

# A Memorable Educator from Palestine

Ahmad Samih al-Khalidi (1896-1951)

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## Abstract

The broad context of this article is the British Mandate on Palestine 1920–48, a period that was in fact a brutal British colonial occupation that led not only to the prevention of the realization of Palestinians’ national aspirations but ultimately to the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from their homeland. During that period, the national struggle of the Palestinians involved activists from the fields of politics, economics, education, and culture. Each field became an arena of resistance. One of the significant results was that a group of prominent and visionary Arab teachers and educators began to emerge and took upon themselves to lead and advance the educational endeavors of Palestinian society under those difficult and complex conditions. Ahmad Samih al-Khalidi was one of the most important and influential of them.

## Keywords

Palestine; British Mandate; education; modernization; Ahmad Samih al-Khalidi; Arab nationalism.

The colonial British Mandate over Palestine was, as Rashid Khalidi explains, the first war declared by colonial Britain and its ally, the Zionist movement, against the Palestinians and began with the Balfour Declaration of 1917.<sup>1</sup> Khalidi’s thesis reinforces the views of historians who see British and even American support until today as the basis for the existence of the state of Israel.<sup>2</sup> During the Mandate, dramatic upheavals and changes took place that

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transformed Palestinian society, including in politics, economy, society, culture, and education.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, the process of comprehensive modernization that Palestinian society underwent throughout the Mandate period has been largely neglected in Palestinian historiography; as such, this inattentiveness weakens and harms the otherwise fair and accurate Palestinian narrative.<sup>4</sup> The story of the Palestinian press, sports, and culture, and writers and libraries has been ignored.<sup>5</sup> Also, the enormous influence of progressive Palestinian educators in shaping the social, political, and national identity of Arab students throughout the Mandate years has not yet gained the attention it deserves.<sup>6</sup> I argue that despite work published in the last decade by scholars such as Furas, Schneider, Greenberg, Brownson, Davis, Demichelis, ‘Adawi, and others, official and private Arab education, including its schools, teachers, and students, require more comprehensive and in-depth research.

This essay seeks to contribute to that effort by focusing on the impressive work of one of the greatest Palestinian educators and agents of new pedagogical ideas during the Mandate, Ahmad Samih al-Khalidi (1896–1951). For thirty years, Khalidi worked as a teacher, principal, and inspector of education, leaving a huge impact on generations of students and teachers. From 1925 to 1948, Khalidi presided over the renowned Arab College in Jerusalem. During this time, he succeeded in shaping its image and goals, promoting it and elevating its status until it became the most important and influential Arab educational institution in Mandate Palestine.<sup>7</sup> This essay examines and analyzes Khalidi’s vision, principles, and projects and sheds light on his activity in the social and national field, which continued even after the Nakba. To do so, this essay draws on diaries and memoirs of Khalidi’s students, colleagues, and friends, including the memoirs of his wife ‘Anbara,<sup>8</sup> and his influential book *Arkan al-tadris* (Foundations of Teaching),<sup>9</sup> as well as his articles published mainly in the college’s journal *Majallat al-Kulliyya al-‘Arabiyya* (the Arab College).

## Pioneering Principles and Vision

Many of Khalidi’s contemporaries saw him as the greatest Palestinian educator during the Mandate, alongside Khalil al-Sakakini.<sup>10</sup> Khalidi first began to form his progressive educational vision when he was a student at the American University of Beirut. At this early stage, he was exposed to Western ideas about education and, in preparing to be a future educator, sought a deeper knowledge of these foundations. Khalidi’s attitude toward the West, like that of many educated Palestinians and Arabs, stemmed from the complex reality of those days. On the one hand, he admired Western science, culture, democracy, and liberalism, but on the other hand he opposed European colonialism and its arrogant and violent colonial foreign policy. Like other colonial elites, Khalidi adopted a pragmatic position that emphasized the usefulness of higher education and Western ideas and worldviews.

In late 1925, after the British Mandate placed him in charge of the Arab College, Khalidi began writing about his educational beliefs and insights in the college’s journal.<sup>11</sup>

Khalidi saw Palestinian society as an undeveloped, traditional, and weak society in a precarious state and unable to withstand the many threats and challenges facing it. He believed that only education and modernization could strengthen Palestinian society and rescue it from its distress and misery. Khalidi was not convinced of the principles of democratic education and argued against equal distribution of resources and equal opportunity in secondary and higher education. Secondary school graduates had the weighty responsibility of leading society to a better and more successful future, and so Khalidi insisted there was no place for mediocre or weak students.<sup>12</sup>

To redress the failures of Arab education, Khalidi proposed evaluating modern Western education and taking from it only what was appropriate. The strengths and weaknesses of Western education, Khalidi concluded, were embodied in the German and U.S. systems, respectively. Secondary education, according to Khalidi, was designed for students with high intelligence and capabilities and strong desire, competitiveness, and motivation – a model he associated with Germany.<sup>13</sup> Differentiation in the allocation of resources and in curricula, in his opinion, served the highest interest of society and state, while the principle of equality wasted time and resources because the entry of weak students forced the system to be flexible, pulling down the average level of instruction and, accordingly, academic results – a trend he associated with the United States.

Khalidi believed that the primary purpose of education was to provide graduates a breadth of knowledge and independent and critical thinking skills to enable what he called “self-discovery,” meaning the inner contemplation that would allow the graduate to discover himself, his desires and aspirations. According to Khalidi, education in the United States emphasized students’ rote memorization to pass exams, while students in Germany did not rely on notebooks, writing, or dictation but on creativity and deep understanding. Whereas German education prepared the student to succeed in life, the U.S. system ultimately hurt the student’s imagination and the ability to develop creative concrete thinking.<sup>14</sup>

Khalidi had a broad pedagogical education and was inspired by some progressive European educators such as Italian physician and educator Maria Montessori (1870–1952) and Swiss thinker Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. Khalidi wrote a pamphlet on Pestalozzi’s educational principles, which he distributed to his students. He was also, according to his wife ‘Anbara, the first Arab educator to devise intelligence tests, which were then used by schools and parents.<sup>15</sup>

## **The Need for the “Ideal Teacher”**

A significant part of Khalidi’s educational thought and work focused on introducing innovative and modern models in the training of educators. Most Arab teachers under the Mandate were trained during the Ottoman period,<sup>16</sup> training that Khalidi thought was superficial and did not address students’ minimum psychological needs. Khalidi viewed teachers as of central importance in realizing the main goal of education as he saw it, namely, to strengthen Palestinian society from within and enable it to

modernize, rescuing it from social stagnation and outdated tradition. Teachers were responsible for preparing the next generation, the leadership of the future, to bring a better life to Palestinian society. Khalidi thus sought to transform the Arab College into an educational institution that was selective in admitting students but also careful in hiring teachers.

At the graduation ceremony in July 1933, Khalidi spoke of the importance of the quality of the students and teachers to the success of any educational work: "Proper educational institutions do not rely on the splendor of the buildings and luxurious furniture, but on the quality and level of the curricula, on students and teachers."<sup>17</sup> The college regulations and its strict agenda were also influenced by the spirit of the education in which Khalidi believed. A kind of semi-military code required every student to perform duties, respect punctuality, and comply with regulations. Khalidi appointed an "officer" (Fakhri al-Khatib) to oversee the observance of regulations and respect for the agenda. The procedures also included a school uniform that Khalidi designed with his colleagues: a green suit jacket with the college emblem on the top left side, brown trousers, and a green tie. The emblem of the college was an Arab falcon, another hint at Khalidi's desire to emphasize the Arab character of the college.<sup>18</sup>

Between 1929 and 1938, Khalidi published dozens of original articles and translations on pedagogy in the college's journal. He devoted most of them to European paradigms in teacher training with an emphasis on the German model. In his articles and books, Khalidi addressed students' psychological, social, and intellectual aspects and emphasized to teachers the importance of respecting students, encouraging them, avoiding any form of humiliating punishment, and raising their self-confidence and inner capability. In 1929, Khalidi translated Robert S. Woodworth's 1921 textbook *Psychology: A Study of Mental Life*, which clarified the connection between education, teaching, and psychology.<sup>19</sup>

Khalidi believed that the most reliable measure of a teacher's performance was the student. A good teacher must be a source of inspiration and a role model through his values, his attitudes toward his students, and his aspiration for knowledge and education.<sup>20</sup> In his memoir, Ihsan 'Abbas (1920–2003) described studying at the Arab College in Jerusalem from 1937 to 1941. 'Abbas gave special respect to Khalidi, remarking on his teaching methods and his attitude toward his students: "Khalidi designed strict school procedures to educate his students on values such as responsibility, seriousness, and commitment. On the other hand, he did not punish in an abusive or degrading manner and thus he saved many students from dropping out. He was always an educator."<sup>21</sup>

In *Arkan al-tadris*, Khalidi expressed his dissatisfaction with the existing teaching methods, and presented innovations for all stages of education, especially in subjects like mathematics, science, geography, and history. Khalidi gave special emphasis to Arabic language instruction, considering it of utmost national importance.<sup>22</sup> In the book, Khalidi elaborated on his progressive vision of the vital importance of the work of teachers to the supreme interests of society and the nation: "The hands of the teacher, more than any other person, hold the future of the nation, its progress, and

the development of its culture and literature . . . the teacher can do all this only if he embodies the knowledge, morals, professionalism, strong personality, and personal example.<sup>23</sup>

Khalidi was uncompromising about the quality standards for teachers. He aspired to train high-level professional teachers who had an outstanding work ethic with disciplinary specialization, alongside broad and diverse general education. He did not tolerate superficial, mediocre, narrow-minded teachers. He abhorred those teachers who saw school only as a livelihood and called for such individuals to give way voluntarily to teachers dedicated to serving society; if they would not, he called for them to be fired immediately. As he wrote in *Arkan al-tadris*:

Teaching is a profession that has rules, so it is not a refuge for the unemployed. We knew that this profession requires scientific preparation and that it has specific rules, so it is only permissible for those who are qualified . . . It is a shame in any country for the teaching profession to be taken over by ignorant people who do not know anything about the rules and principles of teaching, and all that matters to them is employment and a salary.<sup>24</sup>

## Politics, Education, and Modernization

Education policy in Mandate Palestine reflected British beliefs in the inferiority of Palestinian society and the Mandate's structural commitment to the Zionist project at the expense of any Arab efforts and aspirations to establish an independent state. The budget for Arab education, for example, never exceeded 6.5 percent of the total budget; meanwhile, the British prioritized the establishment of agricultural-oriented elementary schools in Palestinian villages, which offered only three years of schooling, and closely monitored teachers and students with an eye toward suppressing any degree of nationalism.<sup>25</sup> The history curriculum focused on European history and culture while neglecting the study of Arab history and culture.<sup>26</sup> Khalidi's legacy includes dozens of books and articles on topics in Arab and Islamic history, alongside his contributions on education and pedagogy. Despite the deep political crises through which the Palestinian people lived, Khalidi's intention was clearly to assert that Palestinians have a history, have contributed in the fields of education and culture, have never been a barren society, and will always have a future.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike many of his family members, Khalidi never belonged to a party or political movement.<sup>28</sup> Apparently political activities did not suit his personality and character. Although he was engaged in a number of social organizations, including charitable and professional institutions as well as the Association for Palestine (*Jam'iyat Filastin*) and the Muslim Youth Association (*Jam'iyat al-shubban al-Muslimin*), Khalidi saw himself primarily as an educator.<sup>29</sup> Yet Khalidi clearly saw a connection between education and the realization of the interests of society and future generations. As

his wife ‘Anbara wrote: “He understood the reality and saw the future, and believed that advancing future generations is the most important service to the Palestinian people.”<sup>30</sup> Unlike other prominent educators like Akram Zu‘aytir and Darwish al-Miqdadi, Khalidi believed in the effectiveness of education as a way of resisting the British and Zionists more than he believed in the effectiveness of politicizing the Arab education system.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, although Khalidi was a senior official in the Mandatory Department of Education for about thirty years, he did not refrain from expressing himself freely in articles on nationalist issues such as Palestinian history, or from expressing Arab national pride. It is best to assume that Khalidi’s attitude was pragmatic. He saw a reality in which a colonial power had conquered Palestine and ruled over his people, a reality in which Palestinian society suffered a severe political, social, and economic crisis. Given this reality, Khalidi believed that the most effective and realistic way to deal with the situation was to promote education and culture, to educate those who could lead the Palestinians more successfully than the existing leadership.

To this end, Khalidi insisted on the importance of strengthening the status of the Arabic language as the official language of instruction in the Palestinian Arab education system from kindergarten to college:

Excluding education for ethics and morals, teaching Arabic language, the language of the nation, is considered the most important subject to teach in primary and secondary education. . . . The importance of the Arabic language differs from other professions because it is the tool through which we communicate, think, and express opinions, and also through it students learn the rest of the subjects.<sup>32</sup>

## **Directing the Arab College**

The first director of the Arab College was the influential educator Khalil al-Sakakini, appointed in 1919. Sakakini resigned in July of the following year to protest the appointment of Herbert Samuel, a prominent British Zionist, as Palestine’s High Commissioner.<sup>33</sup> After Sakakini, the British appointed another important educator, Khalil Totah.<sup>34</sup> Totah also resigned, following the student strike in protest of Lord Balfour’s visit to Jerusalem in 1925 to inaugurate the new Hebrew University. Humphrey Bowman, the British director of education, immediately appointed Khalidi who was at the time a highly regarded senior inspector in the education department. In the summer of 1926, Khalidi received a permanent appointment, beginning a cautious chapter in the history of the college. In large part due to Khalidi, the college quickly became one of the most important colleges for teacher training in Palestine, so much so that, as students testify, every Palestinian family dreamed of sending their sons to the Arab College.<sup>35</sup> Nicola Ziadeh writes that Khalidi’s main preoccupation was the constant need to recruit professional teachers with a progressive educational vision,

aware of their mission as change agents working for the benefit of society and the nation. To accomplish this, he recruited highly qualified teachers from universities in Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, and Sudan.<sup>36</sup>

Khalidi also changed the admission policy with the aim of turning the college into a selective institution. Thus, only the top two graduates of each elementary school were accepted. As a result, the number of students remained limited, never exceeding 120.<sup>37</sup> Khalidi added a fifth year to the school's curriculum in 1926, and a sixth year in 1938, indicating his intention to upgrade the college's academic level and status. The additional years were meant to help its graduates integrate into teaching, and pursue their studies to obtain graduate degrees. By 1927, a graduate who had completed four years had to pass the government matriculation exam under the supervision of the Palestinian Council for Higher Education, after which he could obtain a certificate authorizing him to teach elementary school. Beginning in 1927, fifth-year graduates were able to obtain a diploma that would allow them to teach in elementary schools and the first two years of high school.<sup>38</sup> With the addition of the sixth year in the 1938–39 school year, graduates who passed the government intermediate exam were able to continue their studies for another year at university, earn a bachelor's degree, and then teach all levels of high school.<sup>39</sup>

In keeping with these changes, in 1927, Khalidi changed the name of the college from Dar al-Mu'allimin (Teacher training institution) to the Government Arab College for Teacher Training in Jerusalem. The name change was not merely cosmetic, but proof of his ambitious vision, two elements of which were emphasized through the new name: academic status, and the Arab character of the college.<sup>40</sup> Khalidi was aided in executing his vision by his friendship with Humphrey Bowman and, especially, his successor, Jerome Farrell, who took over the education office in 1936. As Bowman noted, Khalidi "was given a large measure of independence, and knowing well that, so long as he did not exceed his authority, he could rely on my support . . . he never abused his powers."<sup>41</sup> Walid Raghbi al-Khalidi explains the extent of Farrell's influence and support for the college and the administration: "Farrell supported the college when he saw that the level of teaching in it was advancing to the level of colleges in London and America and was run according to Western standards, something that did not exist in any Arab country."<sup>42</sup> Under Khalidi's stewardship, the Arab College moved in March 1935 from an old, crowded building opposite Bab al-Zahra, near Damascus Gate, to a new building east of Jerusalem, on the hill of Jabal Mukabir, close to the British High Commissioner's palace.<sup>43</sup>

With the addition of the fifth and sixth years, students at the Arab College were given the choice of specializing in either humanities or sciences. This change obliged Khalidi to upgrade the curricula, teaching methods, and teachers.<sup>44</sup> Students of the sciences studied mathematics, physics, chemistry, and laboratory and scientific research. They submitted research work at the end of the year and underwent practical training, teaching in two schools in Jerusalem: al-'Umariyya Elementary School and al-Rashidiyya High School.<sup>45</sup>

Rapidly, the college progressed and become a serious competitor to the wealthy

missionary colleges. By 1931, 284 Palestinians had studied at the American University of Beirut and another 30 in Egypt. It is probably the case that graduates of the Arab College were prominent among those graduates. The results of the matriculation exam held in 1948, the year of the Nakba, showed that 95 percent of the Arab College students who took the Arabic exam had passed, compared to 77 percent of the non-governmental college students.<sup>46</sup>

Following the college's successes and growing reputation, Khalidi demanded that the Department of Education turn it into a post-secondary academic college that could award a bachelor's degree and then to declare it the Arab University of Palestine. In 1947, the government began to add buildings and expand the college compound, but the events of the Nakba and the closure of the college thwarted this.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Khalidi was from the highly respected and influential generation of educated Palestinians who acted with national and social awareness during the dramatic years of the Mandate. Educators like Sakakini, Totah, Miqdadi, and Zu'aytir took advantage of their positions within the Mandatory education system to offer a more progressive educational experience for Palestinians with the hope of serving the nation. Like Sakakini and Totah, Khalidi believed that education was capable of producing the modernization needed by the Palestinians. To this end, he adopted Western ideas and principles of education despite his awareness of the history of relations between the Arab and Western worlds. Khalidi was not active in the political arena, perhaps because he was a senior official in the Department of Education, but also because he believed that through education he could better serve society and homeland.

Even after the Nakba, when he lived in Lebanon, Khalidi never stopped thinking of ways and initiatives to serve his refugee people. When the Lebanese-born scholar and activist 'Ajaj Nuwayhid met his friend Khalidi in Beirut after 1948, Khalidi told him of his intention to establish a college in Jordan that would form the basis of a university serving both Jordanian citizens and Palestinian refugees, but this plan too would go unrealized.<sup>48</sup>

Khalidi was renowned for his broad and strategic vision, his grand aspirations and dreams, his bold and groundbreaking activities, and for his spirit of giving and contributing to his society. Khalidi took a firm stand against traditional educational norms that dominated Arab education at the time, considering them as a legacy that must be disposed of in order to transform and modernize Arab society, and struggled to bring elements of the European education system, which he viewed as more advanced and successful, into the Arab education system.

Unlike influential democratic educators like Sakakini and Totah, Khalidi did not believe in a democratic secondary education open to all students in accordance with the principle of equal opportunity. He believed that Palestinian society's complex and crisis-ridden reality and the general weakness of Arab education left no room for the progressive ideals of democratic humanist education. Khalidi resolutely expressed his



views in meetings with Arab school principals and inspectors, arguing that secondary education must be selective. Because of his impressive personality and wide influence, Khalidi earned the respect of students and colleagues, who treated him with great admiration as an unforgettable “educator of a generation.”

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### Endnotes

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- 5 Ami Ayalon, *Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy, 1900–1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 2.
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- 8 ‘Anbara Salam al-Khalidi, *Jawla fi-l-thikrayat bayna Lubnan wa Filastin* [Memoirs of Lebanon and Palestine] (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1978).
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- 12 Khalidi expressed his views in meetings held at the Arab College with principals and Arab education officials. See, for example, the protocol of a meeting held on 16 August 1928, published in *Majallat al-Kulliyya al-‘Arabiyya* on 1 January 1929, 14–20.
- 13 Khalidi wrote about the education system in Germany in a two-part article, “Al-manhaj al-hadith li-tadrib al-mu‘alimin fi Almaniya” [The modern method of teacher training in Germany], published in consecutive issues of *al-Kulliyya al-‘Arabiyya* on 10 June 1931 (1–6) and 15 July 1931 (1–11).
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 22 Ahmad al-Khalidi, *Arkan al-tadris*, 121.  
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 26 Brownson, "Colonialism," 10.  
 27 For a list of Khalidi's books, see: Ya'qub 'Awdat, *Min a'lam al-fikr wa-l-adab fi Filastin* [Intellectuals and writers in Palestine] (Amman: Wakalat al-Tawzi' al-Urduniyya, 1987); Jihad A. Salih, *al-Ruwwad al-Maqdisiyyun fi al-haya al-fikriyya wa-l-adabiyya fi Filastin* [Jerusalemite pioneers of intellectual and scholarly life in Palestine] (Ramallah: al-Ittihad al-'amm li-l-kuttab wa-l-'udaba' al-Filastiniyyin, 2011), 47–49.  
 28 Furas, "Old Arabs, New Arabs," 11.  
 29 The main initiatives that he began or was a major partner in were: the Association for the Advancement of Higher Education (*Jam'iyat nashr al-ta'lim al-'ali*); the Palestinian Orphanage Association (*Jam'iyat al-yatim al-'Arabi*); the Dayr 'Amr project; and al-Hiniya project.  
 30 'Anbara al-Khalidi, *Jawla fi al-dhikrayat*, 203.  
 31 Furas, "Old Arabs, New Arabs," 11.  
 32 Ahmad al-Khalidi, *Arkan al-tadris*, 121.  
 33 Kamal Moed, "Educator in the Service of the Homeland: Khalil al-Sakakini's Conflicted Identities," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 59 (Summer 2014): 71.  
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 40 'Ajaj Nuwayhid, *Rijal min Filastin* [Men of Palestine] (Beirut: Manshurat Filastin al-muhtalla, 1981), 72; Demichelis, "Governmental Arab College," 267.  
 41 Humphrey Bowman, *Middle East Window* (London: Longmans, 1942), 263.  
 42 Walid Khalidi, "al-Kulliyya al-'Arabiyya," 4.  
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 47 Najati Sidqi, "Ahmad Samih al-Khalidi," *Majallat al-Risala*, Beirut, (vol. 957, 5 November 1951).  
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