

## LOST IN TRANSLATION

### *An Exploration of English Fluency and Class Division in Jordan*

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TODAY, THERE EXIST TWO VERY DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF JORDAN VYING FOR SUPERIORITY: THAT WHICH IS ROOTED IN AN INDIGENOUS ARAB CULTURE AND LANGUAGE, AND THAT OF A WESTERNIZING, WEALTHY, AND INFLUENTIAL MINORITY. ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND FLUENCY IS AN IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTOR TO THIS WIDENING GAP. IT CAN DETERMINE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY, SOCIAL INTERACTION, AND ACCEPTANCE INTO VARIOUS SPACES. ITS CAUSES, WHILE COMPLEX AND DIFFICULT TO UNTANGLE, CAN ULTIMATELY BE TRACED TO AN EDUCATION SYSTEM RIFE WITH CLASS-BASED HIERARCHY AND UNEQUAL RESOURCE DISTRIBUTION AS WELL AS A POSTCOLONIAL ASSOCIATION OF ENGLISH AS A LANGUAGE OF SUPERIORITY. THUS, RATHER THAN PERPETUATE THE SPREAD OF ENGLISH FOR NONESSENTIAL PURPOSES, JORDAN SHOULD UNDERTAKE EDUCATIONAL REFORM PROJECTS FOCUSING ON AN ARABIC CURRICULUM WITH UNIVERSAL STANDARDS ACROSS GOVERNORATES AND THE PUBLIC-PRIVATE SECTOR DIVIDE. FURTHERMORE, IT SHOULD MORE EFFICIENTLY ENFORCE EXISTING LAWS AFFIRMING THE PRIMACY OF ARABIC IN PUBLIC LIFE AND TAKE STEPS TO TIGHTEN LOOPHOLES SUCH AS TOURISM PERMITS FOR PRIVATE BUSINESSES.

## CONTEXT OF A LANGUAGE-DRIVEN CLASS DISPARITY

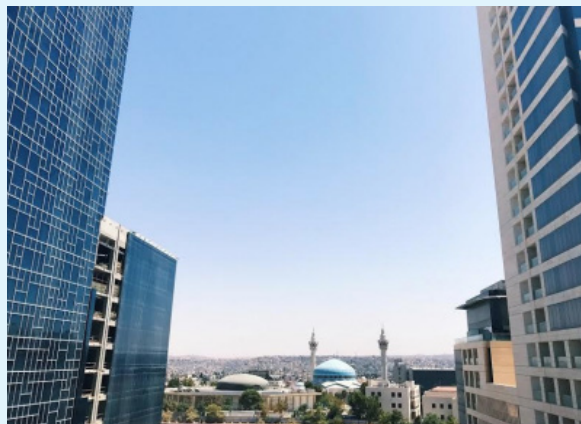
In 1999, King Abdullah II assumed the throne of Jordan, an Arab country, after spending a lifetime speaking English as a first language and being educated in Western civil and military institutions. In this respect, he was little different than “the elite class of Amman,” who occupy spheres of English-language fluency and of increasing Westernization and wealth (The Guardian, 1999). They receive private school education and remain largely segregated on a societal and economic level from their less privileged countrymen, who oftentimes happen to be monolingual. Jordan as a whole ranked among the bottom twenty countries in the 2017 EF English Proficiency Index despite its recent efforts and high educational spending relative to its neighbors and other regions of the world (EF, 2017). While such figures point to the issue of a lack of English fluency in Jordan in general, the situational realities in the capital and beyond highlight stark socioeconomic stratifications in English proficiency. As English becomes more necessary and evident in everyday life, its exclusionary traits manifest in education, employment, and development, and thus permeate various facets of Jordanian society.

In terms of English language use, Jordan exists in what Christiaan Prinsloo terms “the expanding circle,” in which countries have only one official language, yet English is becoming prominent and advantageous. Prinsloo cites the case of South Korea, whose exposure to English developed in a manner similar to that of Jordan: while language training began among upper-class families, it soon manifested into compulsory English classes, and exists today as entire subjects—math and science in particular—are taught in English (Prinsloo, 2017). In Jordan, students in public schools have been mandated to take English beginning in first grade, a significant change from the fifth-grade start date prior to educational planning done in the early 2000s, and public universities continue the long-standing practice of teaching scientific subjects in English and the humanities in Arabic. While rooted in good intentions of better preparing students for a global labor market, this focus on English helps to “nurture linguistic and cultural imperialist sentiments that configure the hierarchy of English norm-dependence [...] that has a stronghold on the knowledge economy” (Prinsloo, 2017). Moreover, although there is a strong desire to portray the country and educational system as prioritizing English and Western themes, efforts are falling short. Thus, only a privileged class is achieving

nominal English proficiency which is then used to emphasize class difference and inequality in Jordan.

In Jordan and throughout the region, English language proficiency is an important factor in employment options and opportunity, especially as tourism and foreign NGO markets experience significant growth (Alhababha, Pandian, and Mahfoodh, 2016). In a survey of Jordanian college students, the majority indicated their desire to learn English was rooted in obtaining a good job or to teach English, which is similarly linked to “the belief that teaching English was an easy, comfortable, and well-paid job” (Abu-Melhim, 2009). Perpetuated by the education system, primarily through the Tawjihi exam, this desire for stable and well-regarded employment often trumps genuine interest in a subject or commitment to its execution. The Tawjihi, taken by high school seniors, requires extensive rote memorization and determines a student’s career path based on their score percentile. The highest scoring students are directed toward engineering and medical professions, while those in lower percentiles generally pursue careers in the humanities or teaching. Of course, the role of English in job markets is not a uniquely Jordanian or regional fact—as a lingua franca, or a common language used between speakers of different native languages, it is internationally advantageous to become proficient. In South Africa, for example, “English proficiency among African men with post-secondary education resulted in approximately 90% better earnings” (Prinsloo, 2017).

Beyond students’ decisions and future intentions to study the language, English directly affects business opportuni-



ABDALI MALL COMPLEX WITH VIEW OF KING ABDULLAH I MOSQUE (COURTESY OF HAILEY BURGESS)

*“The Abdali Mall and Boulevard complex features exclusively English-language signage at restaurants, shops, and outdoor spaces, rendering it completely inaccessible to anyone lacking English proficiency.”*

ties and decisions in Jordan. For example, “shop owners may have decided to resort to a foreign language and completely exclude their own tongue, as to show the highest degree of prestige” (Obeidat, 2008). As English use is an emerging global trend in international markets and “the aura of Englishness... is undoubtedly very lucrative,” it is not far-fetched to believe that business owners may find that catering to elite communities through selective language use produces greater yields than marketing to their neighbors (Aristova, 2016). Furthermore, as tourism, NGO, and other English-heavy professional sectors grow in Jordan, an added dimension of economic exclusion develops. In addition to the de facto necessity of *wasta*—the influence of personal networks and social connections in colloquial Arabic—that already dictates Jordanian life and employment opportunities, many find themselves excluded from an English-language job market in a country with only one official language.

However, labor markets don’t tell the whole story. In “limited areas of the capital Amman” (Bani-Khaled, 2013), English is used as an everyday language. At a minimum, it is required as a tool for navigating wealthy spheres in the city, all of which are located in an expanding West Amman. The Abdali Project is a prime example of English as a class divide and tool of exclusion in Jordan. Marketed as a “new downtown,” it seeks to implicitly focus the public’s attention on Gulf-style wealth acquisition and Westernization rather than the problems facing the majority of Ammanis and especially those in East Amman. Luxury development in the new Abdali claims to service Jordanians, but chief buyers have consisted of “Jordanian expats and high-net-worth individuals residing in Jordan” (Gulf News, 2017). The Abdali Mall and Boulevard complex features exclusively English-language signage at restaurants, shops, and outdoor spaces, rendering it completely inaccessible to anyone lacking English proficiency. Furthermore, it was constructed at the cost of hundreds of vendors affected by the downsizing and effective concealment of the popular Friday Market from Abdali to the less-visible and farther East Ras al-Ain district (*Jordan Times*, 2014).

While the city center consists of established, local businesses, and mixed-language or Arabic signage, the “new downtown” contains little trace of Jordanian popular culture or the country’s only official language. Signage, while perhaps overlooked, is a key indicator of who is welcome in a certain space—particularly in Amman, whose clear divides between classes, economic spheres, and nationalities has been established and defined. In neighborhoods such as Abdoun and Abdali, foreign, English-speaking expats comfortably navigate life in Amman without ever speaking or caring to learn Arabic, while neighborhoods in East Amman carry security warnings from Western organizations to their members and employees. Thus, the divide in English-language knowledge, produced by an unequal education system that privileges those with resources to access a private education and ability to inhabit spaces where English is the dominant tongue, perpetuates markers of difference among Jordanians and ensures that two completely separate spheres of existence are created.

Exposure to and empathy with a social condition is a key element of addressing it within wider audiences, as populations are “heavily influenced by the judgements about the kinds of values felt to be under threat” (Manning, 2008). Since English is closely tied to a culture of elitism, particularly in the capital of Amman, there may be a greater impetus on those lacking fluency in English to learn it for themselves, thus removing responsibility from larger society. However, the “sociolinguistic national identity” at stake should be considered (Prinsloo, 2017). As in other regions of the world where English is not a native language, “the appearance of English translations in public signs and other elements of urban cultural landscape” indicates the encroaching hegemony of globalization dominated by the English-speaking West (Aristova, 2016). Furthermore, the increased usage and popularity of English “[relies] heavily on matters of social prestige, economic or social benefits” to build upon existing socioeconomic structures and inequities (Aristova, 2016). Beyond the risk to the Arabic language and culture should these spheres of English dominance expand, educational and environmen-

tal stratification contributes to the dangerous economic and social fracturing of Jordanian peoples and sectors.

A note on refugee populations and crises in Jordan should be addressed here. Across the board, refugees do not create new burdens for Jordan so much as exacerbate existing policy and infrastructure failings. The same is true of the issue of English language disparities. Palestinian refugee camps in Amman, inhabited since the first wave of Palestinian forced migration during the 1948 Nakba, make up a portion of East Amman. Although fully integrated into the city, their neighborhoods, like other downtown areas, feature little if any English signage and do not benefit economically from influxes of tourists and students to the city. For their exclusion and stigma, they may as well be located miles from Amman. Thus, refugees are but one example of the interconnected economic, nationality, and language privileges contributing to the de facto segregation of the city.

#### POLICIES OF OSTRACISM

Policy, of course, plays an essential role in perpetuating the spread of English and its consequences. It is official policy in Amman that all advertisements and signage—public and private—must be written in Arabic, where Arabic is the largest and most noticeable language (Amman Municipal Regulations, 2016). However, in 2016, at least 2,800 establishments in Amman were documented in violation of such ordinances (Alghad.com, 2016). In practice, English-language spaces can be showcased by way of the lack of police enforcement, or tourism permits. Tourism permits require extra fees and are purchased through the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, 2017). Based on the existing *wasta* culture that requires government connections for timely bureaucratic procedures as well as the class divide in many industries, one need not extrapolate far to assume that those with greater means tend to operate English-language establishments under the banner of tourism, thereby creating another layer of linguistic class divide. While policies are indeed in place to protect the Arabic language, the divergent priorities of government toward a wealthier, Westernized population are revealed implicitly through the allocation of resources, selective enforcement of law, and development projects.

Another such example of English as a language of exclusion is the increasingly utilized ability of employers to list opportunities exclusively in English or to explicitly exclude

monolingual candidates from applying. Unlike shop signs, which are symptomatic of changing norms in a given area, employment advertisements set such standards by institutionalizing English as a necessity. In a study examining ads from 1985, 1995, and 2005, there existed “a steady increase in the percentage of English ads... [and] a significant increase in the percentage of ads that make English proficiency a precondition for employment” (Bani-Khaled, 2013). Thus, increasing economic hardship in Jordan throughout the early 2000s correlated positively with exclusion of many Jordanians from this growing, English-fluent workforce.

Success in a job market, though, is predicted by one’s educational experience. “The biggest determiner of having experienced quality education and being employed/employable is social class” and Jordan, like other neighboring countries, has developed a starkly tiered education system in recent years spurred by decreased public school quality and subsequent growth of private sector education (Erling, 2015). Private schools now enroll at least a quarter of Jordanian students, most of whom hail from solidly middle-or-upper class backgrounds (*Jordan Times*, 2017). Unlike public schools, no regulations govern the practices of private schools, including their English-language instruction, and the latter often outperform their counterparts, whose deficiencies in educational environment and teacher training are well documented (Alhabahba, Pandian, and Mahfoodh, 2016). Furthermore, there exist several international, English-language only private schools in Jordan. These schools are among the most prestigious and, given the trend to teach highly-sought after scientific subjects in English at Jordanian universities, are preparing their already-privileged students for high-powered careers. This use of English as an alternate language is widespread and similarly viewed as problematic in North African countries like Morocco, where it “greatly privilege[s] the entry of those educated in French – privately, outside the state system” (Erling, 2016).

Educational and consequent English-language stratification is not limited to public-private school disparities; outside the capital of Amman, educational standards drop even lower. Rural, generally poorer sectors of Jordan are underserved across the board, but inequity is particularly pronounced relative to education. In the North Badiyah region, large classroom sizes and a lack of teacher preparedness combine with depleted economic opportunity and resources to create lower learning outcomes (Bani-Khaled,

2013). This concentration of resources, or lack thereof, inevitably spills into English-language instruction, which focuses on traditional methods of memorization, as is the case elsewhere in the Jordanian educational system. Thus, severe disparities in English language education not only creates pockets of opportunity and wealth in the capital, but also excludes citizenry from already poverty-stricken and resource deficient outer governorates. (Tarawneh and Husban, 2011).

## OPTIONS FOR THE ROAD AHEAD

### *Educational focus*

The most straightforward approach to addressing a population disparately fluent or proficient in English would be to achieve equality in educational standards and success. That is, rather than address the complex root causes of English as a language of elitism, the problem could be remedied by students' improved studying of English as a second language across socio-economic backgrounds. However, policy proposals would then inherently place the impetus upon less privileged citizenry to learn a foreign language as a prerequisite for success. This principle is deeply disturbing; yet, barring the sudden decline of the US and the West as hegemonic and neocolonial figures in the developing world, the realities of English as a lingua franca will not shift in the near future. Thus, educational reform and the stripping of elitist and classist elements to English language learning could work to solve this single facet of the problem. This process would include reforms to teaching processes and syllabi, distribution of resources, and tailored regulatory procedures.

Moreover, it has been widely documented that the Jordanian education system, with its focus on rote memorization at the expense of critical thinking, impedes students' preparedness for the labor market (Erling, 2015). This problem extends to English language learning, where classroom methods are largely contingent upon individual teachers. In 2016, only 24.9% of English language graduates passed the teaching qualifying exam, which is sometimes not even required to gain employment at lower-income public schools (Alhabahba, Pandian, and Mahfoodh, 2016). In many instances, teachers lack proper training in teaching itself, even if they have a firm grasp on the English language, and are unable to effectively impart knowledge to their students (Roy and Irelan, 1992). Russia, another country marked with low efficiency in English, seeks to boost university proficiency by "increas[ing] the number of subjects taught in English and introduc[ing]

compulsory teacher education programs in English" (EF, 2017). The latter would improve the Jordanian classroom environment and assist in language instruction, especially if it consisted of mandatory sessions across the board, in public and private schools alike. However, without early intervention at the primary school levels, this recommendation could be too little, too late since it focuses on late-stage education when it is markedly more difficult to acquire a foreign language. Furthermore, increasing English subject matter is unlikely to increase proficiency or general performance if the students lack a solid foundation in the language.

To this end, Spain's example may be considered: about 20 years ago, the Ministry of Education (MOE) began "starting English classes from an early age and implementing a full school approach [...] [in] more than 350 public elementary schools in Madrid and 180 other private primary schools [...] Teachers in these schools are required to have C1 level in English, with additional training for those who need it" (EF, 2017). Increased exposure to foreign language, especially throughout an entire curriculum, would certainly serve students' language interests, but at the expense of national linguistic identity and culture. Furthermore, its effectiveness has been questioned, as some students exhibit less command of subjects learned in English. Perhaps, then, the answer is not erasing the native language, but teaching subjects in both languages if necessary. In addition, quality of teacher training should remain the focus, since policy to address existing deficiencies is dependent upon proper execution.



CORRIDOR STAIRCASE BETWEEN THE JABAL AL-LWEIBDEH AND WASAT AL-BALAD NEIGHBORHOODS IN AMMAN (COURTESY OF HAILLEY BURGESS)



However, such educational methods are rendered useless if they are directed only at certain schools or demographics. To this end, standard practices could be devised and implemented equally throughout the country. Without “an educational body that is responsible for national standards and guidelines,” policies cannot be effectively applied and a system stratified by the availability of outside resources and circumstances—such as a stable family situation, socioeconomic status—etc., will persist (Alhabahba, Pandian, and Mahfoodh, 2016). In Germany, setting such universal standards has been instrumental in achieving increased English proficiency, although, it has been consistently high so comparisons to Jordan should be taken rather lightly (EF, 2017). Even though private schools should be regulated in the same manner as public ones to ensure equity, the issue is more complicated in Jordan. Wealthier families send their children to private schools, by and large, because of the blatant failures of the public system. Thus, the Ministry of Education standards must be sufficiently competitive and effectively enforced, lest private schools lose their slight educational edge (*Jordan Times*, 2015).

#### *Language and heritage preservation*

Although emphasizing Arabic goes against international trends that suggest English correlates with greater economic and educational opportunity, ensuring greater fluency in English comes at the price of diminishing the native language and traditions in favor of colonial ones. Since “the spread of English is deeply rooted in American and British political and economic interests,” its adoption is often falsely billed as progressive globalization and modernity. Arabic language, though, can solidify national or ethnic heritage in the face of encroaching Westernization and extended neocolonialism (Prinsloo, 2017). Thus, it is also possible and incredibly necessary to address the underlying current that creates the perception of English as a language “of social prestige” (Aristova, 2016). Elitism through language and the postcolonial environment is also deeply connected to the educational process: in South Africa, official policy is to teach Afrikaans in conjunction with English, but most schools and students prefer English due in part to the apartheid stigma around African languages (Prinsloo, 2017). However, it may well be impossible to both promote a native language and avoid the potential economic disadvantages associated with a lingua franca.

The Jordanian Majma of the Arabic Language has partially carried the banner for Arabic preservation. As an organiza-

tion based in various Arab countries, it seeks to promote the language’s use in official contexts and prevent its usurpation by foreign languages. In 2015, the Law for the Protection of the Arabic Language was passed in Parliament (*Jordan Times*, 2015). Among its most prominent provisions are those regulating Arabic signage discussed previously, as well as requirements that all teachers pass an Arabic proficiency test, and that all organizations use Arabic in official documents or provide a translation (Majma.org, 2015). Majma also seeks to reverse the trend of English in academia by distributing Arabic translations of scientific terms. Thus, while other recommendations include increased subject matter in English, this route would relegate English to an exclusively foreign language.

However, although the government approved the aforementioned law, it has not taken further steps to promote Arabic language, such as restricting university policies or courses’ language. Given this in the context of projects such as Abdali and New Amman, which threaten the sociolinguistic core of the city, the government has a thoroughly ambiguous position on Arabic language preservation and its importance in light of possible tourism revenues and foreign investment. Furthermore, it continues to foster a civil society and NGO complex in which foreign funding from Western, English-speaking institutions and governments form the backbone of the industry. While efforts to resist neocolonial objectives are admirable, the positive effects of policies like Majma’s in the absence of comprehensive reforms regarding CSOs and other means of foreign intervention in Jordan may be minimal. There is a distinct possibility that, by discouraging English use, individuals’ economic opportunity and thus potential quality of life could be impeded, however misguided that reality may be.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the discussion of policy options and the contextual complexities of Arabic and English language use in Jordan, it is clear that there cannot be a single-faceted approach. Any solution to this problem must address the multiple levels of elitism, class separation, practical English knowledge, inequity in education, and a fiercely competitive job market which intersect to create the layers of linguistic privilege in society. Thus, despite its drawback of playing into colonial attitudes of adopting a lingua franca, educational equality must be achieved in Jordan in order to address the elitist orientation of disparate English education. Educational reform is at the core of addressing a mul-

*“By continuing to promote, or implicitly support, English-language establishments, the lifestyle of scores of citizens is deemed as less valuable, as is the country’s language and culture itself.”*

tiplicity of social problems, and especially those with a component of shifting perspectives and attitudes about a subject. In this way, English language can be equitably improved as a foreign language, targeting current exclusion from social and economic spheres; simultaneously, the priority of Arabic in society can be emphasized starting with the education system. In addition, educational reform as a whole, not limited to English, would improve prospects for all sectors of Jordanian society, including employment and job market readiness.

The most important steps in educational equity that should be taken to address English fluency and its class affiliations are universal implementation of educational standards and adoption of an Arabic-centric curriculum. Through these measures, the education system can direct the course of society in the direction of socioeconomic and linguistic equality among Jordanians. Universal implementation includes as an essential provision the equal distribution of resources, including teachers and teacher training, to schools in all governorates and regardless of public or private status. The potential threat to private schools’ elitism is exactly why they must be the focus of future policy: by applying even standards, education may

become the public’s investment and a more level playing field for achievement.

Furthermore, a stipulated Arabic curriculum would shift the focus of English as a marker of class difference to that of an important, but not supremely so, foreign language. Rather than increasing courses taught in English, universal standards should eliminate this practice entirely and concentrate on quality of English foreign language instruction. Students are entitled to “the right to receive education in one’s mother tongue or native language” under several international covenants, and an Arabic-only curriculum would ensure the primacy of Arabic in education and in the wider culture and society (UNESCO, 2017). The hierarchical, linguistic-related tiers of the educational system are a major source of English language and concurrent class divide, and dismantling them would signal one step toward societal equity.

Beyond education, the existing standards regarding Arabic-language signage must be enforced and the standards for business tourism permits tightened. This can occur through more vigilant monitoring of and punishment for business owners as well as decreased approval of exceptional cases to Arabic signage law. Space inherently signals its inclusion or exclusion of certain groups. By continuing to promote, or implicitly support, English-language establishments, the lifestyle of scores of citizens is deemed as less valuable, as is the country’s language and culture itself. Thus, it is essential that young Jordanians are not only taught in an environment that embraces the Arabic language through their curriculum, but also in communities that stress unity of country and people over linguistic and wealth driven class separation. In this way, Jordan might reject tendencies toward English and Western hegemony which serve only to exacerbate existing social gaps and unjustly concentrate resources and opportunities amongst an elite few.



DOWNTOWN AMMAN AS SEEN FROM RAINBOW STREET  
(COURTESY OF HAILEY BURGESS)

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