

Palestinian schools in Jerusalem strike over Israel-imposed books



A woman is seen from behind walking in an empty classroom

Palestinian classrooms in occupied East Jerusalem are largely empty after a strike began on Monday [Ahmad Gharabli/AFP]

Occupied East Jerusalem, September 20 (RHC)-- Palestinian schools in occupied East Jerusalem are observing a general strike in protest at attempts by Israel's Jerusalem municipality to censor and edit Palestinian textbooks, as well as introduce an Israeli curriculum in classrooms.

Hundreds of schools shut their doors on Monday morning – the latest in a series of recent steps over the past few weeks led by parents, which included protests and a refusal to teach the Israeli-imposed textbooks.

In a joint press release on Sunday, the unified parents committee and the Palestinian National and Islamic Forces in Jerusalem called for a full strike and demanded international institutions step in to protect Palestinian education. Journalists and residents shared dozens of images of empty classrooms and closed schools on Monday morning.

Ziad al-Shamali, aged 56, head of the parents committee union, told Al Jazeera that if Israel's efforts succeed, it "will have control over the education of 90 percent of our students in Jerusalem." There are more than 280 Palestinian schools in Jerusalem, with some 115,000 students from kindergarten to grade 12, according to al-Shamali. He claimed that approximately 90-95 percent of schools were observing the strike.

Al-Shamali said that Israel had been trying to impose a "distorted version of the Palestinian Authority (PA) curriculum" on private Palestinian schools since the beginning of the year. "They are doing this under the pretext that they grant private schools licenses, and that they give them funding," said al-Shamali, who lives in the neighbourhood of al-Tur in occupied East Jerusalem.

The existing municipality-run schools for Palestinians in the city have already begun to teach the altered version of the PA curriculum, he continued, while new schools being built by the municipality were being forced to teach the Israeli curriculum.

"What is worrying the parents is that they are being cornered between distorted Palestinian curriculums and Israeli curriculums," said al-Shamali. "There is an Israelisation of Palestinian education going on," he continued, which had existed for the past 10 to 12 years but had intensified over the last three ones.

"Now, they are adding their own content like 'Yossi is Mohammad's neighbour', about settlements, about co-existence," said al-Shamali. "They have played with textbooks for Arabic, religion, history and any national references."

On Sunday night, videos were shared on social media of residents hanging up posters reading "general strike – yes to the Palestinian curriculum, no to the distorted curriculum".

In July, Israeli authorities revoked the permanent licenses of six Palestinian schools in Jerusalem, claiming that their textbooks incited against the Israeli state and army. They were given permission to operate for a year if the curriculum was edited.

The eastern half of Jerusalem was militarily occupied by Israel in 1967 and illegally annexed. Some 350,000 Palestinians currently live in occupied East Jerusalem, with 220,000 Israeli living in illegal settlements among them.

Today, 86 percent of occupied East Jerusalem is under the direct control of the Israeli government and settlers. The annexation of East Jerusalem is not recognised by any country in the world, apart from the United States, as it violates international law that outlines that an occupying power does not have sovereignty in the territory it occupies.

In 2009, the Jerusalem municipality adopted a master plan intended "to guide and outline the city's development in the next decades". The vision, as stated in the plan, is to create a Jewish demographic majority, with Israeli Jews making up 70 percent of the city, and Palestinians only making up 30 percent. This was later amended to a 60:40 ratio.

Al-Shamali said the parents committee was planning to continue to protest or escalate its actions if its demands were not met or if Israeli authorities begin to forcefully impose the altered textbooks.

“It’s likely that we will continue with the strike and escalate it,” he said. “We will also continue with our protests in front of the schools, and we will call on international institutions to intervene.”

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