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Critical psychology in the Arab world

Insights from critical community psychology in the Palestinian colonial context

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The main argument of this paper is informed by the realization that, despite its significance as critical alternative to colonial psychology, out of all branches of academic Western mainstream psychology taught in Arab and Palestinian universities, community psychology as a sub-discipline is noticeably marginalized and under-recognized. Community psychology has a formative quality and the potential to make contributions to the emancipation and liberation of marginalized communities, as opposed to many problematic forms of historical and contemporary enactments of mainstream colonial psychology in the Arab World (Makkawi 2009; Soueif and Ahmed 2001). Following a historical trend in postcolonial situations, universities in the Arab World continue to import and uncritically apply Western constructions of knowledge, including psychology, and the intellectual legacy of European colonialism continues to dominate these academic institutions (Abouchedid 2006). This intellectual hegemony of colonial knowledge in Arab universities renders the enactment of critical psychology in general and community psychology in particular – both in academe and in community settings – a challenging undertaking. In this paper, I draw upon an emerging program of critical community psychology at Birzeit University in Palestine, arguing that envisioning critical psychology in the Arab World in general is better conceived through critical community psychology as an emerging alternative to colonial psychology.

There is no formally recorded history of the inception of community psychology in Palestine. However, early manifestations of community psychology in the Palestinian colonial context can be traced back to various phases of community grassroots organizing and action during the anti-colonial struggle for self-determination. The vision and praxis of the newly established master's program in community psychology at Birzeit University evolved from and were inspired by earlier forms of community grassroots action during the first Palestinian *Intifada* in the occupied West Bank and Gaza (WBG) in 1987. While this paper highlights the recently developed master's program in community psychology as an exemplar of critical psychology in the Arab World, I focus on the roots of community psychology in the Palestinian community long before its formal academic inception.

I start by describing the colonial condition in Palestine with particular attention to the occupied WBG, where this specific case of community psychology enactment is being implemented. The focus is placed on academic psychology and the legacy of colonial knowledge inherited

and applied by Arab and Palestinian universities and the formal educational system as a whole. The following section describes the earlier roots of community psychology enactments which were manifested in community organizing and grassroots activism before and during the first Palestinian *Intifada*. Subsequently, the paper addresses the problematic shift in this 'bottom-up' form of community grassroots action and the setback it sustained following the signing of the Oslo agreement in 1993. This setback is manifested in the work of an expanding network of Western-funded Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the parallel trend of reductionist research on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among Palestinian victims of military violence. Both the work of the NGOs and the PTSD research accumulation are problematic and pose serious challenges to community psychology enactment that is committed to people's liberation and social justice. The concluding section of the paper describes the emerging master's program in community psychology at Birzeit University, highlighting its roots in earlier phases of community psychology enactments during the first *Intifada*, and raising the possibility for critical psychology in the Arab World in general.

The colonial condition and colonial knowledge

Following a systematic settler-colonial process by the Zionist Movement, the state of Israel was formally established in 1948, and soon began an ethnic cleansing campaign leading to the mass expulsion of more than two thirds of the indigenous Palestinian people, leaving a fragile minority behind (Morris 1989). Furthermore, in 1967 the remaining territories of historical Palestine, namely the WBG, were occupied by the invading Israeli army in another wave of colonialist expansion. Two fragmented Palestinian communities remained in historic Palestine, but have been divided by the virtual 'green line' and live under two contradictory sociopolitical conditions, and more than half of the Palestinian people dispersed as refugees in exile.

Highlighting the persistence of the colonial condition in historic Palestine is pertinent to our discussion of the challenges facing the enactment of critical and decolonizing community psychology in such a context. The colonial condition in historic Palestine is illustrated in Rouhana's (2011: 1) statement that, political justifications aside, describing 'Zionism [as] a settler colonial movement therefore is, at the very minimum, a description of the process in which Palestine was taken over'. This colonial condition continues to characterize the life and struggle of the various Palestinian communities, which were fragmented and divided as a result of the prolonged colonial practices enacted by the Israeli regime after 1948. Colonialism as a process and materialistic manifestation has always been described as a violent action perpetuated by the colonizers against the native people (see Bulhan 1985; Fanon 1963; Freire 1970). Reasserting Fanon's (1963) description of the colonial condition as violent contact between the colonizer and colonized, Jinadu (1976: 604) writes:

> The contact occurs in such a way that the numerically inferior alien race is actually the sociologically (*i.e.* politically and economically) superior race. This is so because of its access to, and monopolistic control of, socio-economic and political sources of power. This control is made possible and facilitated by the 0sheer weight of military superiority and material wealth of the alien race.

For decades, Israeli colonial practices in the occupied WBG included labour exploitation, fragmentation of Palestinian lands, settlement activities, control of the Palestinians' education, restricting people's movement, consistent political harassment, and military intervention, all rendering life conditions for the native population unbearable. The colonizer-colonized power

relation penetrated all spheres of life for the native Palestinians. It is within this context of settler colonialism that critical community psychology is called upon to address community mental health problems stemming directly from repressive colonial hegemony (Makkawi 2009). Since universities as centres for the production of knowledge expected to lead the development and enactment of community psychology in such context, it is imperative to examine the historical development of academic psychology in Arab and Palestinian universities in general.

Modern universities in the Arab World were established during the era of European coloni-alism, or shortly after some of the Arab states gained their artificial independence (Abouchedid 2006). Colonial education and Western epistemologies have dominated the earlier stages of Arab academic institutions despite Arab nationalists' efforts to create 'counter-colonial model of education capable of healing the masses from their woes resulting from colonial subjugation' (Abouchedid 2006: 5). Psychology was introduced to the Arab World through Egypt by colonial powers of the time and since then Arab universities have been uncritically importing, reproduc-ing, and teaching Western mainstream psychology.

More than half a century ago, Western scholars based in the American University of Beirut plainly stated that 'Psychology in the Arab Near East sprang from and is nourished by Western Psychology. British, French and American influences can be seen – and distinguished – in the work of psychologist through the area' (Prothro and Melikian 1955: 304). While this statement came just as a number of Arab countries were gaining their independence, 'colonial psychology' continues to be persistently hegemonic as the intellectual inherited legacy of colonialism in academe throughout the Arab World (Abouchedid 2006; Nasser and Abouche-did 2007). Melikian (1984: 65) identifies the challenges facing the 'transmission of psycholog-ical knowledge in five oil-producing Arab States' as hinging on 'Arab concept of mind and behavior and Arab perception of psychology'. To locate the obstacles facing the transmission of psychological knowledge in the culture and collective mentality of the native commu-nity, rather than the discipline of psychology itself, illustrates the prominence of intellectual colonial hegemony years after the termination of formal colonialism. Palestinian universities under Israeli colonial rule in the WBG, modelled after Arab universities, are no exception to this colonial legacy.

Arab scholars infatuated with Western epistemology of mainstream psychology which they teach and research often state uncritically that 'Egypt was the main gateway through which modern psychology was introduced and practiced in the Arab countries' (Soueif and Ahmed 2001: 216). But this 'modern' mainstream psychology, when found in other similar colonial circumstances, was contested as colonial psychology (Bulhan 1985; Fanon 1963; Martín-Baró 1994). Continuing uncritically to import, practice, teach, and research Western psychology throughout academic institutions in the Arab World is problematic and hinders attempts to develop alternative, critical, and decolonizing forms of psychology. Based on his concise review of Ahmed and Gielen's (1998) edited volume *Psychology in the Arab Countries*, Farraj (2001: 281) writes that 'Arab psychologists rarely conduct studies on topics they have identified as being of special importance to people living in the Arab world. Instead of that, they are more likely to design studies around already existing instruments for examining certain constructs'.

Social psychology is the most researched area in the Arab psychological scholarship (Soueif and Ahmed 2001). The issues and problems investigated in social psychology lend themselves quite easily to critical examination and application to real-life problems of the oppressed major-ities (Martín-Baró 1994). This intellectual space opens the possibility of developing native and relevant contributions to psychology (Hwang 2005). For comparison, Latin American social psychologists' discontent with the US model of social psychology evolved into what is widely known as the paradigm of liberation psychology (Martín-Baró 1994). Nonetheless, Arab social

psychologists continue to apply Western mainstream theories and concepts to their areas of research with little critical theorizing based on local real-world social problems.

Arab psychologists tend to claim that the theoretical roots of contemporary psychology in the Arab World reach back to pre-disciplinary intellectual legacies of great Arab-Islamic philosophers (Soueif and Ahmed 2001). However, there is no evidence of current developments or transformations of these classic ideas, especially in the discipline of psychology. Recognizing that 'it is in the nature of human nature to change' (Parker 2007: 1), mainstream psychology is constantly challenged to re-examine its basic premises in light of the changing human condition. There is a sense of absurdity in attributing contemporary psychology in the Arab World to classical writings of Arab-Islamic philosophers such as *Al-Farabi, Ibn-Sina, Ibn-Roshd, Ibn-Al-Heitham*, and *Ibn-Kaldoun*, to mention but a few of the often-cited 'pre-disciplinary' great Arab-Islamic thinkers, as the founding fathers of Arab psychology (Soueif and Ahmed 2001), especially when their ideas are seldom developed further by contemporary Arab psychologists.

The dichotomy between mere yearning to the ancient roots of Arab-Islamic philosophy with lack of contemporary development in psychology on one hand, and simply importing Western mainstream psychology with no contribution to knowledge construction on the other, obscures the development of critical psychology in the Arab World. Psychology that does not evolve from examining real life issues under colonial repression is part of the problem rather than part of the solution. The tendency to overlook intellectual contributions of anti-colonial psychologists working within similar contexts, such as colonial Algiers (Fanon 1963) and Latin America (Martín-Baró 1994; Freire 1970), or that draw upon contemporary paradigms of liberation and decolonizing psychology (Montero 2008; Seedat and Lazarus 2011) is peculiar to contemporary Arab psychological research and teaching. It is within this conflicting intellectual milieu that the enactment of critical community psychology, especially in the Palestinian colonial context, becomes appealing and challenging at the same time.

Palestinian universities in the WBG are not only considered centres for learning but also symbols of survival and resistance to the Israeli occupation. Despite their anti-colonial inception and constant targeting by the Israeli military occupation (Bruhn 2006), Palestinian universities resemble many of their sister institutions throughout the Arab World in their 'failure to emancipate education from its colonial past' (Abouchedid 2006: 1). In most social sciences, but especially in psychology, Palestinian universities continue to teach mainstream, Western individualistic knowledge. They have been criticized for lacking the academic culture of scientific inquiry, suffering from the absence of epistemological consciousness, implementing traditional ways of assessment and examinations, encouraging the brain-drain of qualified faculty members, relying on traditional teaching methods mostly using 'banking education' (Freire 1970), lacking theoretical vision for Palestinian higher education, and failing to place the development of higher education within its historical context (Shaheen 2004).

Early manifestations of community psychology in Palestine

During the first two decades of resisting Israeli occupation (1967–1987), Palestinian people in the WBG established an extraordinary network of grassroots organizations, including student unions, women's and workers' groups, and a wide variety of professional and community organizations. These community organizations obtained significant momentum through the public spirit of collective responsibility and volunteerism for the public good. This 'bottom-up' community organizing was initiated and maintained by community members who had no assistance from academic psychologists. During the first *Intifada* in 1987, the network of grassroots

organizations and community groups provided needed social and psychological support to vic‑tims of political and military violence (Hiltermann 1991).

The role of grassroots organizations in popular education during the first Palestinian *Intifada* embodied a particular enactment of community psychology in the context of prolonged periods of closure of schools and universities by the Israeli military authorities. Palestinian teachers and students in the WBG 'constituted an assisting force in the organization of un‑institutionalized (and militarily declared illegal) educational activities, in conditions of widespread popular resistance' (Mazawi 1994: 507). Although declared illegal by the Israeli army, neighbourhood committees of *Intifada* activists organized and conducted popular education activities in *ad hoc* classrooms. In these educational activities, both community teachers and students were involved in authentic and interactive teaching and learning process that integrated local community needs with the national struggle for self‑determination (Hussein 2005). Palestinian universities, which were also closed by military order, struggled to meet the needs of their students, but noticeably failed to understand and transform grassroots manifestations of community psychol‑ogy at that time (Makkawi 2009).

The signing of the Oslo agreement between the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the government of Israel in 1993 embodied a constraining turning point in the development of Palestinian national movement and grassroots organizing. Sub‑sequently, overseas development aid from Western capitalist countries introduced funding and development requirements that supported the emergence and proliferation of a wide network of Non‑Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Grassroots voluntary organizations simply dis‑appeared from the landscape in that the space to develop their own social and economic infra‑structures was diminished due to the new funded NGOs which mushroomed throughout the community (Bakeer 2012). Many of the leaders of the old grassroots voluntary organizations became paid administrators in the new NGOs network.

When the second *Intifada* erupted in 2000, the Palestinian community in the WBG was less prepared to sustain the collective struggle and provide the social and psychological support it had done before. Compared with mass demonstrations, community building, alternative eco‑nomics, popular education, and strong psychological sense of community, which were prev‑alent during the first *Intifada* (1987), the second *Intifada* (2000) was less grassroots based and highly militarized, with many casualties and victims of military violence. It is within this social milieu of a demoralized, depoliticized, and pacified community that mental health NGOs were wrongly expected to provide mental health services and to attend to problems stemming from the brutal repression and military violence perpetrated by the Israeli occupation.

Problematic manifestations

In contrast to indigenous grassroots community organizations, NGOs constitute a network of Western funded projects misleadingly referred to as civil society. In the Arab World, the number of such western funded NGOs increased from 20,000 in the mid‑1960s to 70,000 in the late 1980s. In the WBG alone the number jumped from 272 on the eve of first *Intifada* in 1987 to about 444 after the Oslo agreement of 1993 (Qassoum 2002). In 2004, a total of 57 NGOs were providing psychosocial and mental health care services to a variety of groups in the WBG includ‑ing women, children, people with disabilities, and victims of military violence (Giacaman 2004).

Many of these organizations provide overlapping services, sometimes to the same population, all depending on the availability of external funding, which is typically conditional upon the political situation in the occupied territories. The staff and administrators of these mental health NGOs are acting in a vicious circle that goes like this: writing proposals for project funding,

receiving the funds, implementing a funded project, writing a report to the funder, and moving on to writing the next proposal. These projects are sporadic, overlapping, poorly defined, never properly evaluated, and are anything but strategic movement to enhance community mental health among the oppressed Palestinian communities. Despite the fact many of these mental health NGOs operate centres within the community, their frameworks for intervention are awkward and mostly apply individualistic approaches to counselling and psychotherapy.

While grassroots organizations were established from the bottom up with a broad base of supporters, typically linked to political parties and inspired by self-sufficiency logic, NGOs are established by a few individuals with links to Western funding organizations and with no popular base (Samara 2001). Western-funded NGOs are conceived within the wider strategy of co-option and entrapment of the Arab and Palestinian intelligentsia, seeking to depoliticize, distract, and distance radical and organic intellectuals from involvement with the struggle for justice and self-determination (Qassoum 2002).

Parallel to the expanding network of mental health NGOs, there has been a growing body of reductionist research on the exposure of Palestinian children and young people to political violence and trauma due to Israeli military violence. Both types of activities are individualistic, non-participatory, and acritical, and represent power knowledge embedded in the current phase of global capitalism. War-related mental health problems and psychological distress among the Palestinian people have been prevalent in their collective experience since their first uprooting by Israeli colonization in 1948. This collective trauma has been passed down from one generation of Palestinians to another. However, it is only recently, namely since the first *Intifada* in 1987, but with new momentum during the second *Intifada* in 2000, that research on mental health and war-related psychological distress among the Palestinian people has proliferated. Due to its obsessive focus on the consequences for the individual of exposure to military violence and trauma, this research has little relevance to the community-level work conducted by indigenous mental health practitioners providing services to Palestinian victims of military violence.

According to Haj-Yahia (2007), this accumulating empirical research suffers from a number of methodological flaws. First, these studies use traditional quantitative research methods. Second, the majority of the research has been conducted in the Gaza Strip, where political violence and life hardship is greater than in the West Bank. Third, there is a lack of comparison groups with young people who have not been exposed to the same level of military violence. Fourth, military violence and traumatic events are measured on dichotomous scales of measurement using yes/no response categories. Finally, the scales used in these studies were initially developed in English, mainly in the USA and Western Europe and were merely translated into Arabic with no cultural relevance.

This research focuses on the measurement of psychological constructs and coping mechanisms at the *individual* level of abstraction, whereas trauma caused by the Israeli military violence, is conceived at the *collective* level of abstraction. Previous research with Palestinian students attending Israeli universities has indicated that collective-national identity enhances their psychological adjustment within a hostile and discriminating political environment (Makkawi 2004). The literature indicates a positive correlation between higher stages of ethnic identity development and personal self-esteem (Phinney 1995). Ethnic identity serves as a protecting factor for mental health in the context of ethnic-racial discrimination and prevents negative stereotypes from affecting self-concept (Mossakowski (2003). Current research on the Palestinian people in the WBG must examine the relationship between collective-national identity and coping with the psychological consequences of military violence.

Research conducted with colonized communities such as the Palestinian people ought to be decolonizing praxis, indigenously informed, and transformative, and utilize methodological flexibility including qualitative methods (Smith 1999). The disentanglement between the

accumulation of reductionist quantitative research and the mere implementation of funded training projects is best illustrated in a series of empirical quantitative research studies published by researchers affiliated with Gaza Community Mental Health Program (GCMHP). In describing community mental health as practiced by the GCMHP, Qouta and El-Sarraj (2002: 333) assert with reference to their research program that 'research activities improve knowledge of health and human rights issues facing the Gaza community; the publication of research documents is a valuable tool in raising the profile both of GCMHP's work, and of the current situation in Gaza'. However vague this statement might be in its depiction of the role of research in the work of one of the largest community mental health NGOs in Palestine, the dialectical interconnection between scholarships and practice as the simplest form of praxis, is strangely missing. What is really in question is the disconnection between the various interventions and 'human rights activities' (however individualistically the concept of human rights is defined) and research produced by the staff and visiting researchers in the GCMHP. Empirical research and community mental health interventions, in this case, are glaringly disconnected and hardly inform one another.

Critical community psychology at Birzeit University

The community mental health system in the WBG emerged recently as a section within the emerging general health system run by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The PNA assumed responsibility for education and general health within which the mental health system had emerged as an 'embryonic system' attending to a vast number of risk factors impacting the community mental health at large (Giacaman 2004). The stagnation within this emerging system, when added to the expansion of the funded NGO network, especially in mental health, constitutes a challenge facing the team working on the development of critical community psychology at Birzeit University envisioned to be consistent with the grassroots community action from the first *Intifada*.

The few available documentations of the emerging mental health system focus on existing structures: two psychiatric hospitals, a total of 15 outpatient governmental community centres/clinics, and more than 20 clinics managed by NGOs and the private sector (WHO 2006). Due to prolonged Israeli occupation, along with the limited resources of the PNA to monitor the various psychological and mental health services provided by the network of NGOs in the occupied WBG, there has been an entrenched phenomenon of overlapping and border-crossing practices among the various mental health professions.

Realizing that community psychology is context dependent (Fryer and Laing 2008) requires indigenous contributions to knowledge construction (Smith 1999) and examination of relevant community problems within their local contexts. With this recognition, the community psychology program at Birzeit University was established under the assumption that opting for a paradigm of critical community psychology with an interdisciplinary outlook and contextualized decolonizing praxis should improve this acute situation of community mental health. But the interdisciplinary nature of community psychology the program espoused, especially when, internationally, the whole field of community psychology is still evolving, has repeatedly exposed it to issues of boundary definition with neighbouring disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and education. Similar claims for doing community psychology are also made by many NGOs by merely affixing the word 'community' to the title of whatever training project they are conducting.

As an emerging sub-field within psychology, it is quite a challenge to have a fixed definition of what community psychology is and many would argue that we have several 'community psychologies' (Fryer and Laing 2008). As it is context dependent, community psychology that works well in one context may not be suitable for another context and indigenous scholarship is

expected to facilitate the development of what community psychology works for what context. Proposing the development of a context specific sub-discipline that requires local production of knowledge, in an academic environment that is 'alienated from indigenous epistemology' (Abouchedid 2006: 1) and continues to import and uncritically apply 'colonial knowledge', is not only challenging but also risks the possibility of strengthening the already existing confusion in mental health practices mentioned above.

The program is inspired by the assumption that the individual's psychological well-being in this colonial context is to a large extent an outcome of the ongoing Zionist colonization, oppression, repression, and exploitation. It is essential to examine how the ongoing occupation, military violence, the creation of the colonialist separation wall, checkpoints, economic embargo, the rise of poverty, imprisonment and torture, assassination and killing, school closures, and the systematic destruction of Palestinian community's infrastructure all play a significant role in the severity of people's mental ill-health and the increase in risk factors. Consequences of these factors include but are not limited to disempowerment, poor community prevention, delinquency, child labour, high-risk behaviours, aggression, domestic violence, school violence, substance abuse, and many other harmful mental health problems. The key premise is that while working with groups and communities within this oppressive context, we emphasize that ultimately the process of community critical *conscientization* (Freire 1970) is by and in itself a process of psychological liberation and mental health promotion.

Community psychology enactment at Birzeit University is envisioned as praxis focusing on community participatory action research about context-specific issues within the Palestinian colonial context. Realizing that empirical research about colonial policies, military violence, oppression, and community mental health in the WBG has been dominated by positivistic, reductionist, mainstream quantitative research methodologies with pre-determined categories and hypothesis testing (Haj-Yahia 2007), earlier research projects in the Birzeit program opted for a critical shift in their methodology and research questions. We took the challenge of shifting our general approach to research and knowledge construction to be more consistent with indigenous methodologies (Smith 1999) conducted by our students as indigenous researchers with already 'built-in' sensitivity to the local community's culture and aspirations. We framed our emerging research efforts in the broader theoretical, epistemological, and methodological tools of the Grounded Theory tradition (Glaser and Strauss 1967) due to its flexibility and relevance to inductive exploration of newly researched areas. Furthermore, the question of collective-national identity, which has been traditionally neglected in the trauma research in Palestine, was placed in the foreground of a number of student research projects. This allowed for the emergence of context-specific knowledge that may illuminate our understanding of the local social problems, rather than mere implementations of mainstream models which were developed in foreign contexts.

Conclusion

In illuminating the existence of Marxian currents in Latin American community psychology in comparison to US community psychology, Gokani (2011: 113) emphasizes that in Latin America 'community psychology emerged from the efforts of community organizers, activists, and community members pushing to be heard . . . and the need for academics to respond to social justice issues affecting the community'. By analogy, the Palestinian grassroots movement in the WBG, prior to and during the first *Intifada* in 1987 remarkably resembles community level action and organizing in Latin America that led to the academic development of community psychology during the 1970s and 1980s (Martín-Baró 1994 ; Montero 2008). Regrettably, Palestinian academic psychology at that time failed to respond to community grassroots action and

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enactment of community psychology. Instead, the Oslo agreement and the subsequent expansion of the NGOs network in the WBG thwarted the development of academic community psychology in Palestine. Despite this historical shift, which renders the phenomenon of grass-roots community action something from the past, the vision and roots of the emerging program of community psychology at Birzeit University can be located in community level organizing and collective action from the era of the first *Intifada*

Responding to the social and psychological ramifications of an entrenched settler-colonial condition, Palestinian universities in the WBG have been consistently called upon to develop and implement academic programs that would not only train younger generation of Palestinian students for future job opportunities, but also and more importantly develop programs that would contribute to community survival and resilience, and play leading roles in the process of nation building and self-determination. It is our realization that colonialism and colonial practices constitute the most oppressive and direct cause of community mental health problems that led to the establishment of the community psychology program at Birzeit University. An expanded account of the argument presented in this chapter, together with examples of critical community interventions in Palestine, can be found in Makkawi (2015).

Far from being conceived as distinct and set apart from the rest of the Arab World, the emerging paradigm of critical community psychology within the Palestinian colonial context will hopefully challenge academic psychologists throughout the Arab World to begin problematizing taken-for-granted mainstream colonial epistemologies of psychology we import and acritically implement in our research, teaching, and practice.

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Website resources

Arab Psychological Network: http://www.arabpsynet.com
Birzeit University for link to Community Psychology: http://www.birzeit.edu

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