



Monolingualism and Education in Mandate Palestine

Suzanne Schneider

Ramallah, Quaker Mission School.
Photographed in 1937. *Source: Library of Congress.*

Scholars have frequently noted the characterization of Ottoman and Mandate-era Palestine as a place divided. Jerusalem in particular was depicted as teeming with different ethnic groups and religious factions speaking a cacophony of languages, a contemporary Babel in which the endless variety rendered the city's people "one of the principal attractions."¹ This narrative of disorder and discord of course served the goals of political Zionism and its supporters, who argued that this hodgepodge of residents did not represent a nation in the proper sense and thus had no corresponding set of rights to counter Jewish claims on the land. Recent historical work has produced more charitable readings that stress not the tensions fueled by marks of difference, but rather suggest a type of late Ottoman cosmopolitanism characterized by simultaneous, overlapping discussions in

multiple languages about the nature of citizenship and civic responsibility.²

Whether one chooses to conceptualize Palestine's diversity as an asset or liability, there is no doubt that it presented a unique set of challenges to administrators charged with expanding the system of public education during the Mandate period. This article examines the role of monolingualism within the government's education policy, and particularly administrators' claims that the educational separation of communities along linguistic lines was a pedagogic necessity. I suggest that while the Department of Education's preference for monolingual education was warmly received by both Palestinian and Zionist nationalist camps, such a policy inevitably contributed to the fragmentation of the public space into Jewish and Arab sectors, each with its own "native" language.³ Unlike Ottoman Palestine, Mandate Palestine was a multi-lingual country not on account of its cosmopolitanism but because each community was only supposed to know a single tongue.

"It is no doubt easy to be wise after the event," wrote H.S. Scott of the Colonial Office in November 1944, while commenting on a memorandum by the Director of Education for the Government of Palestine, but "if the purpose of the Mandatory was to establish a composite state one would have thought that unity of treatment in education should have been adopted from the beginning." The danger of allowing separate systems of education to flourish, he continued, was that "the cultural rift between Jews and Arabs, which it was a Mandatory obligation to close, would actually be widened and I fear that is exactly what has happened."⁴

This comment encapsulates the general lament that swept through much of the Colonial Office during the Mandate's final years. Generally speaking, officials spent the first part of the period arguing that a unified school system was undesirable and the final years lamenting the fact that it was no longer feasible. Much of the confusion stemmed from the vagueness of the Mandate itself and the differing interpretations as to what political and social reality it entailed. It is telling that, in 1944, the Colonial Office could not exactly clarify what the Mandatory's policy had been or should have been. Was the goal, as Scott articulated it, to form a "composite state" with a binational character? Or was Palestine to be a Jewish state with the Arab majority rendered a minority through massive immigration? An Arab majority with a large, autonomous Jewish population? The fact that an unambiguous answer to these questions was never forthcoming – or that the answer changed with every White Paper – left education administrators without a clear sense of what role schools were to play in shaping the political future.

Upon occupying Palestine, the British assumed direct control of the former Ottoman public schools and nominal control over a plethora of private schools (including those of the Zionist Organization) teaching in no fewer than seven languages and often maintained by political, philanthropic or missionary groups abroad. Supervising such a motley crew was a tall order in and of itself, but it was made even more so by the peculiar terms of the Mandate. Article 15 guaranteed "the right of each community to maintain its own schools for the education of its own members in its own language, while conforming to such educational requirements of a

general nature as the Administration may impose.”

On its face, Article 15 seemed to merely offer statutory recognition of the Ottoman millet system, in which religious minorities maintained a large degree of autonomy in educational affairs. However unlike in Ottoman times, where numerous private institutions surrounded an uncontested public sphere, the Mandate government chose instead to recognize both the Arab and Zionist school systems as public entities, each with its own official language, Director of Education and administrative machinery. In this sense, education policies adopted by the government support Laura Robson’s claim that, rather than simply preserving the millet system as a continuation of the status quo, the Mandatory government actually expanded its scope by making no accommodation for a non-sectarian public space.⁵

Already in 1927, a committee convened by Lord Plumer argued that Zionist schools were not in fact private institutions, as they had been in Ottoman times, but represented a distinct system of public schools. Therefore:

...the Arabic system of schools established by the Government and the Hebrew system supported by the Zionist Organization should be promoted along parallel lines and entitled to receive proportional assistance from public funds, whether from general revenue or local rates. A new Education Ordinance to make legal provision for the practical application of these conclusions has been drafted and will be submitted to you at an early date.⁶

When it was promulgated in 1933, the Education Ordinance gave statutory recognition to this *de facto* bifurcation of public education into two realms, “each classified according to the principal language of instruction.”⁷ British officials, who had heretofore regarded any type of unified school as a potential violation of Article 15, could subsequently point to the Education Ordinance as demanding the legal separation of Arabic and Hebrew-speaking schools.

Sectarian politics that propelled Jewish and Arab communities toward dueling public spaces found a natural ally in the significance each side attached to its national language, a significance with which British education officials agreed. A number of forces therefore contributed to the creation of monolingual educational spaces. For Zionists, multilingualism was deeply associated with Diasporic existence, *galutiyut*, and thereby ran counter to the aims of Jewish national “normalization” in Palestine. While never without its points of ambivalence, the Zionist promotion of communal separatism through the exclusive use of Hebrew aimed at “the escape from European Jewish institutional pressures for multilingual education.”⁸ Within the *yishuv*, leaders such as Menahem Ussishkin argued that “the multiplicity of languages is unnatural” while educators like Izhac Epstein warned of the psychological damages of multilingualism, drawing on the latest in pedagogic research from European countries.⁹

For their part, Palestinian nationalists welcomed the elevation of Arabic as the language of instruction in government public schools, a change effected soon after the British occupation. Already before the war, the literary *nahda* had placed renewed

emphasis on the Arabic language and its literary tradition as vessels of classical heritage. Within the context of late Ottoman Palestine, imperial decentralists promoted the use of Arabic as an administrative and educational language within regions of the Empire with an Arab majority.¹⁰ Finally, educators and political leaders had long decried the influence of missionary schools that educated Arab children in foreign languages and supposedly led to estrangement from the national tongue. In 1909 many of these dynamics coalesced in the form of Khalil al-Sakakini's famed *Dusturiyya* school, which used Arabic as the language of instruction and included a largely secular curriculum.¹¹

Thus, upon entering Palestine, the British encountered well-established movements within both Palestinian and Zionist circles to promote schooling in each group's "native" language. The fact that Hebrew itself was a foreign language to most Zionist immigrants and their children, or that the native language of many Jews in Palestine was Arabic or Yiddish, did not seem to hinder the ease with which "Hebrew" became a moniker for Jew within both British and Zionist circles. Indeed, attempts on behalf of the Ashkenazi community in Jerusalem to amend the Ordinance so that schools conducted in Yiddish could gain recognition as public entities (a status for which any school teaching in Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, Armenian or English could apply) was never accepted by the Government on the grounds that Hebrew was the true native tongue of the Jews.¹²

At the same time, new educational trends within British colonial circles had developed – largely in response to the failures of policy in India and Egypt – that stressed the psychological damage and political turmoil caused by "literary education" through the English language. The doctrine of education "along native lines" presented a compelling alternative, and attracted Humphrey Bowman, the Director of Education from 1920-1936.¹³ Wary of repeating past mistakes, Bowman promoted the "right kind" of education: primary over secondary, agricultural and technical over literary, and conducted in Arabic rather than in English.

"Over it all presides the headmaster," Bowman said in describing an idyllic Palestinian school, "a Moselm Arab wearing native dress, trained in agriculture and in several crafts, an excellent teacher, though without a word of English, an enlightened, loyal and devoted servant of his village and of his country."¹⁴ He was a man of the village, still cloaked in the familiar garb of "tradition," but bearing all the tools necessary to rationalize the economic basis of rural life. Rather than spoiling the peasant, Bowman argued that education of the "right kind" would make him "more, not less, contented; you will save him from his eternal enemy, the moneylender; and you will give him a new pride – a pride in himself and in his village. And you will keep him on the land."¹⁵ Limited exposure to English therefore formed a crucial component of an educational program designed to preserve the political and social status quo.

One can thus point to a convergence of factors that fueled the embrace of monolingualism in Palestine's schools. Nationalist sentiment, modern pedagogic research and emerging paradigms of colonial rule all seemed to point to the necessity of separate school systems for Jews and Palestinian Arabs, each offering instruction in the "native" language. Similarly, instruction in English – which could serve as a

possible common language between communities – was on the whole either restricted or undertaken grudgingly, and with mixed results.¹⁶ Thus while foreign languages were not completely excluded from the curricula in certain instances, their place was at best ambivalent and they were certainly not to be used as the primary language of instruction.

It was not before the Palestine Royal Commission's inquiry in Palestine that the political consequences of separate school systems, consistently justified on the basis of linguistic necessity, came to the fore. At the same time that the PRC suggested the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab enclaves, the members also praised the work of a small number of private "mixed schools" and wondered if more could have been done in the past to promote this form of education. The answer, coming from the Director of Education, was the oft mentioned retort that language represented an unbridgeable gap that no school system could hope to overcome. Significantly, Bowman spoke of the difficulties involved in fostering a shared educational space as linguistic rather than political in nature:

The language of Arabs is Arabic; the language of the Jews is Hebrew. Both races attach very great importance to the education in elementary schools through their own language. It would be impossible in my opinion to have Arabs and Jews in one school as long as the language difficulty exists and I see no possibility of that language difficulty being solved.¹⁷

Members of the Royal Commission continued to press Bowman on the issue, suggesting that English-language schools could serve as an apolitical meeting ground for the temperamental natives. In this the PRC echoed a general tendency to make the development of a shared sense of Palestinian identity dependent on the adoption of supposedly "neutral" English values. One member of the PRC went as far as to ask Bowman to explain "this exceptional procedure," noting that "in no other territory under British rule... is there a Government maintained secondary school in which the language of instruction is not English."¹⁸ However, as mentioned, English was purposely excluded as a subject in most village schools, and Bowman was a firm believer in the pedagogic advantage provided by instruction in one's native tongue. Moreover, it is hard to imagine how the Department could have opened an English-language secondary school when it only maintained a single secondary school in all of Palestine.

Bowman's Deputy Director and eventual successor, Jerome Farrell, further argued against the possibility of mixed schooling on the basis that it was pedagogically unsound. Thus when the Royal Commission Report raised the question whether more might be done to foster mixed schooling, Farrell argued, "on purely educational grounds the proposals can hardly be justified. No elementary or secondary pupil whose native language is of literary and cultural value should be encouraged to seek instruction through a foreign medium."¹⁹ Once again, the veneer of scientific respectability allowed officials to sidestep the political ramifications of educational decisions by defending certain policies, such as segregated schooling in separate languages, as pedagogic necessities.

In short, it was not that the British merely failed to support mixed schooling, but that officials never seemed to consider the almost inevitable political consequences of nurturing separate school systems. They saw nothing contradictory about, on one hand, claiming that the policy of the Department of Education was “to lessen the cultural gulf between the two races,”²⁰ and on the other, facilitating the complete separation of the two groups through segregated, monolingual education. Education may have been a tool for equalizing the “two races” in Palestine, but certainly not for facilitating their integration.

Such a policy had no shortage of ambiguities, but two in particular are worthy of mention. First, support for monolingual education in each community’s “native” language was one of the few education policies that earned the unequivocal approval of Palestinian and Zionist nationalist forces, and yet it inevitably contributed to the political and social fragmentation of Palestine into distinct Hebrew and Arabic spaces with limited *capacity* (to say nothing of desire) to communicate with one another. Secondly, the justification for monolingualism largely hinged not on obvious political motivations, but on the needs supposedly dictated by modern pedagogical research and “progressive” colonial administrative tools. As such, the question of language was dislocated from the political realm in which it was situated to become a quasi-scientific marker of race with its corresponding educational necessities. That these policies were advanced by administrators who insisted on the primacy of pedagogic, rather than political, reasoning did not make their political impact any less dramatic.

Writing in 1944, H.S. Scott proclaimed that the development of education under the Mandate was “indeed a tragic history.”²¹ Taking tragedy to mean a failed endeavor with highly undesirable consequences, it is hard to disagree. Furthermore, this history could easily be seen as tragic in the classical sense of a series of developments doomed to end disastrously. All the forces in play, including colonial policy, nationalist sentiment, and the pedagogic science of the day, seemed to work against the creation of shared educational spaces that might have helped to avert the division of Palestine.

On the other hand, this interpretation appears to deny the highly contingent nature of history, and perhaps more importantly, to overlook the concrete policies that produced educational separatism under the Mandate. For instance, neither the recognition of the Zionist school system as a public one, nor the decision to use Arabic, rather than English, as the language of instruction in government secondary schools, should be taken as self-evident. Yet how could these measures have been avoided? We are left with the difficult challenge of reconciling a commitment to historical contingency with an outcome to which an alternative is difficult to imagine. I can only suggest that our inability to articulate what that alternative might have looked like does not mean it didn’t exist; it simply testifies to the epistemic violence of historical narratives that render the present inevitable.

Suzanne Schneider is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Middle East, South Asian and African Studies at Columbia University.

Endnotes

- 1 John de V. Loder to mother, 4 May 1918. Private Papers Collection, Middle East Centre at St Antony's College, Oxford. Quoted in A.J. Sherman, *Mandate Days: British lives in Palestine, 1918-1948* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 38.
- 2 Michelle Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).
- 3 The issue of one's native language was endlessly complicated by Jews whose mother tongues were Arabic, Ladino or Yiddish, not the Hebrew promoted by Zionist groups. Hebrew can hardly be said to have been *anyone's* native language prior to WWI. See Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
- 4 H.S. Scott, November 3, 1944, on memorandum by Jerome Farrell. CO 733/453/4.
- 5 Laura Robson, *Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine*, 1st ed., Jamal and Rania Daniel series in contemporary history, politics, culture, and religion of the Levant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).
- 6 Lord Plumer to Amery, April 14, 1927. CO 733/139/5
- 7 Government of Palestine, Education Ordinance, No. 1 of 1933. Part I, 3-(1).
- 8 Liora Halperin, "Babel in Zion: The Politics of Language Diversity in Jewish Palestine, 1920-1948" (Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA, 2010), 321.
- 9 Halperin, 326-29.
- 10 The Decentralization Party, *al-muntada al-arabi*, first emerged after the restoration of the Ottoman constitution in 1908 and promoted greater autonomy of the Empire's Arab provinces. In 1913, the First Arab Congress promoted a platform of decentralization within an Ottoman framework, including the use of Arabic as an educational and administrative language. See: Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 286-289.
- 11 For more on al-Sakakini's educational initiatives, see: Robson, *Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine*, 29-32.
- 12 See: The Council of the Ashkenazic Jewish to OAG, August 13, 1928; and, Yonathan Binyamin Halevi Ish-Hourvitz to OAG, August 13, 1928. CO 733/146/8.
- 13 Lord Lugard, the former Governor of Nigeria, was the most forceful proponent in the post-war era of indirect rule and the corresponding cultivation of native "tradition." In his words, "the education afforded to that section of the population who intend to lead the lives which their forefathers led should enlarge their outlook, increase their efficiency and standard of comfort, and bring them into closer sympathy with the Government, instead of making them unsuited to and ill-contented with their mode of life." See: Frederick John Dealtry Baron Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, 5th ed. (London F. Cass, 1965), 425-6.
- 14 As articulated in a speech before the Royal Central Asian Society after his resignation. See: Humphrey Bowman, "Rural Education in the Near and Middle East," in *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society Volume XXVI*, ed. The Royal Central Asian Society (London, 1939), 407.
- 15 Bowman, "Rural Education," 402-403.
- 16 Despite ample demand, English was not included in the curriculum for rural schools. See: Government of Palestine Department of Education, "Syllabus for State Elementary Schools for Boys in Towns and Villages," (Jerusalem, 1921). For a further breakdown of the differences between urban and rural schools, see: Khalil Totah, "Education in Palestine," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Vol. 164, Palestine. A Decade of Development (Nov. 1932). While both Arabic and English were included as subjects in many Zionist schools, accounts reveal that attempts at teaching these languages were not very successful. As one former student recalled, "kids learned English but didn't know English." See: Halperin, "Babel in Zion," 317.
- 17 "Testimony of Mr. H. E. Bowman, C.M.G., C.B.E., Director of Education. November 27, 1936," in *Palestine Royal Commission Minutes of Evidence Heard at Public Sessions* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1937).
- 18 "Testimony of Mr. H. E. Bowman."
- 19 CO 733/362/2, Farrell memorandum on "Report of the Royal Commission on Palestine: Recommendations with regard to 'mixed schools' and language instruction." November 20, 1937.
- 20 Jerome Farrell, "Note on the principles upon which the grant-in-aid of the Jewish public school system should be estimated and applied." January 30th, 1937. CO 733/346/17.
- 21 H.S. Scott, November 3, 1944, on memorandum by Jerome Farrell. CO 733/453/4.