

Opinion | The Book for Israeli Soldiers That Makes Language an Instrument of Torture

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There is absolutely no doubt that without books we're a very uneducated society. Books take us to places, they introduce us to people and make us explore new realities. Language books are particularly important tools for learning about new cultures, and they allow us to expand our vocabularies.

Israeli publisher Minerva Books recently released a new work titled "Hebrew-Arabic Phrase Book for Army and Security: Conversational Arabic Dialect Using Hebrew Transliteration." The premise, as stated on the back cover, is to give Israeli soldiers and other security forces a tool for "communicating better and more efficiently with the speakers of the Arabic language." The publisher adds that "better communication and mutual understanding is imperative and can prevent injuries in times of tension and fighting."

The book is small, perfect for a soldier's side pants pocket. From start to finish it uses Hebrew-letter transliterations so that the Arabic alphabet can be avoided altogether.

The elimination of the Arabic script further distances the Israeli army and security personnel from an important visual representation of the Palestinians and their cultural identity, denying them the basic right to be seen as a coherent, civilized nation with its own language. It renders them an irregular group of people who can only be communicated with using a mishmash of sounds and phonetics via Hebrew letters mixed with odd-shaped punctuation and annotations.

The book's contents reflect exactly what's written on the cover. The first chapter is on checkpoints; the first line is the greeting "good morning," but everything that follows is precisely what a "good" Israeli soldier should demand at a checkpoint:

"Show me your ID."

"Give me the entrance permit."

"The permit isn't valid."

"Where do you work and for whom?"

"Stand one after another in a line."

"Put the bag in the scanning machine."

And so on.

This phrase book sure is comprehensive. It's divided into chapters with names like "Arresting," "En Route to a Target," "Questioning Passersby," "Violent Entry into a House," "Interrogation," "Types of Loudspeaker Announcements," "Dispersing Crowds," "Curfew Announcements," "Entering a Village" and many more topics on what the army regularly communicates to Palestinian civilians.

The book also contains chapters like "Colors," "The Human Body," "Equipment," "Transportation," "Numbers," "Days of the Week" and "Telling Time." But it also has peculiar chapters like "Islamic Month Names and Holidays" and "Names of Palestinian Security Apparatuses," as well as the abbreviations of Palestinian political parties.

You can't help but wonder how soldiers will use this book. It contains questions but no potential answers, no prepositions or articles, no advice on the structure of an Arabic sentence. And, believe it or not, all the verbs are in the imperative!

It's abundantly clear that the book was intended for one-way communication, with commands provided in an orderly fashion. There was no interest in the answers, as if they never really mattered in the first place.

If anything, the book is an added source of power for the powerful with no interest in the people subjected to the army's practices. They don't receive the benefit of being understood or even listened to.

Perhaps the most dehumanizing part is on page 79, "Sayings and Idioms for Interrogating Someone." Here the authors want the Palestinians to be interrogated and tortured with the sophisticated use of expressions deeply rooted in Palestinian and Arab culture.

This is very ironic considering all the attempts by the Israeli army and political world to deny the existence of this culture to begin with. In fact, the book's cover omits the word Palestinian, sticking with "Conversational Arabic."

This book is neither ethically sound nor useful. It was probably produced in a bid to generate a large bulk sale for the army and the security forces. Will the settlers also be potential customers? Or will the publisher create a special edition for the West Bank settlers rampaging through Palestinian cities?

This book is dangerous. It contradicts the publisher's premise; it deceives its target audience (in this case, people with large and lethal guns) into believing that they will be able to understand and communicate. It tricks them into a false sense of familiarity and knowledge, and therefore gets them to act incorrectly in situations they clearly misunderstand. It would be more ethical to produce a booklet detailing the rights of the civilians being stopped, frisked, arrested and interrogated.

There are one thousand and one reasons why the Israeli (army or otherwise) should learn Arabic: to enrich their cultural awareness, to widen their understanding of "the other," and to enjoy a taste of a vast and rich civilization.

But perhaps the most important reason is that 9 million Israelis live among 439 million Arabic speakers in the Middle East. This book isn't a step in that direction. It weaponizes the language and dehumanizes the Palestinian people, transforming the art of literature into a tool of torture, and the sound of poetry into the deception of "security."

With this publication, Minerva Books is a far cry from representing the goddess of wisdom and justice. Rather, it embraces the prince of darkness.

Mahmoud Muna, aka the Bookseller of Jerusalem, owns the American Colony Bookshop in the city.