 percent of the costs of approved independent schools, with parental contributions and fundraising filling the gap.

However, the church schools now receive no more than 45 percent of their running costs, Abdelmasih said.

“The schools just can’t survive after those kinds of cuts,” he said.

Education officials have also capped payments from parents whose children attend the schools, effectively barring them from making up the shortfall.

The schools’ officials have accused the government of discrimination, pointing out that in May Netanyahu agreed to [cover in full](#) the budget of two networks of independent schools for ultra-Orthodox Jews, in return for their parties joining his coalition.

Many of the church schools have a matriculation rate of 95 percent, better than most of Israel’s top Jewish schools.

Yet, with Palestinian families three and a half times more likely to be [below the poverty line](#) than Jewish families, parents are already struggling to pay existing fees, according to the schools.

The alternative for these families is to take their children to state-run Arab schools, where the dropout rate is 17 percent, and barely more than a quarter of students matriculate.

Decades of discrimination

Nabila Espanioly, director of the Tafula child development centre in Nazareth, said the poor performance of Arab state schools could be explained by decades of severe discrimination.

Studies by the Follow-Up Committee for Arab Education show that Jewish pupils receive [at least five times](#) more funding than Arab pupils – \$1,100 each compared to \$192.

The Arab sector suffers from a [shortage](#) of more than 6,000 classrooms and 4,000 teachers.

Jewish schools have [twice as many](#) computers relative to their student body than Arab schools.

In addition, Palestinian leaders have long complained of interference by the Shin Bet, Israel’s internal security agency, in the appointment and promotion of teachers in the Arab state system, undermining educational values and the professionalism of its staff.

“Parents want quality education for their children but the reality is that the only good choice for most of them is one of these church schools,” Espanioly said.

Many of the community’s leaders – academics, professionals, and Knesset members – were

educated in such schools, observed Oudeh Bisharat in [a recent column](#) for the Haaretz daily.

Israel now appeared “determined to crush” the system because of its very success, he added.

Boutros Mansour, principal of the Baptist school in Nazareth, said the church-run schools expected the same treatment as the large number of independent schools for some 200,000 Jewish children from the religious ultra-Orthodox community, known as Haredim. They are fully funded by the government.

“The ridiculous thing is that the schools for the Haredim break the law by refusing to teach the core curriculum, including subjects like maths, English and science, and they get 100 percent funding,” he said.

“We, on the other hand, teach more than the core curriculum and have some of the best results in the country, and yet we are being starved of funds and are in danger of closure,” he added.

The education ministry was unavailable for comment. But in a statement last month to Haaretz, it said the church schools had rejected all of its proposals.

It [suggested](#) that they “join the public education system, which would mean a budget allocation of 100 percent while preserving the schools’ special characteristics”.

Mansour, however, said the schools’ academic achievements and special character, including its Christian ethos, would be impossible to maintain if they came under government control.

Appeal to Pope Francis

Some rights groups vowed to take action. Adalah, a legal centre for the Palestinian minority, said it was preparing to challenge funding cuts in the courts. The policy, said Adalah lawyer Sawsan Zaher, contravened the 1961 UN convention against discrimination in education, which Israel has signed, as the government was fully funding independent Jewish schools.

Israel also had an obligation under international law to recognise the protected status of schools that existed before Israel’s creation and served a “homeland minority”, said Zaher.

Abdelmasih said that if the education ministry refused to reconsider its cuts, Christian leaders in Israel would appeal to Pope Francis to exert pressure on Israel.

The threat to the church schools comes as Israel’s small community of Christian Palestinians – about two percent of Israel’s population – says it feels increasingly [under attack](#) after a [string of hate crimes](#) against Christian and Muslim sites were committed by Jewish groups closely associated with settlements.

Other Palestinian Christians complain of feeling pressured by the government to serve in the army, worrying that military service would put them on a [collision course](#) with Israel’s Muslim population.

Mansour said such pressures have led many Palestinian Christians to consider emigrating. “Our schools are important in keeping the connection between Christians and this land. We

tell our pupils about their Palestinian Arab identity and heritage – that this is their country.”

Jabareen, the Arab Knesset member, submitted a bill this month that would require the education ministry to promote educational and cultural values suitable for the Palestinian minority.

“At the moment, the education system strongly advances Zionist values of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, and Jewish culture and heritage,” he said.

“It entirely ignores the identity and culture of 20 percent of the population, and that has to change,” he added.

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