

Becoming Post-Communist

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of Russia and Eastern Europe

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Yonatan Mendel, *Safah miḥutz limkomah: orientalizm, modi'in veba'aravit beyisrael* (Language out of Place: Orientalism, Intelligence and Arabic in Israel). Tel Aviv: The Van Leer Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2020. 282 pp.

Yuval Evri, *Hashivah leAndalus: maḥlokot 'al tarbut vezehut yehudit-sefaradit bein 'araviyut le'ivriyut* (The Return to Al-Andalus: Disputes over Sephardic Culture and Identity between Arabic and Hebrew). Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2020. 357 pp.

Is Israel a Middle Eastern state? Geographically it is located in the region but culturally it is not, argues Yonatan Mendel. Very few Israeli Jews, including the second and third generations of immigrants from Arab countries, speak, read, or write in Arabic. Under the British Mandate and in Israeli Basic Law up until July 2018, both Hebrew and Arabic enjoyed the status of official languages. However, in 2018, the Knesset enacted a new Basic Law that downgraded Arabic to having a “special status,” with Hebrew remaining the sole official state language. This well-written book, a revised edition of the author’s volume in English,¹ deals with the history and politics of Arabic studies in Jewish Israeli mainstream schools. Ultraorthodox schools do not teach Arabic, and in most national-religious schools it is either not taught or else is offered as an elective subject. Both systems are therefore not included in Mendel’s discussion.

As Mendel shows, methods introduced by Hebrew University professors back in the 1920s and 1930s continue to shape the teaching of Arabic in Israeli schools and universities. Almost all of these professors had been trained in the Oriental studies departments of German universities, where the emphasis was exclusively on the philological, grammatical, and syntactical analysis of texts. Colloquial language, with its many regional and status dialects, was considered too “popular” (that is, non-scholastic) to be included in the faculties of liberal arts.

Whereas other scholars have focused on the study of Arabic in Israeli universities,² Mendel is mostly interested in high school education. Based in the main on archival documents from the mid-1930s up to the mid-1980s, his book is organized chronologically. The first chapter deals with the pre-statehood period, the second from 1948 to the Six-Day War of 1967, and the third on the combined impact of the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Chapter 4 centers on the decade from 1976–1986. From there, Mendel moves to a discussion of two prestigious informal educational institutions aimed at promoting peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs in Israel, Giv’at Havivah and Ulpán Akiva. The last chapter, based on interviews and newspaper articles, deals with Arabic teaching in the 21st century.

Up to 1948, Palestinian Jews spoke Arabic in their everyday life encounters with their neighbors' hegemonic culture. Two developments dramatically changed this situation. The first was the philological methods of teaching Arabic that took hold in Jewish educational institutions; the second was the Zionist/Israeli–Arab conflict. Both led to what Mendel defines as the “Latinization” of Arabic; that is, relating to Arabic as a textual language that students translate.

Mendel exposes and critiques the symbiotic relationship between Arabic studies and the security establishment. The opportunity for future service in military intelligence is a prime factor motivating young Israelis to study Arabic, and the Ministry of Education and school principals willingly accept army funds covering not only the cost of Arabic classes but also extracurricular activities. At the ministerial level, military intelligence officers take part in planning how to increase the number of Jewish high school students learning Arabic. In consequence, the intelligence corps of the Israeli army has a major role in determining how Arabic is taught; this, according to Mendel, contributes to the militarization of Israeli society in general and high school students' education in particular. For the vast majority of Israeli Jews, the army–school symbiosis is natural and necessary, considering Israel's conflict with most of its neighboring countries. The boundaries between civilian and military spheres are thin and easily crossed.

In the pre-statehood era, as noted, the situation was different. With Arabs constituting a majority of the population, Arabic was the *lingua franca*, according to Mendel. It was spoken as well by urban Ashkenazic Jews, with no particular security importance. But as the conflict between Zionism and the Palestinian national movement (already manifest in the 1936–1939 Arab Revolt) escalated from 1945 onward, Arabic became the “language of the enemy.” It was increasingly taught in order to spy, control, and occupy rather than as an expression of communication, an aspect of a rich culture, and as a potentially integrative tool. Ashkenazic Jews who were leaders of both the Zionist movement and the state of Israel adopted an Orientalist view on Arab language and culture that distanced the young state from encounters with Arab native culture, art, and intellectual life. In addition, whereas the younger members of the first generation of Jewish immigrants from Arab countries preserved their original language and culture and thus could serve in Israeli intelligence units, the second and third generations acceded to hegemonic social pressure, abandoning their Arab cultural origins in order to integrate into the Hebrew national culture. Growing intelligence needs after 1967 and 1973 wars were what led the army to collaborate with the Ministry of Education to establish a multi-layered network to expand the study of Arabic.

The education system–intelligence network largely excludes Israeli Arabs, who are perceived as a security risk. According to Mendel, only a marginal number of Israeli Palestinians teach Arabic in Jewish schools, and they are not allowed to accompany their students to meetings with army officers on issues pertaining to their Arabic education, or to participate in joint social gatherings. What this means is that the vast majority of teachers do not speak Arabic at home, nor do they regularly consume Arab culture and media or write in Arabic. Consequently, a new type of Arabic has developed: “Israeli Arabic,” as Mendel calls it, which stands as a barrier between Jews and Arabs. If Mendel had instead used the term “Israeli-Jewish Arabic” he would have been more

accurate and in line with his own argument on behalf of Jewish–Arab integration and mutual respect.

There are a few other problems in the book. Though Mendel's writing is fluent and his book is well-documented, he frequently hammers at his main argument. He over-emphasizes his thesis to the extent that readers are apt to conclude that he is mainly interested in campaigning against dominant Israeli educational institutions and their methods of teaching Arabic. He argues, for instance, that both Giv'at Havivah and Ulpan Akiva collaborated with the army intelligence corps in a manner similar to that of the Ministry of Education. However, he does not provide data on the extent of such collaboration in each of these institutions' activity. Moreover, Mendel himself notes that, in 2001, UNESCO awarded Giv'at Havivah its Peace Education Prize; several years earlier, in 1992 and 1993, a group of EU members of parliament and U.S. Congressional representatives, respectively, nominated the founder of Ulpan Akiva for the Nobel Peace Prize (pp. 201–201). Mendel does not speculate as to their motives for doing so, or whether they had any knowledge concerning alleged collaboration.

Finally, the book is somewhat short on nuance. It fails to take account of certain possibilities—for instance, that some of those who serve in army intelligence and then go on to study Arabic in a university program might come to respect the richness of Arab culture or learn colloquial Arabic, or that certain texts can serve to build bridges between people rather than hierarchically dividing between “us” and “them.”

Whereas Mendel deals with teaching Arabic and social history, Evri is interested in Arabic as identity expression and intellectual history. Based on several of Evri's articles published in English, *Hashivah leAndalus* covers a time frame extending from the end of the 19th century to the 1930s as it probes several case studies pertaining to Sephardic enlightenment and Sephardic identity in the context of the Ottoman and British empires.³ Evri takes the 21st-century new historians to a different direction, demonstrating that Jewish enlightenment was not limited to Western Europe, and that its Sephardic wing had reached different conclusions regarding native Palestinian Jews and Arabs than those adopted by the Ashkenazic-European Zionist modernization project.⁴ As opposed to the colonial–Orientalist approach of European Zionists that perceived Palestine's inhabitants as passive and conservative, he argues, members of the Sephardic enlightenment felt a kinship with the Arab renaissance (*al-Nahdah*) and raised their voices in favor of their approach to Jewish–Arab medieval collaboration in West European learning centers such as Madrid, Frankfurt, and Heidelberg. In contrast to the current scholarly consensus, Evri convincingly argues that Sephardic intellectuals were agents, not mere victims, of Western colonialism. This said, his definition of “Sephardic” is fluid and less convincing. He writes that it is a “mobile category” with “multi-representations” (p. 6), and his discourse moves freely from “Sephardic” as the identity of a European geographical unit to Jewish–Spanish medieval culture, to an Israeli identity based on Oriental origins, and to the category of “Arab-Jews.” Is this “mobile category” a unique Sephardic phenomenon or it is applicable as well to Ashkenazic Jews? Aren't all identities multi-representational? The author does not relate to this matter.

Following an introductory first chapter, Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the late Ottoman period and Chapter 4 with the early British Mandate. The second chapter—twice as long as any of the others—focuses on two individuals, Shaul Abdallah Yosef

(1849–1906), an autodidact merchant from Baghdad who settled in Southeast Asia, and Dr. Avraham Shalom Yehuda (1877–1951). Both of them fundamentally disagreed with Ashkenazic Jewish scholars who, regarding themselves as cultural heirs to the Sephardim of the Golden Age, analyzed Hebrew Andalusian poetry and literature according to Western Orientalist philological methods. Yosef and Yehuda each argued that the Golden Age of Hebrew Sephardic heritage should be seen in the context of the medieval Arab culture to which Jews of the region belonged, and about which German and Russian scholars were ignorant. The latter contended that Jewish cultural creativity was frozen in the period between medieval Andalusia and the 18th-century Enlightenment. According to Yosef and Yehuda, there was no break in Sephardic integration in Arab, or the dominant Muslim, culture.

The Sephardic intellectuals favored Jewish renaissance through integration in the Orient. They heavily criticized the Zionist policy of isolation from, and superiority over, native Palestinians. This was an intra-Jewish multidimensional conflict revolving around status, waged between Ashkenazic newcomers and Sephardic natives—but entailing, as well, a conflict over Palestinian Hebrew identity and its orientation toward its environment, in which an integrative stream that saw Arabs as potential partners squared off against a separatist, pro-Western approach that viewed Arabs as bitter enemies. The Sephardic approach failed, Evri argues, mainly because of the Ottoman defeat in the First World War. The Sephardim in Palestine, who had once enjoyed an official status as the representative Jewish community (*vis-à-vis* the Ottoman authorities), lost ground to the majority Ashkenazic communities in Palestine and, more crucially, to the Zionist leadership abroad that tied itself to Britain. Notwithstanding, Sephardic intellectuals opted to remain loyal Zionists rather than cooperating with Palestinian Arab partners against the separatist Zionist approach. They translated (from Arabic) and published about five hundred critical newspaper articles warning that Zionist methods would lead to negative consequences, which were ignored by the Zionist leadership. Frustrated, they accepted the role that the more recently arrived Zionist leaders allocated to them: namely, mediating between the new elite and Arab natives as propagandists and intelligence agents. Had Sephardic leaders accepted the Palestinian Arab leaders' offer to cooperate (p. 207–208) the two peoples' history might have been less bloody.

Evri's analysis is innovative but also repetitive, and he fails to integrate previous scholarly studies into his text, as opposed to citing them in footnotes. He also ignores the fact that many Zionist settlers spoke Arabic even if they did not read or write it, and they also imitated popular Bedouin and *falah* (rural) customs, though not those of the urban elite (*efendiyah*), the national movement's powerbase. In other words, as was the case with other settler-colonial societies, the dichotomy was less sharp than Evri's Sephardic primary sources describe.

Finally, according to Evri, the logic of partitioning Palestine between Jews and Arabs guided British policy from the establishment of the Mandate in 1922. In fact, the League of Nations Mandate states that Great Britain is responsible "to put into effect" the Balfour Declaration on establishing a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine—that is, a single state. Only the 1936 Arab revolt brought the Peel commission of 1937 to suggest the partition plan that the British cabinet endorsed. In the late Ottoman period, Evri concludes, people had mixed, if not competing, identities made up of Ottomanism, Arabism,

religion, and local patriotism. However, following Sephardic primary sources and new historical studies, Evri rightly gives primacy to local patriotism, frequently referring to Palestinian Jews as “sons of the land” (*benei haaretz*).

Hashivah leAndalus is relevant to current-day Israel. Evri shows that the conflict between Mizrahi and Ashkenazic Jews that continues to divide Israeli society did not start in the 1950s with the hegemonic Ashkenazic establishment’s discrimination against, and marginalization of, immigrants from Middle East countries. Decades before, in the early 20th century, the Ashkenazic elite already perceived Sephardim as a problem. In the eyes of the elite, the Sephardim would have to change; they were obliged to integrate into the dominant culture that the Ashkenazic newcomers created in order to be considered true sabras.

MENACHEM KLEIN
Bar-Ilan University

Notes

1. Yonatan Mendel, *The Creation of Israeli Arabic: Political and Security Considerations in the Making of Arabic Language Studies in Israel* (London: 2014).

2. Menahem Milson, “Reshit limudei ha’aravit vehaislam bauniversitah ha’ivrit,” in *Toledot hauniversitah ha’ivrit birushalayim: shorashim vehathalot*, ed. Shaul Katz and Michael Heyd (Jerusalem: 1997), 575–588; Amit Levi, “A Man of Contention: Martin Plessner (1900–1973) and His Encounters with the Orient,” *Naharaim* 10, no.1 (2016), 79–100; Eyal Clyne, *Orentalism, Zionism and Academic Practice: Middle East and Islam Studies in Israeli Universities* (London: 2019); Gil Eyal, *The Disenchantment of the Orient: Expertise in Arab Affairs and the Israeli State* (Stanford: 2006).

3. Yuval Evri, “Return to al-Andalus beyond German-Jewish Orientalism: Abraham Shalom Yehuda’s Critique of Modern Jewish Discourse,” in *Modern Jewish Scholarship on Islam in Context: Rationality, European Borders, and the Search for Belonging*, ed. Ottfried Fraisse (Berlin: 2018), 339–354; idem, *Translating the Arab-Jewish Tradition: From al-Andalus to Palestine / Land of Israel* (Berlin: 2016); idem and Almog Behar, “Between East and West: Controversies over the Modernization of the Hebrew Culture in the Works of Abdallah Yosef and Ariel Bension,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 16, no. 2 (2017), 295–311.

4. Menachem Klein, “The 21st Century New Critical Historians,” *Israel Studies Review* 32, no. 2 (Autumn 2017), 146–163.