EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND ARAB NATIONALISM IN MANDATORY PALESTINE

BY

A. L. TIBAWI, B. A., PH. D.

Esher, Surrey (England)

Recent events in newly independent and still dependent territories in the Middle East and elsewhere have again demonstrated the close relation between national agitation and the schools. Movements of national independence and political agitation against foreign rulers or unpopular national governments in such territories often seek some support for their cause in the schools, occasionally and secretly among the teachers, but more frequently and openly among the students. The purpose of this paper is to examine such a situation in mandatory Palestine as a typical case.

The mandatory régime proved to be a break with Ottoman educational practice. Thus the control by the Government of Palestine of the Arab educational system was direct and complete: all administrative and higher executive posts were placed in British hands, and such local education committees as survived the change of rulers became consultative only, strictly under official control. In their struggle for national independence the Arabs always maintained that in this particular respect the mandatory government "usurped their municipal rights." This claim was made in a memorandum submitted in 1925 to the League of Nations' Permanent Mandates Commission. They argued that municipalities as organs of local government had fairly wide powers and duties with regard to education during the Turkish days. These powers were either completely assumed by the new govern-

1 For a short note on the educational set-up under the British mandate and its background during the Ottoman period see my article "Religion and Educational Administration in Palestine of the British Mandate" in The World of Islam, N. S. Vol. III, Nr. 1, 1953.

2 Minutes of the Seventh Session, p. 110.
ment or severely curtailed. The Arab demand for national control or the restoration of local control in education was never granted. In consequence a state of tension had been allowed to develop between the parents of the children to be educated and those who were to control that education.

Political propaganda has often represented the struggle for Arab national independence in Palestine as a movement led by seekers after the sweets of office. That may well have been one of the lesser motives of some of the leaders, but there seems to be little doubt that—to quote the statement made by the Chief Secretary of the Government of Palestine in Geneva in 1934—“the Arab leaders were both concerned to raise the educational standard of the fellaheen and to promote higher religious education.” There is no question then that, so far as the general demand for the control of national education was concerned, there was genuine and strong feeling against leaving that control in non-Arab hands unchallenged. To paraphrase the statement quoted above, Arab control of education was a national policy with two important objectives: raising the social level of the population and thus leading it on the highway of independence of foreign rule; preserving the national culture against an invasion of an alien people and culture. The first objective of shaking off foreign rule, in this case British, was common to all Arab countries under British or French tutelage. The second, however, was meant to guard against Jewish settlement with all that it stood for, and was peculiar to Palestine. The two objectives were quite frequently merged in one. Thus British rule was resisted both as a cover for Jewish settlement and as an imperialism disguised as a League of Nations mandate. Again, Jewish immigration was loathed not merely because it intruded alien culture and traditions on an Arab country, but also as a method of perpetuating foreign domination.

Neither of the Arab objectives was in the end achieved through the agency of education, or indeed through any other agency. The history of education in Palestine during three decades of British rule is therefore sadly coloured by that state of tension between the Government of Palestine and its Department of Education on one

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1 Permanent Mandates Commission, Minutes of the Twenty-Fifth Session, p. 39.