



Published on *The American Task Force on Palestine* (<http://www.americantaskforce.org>)

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## PA?s path to independence

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The Jordan Times (Opinion)

November 3, 2010 - 11:00pm

<http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=31540> <sup>[1]</sup>

November 4, 2010

**Article Author(s):** Daoud Kuttab

**Media Outlet:** The Jordan Times

**Article Type:** Opinion

**Date:** November 4, 2010

**Source Link(s):** <http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=31540> <sup>[1]</sup>

I can see the path to the state of Palestine. And education is an integral part of it.

Palestinians have always prided themselves on being among the highest educated among all Arabs, but if this was true in the past, it is not true anymore, and it is certainly not true for Palestinians in the occupied territories.

Sure the illiteracy rate is very low. And it is true that Palestinians continue to seek basic and higher education, but in the last few decades, the level of Palestinian education has suffered, and local universities had to lower their standards in order to be able to accept the recent high school graduates.

Refocus on education has been a few years in the making. Many senior educators say that some of the problems they had to deal with were due to the repeated closures during the Intifadas, the lack of respect for authority, the occupiers, as well as some of the decisions made by the Hamas-led government in 2007.

Salam Fayyad, who took over as acting prime minister shortly after the split between the West Bank and Gaza, has worked hard at making education one of his government?s top priorities. The Fayyad administration made sure that resources were made available to reduce overcrowdedness, by taking on an ambitious construction programme. Tens of new schools and hundreds of new classrooms were built in a short period of time.

But the emphasis on education was not limited to construction. A concerted effort was made to revise the existing rote-based educational programme, the ministry introduced totally new programmes, new computer labs were added and serious efforts were exerted to digitise the entire educational system.

A five-year well-thought-out educational plan was designed and implemented. The plan looks at education with a more holistic approach, with serious thought given to the need to augment present programmes with preschool education, and the introduction of new methodologies that focus on critical thinking.

The Palestinian version of Sesame Street, funded by USAID, filled the screen of Palestine TV, radio stations will soon air a programme targeting parents and a website for parents, children and early education practitioners will be launched early next year.

While the priority given education is meant first and foremost to benefit the Palestinian people, it has finally put to rest attempts by Israel and its international promoters to paint Palestinians in an anti-educational stereotype. Efforts to label the Palestinian educational effort as promoting hatred and bigotry have become a joke to anyone following the tremendous push for moderation and wholesome learning by the Palestinian leadership.

Not only have Fayyad and his government succeeded in shaking off the falsehoods about what is happening in the Palestinian educational field, now the Israelis are guilty of exactly some of the accusations they were levelling at Palestinians. Israeli intolerance, for example, was crystal clear a month ago when it was revealed that Palestinians are willing to participate in an experiment in which the two historical narratives (the Palestinian and the Israeli) are presented in a straightforward and truthful manner. When the organisers of this experiment attempted to get the approval of the Israeli ministry of education, the idea was rejected, without the relevant Israeli officials even looking at the content that made up the parallel narratives.

This week, there was yet another example of Israeli intolerance and opposition to serious educational attempts by Palestinians. The Israeli authorities banned Fayyad from attending a ceremony celebrating the revamping of 15 Palestinian schools, some of which lie within the Jerusalem municipal boundaries. These schools, which have been neglected and abandoned for years by the Israel-run municipality and the Israeli ministry of education, were fixed with Palestinian money in record time.

A former Israeli Knesset member, Yossi Sarid, summed it up in a tongue and cheek article in Haaretz titled 'Why is Salam Fayyad Israel's public enemy number one?', in which he argued that the Palestinian prime minister is killing Israel with his moderation.

The state of Palestine will need a lot of hard work to become a reality. All successful modern states have given priority to education. If the present Palestinian attention to education continues, I am sure that the dream of an independent state will become a reality much sooner than many think.

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