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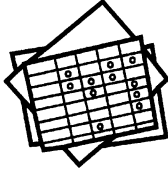
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## QUICK STUDIES



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## Rereading the British Mandate in Palestine: Gender and the Urban–Rural Divide in Education

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### *The Arab Education System in Government and Nongovernment Schools, 1945–46<sup>1</sup>*

	Schools	Teachers	Boys	Girls	Total Pupils
Government schools	514	2,156	64,536	16,506 (20.3%)	81,042
Private Muslim schools	131	432 (1944–45 figures)			14,649
Private Christian schools	182	1,468 (1944–45 figures)			29,234

Under Ottoman rule, the relations between native Arabs and Jews in Palestine were based on understanding and respect, as was the case between Muslims and Christians. Shared enrolment of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian students in the same schools—either the Jewish Alliance Israelite schools (established in 1882) or in the *nizamiyya*, the Ottoman public schools first established by the Turkish law of 1869<sup>2</sup>—promoted mutual understanding for a small elite. In contrast, the British Mandate policy in education played a major role in reshaping national, regional, and class and gender identities. It was through education that two separate national entities were developed, the urban/rural division was deepened, class boundaries were rendered unbridgable, and gender identities were molded to suit the British model.

Education was geared to benefit an urban, mostly male elite. Division of public schools along national and linguistic, or simply national, grounds into

an Arab public system and a Hebrew public system had its roots in the first formative years of the Mandate.<sup>3</sup> The British education department exercised direct and complete control over the Arab public system and indirect and somewhat nominal control over the Jewish system.<sup>4</sup>

In the British administration there was a struggle between two tendencies: one insisted on academic subjects geared to educate an elite class, and the other pressed subjects such as agriculture and domestic science to “keep the peasants on the land by teaching their children farming beside basic education.”<sup>5</sup> The former tendency won and the latter remained merely experimental. That was reflected in the number of years of education given for town schools (seven years) as opposed to education for village schools (four years).<sup>6</sup>

The British Mandate was never able to introduce compulsory education or to provide state schools in sufficient numbers to make education universal—or to provide enough places in schools for all who applied for admission. This was directly attributable to political commitments of the government and only indirectly to its financial circumstances. The Mandate government controlled all services for Palestinians centrally and was particularly ineffective when it came to education. In contrast, Jews benefited from autonomy in running their institutions and in deciding their policies. A report on the administration of Palestine for 1932, submitted to the League of Nations, cited the charge that the government was deliberately keeping the Arab population in “a state of illiteracy and ignorance.” The education service faced continuous budget reduction due to “increased expenditure on public security.”<sup>7</sup>

The neglect of girls’ education was attributed by the British administration to “religious and social barriers” and to the local community’s lack of interest. An official document published in 1946 stated that “there has not yet been a universal demand for the education of girls in Muslim villages, although the demand is increasing.”<sup>8</sup> However, neither “religious” nor “social” considerations were real obstacles, at least during the last decade of the Mandate. In towns, where seclusion of women was widely practiced, there were two girls for every three boys attending school, whereas in villages, where no seclusion was practiced, there was only one girl for every eleven boys attending school. “The paucity of girls’ schools,” wrote an Arab member of the education department in 1950, “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.”<sup>9</sup> Public education had no scheme for training female rural teachers before 1935, when a single training center opened. At this time women teachers, trained or untrained, were almost impossible to find in the Muslim community, and very few with sufficient general knowledge and experience could be found among the Christian communities.<sup>10</sup>

The town syllabus was designed both for boys’ and for girls’ schools, whereas the village syllabus was initially for boys’ schools until the number of girls’ schools in villages increased. Slight variations in village syllabi allowed for instruction in sewing and embroidery instead of manual work and agriculture

to equip girls to “develop” their environment.<sup>11</sup> Learning English, one of the main skills needed to secure a job in the British administration, was almost an exclusive “privilege” for urban students. “Christian values” were taught to girls in both urban and rural schools.<sup>12</sup> Formal courses were equally alienating, and Arab nationalists have pointed out that although the syllabus contained Arab geography and history, it insisted in its content and tone on the international rather than the national character of Palestine.<sup>13</sup>

Rural schools were under greater financial pressure than urban schools. The British administration required poor villages to bear between half to the entire capital cost of buildings and equipment, whereas more prosperous towns were not usually required to make such contributions until the last years of the Mandate.<sup>14</sup> If the quality and extent of education marked boundaries between rural and urban students, the content and language of the curriculum widened class cleavages, especially among women. It is pertinent and puzzling to note that although men transcended class boundaries in their national political organizations to some extent, women were more confined to “their” class in their more local organizations. The policy and content of education provided to female students provides clues to this puzzle.

The British Mandate, as the Israeli occupiers did later on, raised the banner of advancing women’s education, reflected in the early creation of a section for female education by the British military administration in 1918. With passing years, however, female education remained one of the major lacunae in Mandate policies: because it was not compulsory, it had a limited effect on women’s situation. The British education system was highly centralized, with all decision making concentrated in the hands of British directors and assistants.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, men’s education was later Arabized. The principal and staff of the men’s training college were all Arabs (except for the lecturer in English). At the women’s training college, however, the principal, vice-principal, and three lecturers were British, with the rest of the staff Palestinian.<sup>16</sup> Palestinian government secondary schools and teacher-training colleges for girls were governed by British standards and conducted in English.

Foreign schools provided another source of education. European Christians established various foreign Christian schools, or rather “various foreign school systems.”<sup>17</sup> Despite their service to the country, all foreign schools during the Mandate period came to be viewed with mixed feelings by Arab nationalists, Christians no less than Muslims. Although they were generally considered to have rendered a valuable service to the country by providing places for practically every Christian child of school age not in a state school, they tended in this way to “deepen, not to bridge, the educational gap between the two sections of the Arab community.”<sup>18</sup> Most foreign schools were concentrated in or around towns, easily accessible to children of Christian Arabs, who were mostly urban. In contrast, more than two-thirds of Muslim Arabs lived in villages, many of which were without state schools and far from most foreign schools. The comparatively few Muslim Arab children attending foreign schools were either very

rich, able to pay fees, or very poor, admitted out of compassion or because of exceptional merit. The disparity in literacy rates among Muslim and Christian Arabs must always be evaluated against this background.<sup>19</sup>

My interviews with Palestinian women underscore the impact of education on people's identity. A graduate of St. Joseph, a French Catholic school in Jaffa, remarked,

In our school, we used to learn everything about France: geography, population, weather, fashion—even street names. We were not allowed to speak in Arabic during breaks; we could be fined if the teachers heard us speaking in 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; I realized that I am one of them, an Arab.<sup>20</sup>

Wadi'aa Khartabil, onetime head of the Tulkarem Arab Women's Union, has similar memories about her education: "I went to the American school in Beirut, in which the majority of courses were in English; that is why we were less interested in Arabic or Islamic cultures. When my father realized this lacuna, he asked a shaykh to teach us Arabic and the Qur'an twice a week."<sup>21</sup>

Class background and a foreign education helped to bring together middle-class women from different regions and different religions. As one women activist recalls, "We were all the same. We were educated and never felt any difference . . . We used to live together in boarding schools and . . . [were] members of the same associations . . . We used to love each other."<sup>22</sup> This class unity was exclusive; it did not and could not include rural women. Rural women were different in all aspects of their daily reality; they went, if they could go at all, to different schools, followed different courses, spoke a different language, lived in different houses, and dressed differently. The gains achieved for a few middle-class women under the British Mandate did not survive the foundation of the Jewish state, however, which led to the uprooting and dislocation of Palestinian society in all its social strata.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Abdel-Latif al-Tibawi, *Arab Education in Mandatory Palestine: A Study of Three Decades of British Administration* (London: Luzac, 1956), 270–71.

<sup>2</sup>*A Survey of Palestine Prepared in December 1945 and January 1946 for the Information of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry*, vol. II (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Palestine Studies, 1991), 635.

<sup>3</sup>Al-Tibawi, *Arab Education*, 27–28.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 160–62.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 24–25.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>12</sup>It is particularly striking to note that mostly Muslim rural schools were teaching female students to embroider St. George (England's patron saint) killing the dragon with his long spear.

To this day, it is common to see embroidery of this and other Christian saints hanging on the walls of peasants' houses.

<sup>13</sup>Al-Tibawi, *Arab Education*, 89.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>Personal interview with Im Salim, n.d.

<sup>21</sup>Wadi'aa Khartabil, *Bahthan 'an al-Amal wa-l-Watan* (In Search of Hope and Homeland), *Wadi'aa Qadoura Khartabil's Diary, 1936-1990* (Lebanon: Bissan Publications, 1995), 39.

<sup>22</sup>Sa'ida Jarallah cited in Ellen Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its "New" Women: The Palestinian Women's Movement 1920-1948* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003), 144.