

Why Only a Hebrew University? The Tale of the Arab University in Mandatory Jerusalem

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Abstract

This article asks, why was there no Arab university in Mandatory Palestine (while there were two Jewish universities). Apparently, the colonial mentality of the British authorities who deemed the Palestinians yet another colonized people who had to be oppressed, while regarding the Zionist settlers as fellow colonialists, feared that such a university would enhance the Palestinian national movement. At the same time, Zionist pressure, British anti-Arab racism, and lack of resources also combined to undermine the emergence of a proper Palestinian higher education system. Nonetheless, educators, intellectuals and some politicians of the Palestinian community did not give up on the idea. They used several teachers' colleges to provide high quality university-level studies, the most notable being the Arab College (al-Kulliyya al-'Arabiyya) whose graduates went on to pursue careers in universities in the region and abroad. There was also an attempt by the mufti, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, with the help of donations from abroad, to build an Islamic, but open to all, university throughout the 1930s. This initiative was foiled by the British Mandate government despite the willingness both in the Arab and Muslim worlds to support it.

Keywords

University; Jerusalem; Hajj Amin al-Husayni; Hebrew University; All-Islamic Conference; British Mandate; Arab College; American University of Beirut; education.

The Anglo-American Committee was, for all intents and purposes, the last international group attempting to find a solution to the Palestine question during the Mandatory years.

It was assembled in January 1946 and was tasked with the mission of examining the impact of the Zionist project on the Palestinians and making recommendations for the future. Its final report recorded the committee's bewilderment at the absence of any proper higher educational infrastructure, including a university, in Palestinian society, and blamed British authorities for this dismal reality:

We would also stress the urgent necessity of increasing the facilities for secondary, technical and university education available to Arabs. The disparity between the standard of living of the two peoples, to which we have already drawn attention, is very largely due to the fact that the Jewish professional and middle class so largely outnumbers that of the Arabs. This difference can only be removed by a very substantial increase in the facilities for higher education available to Arabs.¹

Indeed, the absence of a Palestinian Arab university in Mandatory Palestine at a time when most Mashriq countries boasted such institutions is a conundrum. This article poses the question – why, during the Mandatory period, was Jerusalem not graced with a Palestinian university? The city already had a Hebrew university for the small group of Jewish settlers in the 1920s but not one for the indigenous Palestinian population who were the majority in the country. This article examines the reasons behind the absence of a university and assesses the impact that this absence had on the history of Palestine during the Mandatory period and beyond.

British colonialism, Zionist lobbying, anti-Arab racism, and an overall underestimation by both British officials and some Palestinian leaders of the scope and ambition of the settler colonial project of Zionism were among the main reasons for the failure to open an Arab university in Jerusalem. Nonetheless, the local social and educational elite did its best to offer some alternative avenues for higher education, among them developing the Arab College (al-Kulliyaa al-‘Arabiyya) in Jerusalem into an advanced educational institution. This was done in many ways, as we shall see, openly under the nose of the British.

This local educational energy, which did not always see eye-to-eye with the British Mandate authorities, played a crucial role in nurturing a human capital of knowledge and planting a national orientation in a new generation who would contribute to the resurrection of Palestinian education, scholarship, and cultural life following the horror of the Nakba in 1948. This continuity meant that Palestinian culture was not obliterated by the Nakba and that those who survived it could build on a legacy forged during the Mandate period of continued cultural resistance along with political struggle.

The Arab College stands out in this effort as it worked closely with regional universities, and in particular with the American University of Beirut (AUB), so that its graduates could pursue further education or academic careers there. This was achieved by adapting the Arab College's syllabi to that required by AUB. As Yoni

Furas writes, this cohort of Palestinian graduates who went to AUB (and one could add those who studied at the American University in Cairo) did not always end up as faculty members (in fact very few did). Many of them chose other careers that, had it not been for the Nakba, would have made them part of the core group of the future Palestinian elite.² Rochelle Davis points out that many of the graduates found their way to senior banking and government positions; another indication of the human capital Palestine lost in the Nakba, beyond the physical destruction of the country and the ethnic cleansing of half of its Arab population.³

British Educational Policy

For the duration of the Mandate, the British authorities in Palestine were directly responsible for the education of the Palestinians, while the Zionist enclave enjoyed an autonomous status.

Palestine was not administered as a single colony by Britain, but rather as two very different kinds of colonies when it came to the issue of education. The Zionist community was requested, rather than ordered, to follow colonial policy in matters of education. Also, the Zionist educational system received funding from the Mandatory government which enabled it to build itself up as part of an independent infrastructure for a state within a state. This formative stage also included the building of independent military, economic, and political capacities that well served the movement when Britain decided to leave Palestine. Meanwhile, colonial officials heavily micromanaged the public school education of the Palestinians. They nurtured both rural and religious education, deemed apolitical realms in what Suzanne Schneider frames as “Mandatory separation” in her excellent book of the same title.⁴ Moreover, as Rochelle Davis notes, while Palestinian students were taught by Palestinian and Arab teachers and supervised by Palestinian inspectors, those formulating the curriculum and administering the educational system were British officials.⁵

Educational policy was informed by the overall colonialist attitude towards colonized people elsewhere in the empire. From this perspective, education needed to be controlled and regulated as a process of modernization so as not to harm imperial interests. There were two schools of thought in Britain about how far and in what manner London should rule its colonies: a generous one, which prevailed in the early years of British rule in Palestine, and a more austere one, which dominated later policy. The first strategy assumed a long British stay in Palestine and appeared euphemistically in the documents as “the commonwealth approach.” Its logic was that there was a need to invest in the local infrastructure so that economic autonomy would benefit colonized and colonizer alike.⁶

Sometime during the 1920s, this approach was abandoned and replaced by a more austere view that assumed a brief British stay in Palestine. This meant, from a utilitarian point of view, a wish not to invest too much and to allow educational autonomy, at least in the Palestinian rural areas, provided it followed the traditional customary hierarchy through heads of clans and mukhtars.⁷ The British were aware that

“uncontrolled” modernization invites a modern education that can only be properly obtained in the city.⁸ Whether invested as a long-term or a short-term project, the British colonial bureaucrats in Palestine understood their mission to be one allowing limited modernization, that is, improvement in rural life based on local traditions. They wanted to avoid the “dangerous” leap towards anti-British nationalism that had already emerged in Egypt and India (many of these bureaucrats had served in these two countries before coming to Palestine).

On the one hand, Khalil Totah’s memoirs tell us there was a consensus between the Palestinian educators and the British officials that much had to be done to improve rural education.⁹ On the other, more than anything else, the officials wanted to keep the villagers in the rural areas, and hoped that they could encourage this by supporting traditional agriculture. Full urbanization was deemed a dangerously uncontrollable process. The local social elite was to be left intact but subordinate to British officials, who would mediate between village and government. Colonial officials thus allowed only a slow process of change, which left the rural economy unable to cope with the economic competition from the Jewish market.¹⁰

‘Abdul Latif Tibawi, who served in the department of education and published his seminal work *Arab Education in Mandatory Palestine: A Study of Three Decades of British Administration*,¹¹ has a slightly different take on British policy in this regard. Davis, who also looked thoroughly at the history of Mandatory education shares Tibawi’s assertion that British policy was not monolithic. Both believed there was a school of thought in the British department of education that wanted the urban education system to produce a local elite, and another one that dreaded the appearance of such a political force in the country. It is possible that there were such voices (Tibawi did not disclose many of his sources, which were given to him by the department, and he was not allowed to quote from them directly).¹² It is possible that there was such a school of thought, but judging by action, and not by intent, it seems the consensus was that a local elite had to be an Anglophile and not a national one, whereas the emergence of a national elite among the Zionist community did not seem to be a concern for the British.

It is interesting that some scholars such as Davis believe that some educators, including those teaching in the Arab College, did not object totally to this British policy for their own reasons. She quotes Totah as declaring: “Rural education should be overwhelmingly agricultural and town schools distinctly vocational,” and found a similar attitude expressed by Tibawi. Davis contends that such views were common among the elite who tended to adopt a condescending attitude towards the rural community; therefore, providing a mere rudimentary education to the masses had the added bonus of preserving the privileged status of Palestinian elites.¹³

Regarding practical educational development, this meant that the British only strove to expand the elementary school system; in 1919 alone, fifty-two schools were opened in rural Palestine.¹⁴ At the same time, there was a reluctance to open high schools, and a rejection of the idea of a university – although, as we shall see, some British officials regarded a university as a separate project that could advance “British

values” in Palestine. By 1948, there were only ten high schools all over Palestine (and only two for girls), while four schools had some high school secondary-level classes. Three of the high schools also served as teachers’ colleges, the most famous among them being the Arab College in Jerusalem, of which more will be said later.

As mentioned earlier, the British were obsessed with the link between urbanization, education, and nationalism. From their perspective, urbanization enhanced by education was a “dangerous” process – dangerous as it could lead to the development of an anti-colonialist national movement. Such a “danger” was familiar to some of the British officials who ran the educational department in Palestine and had previously been posted in Egypt, where British colonialism already experienced a powerful national movement led by an educated elite demanding an end to British rule in Egypt.¹⁵

The problem for Britain in Palestine was that, with the expansion of Zionist colonization, an uncontrolled process of urbanization occurred, coupled with the emergence of a national middle class in the towns that worked to help graduates of elementary schools in the villages continue their studies in the city. Responding to developments beyond their control, the British developed teacher training under their supervision in the towns and complimented themselves that this was their original contribution to education in Palestine, along with their campaign to encourage girls’ education in the villages. Two new colleges for teachers were opened in Jerusalem. This was indeed a welcome addition to education in Palestine, but a far cry from what the society desired and needed. One should also note that such institutions had already existed towards the end of Ottoman rule. In fact, one such school – the Sultaniyya College – was closed by the British who moved its sophisticated German equipment, the pride of the last Ottoman governor of Palestine Jamal Pasha, to the new colleges.¹⁶ Likewise, girls’ education had already been expanded during the late Ottoman period. Isma‘il al-Husayni, a scion of the notable family (and the original owner of the Orient House) contributed to girls’ education with the help of the Spafford family (the founders of the American Colony in Jerusalem).¹⁷ But it is also true that the Mandatory authorities opened additional schools for girls in many rural areas.

The expansion of the elementary rural school system, the opening of teachers’ colleges, and the introduction of girls’ schools on a larger scale were not meant to enhance higher education but rather to deepen elementary education while keeping higher education closely regulated. This was the policy of Humphrey Bowman, a quintessential colonialist educator, who built the foundation for education in Palestine during part of the Mandatory period. He viewed local people in the same way he had in Egypt and India where he had been responsible previously: namely as primitive, illiterate, and too poor to pay for their education.¹⁸ He was also convinced that there was literally no educational system in Palestine until the British came – “*tabula rasa*,” as he called it.¹⁹ We recognize this today as the distorted Orientalist view of late Ottoman education. As Furas shows, late Ottoman Palestine experienced a boom in educational development, which became a more cosmopolitan process that also affected state education.²⁰

Bowman was replaced before the end of the Mandate by Jerome Farrell, who

pursued a similar policy with the same philosophy, investing in elementary and agricultural education.²¹ Schneider argues that the British government in Palestine did more than that. It supported religious education, assuming it to be an antidote to national uprisings. If anything, this policy led to a stronger fusion in Palestine, as in other parts of the Arab world, between religion and nationalism, leading to a powerful appearance of political Islam in Mandate Palestine.²²

Bowman's idea was to expand elementary schooling, to slightly widen the high school system (under his term in office, only 30 percent of eligible pupils found places in the limited number of high schools), and to open up limited opportunities for a more general, non-nationalist education. In short, Bowman wished the villagers to continue their traditional way of life and production without incentive for change or urbanization (in his eyes a recipe for politicization and nationalization).²³ Bowman claimed insufficient funds in his budget prevented him from encouraging the opening of high schools, but it seems clear that colonialist racism was at play here.²⁴ These attitudes were even more pronounced when either British officials or Palestinian politicians proposed opening an Arab university and later an Islamic university in Jerusalem.

However, it would be a mistake to describe the British policy on education as clear or even coherent. After all, Bowman did allow Palestinians to open an additional college for teachers in Ramallah in 1920 and the Kadoorie agricultural college in Tulkarm in 1930 (funded by an Iraqi Jewish philanthropist, Elie Kedourie, and built at the same time as its Jewish counterpart, Kedourie College, in lower Galilee.)

There were thus contradictions in this policy between a wish to be the modernizer who came from the West, and a fear of the emergence of an anti-British national movement. Even while opposing the idea of an Arab or Palestinian university or an adequate high school system, at the very same time the British fostered a wish to build a British university. At the end of the day neither materialized in a country whose fate was determined by the settler colonial movement of Zionism and not the empire or the native population.

No to an Arab University but What about a British University?

The two Hebrew universities in Mandatory Palestine were theoretically open to non-Jewish students, but neither the Hebrew University in Jerusalem nor the Technion in Haifa had a significant number of Palestinian students; both schools embraced a fully Zionist curricula and extracurricular activities wherever and whenever it was possible.

Before Britain's educational policy was officially formed in the very beginning of the Mandate, British officials contemplated the establishment of a British university in Palestine for all, in line with the notion of the "white man's burden" and mission to civilize non-Western societies. Serious deliberations over such a plan took place in 1922 with the participation of senior British officials, and educators from all three "religious" communities; Ronald Storrs, the military governor of Jerusalem, chaired the meeting. The Zionists, through their representative, Yosef Klausner, informed Storrs they would not participate in the deliberations since such a project "constituted

a threat to Hebrew culture in Palestine” and because “it meant competition for the projected Hebrew University.”²⁵ In that year the planning for Hebrew University in Jerusalem was quite advanced (the foundation stone was laid in 1918 and it opened in 1925, under full Zionist control) and thus the Zionist leadership vehemently objected to the idea of another university.²⁶

Storrs did not give up and founded the “Palestine Board of Higher Studies” in 1923 whose members were entrusted with the task of building the university. It moved into more detailed preparations under a new chair, Herbert Danby, the director of education in the ministry in London. Under Danby the officials discussed how to prepare high school pupils in Palestine to pass the entry examinations for universities in the region and beyond.²⁷

This was the strategy of opening new universities in Britain, to begin building incrementally from below.

This initiative by Danby created the impression for some time that indeed the first step toward opening a university had been taken. A new system of matriculation examination was put in place in Palestine, recognized by the American University of Beirut in 1924 as a valid ticket to admission there. This applied mainly to pupils who enrolled as the next stage in their education into teacher training courses, or colleges, where they would graduate with a diploma called a “higher certificate,” recognized within a certificate system in the British Empire, known as the Oxford and Cambridge School 1 Certificate. This certificate enabled one eventually to become a teacher but also to begin an application to a university outside of Palestine.²⁸ This raised the hopes of prospective candidates only to be shattered by the eventual lack of progress on the issue. The small group of aspirants could have been the core of the first cadre of a new university.

Noteworthy, the clerks in London working in the Department of Education were supportive of the idea of a university. They deemed the project – a university for the majority of people living in Mandatory Palestine – as a natural venture that the government, colonial or not, was supposed to advance. This was the view of Headlam-Morley, the advisor to the Foreign Office and a senior official in the British Ministry of Education. His report generated a conversation about a “Jerusalem Institute for Higher Studies,” a project which was enthusiastically welcomed by the high commissioner at the time, Lord Plummer. Plummer decided to join Headlam-Morley personally and present the idea to the advisory committee of education in the colonies in 1929.²⁹ Their bid seemed at first successful. The idea was accepted by the Ministry of Colonies and the Palestine government was ordered from London to advance the preparation for opening a university in Jerusalem. The canon of the Anglican Church in the city was entrusted with the task. However, the eruption of the Buraq disturbances in 1929 disrupted these preparations; gradually London lost interest, but not the Palestinians, who saw more than ever the university as part of their national project of liberation.³⁰

One problem was that the local Palestinians interested in advancing the project of a university saw no contradiction between a national university and an institute that would be an integral part of the British educational system. Thus, it is possible that the 1929 events provided British officials on the ground, who opposed the idea of a

university, apart from Storrs, with the pretext to kill the project, which they considered an Arab university project. Khalil Totah (1875–1955), the third director of the Arab College and a leading historian on education in Mandatory Palestine, had no doubt that the idea of an Arab university was rejected due to British fears of its potential contribution to the national struggle. In fact, Totah believed the whole of British educational policy during the Mandatory period was motivated by this fear. More specifically, Totah asserted that a university in the eyes of the British would lead to an upsurge in the popular objection among the Palestinians to the Jewish national homeland policy.³¹

Even after 1929, a university in Palestine, and in particular in Jerusalem, remained on the agenda. However, it took a different twist in the 1930s. The advisory committee in the Colonial Office was still very much interested in establishing a university in Jerusalem and was surprised by the lack of any interest from the Palestine government on the ground. It suggested a new idea: a joint university in Palestine and Cyprus to be part of the British higher education system.³² However, the British on the ground, all over the Arab world and in Cyprus, resisted the idea. In 1931, the Cypriot national movement mobilized an uprising that threatened colonial rule in Cyprus. British officials were aware that they had failed to anglicize the educational system on the island and regarded the local intellectuals as their worst enemies – a university was something they could not accept.³³ Without such support, given the complexity of the relationship between funding and political decision, there were no funds for the project. The educational advisory committee of the Colonial Office did not give up, and appealed to the British Council to raise funds for a university wherever possible (either in Palestine or in Cyprus).

The discussion of a British university in Palestine seemed to have a life of its own, at times detached from the political drama on the ground. And so, in the middle of the Arab Revolt and during the time of the deliberations of the Peel Commission in 1937 seeking an overall solution to the problem in Palestine, the committee was willing to give attention to the question of a university:

We are aware that the project of a British University in the Near East has been mooted in other quarters, and we are not in a position to say how practicable it may be financially or otherwise, but we recommend that in any further discussion of the project the possibility should be carefully considered of locating a university in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem or Haifa.³⁴

The members of the commission were now fantasizing about an institution that would reflect the excellence of British values and education. However, if one tries to find a conclusive opinion of the commission, within the verbose documents, it is a recommendation to build a university in Palestine, an idea that had the full support of the British Council and its president, Lord Lloyd. It appears that some members of the Peel Commission believed that such a university would in fact facilitate a kind of a solution for the future, as it would “mitigate” what it called Arab and

Jewish “discordant nationalisms.”³⁵ The report also proposes that it would prevent Arab students from seeking education outside of Palestine and would be a kind of preparatory institution for the Jewish students before joining the Hebrew University.

The only tangible result of all these efforts was that they were too little too late. In 1945, the British Council³⁶ opened “The Jerusalem Institute for Higher Education.” It was a preparatory institution helping Palestinian students to pass entrance exams for the University of London. To the credit of the British Council, it did not see this as a final station. It wanted to develop the institute together with the Arab College into a university.

The educational advisor to the British Council drove the final nail in the coffin of the Jerusalem university in 1946 when he ruled that having the Hebrew University as a direct route to the American University of Beirut, and having the Arab College were enough to satisfy the needs of the local population. Moreover, he recommended closing down the embryonic Jerusalem Institute for Higher Studies. It did not close down immediately despite the recommendation and survived until the Nakba, when also the Arab College ceased to function.

Alongside these rather minor efforts, the Zionist leadership maintained there was no need for such institutions since the Hebrew University was already functioning. The cynicism of that leadership was quite bewildering. It boasted a university open to all, but one that in essence was Zionist and part of the Zionist project in Palestine. And yet it used the Histadrut’s mouthpiece in Arabic, *Haqiqat al-Amr* (The truth of the matter), to publish occasional reports on the university and its achievements as if it were an institution serving the whole of Palestine and the Palestinians.³⁷

An Islamic University for All

After the Buraq disturbances, some members of the Palestinian political leadership and most notably Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husayni attempted a different path. It was in the wake of the All-Islamic Congress convened in Jerusalem in 1931 that the real efforts to open such a university began in earnest in 1932.

The coordinating committee of the All-Islamic Congress sent delegations to Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, and India for fundraising for an Islamic University in Jerusalem. Hajj Amin al-Husayni and Muhammad ‘Ali ‘Alluba Pasha headed the delegations. ‘Alluba at the time was the Egyptian Minister of the Awqaf and a known supporter of the pan-Islamic vision. It was important to have ‘Alluba on the team as al-Azhar University’s leadership was worried that an Islamic university in Jerusalem would undermine al-Azhar’s position in the Muslim world.³⁸ Muhammad Bakhit, former mufti of Egypt, in his public statement against the congress, also criticized the “dreams” of those who pretended to establish a new university that would become the new scientific center of the Muslim world.³⁹

Upon his arrival in Egypt, Mufti Hajj Amin gave interviews to many influential newspapers. In these interviews, he denied that the congress would deal with the caliphate question. The mufti portrayed the projected congress as a Muslim

demonstration intended to emphasize the importance of Palestine and Jerusalem to Islam. He further presented the idea of an Islamic university at Jerusalem as a local project intended to challenge the Hebrew University rather than al-Azhar institution.⁴⁰

‘Alluba, it seems, was not deterred by Bakhit’s criticism as he told *al-Jami‘a al-‘Arabiyya* (25 July 1932) that the executive committee of the Islamic congress was looking for architects to propose the plan for building the Muslim University in Jerusalem. In the interview it was stressed that there were two major missions at that point. The first was to persuade people that this project would help to limit the Zionization of Jerusalem and Palestine and, secondly, it would upgrade the educational system as it would provide secular as well as religious education for the people of Palestine.

The counterpressure on al-Azhar was effective and the mufti managed to galvanize the Wafd party behind his project (who were in the opposition at the time). Opposition leaders, such as Nahhas Pasha, Hamid Pasha al-Basil, and Muhammad Mahmud fully endorsed the resolutions of the congress. They promised to help establish an Islamic university in Jerusalem, to protect Muslim rights in Palestine and Jerusalem, and to defend Islam. Nahhas even gave a contribution of two hundred Egyptian pounds to the newly created fund for the fulfilment of the objectives of the congress.⁴¹

Muhammad ‘Ali ‘Alluba could not claim greater success than enlisting the important scholar Rashid Rida to support the project, but he was less of a prime mover when it came to funding. As the elected treasurer of the Permanent Bureau of the Congress, ‘Alluba had made several unsuccessful attempts to establish committees which would organize the fundraising campaign for the Islamic university. In May 1933, ‘Alluba joined the mufti of Jerusalem in a fund-raising tour to Iraq and India. The mission failed to collect substantial sums, and ‘Alluba returned to Egypt bitter and disappointed. He contemplated appealing to King Fu‘ad I (Faruq’s father) for the financing of this project but was reported to have decided against it for fear that the king would turn him down.⁴²

The mufti had to navigate carefully vis-à-vis some of the Indian supporters who wanted to stress the Islamic nature of a future university, while the mufti wanted it to be Arab and Palestinian as well. The main potential backer, the Indian Muslim leader Shawkat ‘Ali, asked that there will be no “national significance” to the university. However, it seemed that this was not a major hurdle and the mufti agreed that other languages would be taught in the university apart from Arabic while deep down all concerned knew that much like the All-Islamic Congress itself, the university was very much about Palestine.⁴³ And when a consensus was reached, the focus on Palestine was manifested by the decision to have the names of rulers and notables who contributed funds for the implementation of the congress resolutions placed on special boards inside al-Aqsa Mosque as well as in the proposed university. It was indeed a project with clear twin purposes in mind: to promote Jerusalem as a regional center of Islamic learning while simultaneously countering the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, thus addressing the Zionist challenge. The future institute was meant to accentuate symbolically the link forged at the Congress between pan-Islamism and the Palestinian cause.

Some funding did come through. The nizam (ruler) of Hyderabad donated one million rupees. He was nizam by title only, as the actual rulership was abolished in 1911, but still he was an important member of the Muslim nobility in British India. He also had a history of donating to various projects in Palestine: due to his personal ties with Hajj Amin al-Husayni, he donated to waqfs all over Palestine. The British followed Husayni's trip closely, but they approved that donation, probably asserting that his dependency on British rule in India would enable them in the future to make sure that he did not work against their interests in Palestine.⁴⁴

That sum of money was used to buy land in the Tulkarm district that was endowed as a waqf for the future university. At least in this respect, the mufti could have been satisfied; he prevented the sale of the land coveted by the Zionist movement and ensured a future investment for the university. Alas, it was a short-lived victory as the village (Raml Zayta/Khirbat Qazaza) was destroyed in 1948 and on its ruins Jewish settlements were built and the university was not established.

This nexus between endowment, struggling against Zionist purchase of land, and the university enthused also Christian activists in the national movement. Members of the Christian Orthodox community were prepared to do more than send words of congratulations. Most notable in this respect was 'Isa al-'Isa, the editor of *Filastin*, who sent the World Islamic Congress a proposal outlining a scheme for saving Palestinian lands from the Zionists by creating endowments on the coveted land – it was a rather complicated and detailed proposal suggesting that lands owned by Palestinians, but coveted by the Zionists, would be assigned a value per dunam, high enough to attract the interest of rich Palestinians, who might then buy them and donate them as religious endowments. And he suggested that all profits would go to the proposed Islamic university. In reading the proposal to the participants at the congress, the secretary, Riyadh al-Sulh, praised this idea and declared that this was an example that demonstrated the overall Christian solidarity with the Muslim brethren in Palestine.⁴⁵

Why Did the Islamic University Fail?

There were two reasons why nothing came out of the mufti's initiative. The most important one was the British objection. Even if the mufti had overcome the other challenges in the project, the British government would not have allowed it to happen. Officially, the project petered out because of lack of funding and the refusal of the British to allow a second pan-Islamic congress from taking place that might have recruited the necessary funds.

Surprisingly, it was the British government in India that seemed more supportive of the idea than any other part of the British imperial administration. It saw such conventions and projects as a means of alluring the Muslim community in the sub-continent to remain in the Allies' camp, especially after the Second World War broke out.

However, the Foreign Office in London, prodded by the British government in Palestine, rejected the idea, both when it was first suggested in 1931 and when it was raised again until 1940. In the conversation that eventually led to the categorical

rejection, others also participated, such as the British ambassador in Egypt, the high commissioner of Palestine, and the Palestine police force's Criminal Investigations Department (CID) in Jerusalem. A surprising interlocutor was the ambassador in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia) since he represented Ibn Sa'ud's uneasiness about the project as well. The basic message from Palestine, Cairo, and London was that another congress attempting to found a university, as did the All-Islamic Congress in Jerusalem, would be the base for what the officials called "Arab Palestinian propaganda" and warned that in essence it would be anti-British. The issue was discussed quite often as the mufti, even in exile and on the run from one exile to the other, had not easily given up on the idea.⁴⁶

British policy in British-controlled areas in the Arab world in general regarded Arab universities as an unwelcome development. They did not fund universities as they thought university graduates were likely to "become leaders of nationalist movements." In Egypt, it also translated into trying to regulate the curriculum in high school so that there would be no candidates specializing in topics such as philosophy, ethics, social economy, history, and literature.⁴⁷

But opposition was not the only reason that the idea of the Islamic university in Jerusalem petered out. Unfortunately, these fundraising missions, particularly the mufti's long fundraising trip to Iraq and India in 1933, were not successful in raising the funds necessary to establish a university in Jerusalem. Nor was there enough interest among activists in convening a second congress in the city, and that led to the collapse of the organizational capacity of the World Islamic Congress by the end of 1934.⁴⁸ Although the local press constantly mentioned the idea of reviving the university project and holding another congress in Jerusalem in the years that followed, those plans came to nothing and were soon forgotten. As mentioned, even after the mufti's escape from Palestine in 1937, he was still involved in the efforts until 1940; soon after he also lost interest in the project.

'Abdul Latif Tibawi detailed in his work the development of education in Palestine. He examined what he called "the project of the university" and remarked that the Palestinian leadership, even after the idea of a Muslim university was dropped, continued to support the idea of a British university. In their eyes, the two projects of an Islamic university and a general one were not mutually exclusive and actually complemented each other.⁴⁹

In fact, Tibawi observed that Palestinians who participated in the deliberations of a future university, unlike the Zionist representatives, did all they could to assist the various boards established for pushing the idea forward. One tends to agree with him that most of the Palestinians who also backed the idea of the Islamic University did not see it as an exclusively Muslim university. They did not view Arab-Muslim culture as exclusive but rather as one that assimilated elements of the Hellenistic and Christian heritage and therefore was cosmopolitan in nature.⁵⁰

The one body that survived to the end of the Mandate within the British administration was the Board of Examination that vetted graduates of high schools as possible candidates for further academic education in the UK. Muslim schools,

Christian schools, private schools, as well as schools controlled by the Supreme Muslim Council, continued to offer candidates for the board's examinations. The government schools did likewise. During the last year for which figures are available, 1946, at least one-third of the candidates for the board's matriculation came from Muslim or Mandatory schools. The most assured way forward through this path was to graduate from the Arab College in Jerusalem, rightly called by Khalil Totah a university college that substituted for the university that the Palestinians were denied.⁵¹

The Arab College: A University College for Palestinians

In 1991, some of the graduates of the Arab College tried to revive the school sensing that this had been an institute of which the Palestinian people in general should be proud. The special collection the graduates published to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the college proved to be, in Davis's analysis, a proper oral as well as archival history of the college. Davis also surveyed almost all the sources published prior to that collection on the history of the college. The mix of oral and archival material does not complement each other, and at times it is difficult to build a coherent narrative since, naturally, recollections are selective at times, serving agendas which are not always compatible – something that could be said about all archival material. But there are some similar powerful recollections that tell the story of the Arab College as an institution that, quite courageously and impressively, filled the vacuum that Britain, operating under Zionist pressure, created in the Palestinian higher education system. It was not a substitute for a proper university, but it was good enough to deliver many of a university's attributes and had in many ways a similar impact on Palestinian society as a university in Jerusalem would have had.

The British officials who helped to establish the Arab College in Jerusalem in 1918 wished it to be a pilot school with high academic standards for the elite, eventually providing an educational program similar to an English public school education. In reality, it became a unique institution in the Arab world as a teachers' college that was in essence a quasi-university.

The college, located on Jabal Mukabbir, began its life as a teachers' college and changed its name to the Arab College in 1927.⁵² Its first director was probably 'Adel Jabr, the famous Palestinian writer, educator, and journalist. He taught first at the Constitutional School in Jerusalem at the end of the Ottoman period, which was owned by Khalil Sakakini, and then moved to teach at the College of Salah established by the governor, Jamal Pasha in 1915 (the principal of which was Shaykh 'Abdul 'Aziz Hawwash from Egypt who also taught in the Arab College; either he or one of the Egyptian teachers, according to some sources, might have been the first director at least for a short while).⁵³

What is clear is that the first cadre of teachers at the Arab College came from Egypt, but they were soon replaced by Palestinian teachers under the directorship of Khalil Sakakini who did not last long as a director; he resigned in 1919 in protest against the appointment of the pro-Zionist British Jew Herbert Samuel to the post of

high commissioner. In the short period of his directorship, he laid the foundation for others in imagining an institution that was much more than just a teachers' college and tried to introduce general knowledge courses on philosophy and music.⁵⁴

Khalil Totah replaced Sakakini and remained in office until he resigned in 1925. During his term of office, he too tried to turn the teachers' college into a proper further education institution, but did not stay long enough to develop his plan. Balfour's visit to Palestine to inaugurate the Hebrew University in Jerusalem was the reason for his resignation. As Davis comments rightly, this is not an anecdotal event. The visit, apart from reminding the society of the injustice of Balfour, also highlighted the preferential pro-Zionist British engagement with the question of Palestinian higher education. The students at the Arab College were furious and went out to demonstrate and the Palestine government closed down the college in response. The Palestinian political leadership – the executive committee of the Arab Palestinian annual congress – intervened, forcing the students to consent to conform to “college discipline” and on that basis were returned to the college that was reopened.⁵⁵

Totah's position towards the demonstrations and the government's reaction is a matter of historical discord. The discussion about that particular period has much wider implications for our days. The question of how educators should deal with student's national commitment and enthusiasm has become an internal dilemma for Palestinian educators teaching under colonialism, settler colonialism, occupation, and apartheid. How much do you encourage or discourage your students to join the resistance to the oppressor? Totah was a Quaker who opposed violence in principle, on the one hand, but was totally committed to the national struggle. His resignation was indeed the only solution for him.⁵⁶

The episode is also important as it showed the spirit of many of the students seven years into the British occupation and after forty years of Zionist colonization. This was a first signal for the British that they were right in suspecting that higher education and politicization of the younger generation may go hand in hand. It was one of the factors that persuaded the Mandatory government to resist any attempt to build a Palestinian university during the Mandatory period.

Ahmad Samih al-Khalidi, the father of Walid Khalidi, was the last director and remained in this post until the end of the Mandate. His appointment was a turning point in the college's history and development. In 1925, he reoriented the college and further developed the teacher training curriculum that was meant to prepare students to pass the Palestine matriculation examination. Beginning with the summer of 1926, this general examination was administered to students who had completed secondary school and wished to continue their university education – necessarily outside Palestine. The matriculation exam was conducted under the supervision of the Council of Higher Education, which was composed of British, Palestinian, and Jewish experts, and was headed by the general director of the department of education in the Mandate government.⁵⁷ In hindsight, it was clear that the teaching programs included more than preparing pupils for exams. They included an educational infrastructure for students in a variety of disciplines and areas of inquiry in both humanities and the core

sciences; indeed in 1939, from the lowest grade in the college (third year high school pupils), students were streamed into two divisions of higher education: science and arts. The subjects for a matriculation exam included Arabic, English, general history, mathematics, geography, physics, and chemistry. The actual curriculum of the college also added history of education, psychology, and teaching methodology.

The British were aware of this reorientation of the college and at first, Bowman and the department of education in the Palestine government welcomed the more expanded nature of teaching at the college. Their in-house discussion reveals that they deemed this transformation from a teachers' college into a university college as a welcome development. They asserted that it could be the Eton College of Palestine: namely the prep school for a future anglicized elite, admitting only excellent pupils from high schools.⁵⁸ Although this is not what eventually transpired, it did create a class of professionals who helped in the administration of the country.⁵⁹ However, precisely because it was not a British project, but a Palestinian one, its main contribution was to the cultural history of Palestine, substituting for the university the British refused to allow.

Furas has commented that in the 1930s, a career in education was less appealing as salaries were low which may explain decreases in the number of candidates at times. Davis contradicts Furas and actually stresses that there was a higher demand that the Arab College alone could not satisfy. I tend to agree with Davis, as a low salary could not have been a main reason for not choosing a teaching career. We know from oral history that in many villages teachers were paid or salaries were supplemented in kind (which could have included poultry, meat, or wheat), and not with money.⁶⁰

The curriculum of the Arab College was based on English literature and cultural tradition, but also contributed to the general change among its students' attitude toward literature and the revival of Palestinian culture. As Samir Hajj's interviews with the college's graduates testify, the stress in the curriculum on British culture had the twin result of both introducing British culture into Palestinian culture and at the same time encouraging an original modern Palestinian culture, creating a rich infusion whose legacy is still with us.⁶¹ This process of synthesizing European culture with traditional Arab culture and producing original contemporary Palestinian culture is a process that occurred all over the Mashriq as was illustrated by the brilliant work of the late Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* and has recently been acknowledged once more by Ussama Makdisi in his incisive *The Age of Coexistence*.⁶² There were of course those who saw the Western influence as a curse and part of the oppressor's culture, but even the inclusion of Latin language and literature (which included poems, plays, letters, and articles written by ancient Roman authors) in the curriculum was taught as part of the legacy that had brought Arab civilization to Europe centuries before. This is a point made by both the eminent Egyptian writer Taha Husayn and Hilary Falb Kalisman in her work on the Mandate educational system.⁶³

This mixture appeared later in the works of the graduates of this college, many of whom became writers, educators, civil servants, and quite a few reached high positions in the Mandate government. Others continued their studies in British universities.

Hajj points to the works and life of one such graduate, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1920–1994). The literary works of Jabra, including his novels, poems, and translations represent an example of the impact British culture had on the works of one of Palestine’s greatest novelists.⁶⁴ Similar fusion and richness can be found in the works of other graduates who, like some of their teachers, were part of the Nahda (renaissance) in Palestine. Prolific writers and scholars such as Ihsan ‘Abbas, Tawfiq Sayigh, Hanna Abu Hanna, Nasir al-Din al-‘Assad, Nicola Ziyadeh, Muhammad Rafiq al-Tamimi, Mahmoud al-Samara, Mahmud ‘Ali al-Ghul, Muhammad Yusuf Najm, ‘Abdul Rahman and Hashim Yaghi, to mention but a few.

By the early 1940s, some of these writers had already produced books that were part of the curriculum in the college and would have been included in a future university had it not been for the Nakba: ‘Isa al-Sifri, *History of Palestine* (1929); George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (1938); Qadri Tuqan, *The Scientific Heritage of the Arabs* (1941); Nicola Ziyadeh, *The Rise of the Arabs* (1945); ‘Arif al-‘Arif, *History of Jerusalem* (1951); Michel Abcarius, *Palestine through the Fog of Propaganda* (1946).⁶⁵

When these historiographies and sociological works were taught together in the Arab College, they created an Arab and Palestinian national and cultural meta-narrative that enhanced other processes on the ground. They helped to solidify the collective national identity of the Palestinians in their struggle against the pro-Zionist policy of the British Mandate, a policy that since 1918 allowed a settler colonial movement of European Jews to claim the Palestinian homeland as their own. It was possible to offer such a fusion because of the personal interest of the last director, Ahmad Samih al-Khalidi, in translating and writing educational books.

By the early 1940s, the high standard of the Arab College (and also in the Rashidiyya high school in Jerusalem) was recognized by the British educational system and thus, upon completion of the college course, students received an equivalent of a BA degree, under the supervision of the University of London. Most students, however, preferred to go to the American University of Beirut to complete the degree.⁶⁶

Another indication of the high academic standards was the fact that the students in the college always fared well in the general examinations, according to Fu’ad ‘Abbas, a graduate of the college: “In 1942, the year I took the matriculation examination, all twenty students in my class passed and received their matriculation certificate.”⁶⁷ The students came from all over Palestine: Haifa, Jaffa, Gaza, Nazareth, Nablus, Tulkarm, Safad, Bisan, Majdal, ‘Asqalan, and Jenin, and top students from the rural areas were sent to the college, so a meticulous selection also contributed to its high achievement. Many had their tuition fees waived or subsidized and they were boarded in houses and dorms and driven back and forth to the college.⁶⁸ From the memories of ‘Abbas, we learn that you were in danger of losing your spot in the school if your academic performance was poor, or your anti-British activity was too prominent.⁶⁹

Being expelled for being anti-British did not mean that the college ceased to be a national project as well as an educational one. The British tried to monitor and regulate it, but with little success. Early on, Herbert Samuel banned a book written for

the college by the third director Khalil Totah (jointly with ‘Umar Salih al-Barghuthi) titled *A History of Palestine from Ancient Time to the British Era* (1923). In his evidence in front of the Peel Commission, Totah said that Samuel banned the book because it did not fit the pro-Zionist policy of the British government. The college did not change its orientation because of such censoring attempts, nor was it intimidated by the Peel Commission’s overall criticism of the college and other institutions as being “seminaries of nationalism.”⁷⁰

Censorship and the challenge to it arose mainly because, as Furas has commented, the Arab College teachers from the very beginning were aware that they would have to write their own textbooks. They were also highly qualified for doing so, which is another indication of the potential of the Arab College to play the substitute role of the university the British did not allow the Palestinians to have. Those writing the textbooks or teaching them had degrees from British, at times American, universities.⁷¹

The authors of the textbook *Al-Jughrafiya al-haditha al-musawwara* (Illustrated Modern Geography) made it clear that their objective was to give the student “a general idea of the wide world he lives in.” As Davis shows, this goal was directly related not only to the authors’ educational ethos, but also to their biographies, seeing themselves as seekers of knowledge and masters of their own progressive destiny. These textbooks were a joint project by five authors: Sa’d al-Sabbagh (Haifa, 1900–1967), ‘Abdallah Mashnuq (Hama, Syria, 1902–1988), George Shahla (Jerusalem, b. 1894), Wasfi ‘Anabtawi (Nablus, 1903–1984) and Khalid al-Hashimi (Baghdad, 1908–1985). Born at the turn of the century, they reached adulthood in the interregnum and hence experienced the demise of the old order and the rise of the colonial age. Educated mainly in non-governmental Anglican or Muslim Ottoman schools, all but al-Sabbagh enrolled in the American University of Beirut (AUB) in the 1920s. At the AUB, they were prominent members of the famous progressive, national student society al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqa and later they did their post-graduate studies at the University of Cambridge, the Sorbonne, the University of London, and Ohio University. Physically and conceptually, they sought knowledge around the world and symbolized “a new ethos of social mobility through education.”⁷²

Where censorship did take place, it was in fact self-censorship. 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.” In addition, Totah recalled a headmaster telling him that he could “not place a book in the school library without reference [to the authorities].”⁷³

But there was a limit to self-censoring, in particular when it came to textbooks on the history of the Arab world and Palestine. The narrative spanned in these books ignited the national imagination of a younger generation and therefore, as Furas puts, the authorities tried to appropriate historiography and colonize it, or rather denationalize it.⁷⁴

As noted, the Peel Commission was worried that such a textbook would be the basis for “seminars on nationalism,” and indeed such “seminars” took place in the college. Al-Miqdadi, who taught in the college, according to students’ recollections, “talked ceaselessly about Arab nationalism” in classes devoted to European history. He changed his name during his day as teacher from Ibrahim to al-Miqdadi, a name resonating with early Muslim iconography. He also encouraged students to change their names in such a fashion. He suggested looking for names in one’s own genealogy that would stress the longevity of the connection to the homeland, the culture, and religion of Palestine and the Arab world. He wrote articles in the college’s journal, took students on cultural tours and did all he could to plant in them a sense of belonging both to Palestine and to a more pan-Arab national movement.⁷⁵

The Last Struggle: The Intermediate Certificate

The formative moment that allowed the college to play such a crucial role both in the potential that did not materialize because of the Nakba and in what did transpire eventually, came in 1939, toward the end of the Arab Revolt, when outside events inevitably penetrated the college and affected its life. In that year, the college added a fifth and sixth year, on a level at par with post-secondary British colleges. There were two tracks for this new addition: science or literature, with strong stress on Latin. Either track would have awarded the students an intermediate certificate, which opened the way for further education. The same struggle that accompanied the composition of the curriculum earlier erupted once more when the curriculum was expanded in such a way in the late 1930s. The new director of the department of education, Jerome Farrell, inspired by his British school upbringing, tried to micromanage the composition of the curriculum.

The intermediate certificate thus included the study of English and Arabic for both the science section and the literature section. Farrell tried to control particularly the literature track, and put the stress on Western philosophy, classical history, and Latin. But outside the classroom, the Palestinian uprising raged and his attempts to downplay the Arab and Islamic past in favor of a more “universal humanistic” (that is, British) subjects, was rejected by teachers and students alike.

Arab educators associated Farrell’s intervention as trying to westernize the Palestinian students and more importantly to win their support for the British policy in Palestine. In the words of Khalil Totah in this testimony to the Peel Commission:

The Arab education [according to the British] is . . . designed to reconcile Arab people to this policy [of facilitating Zionism] or to make the education so colourless as to make it harmless and not endanger the carrying out of this policy of Government. Jewish education has an aim. It is not colourless. 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.⁷⁶

Epilogue: The Graduates and Their Impact

The partially successful struggle to resist the British indoctrination, coupled with a high level of education in the college at large, turned quite a few of the graduates of the Arab College into political activists or inserted them with the future political elite of the Palestinians. Had a university existed, the potential for playing such a political role would have been even greater.

The route to play a role in the future political elite of Palestine did not depend only on the availability or rather non-availability of proper higher education in Palestine. The Palestinian graduates who made it to the American University of Beirut, were studying at “the hub of pan Arab identity.”⁷⁷ But at that crucial juncture, between *qawmiyya*, pan-Arab nationalism that had no future as we know in hindsight, and *wataniyya*, the local national identity, which would be the focus of the Palestinian liberation movement, a Jerusalem university would have played an important role in solidifying the Palestinian national movement at home.

The absence of a university may have been one of the reasons why Palestinian graduates of the AUB played an important role in the national movement of other Arab countries or within pan-Arabist movements. As they could not serve Palestine after the Nakba, they served in other countries. Graduates and teachers at the Arab College and those who continued to AUB and similar institutions reached high political positions all over the Arab World (a detailed account can be found in Davis’s work).⁷⁸ This human capital was of course not only to be found among the graduates of the Arab College but was there among the local educators at large.⁷⁹

This was more than just a political elite; it was also a cultural one especially for those who graduated from the Arab College. The cultural education they received was unique as it had been shaped in many ways by the demands of the students themselves. As Amin Hafez al-Dajani tells us, it was due to students’ demands that the curriculum included books written by Egyptian authors such as ‘Ali Jarim, Taha Husayn and Mustafa Amin which enriched the Arabic literature background of the college’s graduates.⁸⁰ Al-Dajani tells us the British who were overseeing the college allowed this intrusion of Arabic culture into the curriculum quite reluctantly; their aim, he claims, was to obliterate the Arab national identity and educate this generation only about Western civilization, English literature and culture, disregarding the history and geography of the Arab countries and their literature and heritage, in order to make the student feel proud of English history and all that is English. Thus, this cultural education gained through a political struggle within the college played a special role in the lives of the graduates later on.

The graduates were students who were accepted into the college on merit rather than on social status, and the exilic experience after the Nakba enabled the uprooted graduates to be part of the cadre of Palestinian scholars and writers who would retain a Palestinian cultural presence even with the absence of a Palestinian nation state. One can only ponder the possible impact an education gained in such a way would have had on opportunities for social and economic mobility in a future Palestine. Nonetheless, they, as well as the next generation of Palestinian scholars, intellectuals, and producers

of culture, continued to flourish without a state and within the liberation movement.

It could have been different. An Arab Palestinian university fed by collective national identity and aspiration would have openly enhanced Arab and Palestinian history and culture as part of the curriculum. Its teaching and research would have empowered the anti-colonial narrative, helping to counter the project of the Hebrew University that provided scholarly scaffolding to the Zionist ideology. Elsewhere in the more independent Arab world, higher education provided knowledge and education alongside the solidification of national pride and a sense of belonging. Moreover, higher education institutions played a crucial role in liberation struggles all over the colonized world.

However, what was accomplished was impressive enough. Those who were fortunate to attend the Arab College and similar institutions were taught a colonialist curriculum, but nonetheless were politicized in anti-colonialist ideas, as they pondered on the reality they lived in with the critical tools and methodologies offered to them. Knowledge was disseminated as a regulated and controlled colonialist product, but it could not prevent the graduates from developing a clear sense of national identity and orientation.

This is also a chapter in anti-colonialist struggle. Very rarely do historians refer to the pre-1948 Palestinian struggle as anti-colonialist. It was anti-colonialist in that it was fought on two fronts: one against Zionist settler-colonialism and the other against British colonialism and imperialism. The two struggles fused in the educational battlefield. It was a struggle against the twin Anglo-Zionist “politics of denial,”⁸¹ as the British administrators, with the help of the Zionist movement, used education to undermine the Palestinian national movement while simultaneously claiming that education should be apolitical.⁸² Well, education was both professional and political, scholarly and committed. We all over the world who are part of the expanding area of Palestine studies still adhere to and respect this legacy.

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