

# Al-salam alaikum! Is it finally time for Israelis to learn Arabic?

Teachers and language schools are noticing a rise in the number of locals learning Arabic, although attitudes and angles depend on who's teaching, and where

By JESSICA STEINBERG | 21 January 2018, 11:32 am









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Linguist and Arabic teacher Anwar Ben-Badis teaching and guiding in Jerusalem's Katamon neighborhood during one of his intensive courses (Courtesy Anwar Ben-Badis)

In the 20 years linguist Anwar Ben-Badis has been teaching Arabic, he’s heard nearly every reason why Jewish Israelis choose to learn his native language.

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There are right-wingers and settlers; one settler eventually left the West Bank and moved into Israel proper.

Even President Reuven Rivlin studied with Ben-Badis, as did Knesset member Benny Begin.

His students are generally Jerusalemites who, as residents of a simultaneously mixed and divided city, brush up against their Arab neighbors at the supermarket, the mall and the movie theater and want to be able to say “excuse me” in Arabic (aläafw), or “I only speak a little Arabic” (anaa ataHaddath faqaT qaliil min aläarabiyya).

Perhaps they also want to know what the imam is calling from the minaret at 4 a.m.

His students, some 300 this year, study three hours a week — plus homework — hoping to achieve a comfortable level of spoken Arabic.

“It’s important to me to help them understand that it’s very acceptable to learn Arabic, even though it’s the language of the enemy,” said Ben-Badis. “I’m trying to help free the Israeli student from thinking of it as the enemy’s language, but rather as a way to connect with me. It’s not obvious to them.”

Actually, learning a little Arabic is something of a trend right now, particularly among adults who have time to spare and believe that when your neighbor speaks a different language, it’s important to know what they’re saying.



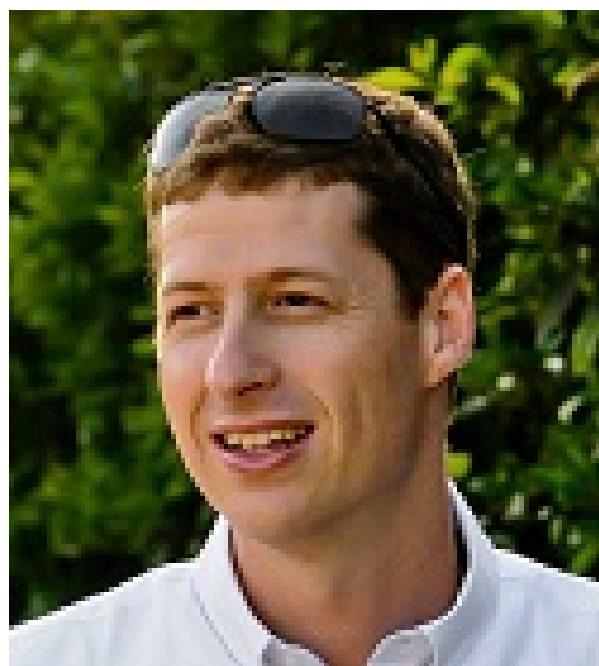
Anwar Ben-Badis teaching his Wednesday Arabic classes at Jerusalem's Islamic Museum of Art (Jessica Steinberg/Times of Israel)

The Jerusalem municipality offers continuing education language classes each year in Arabic and Hebrew, as well as Spanish, Italian and Yiddish. There isn’t generally a huge demand for Italian, said Hagit van der Hoven, who heads the continuing education department, but the Arabic classes are always full.

This year, the municipality opened Arabic classes to its staff as well. “We figured that was the right thing to do,” said van der Hoven. “In Jerusalem, we have joint lives, and we just need it.”

In Tel Aviv, Ishmael Ben Israel, the linguist co-founder of A.M.A.L. — Spoken Arabic for All, a nonprofit that places Palestinian university students in elementary schools in and around Tel Aviv to act as ambassadors of Arabic culture — is also the CEO of LingoLearn, a for-profit, online language learning site. He has hundreds, maybe thousands of students currently studying Arabic, said Ben Israel, whose “hippie” parents named him for the eldest son of the biblical Abraham, a prophet and patriarch in Islam.

Ariel Olmert, the son of former prime minister Ehud Olmert, founded Ha-ambatia, or The Bathtub, a private language school with branches in Tel Aviv and Haifa. Having added Arabic classes to its French offerings four years ago, the school now has 400 students learning Arabic. It creates its own educational materials and aims to make language acquisition a living, breathing endeavor.





“It’s a complicated story why Jews don’t speak Arabic,” said Olmert. “Our idea was that we needed to do it with joy, not because we have to, or because it’s the right thing to do.”

Ben Israel thinks one reason for the heightened interest is the TV show “Fauda,” about an undercover army unit that operates in the Palestinian territories. All the operatives speak Arabic fluently, and Arabic is regularly heard on the show.

“‘Fauda’ was a big thing, it created a lot of buzz,” said Ben Israel. “It’s now cool to speak Arabic; young people see these undercover guys and they’re singing a song in Arabic and it’s something they want to emulate.”



Much of 'Fauda' dialogue is in Arabic, and the show advertised its second season, recently released, with giant billboards in Arabic across Israel (Courtesy 'Fauda')

That wasn’t the case when he was a kid. Ben Israel, now 38, first learned Arabic in high school from a female soldier, which seemed reasonable at the time but later didn’t make sense to him.

“The militaristic connotations of learning Arabic aren’t normal,” he said.

He wants the study of Arabic to help young Israelis think about a civil shared society, and see Arabic as a language of peace, not of war.

Ditto for the teachers he employs, who are native Arabic speakers.

Amal Gaoui, a student at Tel Aviv University who teaches at Tel Aviv’s Gavrieli elementary school, likes that her young students, fourth graders, don’t come with any preconceived notions.

That is, for the most part. When she taught them the term “Allahu Akbar,” which means “God is great” and is often heard in conjunction with terrorist attacks, the students all looked at each other and laughed, said Gaoui. “They said, ‘Hamas says that.’”

This led to a conversation about good people and bad people. “It’s not just learning words,” she said, “but to understand why we’re learning this language.”



Ben Israel often hires Arab women working from home to teach in his online school.

“They’re making a living, and they now have this relationship with Jews,” he said. “At the schools, for the vast majority of the pupils, it’s actually the first time they’ve had any meaningful relationship with Arabs at all.”

Canadian immigrant Lee Gancman teaches Arabic to small groups of adults through the language school he founded, Damascus Gate. Gancman learned Arabic in college, later attending programs in Jordan and Damascus before making his way to Israel.

His students are Jewish Jerusalemites, who want to converse with vendors at the Mahane Yehuda market or chat about the weather with their butcher.





Lee Gancman (left) of Damascus Gate, offers private group lessons in Arabic (Courtesy)

When Gancman advertises on Secret Jerusalem, an open Facebook group known for a startling array of posts on everything from finding bacon in Jerusalem to finding owners for stray dogs, he ends up with long threads about why people want to learn Arabic.

“You’d be surprised by the students,” he said.

It’s his religiously observant students who come into contact with Arabic speakers more often, generally in the Old City, said Gancman. “Secular students say, “I don’t know where to find Arabs.”

### Who’s your teacher?

Part of the challenge in Arabic language education is who should be teaching this significant and sensitive topic to Jewish Israelis.

The Jerusalem municipality’s Arabic teachers are Jewish, professional instructors who have been teaching the language for years, said van der Hoven.

When prospective students ask Ha-ambatia’s Olmert about his Arabic teachers, he tells them, “Our teachers speak Arabic as their native tongue. I’m not about race.”

About half of the students at Ha-ambatia are descendants of families where Arabic was one of the language and want to connect to their roots, said Olmert.

At the same time, while a fifth of Israel’s population speaks Arabic, the book most commonly used to teach spoken Arabic was written in the 1960s by a French priest, he pointed out.

“It’s actually a really nice book; he is a real lover of the language,” he said. But it’s written in Hebrew phonetics, which creates difficulties, he noted.



Ariel Olmert, (back, right), is the founder of Ha-ambatia, a language school for French and Arabic in Tel Aviv and Haifa (Courtesy Ha-ambatia)

“It’s an exhausting process to learn a language,” said Olmert, who comes to the teaching of language through his study of French literature, and nine years of living in Paris. “There are the problems and paradoxes of learning spoken Arabic; Arabic is the language that’s everywhere and nowhere. We want our students to be able to speak and not get too caught up in the rules.”

Back in Jerusalem, Ben-Badis doesn’t shy away from the politics of learning Arabic; perhaps it’s the stubborn Jerusalemite in him.

He believes his native tongue should only be taught by native Arabic speakers who also understand the Israeli character.

“You’re teaching not just the language, but the culture,” he pointed out. “We’re in a particular region; the minute an Israeli Jew decides to learn Arabic, it’s not just a language, it’s a culture, it’s holidays, it’s the everyday stuff. They have no idea.”

This linguist, a PhD from Hebrew University who also interprets and teaches Aramaic, is unusually equipped to handle the Israeli student.

Raised in the north by his Muslim mother and Christian Arab father, Ben-Badis headed to Jerusalem for college, the city his mother hailed from, where his maternal grandfather studied at Hebrew University when classes were being held in Kiryat Moriah.

He lives in the neighborhood of Baka, up the block from his grandmother’s original stone house on Yehuda Street, now situated next to a Bnei Akiva youth group center and two religious Jewish public schools.

“My connection to this place isn’t as a visitor. I’m a son of this place. I know almost every corner of this city,” he said.

He is married to a Jewish American woman who was raised in Israel, and his father-in-law is a Reform rabbi actively engaged in interreligious peace building. Their 3-year-old daughter speaks Arabic, Hebrew and English, and Ben-Badis introduces her to his classes as “100 percent mixed, not half and half.”



"Jerusalem is exactly my daughter with all its shades," he said. "We're very tied to this city because we're very similar to it, and therefore very close to it. I didn't choose Jerusalem."

He teaches Arabic with a similar flavor, "with his truth," he said.



Arabic teacher Anwar Ben-Badis greets his students before another weekly class (Jessica Steinberg/Times of Israel)

For most Arabic teachers, it's a challenge to work with Jewish Israelis because it's difficult to deal with Israeli chutzpah, particularly during stressful times when there are attacks or wars.

"Israelis don't like to listen, they don't like to be told what to do, they think they know everything," said Ben-Badis. "I treat them like students. It's not easy to learn a language, and I demand a lot. It creates a lot of back and forth and we

work hard. But they're not the boss here, I am."

One student, a retired army colonel, told Ben-Badis he gave directions to Arabs his whole life and it wasn't natural for him to reverse the process. Sometimes a student will ask Ben-Badis to write something on the board, but will say it in Hebrew, in the form of a command, and Ben-Badis won't follow those orders.

"The powers are different in here and that's how we progress," he said. "I am who I am here. I'm Anwar, and I use my language as a resistance, to protect my identity."

When he speaks Hebrew, it's with a lilting set of rolling 'r's and harsh 'ayin' pronunciations, as he deliberately brings an Arabic flavor to the Jewish language.

"I don't hide my Arabness — I show it everywhere," he said.

He was once attacked on an Egged bus while speaking Arabic with his nephew. When his brother, a doctor in Haifa, went to help at a Gazan hospital during the 2014 war, Ben-Badis showed his students the WhatsApp texts he received from him, leading to difficult conversations and reactions.

An Israeli policeman was once sent to Ben-Badis' classroom to check that he wasn't teaching anything insubordinate.

None of it has stopped Ben-Badis from trying to expose as much of his culture as possible.

When his own parents were younger, Ben-Badis used to send students to spend the night at their house in order to speak Arabic and be exposed to their way of life. They often came back saying, "We never knew Arabs were like this."

"The meeting of Israelis with Arabic is more than a language class if the teacher is an Arab, it exposes them to the culture and realities of life," he said.

### **In the classroom**

It's 1 p.m. on a Wednesday, which means it's almost time for the second class of the day at Jerusalem's Islamic Art Museum, the elegant, art-filled building in Jerusalem's Katamon neighborhood, where Ben-Badis teaches some of his weekly classes.

His students shuffle in, including an American-born Peace Now activist, a former Tel Aviv University professor of art history and a couple of twenty-somethings sprinkled among the mostly grey haired students. The earlier class included a journalist and a former ambassador.



Toward the end of each year, Ben-Badis takes his students on tours, as part of the process of learning the language. They visit the Al-Aqsa Mosque, stop in at some Arabic libraries in East Jerusalem, and join iftar meals and hear Sufi music during Ramadan.

“We’re not in a normal situation where learning the language is just to connect, it’s something else entirely,” said Ben-Badis. “It’s the difference between the Jewish student learning Arabic and a Palestinian from East Jerusalem learning Hebrew. Jews can live and earn a living without Arabic but an Arab needs Hebrew as a tool of earning a living. For Jews, Arabic is a bonus, it’s a privilege, because he’s the one in power.”

Teaching the language to Jewish Israelis, he said, isn’t about coexistence or bringing peace. In fact, said Ben-Badis, coexistence isn’t a word that he uses any longer.

“I want to help people, no matter who, get to know me better, Anwar, and my nation and my family and the people around me,” he said. “I’m not trying to convince them to change, I’m just trying to open a window or a door. I don’t want to be their friend, I’m showing them something else through the language. The language is a tool.”

*The language schools mentioned above can be contacted through the following links: [LingoLearn](#), [Ha-ambatia](#), [Damascus Gate](#) and Anwar Ben-Badis through the [Jerusalem Intercultural Center](#). There are also learning [language exchanges](#) available through Facebook.*

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