



Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Politics of Teaching History in Mandate Palestine

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For Palestinian nationalists in Mandate Palestine, British education policy was a source of constant frustration. The shortage of schools, the lack of local control over the curriculum, and the marginalization and de-politicization of Palestinian history constituted major grievances. Proceedings from the Peel Commission reveal much about the rationale behind this policy, particularly the bias toward “rural” education and the attempts to control teachers. Drawing on and complementing the work of A.L. Tibawi, this article seeks to shed light on the nationalists’ protests by examining both the responses of officials brought before the Commission, as well as the government’s history curriculum during the Mandate. In doing so, the research shows that education policy was constructed to maintain the underdevelopment of Palestine and to hinder state-building efforts that could compete with those of the Zionists.

AT THE HEIGHT of the Arab Revolt of 1936–39, H. M. Wilson, an Englishwoman who taught at the independent Birzeit School, reflected on the intense nationalist sentiment that animated her classroom: “Every single English lesson worked [a]round in some way to the Rebellion, or would have done if we had let it. I fell into the habit of being prepared for even Tipping’s ‘Higher English Grammar’ to pop up with some remark on subjunctives or participles which could be twisted into an allusion to the Arab cause.”¹

Indeed, the Arab Revolt (known in Arabic as *al-thawra al-kubra*, or the Great Revolt) was the manifestation of escalating nationalist grievances, foremost among them the unprecedented rates of Jewish immigration—doubling the Jewish population from 185,000 in 1932 to 375,000 in 1935—and ever-increasing land purchases, which the British continued to facilitate and encourage throughout the 1930s.² This took place against a backdrop of economic hardship following the Great Depression and years of discriminatory labor practices that saw the British administration as well as Jewish immigrants paying Palestinian workers far less than their Jewish counterparts. In addition, Palestinians had long been frustrated by the Mandate government’s denial of their right to form a representative assembly, while simultaneously allowing the Zionists to build their own proto-state complete with paramilitary forces.³ Taken together, all these factors led to the most disruptive Palestinian uprising during the British Mandate, and it took over 20,000 British troops to put it down—twice.⁴

In this highly politicized context, nationalists also became increasingly frustrated with the colonial education system, which gave Palestinians very limited access to education, enforced a Eurocentric history curriculum, and reserved upper-echelon positions for British citizens appointed by the high commissioner so as to ensure their control of the Education Department.⁵ Palestinian grievances about British education policy in Palestine paralleled those of Egyptian nationalists prior to 1923, when Egypt gained at least nominal independence and control of its domestic policy. British education officials in Palestine thus shaped policy keeping in mind the ostensible lessons that had been learned elsewhere in the empire. Their concerns included the need for a so-called agriculture bias in rural schools, more extensive school inspections, and the containment of any kind of nationalism in schools. The candid responses of Education Director Humphrey Bowman and former Government Arab College principal Khalil Totah in their interviews with the 1936–37 Peel Commission shed light on the broader imperial context of British education policies and concerns. And the Peel Commission’s attention to those matters very much reflected larger imperial interests, particularly as they related to India and Egypt, where officials had supposedly learned the so-called lessons.

Despite the colonial administration’s repeated attempts to stifle nationalism in schools by a variety of means, students and teachers played significant roles as both participants and leaders of the Arab Revolt. For, by the 1930s, many Palestinians had come to feel that what the Mandate government sought was to create a minimally educated generation that would acquiesce to British rule and its support of Zionism.⁶ Among their education grievances was the history curriculum, because it generally marginalized Middle Eastern, and particularly, Palestinian history—an argument that is well demonstrated by A.L. Tibawi, a former official of the Mandate government, in his seminal *Arab Education in Mandatory Palestine*.⁷ Complementing his work, here I examine the selection of historical events and figures that the Mandate government required the history curriculum to cover,⁸ and discuss parallels with restrictions in Egypt in order to situate the Mandate government’s history curriculum in the wider imperial context.

Recent scholarship on education during the Mandate period includes several works on girls’ education and mission schools, some of which also address issues of government policy and nationalism in schools.⁹ Naomi Shepherd’s broad study of the British administration in Palestine includes a chapter on social policy in which she characterizes the education system as an “attempt to impose British standards on Arab children” that failed miserably.¹⁰ I argue, in contrast, that the British actually made little effort in that respect. Had assimilation been their goal, the Mandate authorities would have used English as the language of instruction in secondary schools and provided more than the single government four-year high school in Palestine. My argument is more closely aligned with the work of Ela Greenberg, who shows that Palestinian-run primary girls’ schools generated a great deal of nationalist sentiment during the Mandate period. However, I employ a wider lens to examine nationalism in schools and show how primary and secondary education, as well as extracurricular programs in both government and private establishments for boys and girls, all helped shape the younger generation of nationalists. Overall, I will demonstrate there was a great deal of substance in the Palestinian nationalists’ argument that British education policy was constructed to keep Palestine underdeveloped and to hinder any state-building efforts that could potentially compete with the Zionist project.

Lessons Learned from Egypt and the Merits of “Agricultural Bias”

By the interwar period, British officials in London and in Palestine had become somewhat obsessed with attempting to learn from past blunders, particularly after Egypt’s popular uprising in 1919, which led to nominal independence in 1923. Certainly education officials in Palestine were keen to prevent a recurrence of what had happened in Egypt, where it was not lost on colonial officials that the 1919 revolution had taken place with significant student participation and under the leadership of the educated urban classes. In the words of Humphrey Bowman, who headed the Education Department in Mandate Palestine from 1920 to 1936, the creation of a “half-educated, unemployed class, so prevalent in India and Egypt” had to be avoided at all costs.¹¹ Given the events of 1919 in Egypt, British administrators in Palestine considered the education policy of their counterparts in Egypt to have failed. However, the failure occurred despite considerable rhetoric on the part of officials in Egypt about the importance of learning from education-related mishaps in India.

Education was the one area of policy where the British in Egypt did not attempt to emulate India. As Robert Tignor noted in his description of a broad “Indianization” in the British administration and policies of Egypt, education officials in Cairo were anxious to “avoid mistakes” that had been made in Indian education. Specifically, education in India had been “too European, literary, and not practical enough,” and produced, as a result, an entire “class of intellectuals” who had no training in manual professions and were “constantly discontented with British rule.”¹² In the eyes of British officials in Palestine, Egypt’s situation largely mirrored that of India, despite the colonial authorities’ attempts to avert such an outcome. Finally, and in a related concern, British education officials in Palestine were keen to maintain the demographic status quo, but only in the Palestinian sector of the population. Thus, Bowman ushered in an emphasis on agriculture in the rural curriculum in order to encourage the Palestinian peasantry to stay put in the countryside; simultaneously, the British encouraged the development of Zionist industry and settlement, which was mostly urban.

Bowman’s outlook was greatly influenced by his twenty years working for the Egyptian Ministry of Education. He was determined to avoid the blunders made there—and to be sure, he made entirely different ones. Bowman’s views on the education systems of Egypt and India in part reflected those of his former superior in Cairo, Lord Cromer. In reference to the British administration’s system in India, the first British consul general and de facto ruler of Egypt wrote critically about “a purely literary education” and “the disastrous results which have ensued from unduly encouraging [it].”¹³ It is not surprising that Cromer sought, as a result, to downplay academic education in Egypt in favor of vocational training. “Here I am taking to heart the lesson of India,” he stated in a 1906 letter, “that is to say without discouraging higher education, I am doing all I can to push forward both elementary and technical education. I want all the next generation of Egypt to be able to read and write. Also, I want to create as many carpenters, bricklayers, plasterers, etc., as I possibly can.”¹⁴ Cromer’s abysmal education record in Egypt is well known. His 1902 budget spent all of 1 percent on education,¹⁵ and he restricted access by raising fees and slashing government funding at all levels of education. Prior to the occupation, 70 percent of Egyptian students had received government assistance to pay for tuition, whereas under the British, 73 percent of students paid the entirety of their school expenses.¹⁶

Bowman was determined to learn from Cromer's failings. He attempted to expand education in Palestine and continually requested larger budgets to meet Palestinians' great demand for more schools and increased educational opportunities, but the Mandate government never met his requests. Funds allocated to education ranged from 4.8 to 6.5 percent of Mandate budgets, and although yearly allocations increased, the overall share of the total kept falling. Thus, in 1929 for example, 144,119 Palestinian pounds set aside for education accounted for 6.59 percent of the overall budget of 2,185,885 Palestinian pounds; by 1935, the education budget had risen to 233,521 pounds but it had fallen to 4.8 percent of the Mandate's total budget of 4,863,077 Palestinian pounds.¹⁷ Although grossly insufficient and lagging behind that of many other colonial territories, this level of expenditure was far better than it had been in Egypt under Cromer. Without Bowman's pressure on the Mandate administration and on London to increase spending, the share of education in the budget would have been considerably smaller.

Another significant difference between Bowman's approach and Cromer's concerned the issue of fees. Cromer was clearly unwilling to make education widely accessible and made no apologies for wishing to educate as few Egyptians as possible. "The best test of whether the Egyptians really desire to be educated is to ascertain whether they are prepared to pay for education,"¹⁸ Cromer wrote in *Modern Egypt*, even as he acknowledged that Egyptians were demanding more schools and expanded educational opportunities. When he established the Education Department in Palestine, Bowman distanced himself somewhat from his former boss. He continued the Ottoman policy of providing free public elementary education, at least in the towns¹⁹—although he required villages to foot "at least half" of the bill where they lacked a school building, and for "such furniture and equipment [as] required, and occasionally the pay of an assistant teacher."²⁰ This was but one of the obstacles that a Palestinian rural child faced in struggling for her right to an education, as we will see.

Palestinian education officials were also wary of emulating the "academic" model of other colonial education systems. A.L. Tibawi, a teacher during Bowman's tenure and later chief education officer from 1941 to 1947, writes that the "experience gained in India and Egypt opened the eyes of educational administrators to the futility and dangers, in an underdeveloped country, of a purely academic education which produced more the clerk type than the farmer or artisan."²¹ Likewise, Khalil Totah, head of the Friends Boys School from 1927 to 1944 and principal of the government's Men's Training College for male teachers (later called the Government Arab College) from 1919 to 1926, argued that "rural education should be overwhelmingly agricultural and town schools distinctly vocational."²² Tibawi and Totah, like their colonial masters, considered the number of white-collar jobs in the Palestinian sector of the economy insufficient to accommodate many rural migrants. They did not advocate for the British to remedy these circumstances, perhaps because they realized the futility of demanding such reforms. In any case, providing a mere rudimentary education to the masses had the added bonus of preserving the Palestinian elites' privileged status.

Bowman instituted distinct curricula for town and rural schools in keeping with his views about the merits of an agricultural focus in rural schools. But because of a perpetual and severe lack of funding, his plans never expanded beyond the establishment of two institutions to train teachers in agriculture courses. Certainly Bowman was correct to assert that elsewhere in the empire, "rural

education had been greatly neglected,” to which he predictably added, “this was particularly true of India and Egypt.”²³ His concern for addressing the educational needs of villagers was linked to another objective: to maintain the status quo in the countryside and to discourage the rural population from migrating to the towns. In rural schools, the aim was to instill a very rudimentary education, mostly consisting of basic literacy and math, over a three- or four-year period.²⁴ In contrast, most town-based elementary schools provided six years of education, and some secondary classes were available in a few urban areas. It is difficult to overstate Palestinians’ restricted access to secondary education; in 1932, there was only one four-year government high school for approximately 127,583 high-school-aged children.²⁵

The distinctions between the two kinds of governmental curricula (rural and urban) extended to other issues beyond the number of years of schooling. While there were many common subjects, including religion, Arabic, math, hygiene, history and geography, nature study, physical training, and drawing, the number of lessons devoted to these subjects varied. Consider the number of religion lessons taught in the first three years of elementary education in each type of school circa 1932. Village schools had an average of 7.3 such lessons per week (“Religion and Reading of Koran”), while the equivalent (“Religion”) in town schools was 1.3.²⁶ Why the Education Department added “Reading of Koran” to “Religion” only in village schools or why villages had six more lessons per week is unclear. Tibawi notes there was a shortage of textbooks early in the Mandate, but it was mostly for “history, geography and science books.”²⁷ Given the government’s parsimonious tendencies when it came to social spending, especially on rural education, financial constraints were likely the primary reason for relying more on religious content in village schools. Another possible reason could have been that the Mandatory government wished to claim it was maintaining cultural consistency with the Ottoman era, when the Qur’an was the “only common text-book.”²⁸

The differences between the curricula were most apparent with respect to two subjects: agriculture in the rural schools and English in the town schools. Rural schools had six agriculture lessons per week in years two and three, comprising 15 percent of the week’s total lessons. Only two other subjects had more time allotted: “Religion and Reading of Koran” with seven weekly lessons, and Arabic with twelve. Adding agriculture to the village curriculum took time away from academic subjects, but the point of “agricultural bias” in education was after all to keep villagers in the fields. Town schools had no comparable subject until years five and six, when students had two weekly periods of manual work or vocational training. As for the inclusion of English in the town schools, Arabic was the language of instruction in both types of schools, but the government added English as a subject only in town schools, beginning in year three. The lack of English made it difficult for rural students to continue on with higher levels of education in urban schools; they had to repeat a grade in order to complete the courses not taught in village schools. In that way, the government was able to basically restrict opportunities for rural children to the standard three or four years—that is, assuming a child was fortunate enough to secure a spot in a village school. In his testimony before the Peel Commission, Totah reported that 81 percent of girls who applied to the Tulkarm government school and 72 percent of those who applied to its Gaza equivalent were deferred in 1931.²⁹ Beyond the severe shortage of schools, a further obstacle for rural students was the appalling conditions of schools. According to Tibawi, there were situations

where “one teacher . . . in one single room had the herculean task of teaching between forty and sixty students of four, possibly more, age groups.”³⁰ Town schools fared somewhat better, but even the number of students in town schools ranged from thirty to fifty per class circa 1925.³¹

The 1936–1937 Palestine Royal Commission, or Peel Commission, was particularly interested in Bowman’s development of agricultural education because it reflected a larger imperial policy. Indeed, all of the Peel Commission’s inquiries into British policies in Palestine reflected wider imperial concerns. London sent the commission to investigate the causes of the Arab Revolt, and it proposed a partition plan to resolve the conflict.³² In the commission’s meeting with Bowman, vice chair Sir Horace Rumbold asked, “Am I right in thinking in accordance with modern practice in other parts of the British Empire you are trying to develop both in the primary and in your secondary teaching what might be called an agricultural bias . . . ?” After Bowman confirmed that this was “very much so,” Sir Horace praised the school garden, saying he had seen such gardens in other parts of the British Empire and hoped to see many more of them. Then he homed in on the purpose for such an “agricultural bias.”³³

Vice chair: Do you feel as a result of your education system—I am speaking now about the Arab agricultural population—that your system is helping to stop the drift to a purely clerical or urban life?

Bowman: It is difficult to say how far it has succeeded, but that is one of our aims.³⁴

While some of these questions may have been due in part to the vice chair’s enthusiasm for gardens, he clearly had Egypt and India in mind when he asked whether the colonial education system in Palestine was preventing the “drift to a purely clerical or urban life.” The next section explores how the Mandate government enforced its education policies, yet another subject of the Peel Commission’s inquiries that reflected broader imperial concerns.

Government Inspections and Other Control Efforts

The Education Department’s school inspections were a seemingly significant means of enforcing the government curriculum and policy. On paper, inspections were extensive and included a wide, subjective range of criteria. Their reports show that inspectors usually mentioned the instructor’s teaching methods, class discipline, and ability to maintain the class’s interest and harmony.³⁵ Sometimes they also mentioned the teacher’s proficiency in fielding questions and use of the blackboard. Lastly, knowledge of the material, interest in teaching, suitability for the post, cleanliness, appropriate dress, and punctuality were mentioned on occasion, but the inspectors tended to mention them only when a teacher was lacking in one of those qualities.³⁶ While these inspections may suggest the government’s firm grip on teaching methods and the curriculum, several factors indicate that its controlling efforts were in many respects futile. First, consider the inspectors. In 1932, there were twenty-one inspectors for 308 schools.³⁷ Although this might seem like a sufficient number, as Tibawi reports, “individual inspectors [were] left to their own devices” and they were also responsible for a great deal of administrative work, which tended to consume more of their time.³⁸ In addition, for over a decade, the government carried out no inspections on the subject with the most potential for nationalist sentiment: history.³⁹ And since almost all of the

inspectors were Palestinian, they were unlikely to have reported on any nationalist sentiment they observed.

The last factor that rendered the inspections quite toothless was the simple fact that the Education Department seldom dismissed teachers. More often than not, as many education personnel files show,⁴⁰ teachers deemed substandard were denied salary increases until they could demonstrate improvement. It was simply not pragmatic, or even feasible, to fire teachers, because they were in such short supply (which was another major reason for the perpetual shortage of schools). In 1936, there were only enough spots in urban government schools for 57 percent of all applicants; in village schools, the equivalent statistic was 58 percent.⁴¹ The village statistics, however, are particularly misleading because they only include applicants who actually had a school to apply to. Of 780 Palestinian villages, only 293, or 38 percent, had a school.⁴² The statistics for girls' rural education were the most dismal. By 1931, the government had opened girls' schools in "only one village in a hundred," a sum total of eight rural girls' schools.⁴³ Even by 1940, a mere 4 percent of rural Arab girls attended a primary school, compared with 50 percent for rural boys.⁴⁴ Bowman's testimony to the Peel Commission also sheds light on the efficacy of the inspections. When the vice chair asked Bowman about whether the "operation of this form of control" had been "effective," Bowman tellingly replied, "As regards syllabus, yes, as regards personnel, not always."⁴⁵

All the schools attended by Palestinian children, whether they were government, mission, or independent, were theoretically subject to government regulations and inspections. In practice, however, the administration lacked the resources to control any aspect of mission schools. The superficial nature of oversight in mission schools combined with the government's reliance on their graduates to staff government schools further contributed to the spread of nationalism. Graduating about two dozen students per year, the government-run Women's Training College and Government Arab College were able to produce only enough teachers to meet about 27 percent of the staffing needs in public education in 1936, leaving mission schools to pick up the slack.⁴⁶ As a result of the disparity between the number of teachers needed and produced by the government system, mission schools in Mandate Palestine faced few restraints under British rule. Once the schools had been established, the government exercised no real authority over them at all, beyond approving building plans in order to ensure compliance with health codes. There was little oversight of curricula or of the appointments of teachers. The Education Department required private and mission schools to register the names of teachers and staff in accordance with the Education Ordinance of 1933, but it did not appear to ever contest hires.

An October 1932 letter from the headmistress of the Anglican English High School for Girls in Haifa, Miss Susanna Emery, to her mother provides a good sense of the government's inspection style. After the visit of the head inspector, who was also the principal of the Women's Training College, Emery related the following: "Miss Ridler . . . paid me a visit and I took her round the school. She was very decent and gave me quite good advice. She has no manners at all but is a very clever woman and she had promised Miss Warburton to call on me."⁴⁷ Not only did Emery consider Ridler's suggestions to be of a personal nature rather than in the spirit of a government inspection, but her feedback was also given in an advisory capacity and her suggestions were hardly binding.

The autonomy of the mission schools is equally evident in Bowman's testimony to the Peel Commission about the extent of government oversight in private and foreign schools. The commissioner asked, "In return for the small grant you make you exercise the same sort of control, do you? Do you exercise control over their syllabuses and over their efficiency?" Bowman responded, "Very little. We have the right of inspection but in actual fact it does not amount to very much."⁴⁸ It may seem surprising that the Education Department made such feeble attempts to inspect nongovernment schools, considering that their graduates provided so many of the government's own teachers, but the paradox reflects its desperate need for qualified teachers.

While it may not have taken its inspection role very seriously, the Mandate government used more direct methods in its attempts to stifle the spread of nationalism among its teachers. Strict censorship and political repression were the tools of choice. It required teachers to obtain approval before publishing in any type of media and prohibited teachers from joining associations or groups that could be construed as nationalist.⁴⁹ The Education Department was the sole publisher of textbooks in Palestine and any other locally published books were subject to department censorship, regardless of subject matter.⁵⁰ Teachers who wished to publish their own textbooks were forced to self-censor any potentially "controversial material," including anything on the subjects of nationalism, British rule, and Zionism. For example, High Commissioner Samuel banned Khalil Totah's book *History of Palestine* simply for stating that he (Samuel) had "endeavored to reconcile the Arabs of Palestine to the Zionist policy of the British government but failed."⁵¹ In addition, Totah recalls a headmaster telling him that he could "not spend more than three or four shillings without reference to higher authorities" or "place a book in the school library without reference."⁵² But the government's attempts to control teachers and to constrain Palestinian nationalism were largely in vain. The emergence of nationalism, which was another significant imperial concern, formed the crux of the Peel Commission's inquiries.

Palestinian Nationalism in Schools

While the Mandate authorities certainly exerted more control over government schools than mission schools, they were unable to stem the proliferation of nationalist sentiment in either type of school. Nationalism emerged in government schools despite the fact that Palestinians had practically no say in the standard curricula.⁵³ This lack of input and the great shortage of government schools were major Palestinian grievances about the education system, especially as the Jewish population controlled its own schools.⁵⁴ Totah articulated this sentiment well in his testimony to the Peel Commission,

It would seem that Arab education is either designed to reconcile Arab people to this policy [of facilitating Zionism] or to make the education so colorless as to make it harmless and not endanger the carrying out of this policy of Government. Jewish education has an aim. It is not colorless. Its aim is to establish Zionism, establish a national home, and revive Hebrew culture. The Arabs of Palestine feel there is no such aim behind their education. They feel Arab culture is neglected.⁵⁵

A related grievance concerned the sparse time allotted to Arab history in general and the virtual neglect of Palestinian history in particular.⁵⁶ Because they had no success in convincing education officials of the worthiness of their cause, nationalist leaders turned to students and teachers,⁵⁷ urging students to uphold strikes.⁵⁸ One of the largest of the early school strikes began at the Men's Training College (later Government Arab College) in 1925, to protest Balfour's visit to Jerusalem.⁵⁹ Student involvement in such protests only increased in the 1930s, culminating in the 1936 general strike that marked the beginning of the Arab Revolt. According to a 1937 government report to the Permanent Mandates at the League of Nations, nearly all of the students in town schools and half the students in rural schools adhered to the strike early on in the revolt.⁶⁰

Palestinian and other Arab teachers also had little trouble choosing loyalties, despite coming under severe government pressure. Tibawi tells us that teachers were among the most influential activists in the nationalist movement. Indeed, he states that "several members of the staff, notably the history lecturer [of the Men's Training College] were ardent nationalists actively in contact with those leaders. The literary society in the college was a clearing-house for all studies in nationalist history and Arabic literature . . . speeches given by students and lecturers were as national in tone as any delivered elsewhere in the country."⁶¹ Teachers were involved in a range of activism, such as leading extracurricular student organizations, criticizing education policies in the press, and helping articulate political positions in writing.⁶² It was apparently an "open secret" during the revolt that numerous teachers were involved in some way or another,⁶³ and the government arrested some ninety teachers in the 1938–39 school year alone.⁶⁴ Department officials were quite aware of their teachers' commitment to nationalism. When the Palestine Royal Commission of 1936 asked Bowman "I suppose all your schoolmasters of all grades, the Arabs, have strong nationalistic feelings?" he answered very candidly, "All, from the highest to the lowest, and not only schoolmasters but other Arab officials right throughout the country without any exception."⁶⁵

What Bowman was far less willing to acknowledge was the fact that some of his government's own policies and actions had facilitated the emergence of nationalism in schools. To begin with, the military occupation government from 1917 to 1920 had changed the primary language of instruction in government schools from Turkish to Arabic, omitting Turkish altogether, and the Education Department continued this policy. It certainly made a great deal of sense for students to learn in their native language, especially after the League of Nations' imposition of the Mandate system on Palestine rendered Turkish obsolete. The change to Arabic also enabled the government to focus teacher recruitment and training efforts on Palestinians. The shift to mostly local teachers in government schools was likely another respect in which the British unwittingly cultivated nationalism. Once again, Bowman's responses to the Palestine Royal Commission reveal a great deal, but in this instance the dialogue demonstrates conflicting views between London and officials in Palestine. The vice chair grilled Bowman about his use of exclusively Arab teachers in government secondary schools:

Vice chair: On the understanding that we have got to attempt to govern a country in which the Arab majority is definitely nationalist, if not disloyal, do you not think it is a little awkward that, not only in your primary schools, where it is inevitable, but in such secondary schools as you are developing the teachers are all Arabs?

Bowman: You do not get quite such good education results in English as you would . . .

Vice chair (cutting him off): I think that may be so, but do you see, on the other hand, you have no vehicle for the transmission of British ideas to the young Arabs and that is what strikes me as a little odd in this country . . . you have nationalistic ideas arising, but you have, I suppose, no understanding in the average educated Arab youth of what the British Empire is and what it means, or what principles it stands for?⁶⁶

Indeed, rather than instilling British values among Palestinian students, British education policy facilitated the process for nationalist loyalties to supersede religious ones. While the Ottoman schools had been attended almost exclusively by Muslims, both Muslims and Christians alike attended the Mandate government schools. In the highly politicized context in which students were going to school, to have Muslims and Christians learning in their native tongue side by side as Palestinians contributed to the growing tendency for national identity to take precedence over all other forms of allegiance. In fact, some of the most ardent Palestinian nationalists were Christian, something which seems to have taken the Peel Commission by surprise. When asked about the extent of nationalism by religion, in terms of “Christian or Mohammedan,” Bowman answered: “Both, more strongly expressed in their hearts by the Moslems, but just as strongly expressed in their mouths by the Christians. The Christians are definitely afraid of being a minority and they are anxious to side with their brother Arabs. You will find that some of the most outspoken of them are among the Christians.”⁶⁷

While Bowman may have been more perceptive than one might expect about nationalism with reference to interfaith Palestinian dynamics, he was far less so where scouting organizations were concerned. The government organized and promoted Baden-Powell Boy Scouts and Girl Guides in Palestine, and both became unintended sources of nationalist cultivation. Bowman, who also served as the Boy Scout commissioner, described their composition as “almost entirely” Palestinian Arab.⁶⁸ Students from both government and private schools participated in these programs, fostering connections among youths from diverse religious and economic backgrounds. By 1936, there were about 100 Boy Scout troops, with a total of 3,344 participants, and over 800 girls had joined the Girl Guides.⁶⁹ Since the Education Department recruited troop leaders largely from the ranks of its (mostly Palestinian) teachers, it is safe to assume that the teacher-leaders were subject to even less department oversight in their scouting activities than in schools. Bowman was quick to point out to the Peel Commission that the Girl Guides were “organized under strictly ‘harim’ conditions,” and he describes the program as being “extremely popular” among the girls and teachers alike.⁷⁰ One indication of nationalist leanings among girls’ organizations emerges in Sandy Tolan’s *The Lemon Tree*. Tolan writes of Firdaws Taji, a girl guide who helped support the local fighters with food during the Nakba; she also assisted the doctor in her village clinic.⁷¹ While there is little information about Girl Guides beyond Tolan’s account, Bowman does allude to the nationalist activities of Boy Scouts. Rather, he mentions what he contends were imposters dressed as boy scouts during the protests in 1936: “There were boys who were not members of my Association who undoubtedly did take part dressed as scouts and they were indistinguishable from the others,” he told the Peel Commission.⁷² But apparently enough

scouts took part in the demonstrations that Bowman forbade his group from appearing in uniform for the duration of the general strike and unrest.⁷³

By the 1930s, Palestinian nationalism had flourished well beyond government schools and programs and extended to mission and other independent schools. As mentioned in the introduction, a teacher at the private Birzeit School recalled that her students could find allusions to the nationalist cause in the most insipid of grammar lessons. The teacher, H.M. Wilson, described the Birzeit School as a unique institution in many respects: its founder and principal, Nabiha Nasir, was a woman; the school began as a coeducational institution (although later Nasir decided to separate classes for boys and girls);⁷⁴ an Arab Christian foundation supported the school independently, without connection to a mission or an indigenous church; and although most of the students were Christian, like the town of Birzeit itself, Muslim children also attended the school. Regarding how her students continually drew parallels between their lessons and the nationalist struggle, Wilson provides an example from one of her English literature classes. Reading aloud a moving passage from Clarendon on the English civil war, she says, “The whole class looked up simultaneously and said ‘Palestine!’”⁷⁵ Wilson also emphasizes that her students were careful to distinguish their anti-British government opinions from their regard for her as a person. Likewise, Palestinian students at the Anglican English High School in Haifa were extremely nationalistic despite their Oxbridge-gear curriculum. A former student recalls the charged atmosphere during the revolt: “We had a lot of nationalism. . . . One girl . . . organized a strike of Arab students . . . [and] my sisters and I were the only girls that were not allowed to stay away from school. . . . We were in a lot of trouble with the strikers.”⁷⁶ She adds that after the school “severely punished” the strikers, tensions in school only worsened.⁷⁷ It is telling that nationalism was common even in an environment like that of the Haifa Anglican School, where the last five years of secondary instruction was taught entirely in English and the curriculum was thoroughly British. Regardless of the kind of school involved (private, independent, mission, or government), nationalism among Palestinian students was inevitable in the context of the Mandate.

The Politics of Teaching History in (British) Occupied Palestine

Perhaps the least effective tactic the British Mandate government employed to stifle nationalism was its tight control of the school curriculum and, ironically, the history syllabus in particular. If anything, this backfired even more severely than some of the other policies, as it fueled support for the nationalist cause. Tibawi recalls how futile the government’s efforts were: “In general, the teachers . . . were so fired by the claims of nationalism that they found no difficulty in circumventing the restrictions in the classroom. There was no power able to control all their activities all the time.” As mentioned earlier in reference to the activities of teachers and the government’s ineffective attempts to censor them, “Many of them wrote anonymously the most informed . . . criticism” on the education system in the press, and others “helped national bodies to draft their memoranda.”⁷⁸ The government’s stranglehold on the curriculum for Palestinians, which it largely determined with little regard for popular opinion, ended up being a significant nationalist battleground. Tibawi cites the sparse time devoted to Arab history in general, and to

Palestinian history in particular, as one of the nationalists' foremost grievances.⁷⁹ Certainly this must have been a critical issue for the government schools' Palestinian teachers, who were expected to teach the curriculum.

An interesting parallel can be found in Egypt, where British officials also sought to restrict history content in government schools, particularly under Cromer. Lisa Pollard notes that Cromer viewed courses on all periods of Egyptian history as pointless, both for "the masses" and for students being trained for clerical jobs, because there was a glass ceiling ensuring Egyptians would not rise in the ranks of the bureaucracy beyond the lower echelons.⁸⁰ The negligible offerings in the history curriculum were not lost on Egyptian nationalists. At an Egyptian National Party congress in 1910, Rif'at Wafik "claimed that the limiting and elimination of history from the curriculum was one of the most powerful instruments of British rule in Egypt."⁸¹ Pollard argues that even after Cromer's departure in 1907 and the reestablishment of the Ministry of Education, the British created a superior position for British officials with veto power over their Egyptian counterparts in the ministry.⁸² Egyptians did not gain real control of the education system until after they had staged the popular uprising of 1919, which led to independence in domestic matters and the Constitution of 1923. Until then, Egyptian nationalists had considered their lack of control over the history curriculum a major grievance, just as Palestinian nationalists would during the Mandate period.

But what exactly did Palestinian nationalists consider so offensive in the government's history curriculum? The 1929 elementary syllabus for town schools sheds a great deal of light on their objections, particularly as regards the meager coverage of Arab and Palestinian history. For the preparatory year, the government's stated intent was to stimulate the students' interest in local history by focusing on "stories of historical personages and events which have a particular local interest in the immediate vicinity."⁸³ However, the selection covered conveys a decidedly Eurocentric view of Middle Eastern history. The preparatory class syllabus included "characters in Bible history, . . . the Herods, Josephus, . . . the Jewish [up]rising, . . . Biblical sieges and battles between the Philistines and Israelites, . . . Godfrey de Bouillon, Richard the Lionheart . . . [and] Napoleon and his generals at Gaza, Jaffa, Acre."⁸⁴ It is unclear why the Education Department expected Palestinian instructors to teach accounts of Josephus and the Jewish uprising to Palestinian children in a politically charged climate. One might also question the logic of teaching "the battles and sieges of the Crusades" from the perspective of Europeans in the context of a British occupation. We can probably dismiss the Bible stories as a manifestation of an Orientalizing tendency to conflate all things Palestinian with the Bible. Perhaps we can also attribute the Crusades to a similar Eurocentric weakness, but what of Josephus, and the many events specific to Jewish history? Palestinian students were unlikely to have been receptive to learning these events, particularly in the 1930s. Even more mystifying was the government's inclusion of Israelite-Philistine battles. Did the British authors of the syllabus not realize the linguistic similarity between Philistine and *filastini*? Did they not see that Palestinians may well have identified with the Philistines in their wars with the Israelites, only further heightening tensions?

The Education Department continued with this Eurocentric emphasis in subsequent syllabi, with the second year curriculum focusing more narrowly on British history. In fact, the historical figures covered were almost exclusively British—save Columbus and Napoleon (but what is Waterloo without him?)—and included the traditional Drake, Cromwell, Watt, Wilberforce, and Nelson, as

well as Gordon, for the suppression of the slave trade in Sudan. It seems apparent that the department selected admirable or uncontroversial figures and versions of British history. Similarly, the “Modern Times” sections of the fourth year included “The revival of prosperity in Egypt, The Turkish Constitution and its failure, [and] The Great War and its results in Arab lands.”⁸⁵ It is questionable whether Palestinians would have agreed with the characterization of the “British Occupation and Protectorate over Egypt” as “the revival of prosperity in Egypt.” Listed after “the Mahdi” and before “the Reconquest of the Sudan,” it left little doubt as to who had brought about this purported prosperity.⁸⁶ Considering the (traumatic) impact of both World War I and Britain on the Middle East, it may seem encouraging that “the Great War and its results in Arab lands” was included, but no further indication was provided as to the actual content of that subject. The Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and the Balfour Declaration were likely shortchanged at best in that syllabus. In the last two years of elementary school, the content of the history curriculum became more internationally focused and even less regional, particularly as regards contemporaneous history. The extent to which the modern history of Syria and Palestine was covered is indicated by the two unit headings: “The Turkish administrative system at the beginning of the period and on [sic] subsequent reforms” and “The present Administration of Palestine,”⁸⁷ this last section appearing to be a sterile overview of the Mandate government structure, including the executive, judiciary, revenues and expenditures, and various departments.

Arab history sections of the preparatory, first, second, and fourth year syllabi covered indigenous figures and dynasties such as ‘Umar, Mu‘awiyya, Salah al-Din, and the Ottomans,⁸⁸ with an overwhelming emphasis on the medieval period. The second year syllabus ended with ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi, and the fourth with the Mahdi in Sudan, both of them likely intended to serve as cautionary tales to budding revolutionaries.⁸⁹ The same is probably the case for including Colonel ‘Urabi.⁹⁰ The only other figures from modern Arab history, in all seven years of the history curriculum, included Muhammad ‘Ali and two of his descendants.⁹¹ One would think that if the goal were to inspire students with “stories of historical personages and events which have a particular local interest in the immediate vicinity” some mention would have been made of a “personage” who was actually from Palestine within the last few centuries.

Conclusion

It is instructive to consider the enormous discrepancy in the British treatment of the Palestinian and the Jewish populations during the period of the Mandate. First, the “agricultural bias” policy designed to discourage rural Palestinians from migrating to the cities contrasted starkly with the British effort to encourage Jewish urbanization. Until 1939, support for Zionist endeavors included facilitating Jewish land purchases, immigration, and industrial development in urban areas, all of which promoted Jewish settlement in cities. Second, whereas Palestinians had very little say in the curricula of government schools, the Jewish school system was free of government oversight because, like the Palestinian mission schools, it was effectively independent. This lack of supervision meant the Jewish population was free to develop nationalism in its school system, including in the history curriculum, whereas Palestinians had no such independence in the

government schools they attended. These discrepancies in education mirrored the two communities' access to political and national rights. While the Jewish Agency, which functioned as a government, was permitted to establish a national assembly, appoint diplomats, collect taxes, launch a national bank, create health care and school systems, and form a paramilitary, the British restricted Palestinians' authority to the functions of the Supreme Muslim Council,⁹² which controlled nothing beyond religious endowments and Muslim family law courts.

In some respects, Palestinian grievances about colonial education were neither unusual nor unique: the lack of sufficient funding and the sluggish progress in making education universal were common grievances throughout the British Empire. In Palestine, however, nationalists suspected there was more at play than a mere matter of budgets prioritizing security over social spending, or a lack of political will. Rather, they deduced a calculated policy of neglect—the British were intentionally denying Palestinians their right to an education and perpetuating a “state of ignorance” (*siyasat al-tajhil*) in order to preserve the Zionists' advantages in education and therefore facilitate their establishment of a state.⁹³

Their arguments seem reasonable, considering the astonishing lack of opportunities for Palestinian secondary education and almost complete absence of opportunities for higher education. And despite repeated calls, the government obstinately refused to extend secondary education under various pretexts: Bowman, for example, contended that universal primary education had to be achieved first, and his successor, Jerome Farrell, thought Palestinians were not “ready” for secondary education any more than they were sufficiently “developed” for self-government.⁹⁴ In the meantime, the Jewish population had achieved nearly universal education by 1948 and had “ample facilities” at Hebrew University, which was established without help from the Mandate authorities.⁹⁵ The British were well aware of the significance of such increasing disparities in this critical component of state building. As an official with the Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies Palestine Subcommittee noted with great candor in 1942, “I very much doubt whether the Arab will have been given a reasonable chance of holding his own in the proposed independent state if, apart from teachers, only ten young men are to be turned out annually with a full secondary education.”⁹⁶

About the Author

Elizabeth Brownson is assistant professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, Parkside. Her dissertation, “Gender, Muslim Family Law, and Contesting Patriarchy in Mandate Palestine, 1925–1939,” demonstrates how Palestinian women could often gain benefits by maneuvering within a male-privileged court system. She is currently in the process of revising her thesis for publication.

ENDNOTES

- 1 H.M. Wilson, “School Year in Palestine, 1938–1939,” Middle East Centre Archive, Private Papers Collection, St. Antony's College, Oxford.
- 2 Howard Sachar, *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), p. 189.
- 3 The British Mandate government claimed its refusal to allow the Palestinians to develop democratic institutions was because Palestinians refused to accept the terms of its Palestine Mandate. But the Mandate document and policies explicitly included the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the British

promise to help establish a “national home” for the Jewish people in Palestine, and it neglected to even mention Palestinians by name. Also, there was no mention of political or national rights for “existing non-Jewish communities,” only “civil and religious rights.”

- 4 Charles Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 8th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2013), pp. 135, 139.
- 5 Khalil Totah, “Education in Palestine,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 164 (Nov. 1932), p. 155. Also, see Susan Boyle, *Betrayal of Palestine: The Story of George Antonius* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001) for Antonius’s experience of the glass ceiling that British officials constructed.
- 6 Totah, “Education in Palestine,” p. 162; A.L. Tibawi, “Primary Education and Social Change in Underdeveloped Areas,” *International Review of Education* 4, no 4 (1958), p. 504. Also see Totah’s testimony before the Palestine Royal (Peel) Commission in Thomas Ricks, *Turbulent Times in Palestine: The Diaries of Khalil Totah, 1886–1955* (Jerusalem: Institute for Palestine Studies and Passia, 2009), p. 303.
- 7 A.L. Tibawi, *Arab Education in Mandatory Palestine* (London: Luzac and Company, 1956).
- 8 Other important works include Ylana Miller’s *Government and Society in Rural Palestine 1920–1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985) and Rochelle Davis, “Commemorating Education: Recollections of the Arab College in Jerusalem, 1918–1948,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23, nos. 1–2 (2003), pp. 190–204.
- 9 For girls’ education in a national school during the Mandate period, see Ela Greenburg, *Preparing the Mothers of Tomorrow: Education and Islam in Mandate Palestine* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). For girls’ education in mission schools, see Inger Okkenhaug, *The Quality of Heroic Living, of High Endeavor and Adventure* (Leiden: Brill, 2002) and Nancy Stockdale, *Colonial Encounters among English and Palestinian Women* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).
- 10 Naomi Shepherd, *Ploughing Sand: British Rule in Palestine, 1917–1948* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 167.
- 11 Humphrey Bowman, *Middle East Window* (London: Longmans, 1942), p. 89.
- 12 Robert L. Tignor, “‘Indianization’ of Egyptian Administration,” *American Historical Review* 68, no. 3 (Apr. 1963), p. 657.
- 13 Lord Cromer (Evelyn Baring), *Modern Egypt* (London: Macmillan, 1908), 2: 535.
- 14 Quoted in Tignor, “‘Indianization,’” p. 658.
- 15 Roger Owen, *Lord Cromer, Victorian Imperialist, Edwardian Proconsul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 316.
- 16 Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 137.
- 17 Government of Palestine, Department of Education, *Annual Report for 1936–1937*, National Archives, London, CO 733 346/37, p. 5.
- 18 Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, p. 531.
- 19 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, pp. 20, 72.
- 20 Humphrey Bowman, “Some Aspects of Rural Education in Palestine,” *Asiatic Review* (undated proof), Middle East Centre Archive, Bowman Collection 2/6/149.
- 21 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 79.
- 22 Totah, “Education in Palestine,” p. 165.
- 23 Bowman, *Middle East Window*, p. 268.
- 24 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, pp. 80–81. In 1932, rural students attended school for three years. See Totah, “Education in Palestine,” p. 157.
- 25 Totah, “Education in Palestine,” pp. 156–57.
- 26 Calculated from data in Government of Palestine, Department of Education, *Elementary School Syllabus* (for boys’ schools in towns), rev. ed. (1929), p. 7.

- 27 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 95.
- 28 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 94.
- 29 Totah's testimony to the Palestine Royal Commission (PRC), quoted in Ricks, *Turbulent Times*, p. 298.
- 30 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 43.
- 31 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 76.
- 32 In addition to investigating the causes of the Arab Revolt, the Peel Commission was tasked with proposing a plan that would resolve those grievances as well as the Zionists' concerns. It recommended virtual termination of the Mandate and a partition plan to create an Arab state and a Jewish state.
- 33 Bowman's testimony to the PRC, Middle East Centre Archive's Bowman Collection, St. Antony's College, Oxford, pp. 32–33.
- 34 Bowman's testimony to the PRC, pp. 32–33.
- 35 Education Department files, Israel State Archives.
- 36 Education Department files, Israel State Archives.
- 37 Totah, "Education in Palestine," p. 155.
- 38 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, pp. 32–33.
- 39 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 36.
- 40 I am referring to Education Department personnel files in the Israel State Archives.
- 41 Bowman's testimony to the PRC, p. 29.
- 42 Bowman's testimony to the PRC, p. 29.
- 43 Totah, "Education in Palestine," p. 156.
- 44 C.W.M Cox, "Arab Education in Palestine," Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, Palestine Subcommittee, 27 January 1942, Bowman Collection 2/2/99/3, Middle East Centre Archive.
- 45 Bowman's testimony to the PRC, p. 27.
- 46 Calculated from statistics provided in Government of Palestine, Department of Education, *Annual Report for 1936–1937*, p. 78. Two institutions that the government particularly relied on for its teachers were the Jerusalem Girls' College (a secondary school) and the American University of Beirut.
- 47 Miss Susanna Emery to her mother, 30 October 1932, Emery Papers 1/2, Middle East Centre Archive.
- 48 Bowman's interview with the PRC, p. 37.
- 49 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 196.
- 50 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, pp. 196, 198.
- 51 Mahmud Abidi, "The Arab College, Jerusalem," in *Arabic and Islamic Garland* (London: Islamic Cultural Centre, 1977), p. 31; Totah's testimony to the PRC, quoted in Ricks, *Turbulent Times*, p. 286.
- 52 Totah's testimony to the PRC, quoted in Ricks, *Turbulent Times*, p. 302.
- 53 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 195.
- 54 Abidi, "The Arab College," p. 32.
- 55 Totah's testimony to the PRC, quoted in Ricks, *Turbulent Times*, p. 289.
- 56 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 196.
- 57 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 196; Bowman, *Middle East Window*, p. 311.
- 58 Bowman, *Middle East Window*, p. 311.
- 59 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 199.
- 60 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 201.
- 61 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 200.

- 62 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p.197; Abidi, p. 31.
- 63 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 198.
- 64 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 199.
- 65 Draft notes of evidence from Bowman's testimony to the Palestine Royal Commission on 27 November 1936, tenth meeting (private), Bowman Collection 2/2/105, Middle East Centre Archive. This meeting was private, as opposed to the public meeting cited previously.
- 66 Bowman's testimony to the PRC, p. 99.
- 67 Bowman's testimony to the PRC, p. 106.
- 68 Humphrey Bowman, "Review of Education Policy 1920–1933," Bowman Papers 2/2/13, Middle East Centre Archive.
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- 70 Bowman, "Review of Education," p. 13.
- 71 Sandy Tolan, *The Lemon Tree* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 61.
- 72 Bowman's private testimony to the PRC, p. 107.
- 73 Bowman's private testimony to the PRC, p. 107.
- 74 Wilson, "School Year in Palestine," p. 7.
- 75 Wilson, "School Year in Palestine," p. 7.
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- 77 Quoted in Stockdale, *Colonial Encounters*, p. 184.
- 78 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 197.
- 79 Tibawi, *Arab Education*, p. 196.
- 80 Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and Liberating Egypt, 1805–1923* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 116.
- 81 Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation*, p. 117.
- 82 Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation*, p. 117.
- 83 Government of Palestine, "Elementary School Syllabus," pp. 30–31.
- 84 Government of Palestine, "Elementary School Syllabus," pp. 30–31.
- 85 Government of Palestine, "Elementary School Syllabus," pp. 42.
- 86 Government of Palestine, "Elementary School Syllabus," pp. 41–41.
- 87 Government of Palestine, "Elementary School Syllabus," p. 47.
- 88 Government of Palestine, "Elementary School Syllabus," pp. 32–33, 41.
- 89 Government of Palestine, "Elementary School Syllabus," pp. 36, 41.
- 90 Government of Palestine, "Elementary School Syllabus," pp. 36, 41.
- 91 Government of Palestine, "Elementary School Syllabus," pp. 31, 36, 41.
- 92 For more on the advantages that the British gave the Zionists over the Palestinians, see the second chapter of Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston: Beacon, 2006).
- 93 Quoted in Tibawi, "Primary Education," p. 504.
- 94 Miller, *Government and Society in Rural Palestine*, p. 99. Farrell also refused to open a second agricultural training school for Palestinians, which could have narrowed the chasm between Zionist and Arab agriculture production. See Shepherd, *Ploughing Sand*, p. 163.
- 95 Cox, "Arab Education in Palestine"; Tom Segev, *One Palestine Complete* (New York: Owl Books, 2001), pp. 391–92.
- 96 Cox, "Arab Education in Palestine."