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What role has education played in the history of colonialism? Discuss in terms of specific educational practices, institutions, or curricula.

(Academic discipline - History)

Education in Palestine under the British Mandate

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Those with control over the education in any given state, control the future. They have a direct link in shaping the understanding, identity, and beliefs of entire generations; the role education has played in the history of colonialism cannot be overstated. The educational practices imposed by the British on Palestine from 1917-1948 are a key case of this importance, having shaped the territory into its current form by fostering divisions and deepening existing mistrust. These must be studied and remembered, in the first instance to understand the root of the modern conflict between the states of Israel and Palestine, and to understand the consequences of how a divisive education system has the capacity to fail an entire nation.

To understand British educational practice in Palestine, the Ottoman system which preceded it should be discussed. Over centuries, the Ottomans had developed a millet system; "millet" translating from Arabic directly as "nation," and in the context of the Ottoman empire meaning a religious community.[1] The millet system was the empire's main means of administration, with religious communities able to self-govern. The idea that each community/millet was a separate "nation," doubtless did a great deal to create division, promoting the view of different religious groups to one's own as "other." Until the 1860s, education was left almost entirely to the private systems which individual millets saw fit, but in 1869 an Imperial Order announced that a state-run primary education was to be implemented. These schools had not been created with education as their main goal. Ottoman state education was political – aiming at "consolidating Turkish rule and at preparing a generation of subservient Ottoman subjects."[2] Overall the Ottoman hybrid system of millet and state education had left profound social divides by the time of the First World War.

The manner in which Britain subsequently gained control of Palestine closely ties to the educational practices it issued once in power. In October 1915, British High Commissioner of Egypt (Henry McMahon) declared support for Arab independence in return for their help in WWI: "Great Britain is prepared to recognize and support the independence of the Arabs in all the regions within the limits demanded by the Sherif of Mecca."[3] However, just a few months later in 1916, the Sykes-Picot agreement occurred between French and British, the two powers essentially splitting the anticipated spoils of the war by dividing the Middle East into the countries of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Palestine. Diplomat Mark Sykes agreed on behalf of

[1] Fatih Ozturk "*THE OTTOMAN MILLET SYSTEM*", (Guneydogu Avrupa Arastirmalari Dergisi)*, 2014, p. 71.
[2] Bernard Sabella, "*EDUCATION IN PALESTINE AND BRITISH POLICIES 1917-1948*", (Bethlehem University Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1983), p. 64
[3] "Letter from Henry McMahon to Sharif Hussein", 24th October 1915 public domain, found in McMahon-*Hussein correspondence,* public domain, accessed on https://www1.udel.edu/History-old/figal/Hist104/assets/pdf/readings/13mcmahonhussein.pdf

the British empire to take control of Palestine (the very same area he had promised Sheriff Hussein as an independent Arab state).[4]

Finally, perhaps the most well-known agreement of this era given out by the British was the short, but infamous Balfour declaration of 1917. This committed Britain to: "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."[5] This itself was a move rooted in anti-Semitism; it was held by many in government that the Jewish people were secretly behind every great historical event of the last few centuries. John Buchan (Director of Information) had proclaimed that: "The Jew is behind it all ... the Jew is everywhere, with an eye like a rattlesnake."[6] It was deemed that gaining Jewish favour would somehow be beneficial to a victorious outcome in the war. Thus, by the conclusion of WWI, the British had made entirely contradictory agreements with 3 separate parties. In 1917, the promises made of Arab independence were discarded; the British assumed military, then civil control over Palestine.

The British set up a military administration from 1917 to 1920, during which minor changes to the schooling system occurred, such as the language of instruction switching from Turkish to Arabic. When Britian finally gained an official mandate from the League of Nations for an administration in Palestine, Article 15 of the mandate stated that "The right of each community to maintain its own schools for the education of its own members in its own language ... shall not be denied or impaired."[7] While this appears a protection of rights for individual religious/social groups, it must be noted that Article 15 is the only mention of Britian's educational responsibilities in the entire mandate. This set up the British administration inherit the Ottoman millet system, favouring religiously segregated education over providing a high-quality, universal state education. The British did assume control over the old Ottoman state schools (which became Arab-only) and implemented Humphrey Bowman as the director of education in Palestine. Bowman was British, as were those filling the most senior positions in the education administration – it was the British who created the curriculum and made all major decisions.

The Balfour Declaration had not been forgotten – it was made in a very public manner and was difficult to shirk. In Britain's mandate for the administration of Palestine, 5 entire articles were dedicated to cementing British responsibility to the

4 "The Sykes-Picot Agreement", 1916, public domain, accessed on https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-sykes-picot-agreement-1916
5 "The Balfour Declaration", 1917, public domain, accessed on https://www1.udel.edu/History-old/figal/Hist104/assets/pdf/readings/14balfour.pdf
6 Tom Segev, "*One Palestine, Complete*", (Little, Brown and Company Publishers, 2000), p. 39.
7 "British Mandate to Govern Palestine", 1922, public domain, accessed on https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/palmanda.asp

Zionist cause.[8] Article 4 of the mandate is particularly significant, naming the "Zionist organisation" as a public body which would work with the British administration in "economic, social and other matters".[9] In real terms, this created a Jewish quasi-state which ran its own independent schooling system. Arab frustration grew over their comparative lack of control over their children's education; McMahon began claiming that an independent Arab state involving Palestine had ever been promised.[10]

A large reason for Britian's refusal to allow Palestinians control over their own educational institutions, practice and curricula was linked deeply to events elsewhere in the empire. In 1919, the Egyptian revolution had broken out in a wave of nationalism, leading to the 1923 Egyptian constitution (ending Egypt's status as a British protectorate). In India, many believed that the education had been too academically focused and had produced a large class of intellectuals who were constantly dissatisfied with British rule.[11] Bowman – who had worked in Egypt's educational department - kept this in mind when formulating educational policy for Palestine, particularly the ostensible idea that 'lessons' should be taken from such events to prevent their recurrence.[12]The two main objectives that Bowman ensured the education system pursued were: the prevention of nationalism, and the control of the rural population (who comprised around 60% of Palestinians).[13]

In attempt to curb nationalism, textbooks were censored. This was particularly prevalent in the subject of history, where the teaching of Arab history was almost entirely absent in hopes to prevent Arab children from developing a sense of national identity. In one history textbook issued in 1926, there were only 3 paragraphs contained which mentioned the Arabs at all.[14] The censoring was a deliberate British attempt - either to conform Arab students to the idea of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, or to make the curriculum so bland that no critical thinking counter to this objective could develop. The same was true in non-Palestinian run missionary schools, which taught most of the middle/upper-class children. One graduate of St Joseph's (a French Catholic missionary school) commented, "We used to learn everything about France: ... even street names. We were not allowed to speak in

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[8] ibid.

[9] ibid.

[10] Ben Clarke,"*From Balfour to Boris: Britain's broken promises in Palestine*", (The New Arab, 2017).

[11] Elizabeth Brownson,"*Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Politics of Teaching history in Mandate Palestine*", (Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2014), p. 11.

[12] ibid, p. 10

[13] Sabella, p. 63

[14] Rashid Khalidi,"*Palestine and the Gulf, proceedings of an international seminar*", (Institute for Palestine Studies, 1981), p. 68.

Arabic ... It was only during the revolt of 1936 that I realized that I belonged to the same people who were revolting against the British."[15]

In terms of rural education, the objective remained to eliminate nationalism by preventing rural children from gaining too much of the 'wrong education.' Speaking in a 1939 annual report, Bowman deemed that the "right kind" of education would make the "village boy more, not less, contented ... and you will keep him on the land."[16] Bowman's idea of the "right kind" of education was one that pivoted around rural matters with little consideration for the 'literary' focus which he believed had created such discontent in India. It was also an education which ironically deliberately left most un-educated, or at least severely under-educated. To begin with, the expansion of rural education was chronically underfunded by the mandate government, who created the policy that rural schools must acquire 50% of their funding through donations from the local community. From 1941-45, villagers in rural areas raised around £450,000 for the building of new rural schools. In the same time, the government only raised around £90,000.[17] Bowman barely paid lip service to the understaffed schools of the rural population (who comprised a majority of Palestine). He opened the Kadoorie Agricultural school in 1931 to train teachers for rural areas; in 5 years of this programme, only 75 teachers were trained.[18]

The primary schools that were built in rural areas had a curriculum tailored to "keep them on the land," with agricultural studies forming a core subject and each school owning its own set of gardens for mandatory student use. The primary schooling system was supposed to contain 6-7 grades (which it did in most urban areas), yet in rural areas most of the primary schools did not exceed 3-4 grades.[19] Essentially, rural education taught village children no more than barebones literacy and how to be good farmers. The British state had already picked out the future careers for over 3/5 of Palestine's population: they were to be 'harmless' uneducated agricultural workers, with few loyalties and no sense of national identity.

The government's dictation of Palestinian children's prospects was particularly problematic when considering what the prospects actually were. Most in Palestine were rural workers – the only large employer in the country was the government itself. Through both setting regulations on the academics required to work in a government job, and by controlling who had access to higher education, the government effectively had complete control over creating a ruling class who would

[15] Islah Jad," *Rereading the British Mandate in Palestine: Gender and the Urban-Rural Divide*", (Cambridge University Press, Vol. 39, No. 3, 2007), p. 314.
[16] Humphrey Bowman,"*Rural Education in the near and Middle East*", (Journal of the Royal Central Asian society, 1939), p. 402.
[17] Sabella, p. 71
[18] ibid.
[19] ibid, p. 73

not undermine British rule. On average, the government turned away around 50% of applicants who wished to attend secondary school. Passing grade 6 (the final year) of secondary school was crucial to obtaining a job in government, and the selection process was so brutal that in 1945, only 16 pupils graduated - all male.[20]

The most crucial factor in determining a job in government was a citizen's ability to speak English. This skill was left to graduates of English Christian missionary schools (whose parents were of the upper class to begin with), or the select few in urban areas who had access to a full secondary education; the government promoted monolingualism in education. The British were committed to ensuring the right for "each community to maintain its own schools for the education of its own members in its own language."[21] In practise, this only depended divides between the already mistrustful Jews and Arabs, who now did not even have the means to communicate with each other. For a small minority of the middle-upper class, there were private schools which took in both Jewish and Arab children, teaching both Hebrew and Arabic. As one female graduate of such a school recalled, "We were all the same ... we used to love each other."[22] However, any state schools which provided this were soon closed down after the 1933 Education Ordinance, which firmly split education into two separate spheres, "each classified according to the principal language of instruction."[23] For those Arab nationalists, Zionists, and British officials who already thought that teaching multilingualism was a violation of article 15, the ordinance served as something they could use to demand the segregation of Jewish and Arab children.

The final large failing of the mandate government in education was the gender divide. There was no reason for this discrimination that could have been justified – even at the time. Given the existing urban-rural divide, girls who lived in rural areas suffered the most. In 1931, ¼ of rural villages had a primary school for boys, only 1/100 had a school for girls. By 1945, ½ of all villages had a school for boys, yet still only 8/100 had a school for girls.[24] Town syllabuses had a curriculum for both girl's and boy's education, yet the village syllabus was male only; the government wished to wait until numbers of girls in rural education increased. Of course, the fact that the government was making no attempt to increase these numbers again presents its deliberate failings. A 1946 document published by the British authorities attempted to justify these failures: "there has not yet been a universal demand for the education of girls in Muslim villages, although the demand is increasing," and cited

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[20] ibid, p. 74
[21] "British Mandate to Govern Palestine", 1922
[22] Jad, p. 341.
[23] Suzanne Schneider, "*Monolingualism and Education in Mandate Palestine*", Institute for Palestine Studies, 2017, p. 70.
[24] Sabella, p. 73

"religious and social barriers."[25] As established, throughout Britian's time in government it saw no reason to aid in the breaking down of such barriers – in any case, these "barriers" were poor excuses. In towns, the seclusion of women was widely practised yet there was still a 2:3 ratio of girls:boys in education – in villages this seclusion was not practised, yet the ratio was only 1:11. In 1950, an Arab who had been in the mandate education department noted, "The paucity of girls' schools was not due to any lack of desire on the part of parents to educate their daughters, but to the insufficiency of Government financial provision for education."[26] The gender divide in access to education was likely imposed to conform Palestine to British ideals of gender, to keep the women illiterate to perform their 'role' as mothers and wives to its fullest extent.

Overall, education in the British colonisation of Palestine failed all who lived there. The mandate government not only gave little thought to creating national cohesion and understanding between religious groups, but actively sought to create divides. Monolingualism was encouraged, Jewish communities were given an education system entirely independent of the Arabs, and millet segregation remained much unchanged. Alongside these religious divides, the government education system created divides in all areas, seeking to keep farmers on the land, keep women in the home, and keep Arabs from forming a sense of national unity. A 1932 report given to the League of Nations surrounding the administration of Palestine, accused the government of deliberately keeping the Arab population in "a state of illiteracy and ignorance."[27] Indeed, the education policy for the Arabs was largely centred around the idea that Palestine would soon become a Jewish homeland, and the Arabs were largely regarded by the British as an unfortunate inconvenience to this objective. Winston Churchill was a loud critic of Palestine's 90% Arab population, attacking them for not "making way to a stronger race, a higher grade race, a more worldly wise race which has come in to take their place."[28] He made no mention of what he thought should happen to the some 700,000[29] Arabs who would "make way" for the "Jewish race." Ultimately, the British education system in Palestine left the country deeply divided on all fronts, setting it up for the violence that would occur between Jewish and Arab communities after Britian's withdrawal and official creation of the state of Israel. The failings of the education system resonate today in the form of tens of thousands of deaths, both Palestinian and Israeli.

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[25] Jad, p. 339
[26] ibid.
[27] ibid.
[28] Clarke,"*From Balfour to Boris: Britain's broken promises in Palestine.*"
[29] Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, "*Jewish and Non-Jewish Population of Israel/Palestine*", 2024.

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