

With Schools Starved of Funds, Christians Question Their Future in Israel

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Nearly half a million Palestinian pupils go on strike in Israel as Netanyahu government digs in heels against independent church schools

Thousands of Arab schools in Israel [went on strike](#) on Monday, their 450,000 pupils remaining at home, as the Israeli government geared up for a major showdown with its large Palestinian minority.

The trigger for the strike is the Israeli government's decision to starve 47 independent schools, set up originally by the international churches, of the state funding they have received for decades.

The schools, among the best in the country, have effectively been forced to shut indefinitely, their 33,000 pupils unsure when or even whether they will return to their classrooms.

On Sunday, thousands of families came from across Israel, from cities like Nazareth, Haifa, Jaffa, Ramle and Jerusalem, where the schools are located, to [protest](#) noisily outside the office of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The schools have run up huge debts since education officials began cutting their budgets seven years ago, from 75 percent of the funding received by state schools to just 29 percent today. To open this academic year, they need about \$50 million; the government is offering \$5 million.

Talks over the past 18 months with the education ministry have gone nowhere. As Monday's solidarity strike shows, Netanyahu's government is taking on not only the church schools and the small Christian population of about 150,000, but all of the country's 1.5 million Palestinian citizens, who make up a fifth of the population.

Israel is also risking a diplomatic confrontation with the Vatican and other international churches.

Last week Pope Francis [raised the matter](#) during a visit by Israel's president, Reuven Rivlin, to the Holy See. Rivlin promised to find a solution, though the government itself shows no signs of budging.

Christian leaders in Israel have hinted that they may try to shut important holy sites, such as the Basilica of the Annunciation Church in Nazareth and the Mount of Beatitudes next to

the Sea of Galilee, in retaliation. This, they hope, will bring the issue to the attention of pilgrims and tourists, adding to the pressure on Israel.

Sinister motives

Education officials, however, are hoping they can limit support for the schools by advancing a seemingly reasonable argument: if the church schools want government money, they should join the state education system.

In truth, however, the move is not being advanced on economic grounds. There are far more sinister motives for the crackdown on the church schools, observers note.

Nadeem Nashif, director of Baladna, an organisation in Haifa promoting the rights of Palestinian youth, warns that the Netanyahu government's main goal is to end the educational autonomy of these schools.

"They want to tighten control," he told Middle East Eye. "Even if the government eventually eases the cuts, the battle will have sent a very clear message to the head teachers. Behave like 'good Arabs' or we will shut you down."

The move is related to long-term measures designed to weaken Israel's Christian minority and make the fledgling Palestinian middle class in Israel more dependent on the state, a state that has shown itself consistently and systematically hostile to its non-Jewish population.

The arguments in favour of the government's position on funding cuts can be easily dismissed.

If this is simply an issue of who foots the bill for church schools, as the education ministry implies, then why is the government insisting that the schools not be allowed to make up the budget shortfall by charging parents more?

By tying the schools' hands, the education ministry's terms are, in the words of the church schools, a "death blow", intended to make their survival as independent schools impossible.

Different treatment

Similarly, if this is about the unfairness of state subsidies for religious education, as is also suggested, then why is the government massively funding private religious schools for the Jewish ultra-Orthodox community?

In contrast to the treatment of the church schools, the ultra-Orthodox schools are getting [100 per cent funding](#).

There are other striking contrasts: unlike the church schools, which teach the national curriculum, the Jewish ultra-Orthodox schools break the law by failing to teach core subjects like English and maths. Unlike the impressive record of the church schools, the ultra-Orthodox schools are almost all failing academically.

Also, unlike the ultra-Orthodox schools, which teach only religiously observant Jews, the church schools are open to all segments of the Palestinian minority. Nearly half the pupils

are Muslim.

That is why support for them has come from unlikely quarters. Masoud Ghanaïm, a leader of the southern Islamic Movement, [described](#) the church schools as “among the best in Arab society, and therefore their struggle is our struggle”.

The government’s argument also fails to acknowledge that education in Israel is based on strict segregation. There is separation between Jewish and Arab pupils, and between religious and secular Jews.

In the famous 1954 civil rights case, Brown vs the Board of Education of Topeka, the US Supreme Court ruled that separate schools for blacks and whites were “inherently unequal”.

But since its founding, Israel has insisted on segregation. And as the US justices warned, the outcome has been gross discrimination in education at all levels between the Jewish majority and the Palestinian minority.

Shortage of 6,000 classrooms

Studies show on average a Jewish pupil receives more than [five times](#) the funding of an Arab pupil – \$1,100 compared to \$192. The Arab system has a [shortage](#) of more than 6,000 classrooms and 4,000 teachers. Jewish schools have [twice as many computers](#) relative to their student bodies.

More damagingly still, as Nashif points out, Arab state schools have no control over their curriculum, which is set by Jewish officials, while Israel’s secret police, the Shin Bet, vet teaching appointments and monitor the schools, creating an oppressive atmosphere.

The independent church schools provide the only viable escape route, at least for Palestinian families in Israel who can afford them.

The schools’ matriculation rates show how successful they have been. Many in the Palestinian leadership, as well as a third of the minority’s university graduates and most of its hi-tech engineers, have been educated in the church schools.

Ayman Odeh, the head of the minority’s Joint List party in the Israeli parliament and himself a graduate of a church school, [observed](#) at the weekend: “It’s impossible to talk about development and equal opportunity on one hand, but on the other hand harm the very schools that are succeeding in breaking the glass ceiling.”

In effect, the church schools and the parents who send their children to them have been subsidising the education budget. At a cut-price to the state, the church schools have been producing some of the best-educated pupils in the country.

But this may be exactly part of the problem, from Israel’s point of view.

Fearful of the middle class

During the 1948 war that led to the creation of a Jewish state, the Israeli army cleared Palestinian cities of most of their Palestinian residents, except in the sensitive holy city of Nazareth, which was left relatively untouched.

Israel's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, appreciated that these cities were home to the Palestinian middle classes and centres of intellectual life and political activism.

If Israel were to face organised Palestinian resistance, it would emerge from the cities – which is why Ben Gurion made sure they were erased. Strict systems of control and massive discrimination kept the minority weak and divided.

Over many decades Palestinian society has slowly rebuilt itself. In recent years a middle class has begun to re-emerge in these cities, especially in Nazareth, very much aided by the church schools.

As Ben Gurion feared, the most educated have proven often the most sophisticated critics of Israel, the most organised in demanding their rights, the most articulate and successful in reaching foreign audiences, including Christian solidarity groups and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

It may be no coincidence that the politician currently most reviled by the Israeli Jewish public for her nationalist positions is the Knesset member Haneen Zoabi, a Muslim woman who graduated from a church school in Nazareth.

Pressure to leave

By forcing the church schools to close or come under state control, Israel would remove the keystone of the support structure for the fledgling Palestinian middle class, and especially the urban Christian population.

The next generation of Palestinian elites, including Christians, would be far more dependent on the state than their predecessors and likely to be far more cautious about their political activism, notes Nashif of Baladna.

Observers like Nashif believe this move should be viewed in relation to another recent government initiative, one clearly intended to create divisions in the Palestinian minority: Christian but not Muslim youth in Israel are being pressured to serve in the army.

The fear is that Palestinian Christians are slowly being shown the future, one where they will live as a cornered and vulnerable minority, turned against their Muslim neighbours, and reliant on a state that demands their obedience even as it provides privileges for Jews.

The Christian middle classes are being forced into a deeply uncomfortable choice: either prove your loyalty as Zionists, or know that life will become much harder for you here.

Last week, at a demonstration in Nazareth, a senior Roman Catholic bishop, Giacinto-Boulos Marcuzzo, [warned](#): "If Christian schools are threatened, in the long run it is the very Christian presence in Israel that is threatened."

The church schools have been an anchor for the Christian population, upholding their religious traditions in education, providing them with an identity separate from the alienating one promoted by the state, and offering them opportunities to flourish economically.

All that is now in jeopardy.

Strikes like Monday's and pressure from the Vatican may eventually force the government to partially relent. But many Christians in Israel are starting to suspect that the government is declaring a low-level war on them.

Their co-religionists in neighbouring states are fleeing the region as they face civil wars and threats of persecution. In Israel the mistreatment of Christians may be more bureaucratic than physical, but, as Marcuzzo warns, its effects are likely in the long run to prove just as tangible.

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