

Al Monitor the pulse of the Middle East

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*Summary* Israeli Ministers Miri Regev and Avigdor Liberman have attacked Army Radio over a broadcast featuring Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, even though his poetry is taught in Israeli schools.

## War of the Words: Palestinian poetry broadcast terrifies Israeli right



*Palestinian poet and journalist Mahmoud Darwish gestures during Carthage Theater Days in a Tunis theater, Dec. 6, 2007. (photo by FETHI BELAID/AFP/Getty Images)*

Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman summoned Army Radio commander Yiron Dekel for a reprimand July 20. The station had broadcast a program on the work of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, as part of a series on formative Israeli texts. “It is obvious that this represents a failure and cannot go unchallenged,” said the defense minister’s spokesperson. He commented that this is a serious matter, as to this very day Darwish’s works add fuel to the fire of terrorism against the State of Israel.

The summoning of the commander of the military radio station for “clarification” by the defense minister led to some angry responses. Zionist Camp Knesset member Shelly Yachimovich, for example, slammed Liberman’s reaction on Facebook, calling it “a step that can only be defined as characterizing fascist regimes.” The Meretz chairman, Knesset member Ilan Gilon, argued, “In a place where poetry is silenced, people will be silenced as well.”

The Darwish storm broke following a Facebook post by Culture and Sport Minister Miri Regev. Regev wrote that she was shocked that Army Radio had featured the work of the Palestinian national poet. “The IDF [Israel Defense Forces] radio station has gone off the rails,” she said, and quoted a section

of "Identity Card," which was featured on the program. In his famous poem, written in 1964, Darwish wrote, "I do not hate people. I steal from no one. However, if I am hungry I will eat the flesh of my usurper. Beware, beware of my hunger and of my anger."

It made no difference to the defense and culture ministers that the poem was aired on Army Radio as part of a series of formative texts on the station's "Broadcast University" program. The show targets students who want to broaden their educational horizons. Neither did it matter that Darwish's poems are already included in Israel's high school literature curriculum.

"The poet's freedom to write what he wants is the cornerstone of democracy," Israeli poet Ronny Someck told Al-Monitor. "First you have to know and be familiar [with the poems]. Only afterward can you argue if you are pro or con." Someck views Darwish's poem collection as "the first bolt of the bridge we want to build between Jews and Arabs."

Today's Israel, led by a right-wing government, seems not to support the building of this bridge. The outrage over Darwish's poem joins the ongoing perversion of anything rejected by the worldview of the right-wing regime in Israel, including educational and cultural issues and basic historical concepts.

There are many examples of this erosion, from the rewriting of the civics textbook for Israeli pupils by Naftali Bennett's Education Ministry, to Regev's brutal assaults on cultural and artistic institutions and her demand that these establishments declare their loyalty to Israel or face budgetary cutbacks and culminating in attacks by right-wing ministers on Israeli media outlets and their "encouragement" to adopt the Israeli narrative and work to strengthen Israel's Jewish heritage.

Less than a year ago, the Education Ministry published a pamphlet directing high school principals to focus on certain meanings and emphasize certain points in the study of civics. For example, the pamphlet states that civic studies must focus on love of the nation and the land, as well as the study of Jewish heritage and Jewish tradition. Regarding the Arab language, the pamphlet states that priority should be given to the study of the Hebrew language as the official language that corresponds to the character of the state, while the Arab language enjoys "special status."

On one hand, the Education Ministry did make the historic decision to make spoken Arabic a required subject in elementary schools. However, a teacher of Arabic told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity that in the current atmosphere in Israel, youths rarely choose to study Arabic later on in high school as a specialized course. They view it as the "language of the enemy." According to data provided by the Education Ministry's Pedagogic Secretariat in June 2015, only 6,000 Israeli students — only 1.5% of all the Jewish high school students in Israel — chose to study Arabic as a high school major, despite Arabic being the second official language of the State of Israel.

The current Israeli atmosphere is of fear and existential threat from neighbors, including Israeli Arabs (who were "voting in droves" on election day, in the words of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu). Thus, the narrative that has taken hold is that Arabic is the language of the terrorists and there is no need to study it. By extension, Arab (mainly Palestinian) literature, poetry and culture must be boycotted to prevent Jewish youth from exposure to what the far-right camp considers defamatory. This atmosphere explains the attacks on the Hamashbir Lazarchan department store chain, which dared air a commercial in Arabic on Channel 2 during prime time. There have even been calls to boycott the chain "for encouraging terrorists." It seems that no importance at all is assigned to the

inculcation of knowledge by critical and selective reading among the Jewish youth and the public in general.

“I don’t put Darwish’s books on the shelf of Arab writers,” said Someck. “I put them on the shelf of Israeli authors. Darwish was influenced by Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai. He was very familiar with Jewish poet Hayim Nahman Bialik’s poetry and was friendly with many Israeli writers and poets. If you want to get to know and understand your neighbor and the ‘other’ in your home, you must learn his or her language and literature.”

As an example, Someck brought up the meeting held by Israeli writer Haim Gouri in Egypt after late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s historic visit to Israel in 1977. Gouri met with an Egyptian intellectual who told him, “If Israeli intelligence had read Egyptian poetry written after 1967, they would have realized that October 1973 [Yom Kippur War] was inevitable. Every good intelligence officer must read poetry.”