Arab Women in Palestine during and British Mandate

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During the British occupation and mandate of Palestine from 1917-1948, an active urban life began to flourish as government jobs opened up to both men and women. With increased opportunities for both Jewish and Arab women came challenges to both traditional patriarchal structures, but to the very structure of the mandate itself. Palestinian Women’s organizations such as Palestine Arab Women’s Congress and the Arab Women’s Association proliferated often with an anti-Zionist militancy. At the same time they tended to see the struggle less in nationalist terms of Arab statehood and more in terms of addressing the growing disparity between Jews and Arabs and the perceived injustice of the mandate. Lack of educational opportunities was seen as central to this disparity and thus, unlike their male counterparts, women pushed for education of Arab girls and greater voice in civic affairs.

The focus of my paper is to highlight the dawning of an Arab women’s movement in the Palestinian Mandate and its impact on education specifically. It is a movement that at times is identified with the larger Palestinian struggle, yet also remains distinct and separate. The education of women and girls becomes an ongoing concern that often clashes with the political goal of independence and self-determination. At the same time, Jewish women who become politically active tend to become much more readily identified and are simpatico with the larger political goal of Zionism and thereby tend to be less fractured as a movement. Central to my discussion is the primacy of education in cultivating nationalist identities and that over time this pursuit became quite competitive and political. Moreover, since the purveyors of education, both formally and informally were predominately women, the political status of women became, in part, related to respective educational focus.

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Nationalism orders and directs gender. To a lesser extent gender affect the modality, texture and language of nationalism. Modern conceptions of nationalism are replete with entreaties toward traditionally masculine martial virtue, particularly during dynamic periods of war, state building, and identity formation. It also tends to be the case that during such times as well as other times of social unrest, we see women organizing in relation to those currents. However, in as much as women participate in these events they also do so in part, separate from those movements in a way that is both challenging and sympathetic. Palestine before and during the mandate adds several layers of complexity and nuance to this paradigm given firstly that it was the object of competing national struggles, one directed by Zionist Jews and the other by Palestinian Arabs. As Lynn Hunt has suggested, this meant that community and opposition were created at the same time. Unity and difference, inclusion and exclusion are standard dynamics in nationalist movements. However, Zionism was European and thus a rare phenomenon of nationalism in that it was an ideology exogenous to the very place it sought to cultivate. In the
minds of many settlers then, Palestine was idealization and distortion. This image often gave rise to disillusionment when confronted with the reality of living in Palestine.

As Ben Kiernan has demonstrated, if and when an alien settler community seeks to dislodge the indigenous community they first must strip that community of legitimacy to land. In order to delegitimize a people’s claim, they first must be shown to be uncivilized and thus not proper guardians of the land. One of the ways civilization was gauged by both groups was the status of women which of course, would be judged through their respective prisms. For Zionists, this prism was understood in terms of modernity and progress and thus often underscored how women of the new Zion were liberated and treated as equals. Arab women were then conversely perceived as oppressed in such a way as to jibe with the overall goals and raison d’être of Jewish settlement. On the other hand, Deb Bernstein however, has shown that Arab versus Jewish development is a false dichotomy. Zionist Jews, particularly of the second aliya forward were equally contemptuous of Jews indigenous to Palestine as well as those of the first aliya who they viewed as equally backward, traditional and unenlightened. Thus Jews and Arabs were to a great extent conflated in the minds of some later Jewish settlers as non-European primitives who shared more in common with each other than the new arrivals.

Palestinian Arab identity similarly takes shape in the 19th century but without the well placed support of Zionist patrons who were influential in the halls of government. Moreover, unlike Zionism, national identity and nationalist ideology first developed within the Arab community of Palestine, not external to it. The Arab revolt of 1834 signals the congealing of a separate Palestinian identity. Muhammad Ali and his son, Ibrahim in Egypt ripped control from Ottoman suzerainty. In part, this was precipitated by unpopular military conscription and new rights for non-Muslims allowing them to engage in trading and livestock. The revolt brought together disparate elements of Muslim society. Later, in 1858 land codes restructured the way land was attained. The effect was to move many Palestinians off the land and into the towns as merchants. Indeed, Ottoman policies encouraged merchants. Another Sanjak reorganization in 1872 left Jerusalem and southern and central Palestine as a separate district apart from the administration of Damascus and Syria. Tanzimat reforms had the effect of ending the power of the Shayks, giving rise to secular notables as power shifted to cities such as Jerusalem. Thus, the secular middle and upper class of Jerusalem served as a centerpiece of Palestinian identity formation.

Palestinian Jews had been consolidated mostly in Jerusalem as a millet in the 18th century. Most were Sephardic or Mizrahi Arabic speaking Jews. Very few were Ashkenazi and the Ottomans strictly enforced immigration so that by the time of the Arab revolt, there were only about seven thousand Jews in Palestine. However, their population did grow and consequently, Ottoman authorities took notice and recognized the authority of the chief rabbi in Jerusalem 1880. However, because this authority did not extend to Ashkenazi Jews, their separatism continued. This is significant, of course, because after 1880 immigration restrictions were loosened and Ashkenazi Jews became the dominant group.

Many Jews of this first and second aliya reinterpreted Zionism in political terms rather than religious which, at the very least, meant they need not be required to wait until the coming of the messiah to come to Palestine. This was, of course, in keeping with European Zionists and patrons such as earlier benefactors of the baron Von Rothchilds and later, the Alliance Israelite Universelle, a French Jewish organization which founded an agricultural school for Jews in Palestine. It also meant that a movement with such international influences took on a wider
context and was mindful of the larger issues of the day. Thus, at the Zionist Pittsburgh Conference in 1918, Louis Brandeis helped craft a message consistent with the wider women’s suffrage movement by calling for equal civil rights, “irrespective of race, sex or faith.” While such lofty statements may have been viewed as putative, non-specific and superficial, they nonetheless, of course, helped garner sympathy from progressive quarters throughout Europe and the US as well as raised expectations among Jewish women. At the same time, however, they were not merely vapid empty slogans cynically manipulating world opinion. Rather, they were authentic aspirations consistent with a revolutionary socialism. In this respect, Jews of the second Aliya differed significantly from the first in that they were firstly younger and more likely to be single, and more importantly, tended to be imbued with socialist idealism and for many, it was this new Palestine that they were going to forge a new society. With this in mind, the status of women took on political and national significance. That is, her role was no longer to be determined within the household and negotiated with the male of the household. It was now given social and political significance and as such, a concern of the nation. Because women’s emancipation was au currant, it was taken to be a litmus of modernity and in turn, of civilization. Many Zionists thus, sought to underscore the relative modernity of the Jewish women to the Arab women as an indicator of their legitimate entitlement to the land. This, of course, was an argument apart from Zionism. This was an argument pivoting on utility, function and promise. This implied, of course, that Jews would make better allies of the modern Europeans and Americans. Thus, anti-Semitism notwithstanding, Zionist Jews had a distinct advantage in being able to network and effectively message their programme to the wider western world.

Arab culture, thought and society before the mandate, however, was having a slightly different conversation. This conversation was one that pivoted on the virtues of modernization and the skepticism it engendered. For many, modernization was synonymous with westernization and thus an implied imperialism. Newly arrived Jews from Europe were palpable repositories for many of these leery suspicions of modernity generally. To the extent that modernization meant aping the west, proto Arab nationalists and Arab reformers were split, often within themselves as to how best to proceed. Consequently, the role of women became central to the evolving national identity. Qassim, for one, argued quite clearly that women’s education was essential for the progress of Islamic (Arab) Society. On the other hand, others looked upon the emancipation of women with suspicion, as a foreign import and looked for other ways to define women’s roles in Muslim terms.

Many Arab nationalists favored women and girls education and education in general as a vehicle for uniting peoples by imparting shared history and culture and language. Moreover, through literacy, many more people would be able to access nationalist writers and literature. This was certainly the logic guiding Amin but it was also true of Ataturk as he tried to forge a new Turkey. Thus, there was an emphasis on nationalism as restructuring and an implicit desire to repudiate part of the past while at the same time drawing on shared historical experience in order to build a community. Of course in Palestine and indeed much of the Arab world there was the added complexity of the competing Ottoman nationalism overlaying it. From the Young Turk Revolution onward and certainly conscription, there was brought about by Ottoman participation in the First World War, Arab identity was put under great pressure forcing many to choose.

During the Ottoman period, education in Palestine was design to serve primarily select boys from usually elite families to ultimately serve the empire. This of course, meant learning
Turkish and, at least tacitly promoting or supporting the idea of Ottomanization. The Young Turk Revolution brought some reform in that it sought to educate some girls but again, the language of instruction and learning was Turkish. However, out of approximately eight thousand students throughout Palestine, only 1480 were girls. Nevertheless, this was more than the private Muslim Kuttabs which also had about 8000 students but only educated about 130 girls. Millet schools were also significantly better. Jews were allowed to run their own schools achieving near full literacy for both boys and girl Missionary schools were, of course, largely English and Protestant and educated Christians with similar results. Only five percent of Muslim women could read and 10% of the men as compared with 80 to 90 for Christian schools, respectively.

Under the mandate, Arabic replaced Turkish as the language of instruction and study. However, a greater innovation was the creation of teacher colleges designed to train teachers opening new career paths for women. The Women’s Training College opened in 1919 but tellingly only seventeen students were Muslim women while twenty-nine were Christian women. Nevertheless, the number of women’s school increased as did the number of female students. In 1935 a significant study was made by Ruth Frances Woodsman on a Rockefeller Foundation Grant. What she discovered was a vast disparity in educational outcomes between both boys and girls and between Muslim and Christian girls. Boys attended school more than girls by a ratio of more than three to one (21,202: 5489). Furthermore, Christian girls outnumbered Muslim girls and Christian teachers continued to dominate. Nevertheless, the British were clearly making a concerted effort to educate the Palestinian population more broadly than had been the case during Ottoman rule. Though lagging, Woodsmall’s research indicates that there was a doubling of Muslim girls attending schools between 1920-1935. However, as is often the case, education can be used as a means to control and to reinforce the prevailing social, economic and cultural paradigm and values. The mandate administration of Herbert Samuel successfully promoted education for girls so that between 1920 and 1933 the number of girls being educated doubled but at the same time held Islam in contempt and as a barrier to development. Moreover, part of the curriculum was distinctly designed to impart traditional domestic roles.

Education of Jewish girls was directed toward constructing a traditional Jewish identity and set in those terms was an effective tool for building a national consciousness among Jewish females as well as males. Under the mandate, the language of instruction for Jews was Hebrew and thus the British were instrumental in abetting the growing separatism of the two communities and inadvertently helping to foster separate national consciousness. Jewish schools also helped assimilate disparate peoples, who were immigrants from other lands. Those migrant connections were also instrumental in terms of funding. British policy was such that it allocated resources to Arab and Jewish schools evenly. But overseas donations to Jewish schools far exceed anything the British gave. No such parallel existed for Arab schools. Consequently, Jewish schools were much better funded and simply became better schools with better teachers thus furthering the separatism along socio economic status as well as national or religious identity.

The disparity between Arab and Jewish education as well as male and female educational paradigms led directly to the formation of women’s organizations. As may be expected, Jewish women’s organizations responded to what they perceived as the inferior condition of women’s education as compared to their male counterparts. The Women’s International Zionist Organization was instrumental in forging an adequate education for girls, imparting to them agricultural training as well as traditional academic schooling. Here, too, however, a distinct
chasm opened up between European Ashkenazi Jews and Mizrahi Jews. Fewer Mizrahi Jews attended school and consequently, illiteracy was higher. This disparity generally ran along the rural/urban divide given that Ashkenazi Jews tended to dwell in the cities and Mizrahi Jews tended toward the rural and as such more prone to menial labor and less apt to see the value in education.

World War Two, however put a nationalist, Zionist pressure on this dynamic. Overall, by 1944 twice as many boys went into vocational training than girls. However, during the war if a boy was of age, he had to perform military service. If he was too young, then he was required to do some sort of national service usually involving agricultural production. At the same time, however, there was a growing consensus that greater and more consistent access to education was key to developing a national consciousness. These two contradictory impulses and policies had the effect of underscoring the nationalist immediacy and agenda for both. This meant that girls education became more of a concern, meant to fulfill a Zionist promise. This education could be in terms of fulfilling the traditional roles of motherhood and homemaker or it could a more progressive notion focused on the trades, teaching or public serve. Regardless, emphasis was put on women and girls education to form consciousness as part of a new national identity construction.

This dynamic does not seem to have been present in Arab girl’s education during the mandate. Their education was traditional and designed to fill traditional female roles in the society. However, this education does not seem to have been conceived in order to fulfill a nationalist purpose, a calling to partake in a new Palestinian consciousness. The reason for this is likely because Arabs did not have separate funding streams coming in from outside agency and were dependent up the the Mandate authorities for education. On the one hand, this education was new and profound because it elevated many to a higher level of literacy and it educated girls and women that had not been attempted before. On the other hand, because it was administered by a third party, the British mandate authority, it served no Palestinian national agenda or any agenda that would compromise the British position in Palestine. The Mandate authority developed curriculum and hired teachers accordingly.

Thus while Jewish children in general and girls in particular had more choices and could be schooled in other traditionally male fields such as agriculture, the larger issue was that Jews had much more control and input over their education and curriculum than the Arabs. The effect was that regardless of how the nuances of education was adjudicated, the very fact that it was central gather point of dialogue and conversation meant that the effect was to draw Jews together at the inception and help galvanize a national consciousness as it was implemented and experienced. Girls education figured prominently in this discussion because it was seen as a litmus for progress and modernization, however understood and therefore scrutinized as a comparative measure.

To account for the growing disparity in education and educational outcomes, British administrators found it fashionable to blame what they saw as the inherent backwardness of Islam. But Tibawi argues otherwise stating that there is no Islamic proscription Against female education and that the paucity of funds and haphazard administration by the British was to blame. Given the extra funding being garnered from abroad for Jewish schools the disparity because acute. While the British tried to maintain equality both between Jewish and Arab schools and between genders it was also true that it lacked the immediacy and focus of many of the Jewish schools with an implicit or explicit Zionist agenda. In other words, the Jewish schools, even those
served by the British, felt the subtle and no so subtle directedness of an education as a tool to form a new nation. Palestinian education was denuded of a national purpose or direction and thus lacked cohesion and purposefulness. Both Sheila Katz and most recently Laura Robinson have remarked on the role formal education played in cultivating nationalist identities. My goal is to further examine how these identities were formed at the expense and exclusion of the other identities. Education, therefore, must be viewed as a political undertaking for which Arab Muslims were at a distinct disadvantage.