



## **Committee for the Evaluation of Arabic Language and Literature Studies in Israel**

### General Report

Evaluation Report

July 2014

## Contents

Chapter 1:	Background.....	3
Chapter 2:	Committee Procedures.....	4
Chapter 3:	Evaluation of Arabic Language and Literature Studies in Israel.....	5
Chapter 4:	Summary of Recommendations .....	8

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Letter of Appointment

## **Chapter 1- Background**

The Council for Higher Education (CHE) decided to evaluate study programs in the field of Arabic during the academic year of 2014.

Following the decision of the CHE, the Minister of Education, who serves ex officio as Chairperson of the CHE, appointed a Committee consisting of: <sup>1</sup>

- Professor David J. Wasserstein - Department of History, Vanderbilt University - Tennessee, USA. Committee Chair
- Professor Li Guo - Department of Classics and Program of Arabic Language and Culture, University of Notre Dame - Indiana, USA
- Professor Beatrice Gruendler – Department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations, Yale University - Connecticut, USA
- Professor Otto Jastrow - Estonian Institute of Humanities, Tallinn University - Estonia
- Professor Joseph Sadan - Professor emeritus, Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Tel Aviv University, Israel

Ms. Erica Rashkovsky, Ms. Daniella Sandler and Ms. Dvora Klein - Coordinators of the Committee on behalf of the CHE.

Within the framework of its activity, the Committee was requested to:

1. Examine the self-evaluation reports submitted by the institutions that provide study programs in Arabic Language and Literature, and to conduct on-site visits at those institutions.
2. Submit to the CHE an individual report on each of the evaluated academic units and study programs, including the Committee's findings and recommendations.
3. Submit to the CHE a general report regarding the examined field of study within the Israeli system of higher education including recommendations for standards in the evaluated field of study.

The entire process was conducted in accordance with the CHE's October 2011 Guidelines for Self-Evaluation.

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<sup>1</sup> The Committee's letter of appointment is attached as **Appendix 1**.

## **Chapter 2 - Committee Procedures**

The Committee held its first meetings on 16 May, 2014, during which it discussed fundamental issues concerning higher education in Israel, the quality assessment activity, as well as Arabic Study programs in Israel.

In May 2014, the Committee held its visits of evaluation, and visited the Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, Haifa University and Bar Ilan University. During the visits, the Committee met with members of numerous constituencies at the institutions, including administration, faculty, staff, and students.

The Committee wishes to express its gratitude to the following members of the staff of the Council for Higher Education, who facilitated our work from the start to the end of this long process: Michal Neuman, Yael Elbocher, Dvora Klein, Erica Rashkovsky and Daniella Sandler.

This report deals with the general state of Arabic Language and Literature Studies in Israel.

### **Chapter 3: Evaluation of Arabic Language and Literature Study in Israel**

This is a report on a national crisis.

Israel exists in the heart of the Arab world. It is historically part of the Arab world. Half of its Jewish population has historic roots in that world and twenty percent of its population is Arab. Directly or indirectly, it dominates the lives of the Palestinian Arabs in the territories occupied in 1967. Its politics, external and internal, are heavily involved with the Arab world. For all these reasons and others, the study of Arabic and Islam is of central, vital, national importance to the state of Israel and to its citizens. Further, such study forms part of the humanistic heritage of the civilized world. Israel possesses a proud tradition of excellence in this discipline, going back to the earliest days of the Hebrew University in the 1920s, and its scholars continue to hold a distinguished international position in the field.

In the last decade and a half, Arabic and Islamic studies in Israel have shared the problems of all humanistic disciplines, despite the importance in the Information Age of the ability to analyze and interpret increasing amounts of text, precisely those skills that the humanities train people in. Political and social recognition has melted away. University administrations have turned their attention in other directions. Funding has dried up. Faculty have retired and not been replaced. Younger scholars, finding no posts available, have emigrated or abandoned the field. Students have been attracted to other fields of study. Libraries, the breathing lungs of the discipline, have languished. Study programs have decayed. Threats have emerged to swallow Arabic studies up into the more general (and on the surface more “practical”) sister-field of Middle Eastern studies. But the importance of Arabic studies, both as part of the humanities and in the very specific context of Israel, has not declined in the slightest. Further neglect of it will be detrimental to Israeli society as a whole.

Arabic studies in Israel today face a crisis. The great tradition stretching back to the 1920s is in danger. At the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, once a flagship of Israeli scholarship in this field, numbers of faculty are down by over a half and within the next five years will decline rapidly much further. In the other universities, faculty numbers are also lower, and in some places also student numbers. Human resources and physical plant everywhere have been neglected. Society has learned to disregard Arabic as evidenced by lower numbers of students in high schools and declining quality of instruction there.

Israel must and can excel in this area. It needs to understand its neighbors. It is no idle exaggeration to assert that Arabic is more important to Israel than many other subjects. Other subjects will enhance Israel as a cultural center and make it a place of civilized interests. Arabic, however, is central to Israel’s identity and vital to its national character. Israel needs the support of Arabic as Arabic needs Israel’s support. Arabic in Israel is not a luxury.

This Committee, with members drawn from the senior ranks of scholars in Israel and abroad, found much to admire and to praise in the Departments studied here. Faculty are by and large excellent, and, with all the difficulties under which they labor, produce large amounts of research, much of it first-rate. Students are very good, and generally come to the universities far better prepared than their counterparts in western countries. Teaching proves very effective and students emerge well-trained, interested and often as productive scholars too. Relations among colleagues and between teachers and students appear to be excellent. Standards remain high. Academic contact with colleagues abroad continues, despite the so-called academic boycott of Israel, which has particular effects in this field. Libraries, despite the problems of the last two decades, still hold very good collections.

However, the Committee seeks, deliberately, not to waste space here on redundant praise – that is not why it was asked to come to Israel. Rather, it wishes to point to the very real needs in this sector. Its recommendations are far-reaching, but they need to be; they are also financially very modest and cost-effective, especially so for a university system that concentrates now so heavily on very costly areas in the sciences. Reform and recovery in Arabic studies are urgent tasks. They can be achieved at relatively minor cost – little more, in effect, than the cost of a few academic posts spread over four large university systems nation-wide.

An inquiry of this sort presents a rare opportunity: in particular, it makes it possible to attempt an overview of the subject as it is taught and studied in the country as a whole, and thus to understand the larger problems affecting the discipline and to offer possible paths to solutions. The four departments studied by the Committee offer distinct profiles. Jerusalem is the venerable scholarly and research center; Tel Aviv evinces more a brashness that goes with its relative novelty as the largest metropolitan center of the country, and, with its sister-department of Middle Eastern and African History, a leaning towards the world of modernity and the political. Bar Ilan, as a religious university, offers courses and research inclining more towards Islamic religion and especially exploits the advantages of bringing together research on Judaism and Islam. Haifa responds to its geographical location to offer courses that draw in large numbers of Arab students. All the universities in varying degree recognize and embrace the importance and the possibilities of research in Judeo-Arabic and the other subfields of Middle Arabic, a language bundle that is understudied worldwide (and in which Israeli scholars enjoy particular recognition).

The Committee identified numerous areas where change and improvement are needed. These are outlined in the individual reports on each institution. In this general report, the Committee wishes to draw attention only to a small number of these, particularly those that were common to all the institutions, and in addition to suggest some possible areas for inter-institutional cooperation that may spur both improved scholarship and teaching and increased efficiency, leading to financial savings. If implemented, the Committee feels, its

recommendations have the potential to return Israel to the standing it enjoyed, as recently as a couple of decades ago, as one of the leading centers of Arabic studies in the world. The value of that in the specific context of Israel's position in relation to the Arab world cannot be overstated. It should not be undervalued.

## **Chapter4: Summary of Recommendations and Timetable**

### **1. Departments**

The Committee wishes to stress the importance of maintaining existing departments of Arabic as independent units. They should not be merged with departments of Middle Eastern studies, as has been suggested, in several institutions visited by the Committee, in the recent past. The two fields are distinct, if complementary, disciplines, using distinct methodologies and asking different questions. Each can benefit from the other as each helps the other, but they are and should remain distinct.

### **2. Faculty**

There is a serious and growing dearth of faculty, at all levels, in all the institutions. New hires are needed not in order to make the field larger, but simply to return it to the state it enjoyed twenty years ago. The argument of financial stringency is untenable. The country is richer now than then and the need is greater. Retiring faculty must be replaced. And not only individuals but fields represented by departing faculty members must be replaced. Junior faculty are over-burdened, often with administrative tasks that could more efficiently and more cheaply be undertaken by secretarial staff, and by too excessive a share of graduate student supervision. Simply put: more faculty are required, at all levels, in fields chosen carefully in view of the curricular needs of the subject, without the administrative burden that distracts them from their real work. Some candidates for such posts are available already. Others should be sought on the national and international stage.

A strong tendency, discerned by the Committee, to fill posts in a department by appointing graduates of the same department is unhealthy. Graduates, too, tend to look for posts in their home universities. This is disadvantageous, intellectually and academically. Universities should be national and international in their aspirations, seeking to appoint the best and not simply providing for their own graduates, however excellent they may think them. Posts should be filled by serious national and international competition. Conversely, local graduates should be encouraged to apply elsewhere nationally and internationally, as many of them are indeed competitive worldwide.

In a number of institutions, the Committee noted that retired faculty were continuing to teach, as volunteers. While this is generous on their part, this is not how serious, major academic institutions should operate. If teaching needs to be done, universities should employ faculty to do it and not rely on retired volunteers.

### 3. Arab faculty and graduate students

More Arabs need to be appointed as faculty in Arabic language and literature studies. This means that more Arabs need to be attracted to graduate work in this field, and graduating students should be encouraged and supported to apply for grants and positions nationally and internationally.

### 4. Students

Students are now far less well prepared for study than they used to be. Arabic is less well taught in high schools than in the past. Lower numbers of students take it. The numbers and quality of students taking Arabic in universities are deteriorating accordingly. Steps need to be taken to reverse this harmful trend.

More efforts must be made to attract students into the field. This is no part of our remit, but if the universities are to return to the level to which they rightly aspire, they need to have a supply of students of high quality; and the ability to work with incoming students with a high level of Arabic is a national strength. Those students are needed by society. This measure also implies restoring the quality of Arabic-language teaching in high schools to its previous level.

### 5. Graduate students

Graduate students need to be funded more efficiently. Given the imposition of the model of the sciences more broadly in university financing, that model should be applied properly to the funding of graduate students in this field, to enable them to pursue their studies effectively and successfully. Furthermore, graduate students need to be given more and better introduction to methods of advanced research and to modern theoretical approaches to their subjects. In this field, Arab students in particular need better training in the languages of modern research – mainly English, but also French, German and Spanish. MA studies suffer from a lack of sufficient courses and insufficient faculty time for MA students. More faculty would solve this problem.

### 6. Study Programs

Students and faculty, as well as the Committee itself, noted a need, at both BA and MA level, for more courses, for more varied courses, and for courses that go beyond the narrow contours of Arabic language and grammar alone to engage with broader questions of theory and culture. Arabic should not run the risk of becoming intellectually or academically backward through lack of such interdisciplinary stimulation. Thus, e.g., introductory courses in Arabic dialectology and Semitic linguistics should be added to the curriculum in order to liberate Arabic from its image of being unchanging and unique by showing its historical development and its

close ties with the sister languages, Hebrew and Aramaic. A proper balance should be maintained between courses on classical and courses on modern topics.

#### 7. Graduate seminars

The Committee was surprised to note virtually everywhere that graduate students, at both MA and PhD level, did not have any form of seminar or colloquium to discuss their degree projects. Such seminars should be instituted everywhere, bi-weekly. The value of such a venue cannot be over-stated. In the sciences, graduate students meet every day in their labs. In the humanities here, the Committee learned, they meet rarely, if at all. Students, like faculty, need to have contact with each other, to meet, to share their work, to discuss and criticize each other's ideas, to benefit from the comments of their peers. Such seminars might be only at MA level or only at PhD level, or at both together. They could also be held between institutions – Israel is small enough for that not to be a major problem of logistics. Apart from the coffee, they are cost-free to the institution. Their benefits are enormous.

#### 8. Teaching in Modern Standard Arabic

Teaching of BA courses should be carried out at least in part through the medium of Arabic, meaning here Modern Standard Arabic. This would benefit Arab and Jewish students alike, and also bring Arab and Jewish students together. However, teaching in MSA should mainly be done by native speakers.

#### 9. Spoken Arabic

Any student of a modern foreign language is expected, at graduation, to speak the language fluently. Other than with native speakers, this is not the case with students of Arabic in Israel. Clearly Classical Arabic, as the medium of the Arab literary, cultural and religious heritage (Jewish and Christian as well as Islamic), together with the modern written language (Modern Standard Arabic), must be central subjects of Arabic Studies. However, the spoken forms of the language must be an integral part of the curriculum as well. This aspect has been largely ignored by the Arabic departments, with the result that Hebrew-speaking students leave university without being able to converse freely in Israeli Arabic, in other words, in the Palestinian dialect.

The committee recommends the inclusion of Colloquial Palestinian Arabic in the curriculum. Teaching should be based on the principles of Arabic dialectology and make use of scholarly literature. Subjects like phonology, morphology and syntax should be treated with the same rigor as in Classical Arabic.

## 10. Arabic dialectology

As with the teaching of Palestinian Colloquial Arabic, so too Arabic dialectology is severely under-developed. This scholarly discipline investigates dialects across the Arab world, reconstructing their internal history and providing a theoretical and descriptive framework for the study of individual dialects. The local dialects of the Arab population in Israel are better preserved than in most Arab countries. Israel is thus an ideal place for the scientific study of a great variety of spoken Arabic dialects and should be, or rather become again, a center of Arabic dialectology.

The committee therefore recommends introducing Arabic dialectology as a main discipline in the Arabic departments. This can be done gradually and could take its starting point from Haifa University where Arabic dialectology is already part of the curriculum. Here, too, younger scholars who are junior faculty or teaching adjuncts could be employed to develop the field and help it gain traction.

## 11. Cooperation with Middle Eastern studies

Arabic studies enjoy a natural and a complementary relationship with Middle Eastern studies and Middle Eastern history. They overlap at many points, especially in the study of Islam (though Middle Eastern studies of course also include the study of very many non-Arab parts of the Islamic world). But they use different methodologies and ask different questions. The benefits they provide are different. The relationship should be nurtured and exploited. At the same time it should not be misunderstood. Arabic studies are different from Middle Eastern studies, but each side can learn from and benefit the other. Whether in teaching or research, in the purchase of books and academic journals or the sharing of graduate student colloquia or the use of grant money, those on both sides of the disciplinary divide should learn to work with each other to the benefit of all. Shared courses are one easy and obvious path for the future here, but coordinated book purchasing, joint research projects, increased double majors at the BA level and more can easily be imagined.

## 12. Support for Faculty Research

Graduate studies and graduate students need help. Israeli universities have been quick to adopt the financing model of the hard sciences in the humanities, but without teaching the faculty in the humanities to use that model, either to shape the ways in which they design and carry out research or to support graduate students. Faculty need to be encouraged to develop modes and methods of research that fit the new models, and to introduce their graduate students to these forms of research.

### 13. Library resources

Libraries are the breathing lungs of any humanistic discipline. Books, in varying forms, are its oxygen. It needs a constant supply of that oxygen. Investment is needed everywhere: to maintain the physical basis of the libraries themselves; to fill the gaps in purchasing since the 1980s; to acquire and maintain modern electronic databases and academic journals; for subscriptions to print journals; to acquire texts in Arabic and secondary scholarly literature in Arabic and the languages of western scholarship.

The Committee has suggestions (see below) for more economically efficient ways of purchasing in this area.

### 14. Computers

The Committee noted that faculty were not supplied everywhere with computers. Computers are a basic tool of academic work – both teaching and research – today. No academic can work without a computer. Computers need to be supplied, and they need to be kept up to date and equipped with the necessary programs.

### 15. Office space

Similarly, adequate office space is a necessity. In the humanities, space is needed in order to meet students and guide graduates, to meet and talk to colleagues, to read and to write and to think. It is an illusion to think that all this can be done if six faculty members need to share a single office as is the case in at least one institution that we visited. Isolation, for the humanities scholar, can be as necessary and as intellectually stimulating and fruitful as companionship in a laboratory is for the scientist.

### 16. Major academic projects of international importance

a) Israeli universities have the largest concentration of scholars in Arabic language and literature in the western world. Their standard, even under the constraints of today, is very high. They publish their research in books and academic journals all over the world. Some of it, along with research submitted by foreign scholars, also appears in journals published in Israel (in particular *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, and *al-Karmil*). These serve the academic (and also the national) interest of Israel, by providing a window onto academic work in Israeli universities. Especially at a time of widespread hostility, also in the academic world, to Israel, such journals have added importance. They cost relatively little to produce, but they are not cost-free. Funds should be provided, at a national level, to enable them to do their work without the constant threat of financial shutdown.

b) The Arabic-Hebrew and soon-to-be Arabic-English dictionary project at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem is a major project that will give Israeli scholarship and Israel itself a higher profile in the world. This needs to be given the modest financial support, again at the national level, that is required.

#### 17. Alumni relations

Greater efforts should be invested in keeping records of the career paths of alumni and in maintaining relations with alumni. As in other countries, this would foster a spirit of loyalty to their alma mater among former students and help to create a usable data base about career possibilities for new graduates as well as showcasing the institutions' success in placing their graduates professionally. It could also initiate a very welcome culture of donorship.

### **National recommendations**

Most of the recommendations offered here are institution-specific or apply to all institutions individually. However, two further recommendations are of national order.

#### 1. Library purchasing.

Serious consideration should be given to substantial increases in co-operation among the libraries of the institutions with regard to purchases. In such a small country as Israel, it should be possible to save money by avoiding duplication of purchases and organizing local centers of library specialization within the field. Inter-Library Loans, again in such a small area, should be efficiently and easily possible. This would make it unnecessary to buy copies of every single book for every library and enable more efficient use of scarce resources. This is an obvious area where Arabic departments could profitably cooperate with their sister-departments of Middle Eastern History/Studies.

Another way of optimizing scarce financial resources would be to coordinate the purchase of subscriptions to electronic journals and databases. The costs of these increase all the time, and coordinated approaches to sellers would be likely to lead to lowering of costs.

Possible objections by sellers – legal, technical and above all financial – might be met very simply by the establishment of a single institution – a nation-wide Council for Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies - of which all faculty and students in these fields would be members.

## 2. Specialized centers of excellence

Israel is a small country. Distances between academic centers are small. University faculty in Arabic and related fields tend to know each other. It would be very useful to identify specific areas of the discipline of Arabic studies, such as Judeo-Arabic or modern dialects, whose study and/or teaching could be focused in research centers housed in single institutions but uniting scholars from all four of the institutions surveyed here. Concentrating intellectual and academic power in dedicated centers in this way would lead to savings in library purchasing and in human resources, while raising the quality of the work produced in them.

## **Conclusion**

Many of the recommendations offered here are cost-neutral or very modest in cost. Their benefits can be enormous. Others, in particular those involving the appointment of faculty, and to a lesser degree expenditure on libraries, are more expensive and likely to meet resistance at all levels, from the political down to that of deans and department chairs. Such resistance would be a false and short-sighted economy. Twenty years ago – less than a generation – Israel was a world leader in this field. For less than the cost of an airplane, she can be so again. What is lacking is not so much the funding, but the will, and the recognition of the importance of the field for the country and the people of Israel.

## **Timetable for action:**

In terms of urgency, the recommendations offered above should be dealt with as follows:

### 1. Immediate:

New faculty hires – immediate and ongoing, using both local and international recruitment

Increased attempts at recruitment of students

Funding and training of graduate students

Introduction of graduate seminars

Support for faculty research, training etc.

Improved library resources and co-ordination of library purchasing

Computers

### 2. Medium-term

Recruitment of Arab students and faculty

Changes to course contents and structures

Teaching in Modern Standard Arabic

Spoken Arabic instruction

Co-operation with Middle Eastern Studies

Office space for faculty

Support for major projects

Alumni outreach

Centers of excellence

### 3. Long-term

Arabic dialectology

Signed:

A handwritten signature consisting of a large, stylized letter 'B' followed by a long horizontal line.

Professor Beatrice Gruendler

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Professor Li Guo

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Professor Otto Jastrow

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'J. Sadan', positioned above a horizontal line.

Professor Joseph Sadan

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'David J. Wasserstein', positioned above a horizontal line.

Professor David J. Wasserstein (Chair)

June 2014



Prof. David J, Wasserstein,  
College of Arts and Science,  
Vanderbilt University, TN  
USA

Dear Professor Wasserstein,

The Israeli Council for Higher Education (CHE) strives to ensure the continuing excellence and quality of Israeli higher education through a systematic evaluation process. By engaging upon this mission, the CHE seeks: to enhance and ensure the quality of academic studies, to provide the public with information regarding the quality of study programs in institutions of higher education throughout Israel, and to ensure the continued integration of the Israeli system of higher education in the international academic arena.

As part of this important endeavor we reach out to world renowned academicians to help us meet the challenges that confront the Israeli higher education. This process establishes a structure for an ongoing consultative process around the globe on common academic dilemmas and prospects.

I therefore deeply appreciate your willingness to join us in this crucial enterprise.

It is with great pleasure that I hereby appoint you to serve as the Chair of the Council for Higher Education's Committee for the Evaluation of the study programs in **Arabic Language and Literature**. In addition to you, the composition of the Committee will be as follows: Prof. Joseph Sadan, Prof. Beatrice Gruendler, Prof. Li Guo, and Prof. Otto Jastrow.

Ms. Daniella Sandler will be the coordinator of the committee. Details regarding the operation of the committee and its mandate are provided in the enclosed appendix.

I wish you much success in your role as the Chair of this most important committee.

Sincerely,

Prof. Hagit Messer-Yaron

Deputy Chairperson,

The Council for Higher Education (CHE)

*Enclosures:* Appendix to the Appointment Letter of Evaluation Committees

cc: Ms. Michal Neumann, Deputy Director-General for QA, CHE

Ms. Daniella Sandler, Committee Coordinator