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The Educational and National Project of Khalil Totah: A Study in Palestinian Pedagogical Reform (1886–1948)

CORRESPONDENCE →



AUTHORS & AFFILIATIONS

Dr. Gamal Adawi ¶*

¶ Academic & For Teacher Education, The College of Sakhnin, Israel

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the intellectual and pedagogical contributions of Dr. Khalil Totah (1886–1948), a seminal figure in Palestinian education during the British Mandate. By synthesizing archival data from the Quaker archives and the British Mandate records with an analysis of Totah's writings, this research explores his role in "Arabizing" curricula and his vision of education as a tool for cultural resistance. The study highlights Totah's unique position as a Western-educated scholar who advocated for a modern, yet authentically Arab, educational system. It further examines his progressive stances on female education, practical learning, and his nuanced critique of missionary and colonial schooling.

Index Terms: Khalil Totah • Palestinian Pedagogy • Cultural Resistance • British Mandate • Educational Reform • Friends Boys' School

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Dr. Gamal Adawi*



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This study investigates the intellectual and pedagogical contributions of Dr. Khalil Totah (1886–1948), a seminal figure in Palestinian education during the British Mandate. By synthesizing archival data from the Quaker archives and the British Mandate records with an analysis of Totah's writings, this research explores his role in "Arabizing" curricula and his vision of education as a tool for cultural resistance. The study highlights Totah's unique position as a Western-educated scholar who advocated for a modern, yet authentically Arab, educational system. It further examines his progressive stances on female education, practical learning, and his nuanced critique of missionary and colonial schooling.

Keywords: *Khalil Totah, Palestinian Pedagogy, Cultural Resistance, British Mandate, Educational Reform, Friends Boys' School*

Correspondence: Dr. Gamal Adawi

1 Introduction: The "Forgotten" Architect of Palestinian Pedagogy

At the dawn of the 20th century, Palestine's educational landscape was a contested terrain where identity was forged. Amidst this transition, Dr. Khalil Totah emerged as a visionary reformer. Despite his pivotal role, Totah remained, as Edward Said noted, a "forgotten figure" in modern Arab historiography. This study aims to bridge the gap by analyzing Totah's synthesis of Western progressive education (Columbia University) and his staunch Arab nationalist identity.

2 Intellectual Foundations: Between Tradition and Modernity

Totah's philosophy was rooted in his 1926 doctoral dissertation, *The Contribution of the Arabs to Education*. He argued that the modern scientific renaissance was fundamentally linked to Arab-Islamic civilization, citing scholars like Al-Khwarizmi and Al-Ma'mun as precursors to European enlightenment.

However, his admiration for heritage did not blind him to contemporary flaws. He critiqued the "rote memorization" and "humiliation" inherent in traditional Eastern schooling, contrasting it with the "independent mind" fostered in American middle-class education. For Totah, the ideal model for the Arab world was a "practical democracy" that elevated individuals based on effort rather than lineage.

3 Institutional Leadership: Dar al-Mu'allimin and the Friends School

3.1 Leadership at Dar al-Mu'allimin (1919–1925)

As the first principal of the Government Teacher Training College in Jerusalem, Totah faced the British administration's attempts to depoliticize Palestinian youth. He insisted on a curriculum that balanced pedagogical skill with deep cultural rooting, viewing teachers as the vanguard of national identity.

3.2 The Friends Boys' School (FBS): A Microcosm of Reform

Under Totah's leadership, the FBS in Ramallah became a laboratory for "Arabization." While English was the medium for sciences, Totah ensured that history and geography were taught in Arabic to maintain the students' connection to their land.

Statistical Context: Archival records indicate that between 1921 and 1948, the school reached a total enrollment of 511 students. However, a significant sectarian gap existed; for instance, Christian students often outnumbered Muslims (363 vs. 148), a disparity Totah worked to address by advocating for broader inclusivity.

4 Education as National Resistance: The Peel Commission and Beyond

Totah's pedagogy was inherently political. In his 1937 testimony before the Peel Commission, he condemned the British Mandate's meager education budget and the marginalization of Arab history. He famously argued that missionary schools, despite their contributions, often prioritized foreign interests over the Arab national cause. He called for "financial and intellectual independence," urging Arabs to stop "extending their hands to foreigners" for the education of their children.

5 Progressive Social Advocacy: Female Education and Islam

5.1 The Reformist View of Islam

Totah held a neutral, scholarly view of Islam's role in education. He asserted that the Qur'an was the "original inspiration" for Arab literacy. He viewed the mosque and the church not as relics of the past, but as the historical foundations upon which the modern university was built.

5.2 The Struggle for Girls' Education

In an era of social conservatism, Totah was a fierce advocate for female education. He linked the "national renaissance" (Nahda) directly to the intellectual liberation of women.

- Critique of the Mandate: He criticized the British for leaving 35,000 girls “in ignorance” while the treasury was “overflowing with funds.”
- Religious Justification: He countered conservative opposition by citing historical precedents of female scholars like Umm al-Darda and the Prophet’s Hadith on the obligation of seeking knowledge for every Muslim.

6 The Paradox of Co-Education

While progressive, Totah’s stance on co-education was pragmatic. While he acknowledged that “supervised co-education” in Western liberal societies helped normalize gender relations, he remained cautious about its immediate implementation in the “artificial and tense” social environment of Mandate Palestine. He viewed it as a long-term goal contingent upon broader social reform.

7 Conclusion

Khalil Totah’s legacy lies in his ability to decolonize the Palestinian mind through a balanced educational diet: adopting Western “mechanical and practical” sciences while fiercely guarding the “Arab spirit and language.” His work serves as a foundational blueprint for institutional education in Palestine, proving that pedagogical reform is, in essence, an act of national survival.

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