

EDUCATION AND ASCENDANCY UNDER THE MANDATE:  
THE ESTABLISHMENT AND ENGINEERING OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN PALESTINE

*Presented to the 2001 Association of Israel Studies Annual Meetings, Washington D.C.*

The Mandatory shall see that complete freedom of conscience and the free exercise of all forms of worship, subject only the maintenance of public order and morals, are ensured to all. No discrimination of any kind shall be made between the inhabitants of Palestine on the grounds of race, religion or language. No person shall be excluded from Palestine on the sole ground of his religious belief.

The right of each community to maintain its own schools for the education of its members in its own language, while conforming to such educational requirements of a general nature as the Administration may impose, shall not be denied or impaired.

- Article 15 of the Palestine Mandate<sup>1</sup>

By the end of the 19th century in Palestine something had drastically changed in the way which education was thought about. Education was no longer the realm of Shaikhs, Rabbis and religious functionaries, but was now the domain of trained professional teachers. Education had become, as Tibawi suggests, “an instrument”<sup>2</sup> not only to “inculcate moral values and to form character”<sup>3</sup> but to *do* things; ranging from the construction of a ‘modern’ army, to the formation of an educated national elite or of a new proletarian Jew. While the roots of these changes are to be found with the encroachment of Capitalism and European imperialism during the 19th century, it was during the Mandate — aided and abetted by the Mandatory policies — that these changes reached fruition.

During the thirty year duration of the Mandate, education in Palestine — for both Arabs and Jews — was transformed from a fluid collection of scattered, and independent religious schools into two segregated but centralized public school systems. While the Mandate state

encroached upon most aspects of both public and private life, its effects upon education would be among the most extensive and enduring. The policies which the Mandate Government imposed were intended to unify and centralize education under two segregated streams — one Arab, one Jewish. This meant that, with the exception of Christian and the Ashkinazi religious schools, almost all of the private and community schools, the Muslim, Sephardi and Mizrahi *heders* and *kuttābs*, had, by the end of the Mandate, disappeared or been swallowed by the educational system, and transformed into public schools. Thus, all of the indigenous populations, whether Sephardi Jewish or Palestinian Arab had, by the end of the Mandate, lost all but a modicum of control over their education.

### Educational History in Palestine under the Ottomans

Both Muslim and Jewish education up to the third quarter of the 19th century in Palestine were dominated by ‘traditional’ systems of education. The *kuttāb*, not unlike the Jewish *heder*, was essentially a one teacher – one room – one text – school. The text was primarily the Qur’ān or the Torah, from which reading and writing were taught. Arithmetic was usually but not always taught as a useful but extraneous subject. For a selected few, education could continue at the *madrasa*, again, similar to the Jewish *yeshiva*, which was first and foremost a religious institution. This is not to say that other subjects were not taught or were not of interest. Rather, by their very nature they were of secondary importance.

The encroachment of capitalism and European imperialism brought about major changes. Within the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, and later the Ottoman periphery of Palestine, European missionary and philanthropic schools, typified by the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, had begun, aided by imperialist interest, to make inroads, and heralded a period of vast change. At the same time, the Ottoman Education Law of 1869 established a public system of primary schools<sup>4</sup> and began the process of universalization<sup>5</sup> and rationalization of education. These missionary schools and reforms would transform the perception and shape of education in the Middle East forever.

### Educational History under the British Mandate

In 1917, at the dawn of the Mandate there were about 150 missionary or philanthropic schools, and a huge but largely uncounted number of private Muslim and Jewish religious schools. In addition there were 98 Ottoman public schools<sup>6</sup> and 12 Zionist schools<sup>7</sup>. Legally, all education laws and practice remained unchanged until 1933, with the enactment of the Mandate's Education Ordinance. Even afterwards, the Mandate appeared to adopt the typical British colonial policy of 'maintaining' the *status quo*. Thus, on paper at any rate, the Mandate continued the Ottoman *millet* system, which granted internal autonomy to minority religious communities, allowing them to control their own education and internal affairs, with very little state interference<sup>8</sup>. However, as I will suggest, this is an illusion masking the remarkable changes which were carried out during the Mandate. Talal Asad remarks that "the concept of ... political continuity in Palestinian history before and after 1918 ... covers up a real structural break represented by the Mandate", which in addition to the full blown imposition of capitalism upon Palestine, which is the gist of Asad's argument<sup>9</sup> was the formation and encroachment of a strong centralized bureaucratic state.

The articulation of capitalism and the imposition of a centralized state impressed three basic tendencies upon all forms of education in Palestine.

*Isolation:* Arabic and Hebrew language schools and speakers, became increasingly isolated from one another

*Unification:* The Arab and Jewish school systems became increasingly consolidated and integrated into two large homogeneous but parallel systems.

*Centralization:* Educational administration was taken away from local control and placed on a national level.

These tendencies were direct and predictable effects of British educational and social policy, and effected all schools. However, they had remarkably different effects upon different communities.

One last point which needs to be made, although I will not dwell upon it, is the actual availability of both schooling and funding. There were, simply stated, were not enough Arab schools and classrooms, a problem which continues today. In the last years of the Mandate, close to 50% of Arab applicants could not attend an elementary school because no place could be found for them<sup>10</sup>, and only a quarter of all Arab children attended school.<sup>11</sup> While the official statistics of the Mandatory Department of Education record, oddly, more than 100% attendance among Jews<sup>12</sup>, a 1941 study, cited by Swirski, reported that “a quarter of the school-age children of Jerusalem [who were primarily Sephardi and Yemeni Jews] were ‘without education’; among girls the proportion reached one-third”<sup>13</sup>. Thus, it is fair to say that Ashkenazi immigrants to Palestine had close to universal elementary school attendance, while the rates among Arabs, Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews were significantly lower. In all cases, the reason for the atrocious attendance rates was not lack of interest among parents or pupils, but rather lack of schools. Neither the Department of Education nor the *Va'ad Le'umi* provided these populations with sufficient schools. I will, as my argument progresses, attempt to explain the mechanisms by which the imbalance of education occurred.

### The Absorption of the *Kuttāb*

One of the most common assertions about Arab Education under the Mandate is how much it grew. Between 1914 and 1947 there was an increase of more than 560% in the number of public schools<sup>14</sup>. However, these numbers are deceptive since they do not account for the phenomenal transformation of the *kuttāb* into public schools. In 1914 the Ottoman government counted 379 private Islamic schools, almost all *kuttābs*, in Palestine<sup>15</sup>. Thirty years later, according to the Department of Education, there were 131. Thus, the apparent massive growth of the Arab Public school, is in fact, primarily the transformation of the *kuttābs* into state schools. Relative to the phenomenal (680%) real increase of all Jewish schools during this period<sup>16</sup>, the growth of the Arab schools appears inconsequential.

The Mandate Department of Education, for the most part, looked down upon the *kuttābs*,

not really regarding them as schools of any merit, and had assumed that the Ottoman public system should be the model and basis of Arab public education<sup>17</sup>. There was, according to Ylana Miller, a “general policy aimed at ‘the unification of various groups of schools, technically private but in fact quasi-public, into a single flexible system with that of the government’”<sup>18</sup>. This was the beginning of the unprecedented process of *unification* of all Arab Public schools and their *centralization* under the Mandate’s Department of Education. Tibawi points out that: “Little or no control was exercised by the Turks over [the *kuttāb*], and yet by a remarkably silent revolution the British administration extended its control over many of them and indeed absorbed them ... into the new state school system”<sup>19</sup>. The Department of Education made it known that, if applied for, monies or minor grants-in-aid were available to private schools<sup>20</sup>. The monies however, came with a price; As the teachers came on Government bankroll, the Department of Education had a say in teacher hiring, which eventually led not only to the right of approval of the *kuttāb* teachers, but their appointment. Thus, while holding prerogative of appointments and purse-strings, the Mandate government quietly seized control.

There had never been any form of centralized educational authority in Palestine. Education had been largely privately financed and under local control. During the Mandate, control over education, which was still seen primarily as (Islamic) religious training, was for the first time, controlled by a foreign and Christian power. Naturally there were harsh criticisms and conflicts. Local leadership decried the loss of autonomy, and claimed that the mandate was, in cahoots with the Zionists, imposing *siyāsāt al-tajhīl*, the ‘politics of ignorance’ or ‘policy of making [Arabs] ignorant’<sup>21</sup> — a complaint still heard today about Israeli Arabic education. While the British officials were extremely contemptuous of the *kuttābs*, they, in a paternalistic way, really did try to improve the Arab educational system, and, in a colonial frame of mind, treated Arab and Jewish education as equally as they could<sup>22</sup>. In this way they applied the same policies and standards — with one notable exception — to both Arab and Jewish education, thus unifying and centralization both systems. This notable exception is autonomy; Jewish education was

largely an independent system, Arab education was dependent upon the Mandate bureaucracy.

This dependency and the phenomenal decline of the *kuttāb*, was, in retrospect, linked to and resultant from the contradictory status of the Palestinian Muslims under the Mandate. This status allowed private Islamic schools to be redefined as public schools, and absorbed into the nascent public educational system. In accordance with the terms of the Mandate, all communities, including Muslims became, or were treated as *millets*. This meant that for the first time Muslims became one religious community among others<sup>23</sup>. While official policies had made Muslims a *millet* — necessitating the autonomy of their schools — the Mandate's educational policies treated them like *al-umma*, 'the nation', thus enabling government control of the Islamic schools and consequently the absorption of the *kuttābs*. Had, in fact, the Mandate actually followed its own logic and treated the Muslims like a *millet*; it would, according to Tibawi, "have found itself in a position with no schools to control and no education to direct"<sup>24</sup>. Thus, the absorption of the *kuttābs* by the Mandate's Education Department was, in fact, contradictory to Article 15 of the Mandate, which slated "each community to maintain its own schools". Within 30 years, from the establishment of the Mandate in 1917 to the foundation of the Zionist State in 1947, the *kuttāb* ceased to be a significant force in education. Paradoxically, with this shift, the locus of control over education was removed from the 'public', the parents and local authorities, and placed firmly in the hands of the Mandate bureaucrats, the upper echelons of whom were British, while the lower were composed mostly by Palestinian Christians and members of Muslim 'Notable' families.

Building upon a rudimentary system of public education established by the Ottomans, the Mandate bureaucracy constructed a solid foundation of Arab public education which continues to be the basis for Arab education in Israel. The Mandate and department of education's policies of adopting what they perceived to be the antecedent Ottoman *millet* system, and at the same time treating Muslim Palestinian education as state rather than community-based, allowed for the absorption of local Islamic *kuttābs* into the Mandatory Department of Education. Unlike the Jewish *Va'ad Le'umi*, the 'National Committee', which was completely controlled by Zionists —

the Department of Education was not community controlled, nor was it particularly sympathetic to Palestinian Nationalism. Thus, the unification, centralization and isolation of Arab education would, by imposing a centralized system, remove any semblance of local control. As I will show, these policies would have a very different effect upon European Jews in Palestine.

### A History of Zionist Education in Mandate Palestine

Like Arab education, Jewish education during the mandate became increasingly unified under one centralized bureaucracy, and became increasingly isolated from Arab schools. Unlike the Arabs however, these tendencies among the Jews created an environment which fostered a capable bureaucracy, increasing Jewish independence and self-sufficiency, and reinforced an already well entrenched ethnic hierarchy among Jews.

At the dawn of the Mandate, there were three general types of Jewish schools; Orthodox, Zionist, and philanthropic. The Orthodox schools, the majority until the 1920s, can be further divided by language of instruction and consequently by ethnicity. There were, in 1914, only twelve Zionist schools in all of Palestine and was no central body controlling or coordinating them<sup>25</sup>. By the end of the Mandate the educational scene had drastically changed. Of the Orthodox schools, only the Ashkinazi-Yiddish had survived; the Sephardi-Ladino and Mizrahi-Arabic were swallowed by the National Religious Party school system. The philanthropic societies had been largely consumed by the General Zionist trend and were transformed into vocational schools and teachers' colleges.

One of the central defining characteristics of *Yishuv* society was the 'trend' system, made up of the Socialist Zionists, the General Zionists and the National Religious Party. The *Agudat Yisrael*, an Ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionist party, while not a trend per-se, should also be considered. While the goals of establishing a Jewish state, or at least a homeland was universal among the Zionists, the different political, social, and economic means to its foundation varied greatly. Thus, the social and political machines which were built around the foundations of these trends

became different political parties, with different political, economic and social agendas. The trends not only provided education, but also employment, health insurance, social clubs, banking, and housing<sup>26</sup>. However, they excluded both Arabs and non-European Jews<sup>27</sup>.

Under the *Va'ad Le'umi*, education became completely incorporated with the nascent Jewish Government. The trends, particularly the National Religious Party (NRP), grew stronger under the *Va'ad Le'umi* as part of the tendency towards unification. The major victim of educational unification were the numerous religious community schools; the *heders* established by the Yemenites in Jerusalem at the end of the 19th century, and the older Sephardi *kottafs* and *kuttābs*. These schools fell or, more realistically, were placed outside of the Zionist trends<sup>28</sup>, and consequently received little from philanthropy,<sup>29</sup> and nothing of the £P. 20,000 (\$80,600) grant-in-aid which was given to the *Va'ad Le'umi* by the Mandate government beginning in 1926. Any attempt to raise money for the Sephardi schools was, according to Eliahu Eliachar, blocked by “the various Jewish national funds [who] persisted in preventing any separate appeals by Sephardi representatives”<sup>30</sup>. In fact, the National Religious Party consistently opposed any and all aid given to these schools. The NRP argued that the Yemenite schools were — by their very nature — religious, and thus should be part of their school network. This not only prevented the establishment of an independent Yemenite or Sephardi school system, it also forced these students into the NRP network, increasing its stature and funding<sup>31</sup>. It was made clear that all Jewish schools, including the non-Zionist *Agudat Israel*, were to be controlled by the Ashkinazim.

Under the Mandate, Hebrew education in Palestine congealed from a scattered and disorganized collection of schools, some loosely affiliated and others outright hostile to one another and the Zionist enterprise, to an apparently unified system. The Mandate's insistence upon two parallel but unified and centralized systems of education created a latent government. At the same time, it allowed the Ashkinazi trend system to swallow any potential competitors, most notably those of the Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews.



### Conclusion

The Mandate was neither a ‘real structural break’<sup>32</sup> from the past, nor a simple continuation of the *status quo*. The structural changes entailed by the articulation of Capitalism during the Mandate had roots several decades deep in the Ottoman period. The real change was formation of a strong centralized bureaucratic state. As I have argued, during the Mandate, residents of Palestine, both Jewish and Arab, witnessed state encroachment upon what had previously been under local and private control — education, particularly religious education. For some, the articulation of state power meant the loss of their schools, and the displacement of their control over education to the state level. For others, it meant that the schools their children attended flourished, becoming better supported and managed. In either case, like all other aspects of life under the Mandate, the educational connections between Arabs and Jews in Palestine decreased rapidly through the years.<sup>33</sup>

As I hope I have shown, there were, and are, remarkable similarities in the education of Palestinians and non-Western Jews. The same forces which centralized education under the Mandate and the *Va’ad Le’umi* were those which acted upon, dissolved and absorbed the schools of both populations, leaving them with little influence over their education, and possibly their future. One sector of the population, the recent immigrants from Europe, were far better prepared, funded and accustomed to coping with a centralized state. They were able to harness the demands of the Mandate state to their own purposes, which was, undeniably, the establishment of a Zionist homeland or state, and the removal of any and all obstructions towards this goal. However, the Mandate officials were not blind, nor were the Sephardi Jews or Palestinians helpless. I have, unfortunately, left these aspects of education under the Mandate untouched.

As a brief epilogue, the past decade has shown a rise in both private and community Islamic and Mizrahi schooling<sup>34</sup>, suggesting, once again, that we need to discard that tired notion that the lives, histories and economies of Arabs and Jews were and are somehow isolated from

one another.

---

<sup>1</sup>Notes and References

- . Cited from; Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry. *A Survey of Palestine*. 2 vols. Washington DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1991. p. 7.
- <sup>2</sup>. Tibawi, Abdul Latif. *Islamic Education: Its Traditions and Modernization into the Arab National Systems*. London: Luzac and Company, 1972. p. 51.
- <sup>3</sup>. Tibawi, Abdul Latif. *Arab Education in Mandatory Palestine: A Study of Three Decades of British Administration*. London: Luzac and Company, 1956. p. 74.
- <sup>4</sup>. Grunwald, Kurt. "Jewish Schools under Foreign Flags in Ottoman Palestine." In *Studies on Palestine During the Ottoman Period*, edited by Moshe Ma'oz, 164-74. Jerusalem: Magnes Press of Hebrew University, 1975. p. 165.
- <sup>5</sup>. I am indebted to Ilana Feldman for suggesting this term.
- <sup>6</sup>. Tibawi, 1956. *op. cit.* p. 20.
- <sup>7</sup>. Nardi, Noah. *Education in Palestine, 1920-1945*. Washington, D.C.: Zionist Organization of America, 1945. p. 19.
- <sup>8</sup>. Tibawi, 1972. *op. cit.* p. 63.
- <sup>9</sup>. Asad, Talal. "Anthropological Texts and Ideological Problems: An Analysis of Cohen on Arab Villages in Israel." *Economy and Society* 4, no. 3 (1975): 251-82. p. 262.
- <sup>10</sup>. Government of Palestine. "Department of Education, Annual Report 1939-1940". Jerusalem, 1941. p. 3.
- <sup>11</sup>. Government of Palestine. "Department of Education, Annual Report 1937-1938." Jerusalem, 1939. p. 105.

- 
- <sup>12</sup> . Government of Palestine, 1939. *op. cit.* p. 105.
  - <sup>13</sup> . Swirski. *op. cit.* p. 52.
  - <sup>14</sup> . Tibawi, 1956. *op. cit.* p. 270.
  - <sup>15</sup> . Tibawi, 1956. *op. cit.* p. 20.
  - <sup>16</sup> . In 1914 there were twelve Hebrew speaking Zionist schools in 1948, there were 818 such schools. See; Tibawi, 1956. *op. cit.* p. 272.
  - <sup>17</sup> . Anglo-American Committee. *op. cit.* p. 2-4; Tibawi, 1956. *op. cit.* p. 23.
  - <sup>18</sup> . Dir. of Education. 1946. *Education in Palestine. General Survey, 1936-1946.* Jerusalem: Government Printer, p. 5., cited by; Miller, Ylana. *Government and Society in Rural Palestine, 1920-1948.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985. p. 94.
  - <sup>19</sup> . Tibawi, 1956. *op. cit.* p. 57.
  - <sup>20</sup> . Nardi. *op. cit.* p. 43; Miller, *op. cit.* p. 94.
  - <sup>21</sup> . Miller, *op. cit.* p. 94.
  - <sup>22</sup> . Miller. *op. cit.* p. 94.
  - <sup>23</sup> . Miller. *op. cit.* p. 35.
  - <sup>24</sup> . Tibawi, 1956. *op. cit.* p. 139.
  - <sup>25</sup> . Matthews, Roderic D., and Matta Akrawi. *Education in the Arab Countries of the near East.* Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1949. p. 256; Nardi. *op. cit.* p. 19.
  - <sup>26</sup> . Swirski, Shlomo. *Politics and Education in Israel: Comparisons with the United States.* New York: Falmer Press, 1999. p. 88.
  - <sup>27</sup> . Swirski. *op. cit.* p. 51.
  - <sup>28</sup> . Swirski. *op. cit.* p. 51.
  - <sup>29</sup> . Zionist philanthropic societies had, by the early 20th century, pretty much usurped all of the donations which had previously gone to the Jewish religious community schools.
  - <sup>30</sup> . Eliachar, Elie. *Living with Jews.* London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983. p. 178.
  - <sup>31</sup> . Swirski. *op. cit.* p. 52.
  - <sup>32</sup> . Asad. *op. cit.* p. 262.
  - <sup>33</sup> . There is no indication whatsoever that under the Ottomans the millet system entailed the ethnic and religious segregation witnessed during the Mandate, and today. While it is clear that the vast majority of school children attended the schools of their millet, there is significant evidence that, at least in the latter half of the 19th century, upper-class Jews and Arabs (Eliachar. *op. cit.* p. 50.), as well as Muslims and Christians (Tibawi, 1956. *op. cit.* p. 73.) were frequently educated together.

---

<sup>34</sup> . I am referring here to the religious schools of the **מפסתם** **גן** **עצ** **מ**, the 'Islamic Movement' in Israel, and those of *Shas*, a religious **ע** **ת** **נ** **ע** party