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Palestinian Universities Under Occupation, November 1987–January 1988

Penny Johnson *

At this writing, in early February, the campuses of all universities and schools in the West Bank and most of those in Gaza are empty, closed by military order, as the Palestinian uprising entered its third month.

On 2 February an announcement from Bethlehem University appeared in the local press stating that the vice-president of the university had received a military order closing the university “until further notice.” The university had been scheduled to reopen after three months of military closure following the 28 October IDF killing of a Bethlehem U. student, Ishaq Abu Surur.

At the same time, similar closure orders were delivered to Hebron Polytechnic and Hebron University. Later the same day, Israeli radio announced that the Education Department of the military government had ordered all 800 schools and community colleges in the West Bank—including private and UNRWA schools—closed until further notice. Schools in Jerusalem, which is not under military jurisdiction, were not directly affected, but, with Birzeit and al-Najah universities already closed, education ground to a complete halt in the rest of the West Bank. **

The closure of all educational institutions was unprecedented and demonstrates the gravity of the situation in the eyes of the military

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**The College of Science and Technology at Abu Dis in Jerusalem was closed by military order on 1 January.

authorities. The only “parallel” in the history of the occupation was a West Bank-wide school strike at the opening of the school year in October 1967, when, ironically, the military authorities insisted that schools open and that “normality” be restored to the newly occupied territories.

The military orders apparently were the result, not of specific incidents, but rather of the often-stated IDF contention that educational institutions are “centers of unrest.” *New York Times* reporter Francis Clines was misleading in this respect when he stated (in the *International Herald Tribune* of 3 February) that schools were ordered closed “a day after an attempt to reopen them failed because of continuing unrest.” In fact, although many government schools did not hold full classes, the Friends schools in Ramallah, for example, reported almost full attendance in elementary and preparatory classes. In any case, the security rationale does not hold: schools were largely closed for the two months prior to the uprising, without any noticeable effect on the level of popular resistance.

It is significant that the university closure orders differed from most closure orders of the recent past. By issuing orders closing universities “until further notice,” the military authorities disobeyed instructions of the Israeli High Court which, in a 1981 case involving Birzeit University, asked that the military authorities replace the phrase “until further notice” with a specific period of time.

As the closure of Birzeit University from 10 January to 10 February draws to a close, the university has yet to receive a written order. The same holds true for a number of schools closed during this period. However, even a written order would not have offered an explanation for the one-month closure. Officers in the military government informed both the press and the university that the closure was designed to prevent disturbances. The university administration was pressured to close the institution itself. When administration officials told the army that the university council found no reason to do so, the military authorities took the matter into their own hands and closed the institution with a telephone call.

In a 10 January press release, Birzeit University noted:

Birzeit University can only affirm that preventive measures need to be taken against army excesses, not against universities and schools, and calls on the international community to act firmly to protect the occupied population under the terms of its responsibilities under Article 1 of the Fourth Geneva Convention concerning civilians.

In the week prior to the closure, students at Birzeit University had staged two demonstrations near the old campus that were most notable for

the lack of army intervention. These rallies were not even mentioned among the army's reasons for the closure.

Although the unusual scenario at Birzeit (termed a "liberated zone" by Birzeit students) may have been happenstance, it underlines an important feature of the uprising, what may be called its "deinstitutionalization." In other words, nationalist institutions, which developed in the 1970s and played a leading role—at least up until 1982—have not been particularly prominent in either mobilizing or guiding the uprising. This was particularly true in the uprising's first weeks. Later, as popular committees developed on many levels, Palestinian organizations, and to a lesser extent institutions, played an important role.

The Role of Faculty

The clandestine statements released in the West Bank by the Unified National Command of the Uprising assign different duties to different sectors of society. Academics and intellectuals are urged to write articles documenting and explaining the uprising. And there is certainly evidence of academics struggling to contribute. Several biochemists are working on the composition of tear gas: several varieties are currently in use, and pregnant women in particular have suffered from tear gas in close quarters, and some have miscarried. Others are involved in the arduous and often painful task of recording the scope of army brutality. Some simply try to continue to pursue their own research in difficult conditions.

Little has been published to date. This is due, in part, to the military censorship of the local Arab press, the quickest avenue for publishing articles. One Birzeit academic submitted an article on Palestinians inside the green line, only to be regretfully told by the editor that the words "uprising," "Zionism," and "green line" would not be allowed by the censor. It is impossible to assess the extent of the role of faculty members in the network of popular committees that sustains the uprising, though certainly many have been active in relief efforts. Few faculty members have been detained to date; however, Dr. Samir Shihadah of Birzeit's Arabic Department was detained on 1 February and held without charge.

Islamic Trends

Student council elections at the Islamic University a few days before the beginning of the uprising were perhaps most significant in the trends they did *not* reflect. Given the prominence of the Islamic Jihad movement in

many analyses of the leadership of the uprising in Gaza, it is interesting to note that the student bloc representing the Islamic Jihad movement garnered only a scant 4 percent of the female vote and 11 percent of the male. (Male and female students vote for separate student councils.) The more established Islamic Bloc won with 60 percent of the male vote and 75 percent of the female. The poor showing of nationalist students was attributed by them to voter fraud.

Islamic University faculty and students responded with strong condemnations to the 16 November deportation order issued against university lecturer Shaykh 'Abd al-'Aziz 'Awdah, who the authorities alleged was the leader of Islamic Jihad in Gaza. His deportation order is currently under review: before the military review committee, 'Awdah's attorneys argued that his activities were confined to teaching and to his duties at a mosque. His deportation would be certain to further inflame Gaza.

Deportations of Students

Two al-Najah students, Jamal Shatti Hindi and 'Abd al-Nasir 'Abd al-'Aziz, are in the same situation as Shaykh 'Awdah, their deportation orders currently under review. Among the nine individuals served with deportation orders on 3 January (five of whom have already been deported), one, Muhammad Samara, is a student at the Islamic University and another, Hisham Khadir, a recent al-Najah graduate. Both, along with 'Adil Hamad of Qalandiya, were principally accused, according to press reports, of organizing for the mainstream al-Shabibah youth movement.

It is hard to estimate the number of university students who are among the more than 1,500 individuals detained over the past two months. At Birzeit University, about thirty-five cases of detention have been reported, but the university may not be aware of all detentions, especially in Gaza. Two Birzeit students, 'Umar Nazzal and Na'im Sa'di, were placed under administrative detention in early January.

Al-Najah University: Internal Dysfunction

Al-Najah, the largest West Bank university, was closed during this period by an internal dispute over a board of trustee's decision to raise substantially student fees. The university had reopened on 27 October after a two-month suspension of classes that resulted from a dispute between Islamic fundamentalist and nationalist students, only to shut down two

weeks later over the fees issue. Closure has become the immediate response to internal problems at al-Najah.

Agreement was reached between students and the board of trustees in early January, with the board pledging that students currently enrolled in the university would not be subject to fee increases. To date, classes have not resumed. The university, however, still suffers from financial problems: in December, an 8 percent pay cut for all faculty and employees was announced.

Al-Najah is not the only university affected by financial disputes: in November, an acrimonious exchange of ads in *al-Quds* newspaper took place between the Employee's Committee of the Islamic University in Gaza, which accused the board of trustees of irresponsibility in securing funds to pay their salaries, and the president of the university.

Academic Activities

One of the odder sights in the West Bank in early January, amid the strikes and demonstrations, was that of students assembled at various sites to take their *tawjihi* examinations, the required Jordanian exam at the end of secondary school. The exam, much criticized by progressive educators, determines to a large extent the high school graduate's future access to education and employment. This year 13,000 students were eligible to take this exam, but because of the uprising some were unable to reach examination sites, especially residents of refugee camps that were under curfew.

However, most academic activities have been at a standstill since early December. In November the universities had hosted a number of academic gatherings: a conference at Hebron University on research methods and goals, with participation by West Bank research centers; a daylong civil engineering seminar at Birzeit University; and the second Symposium on English Language Teaching, at Hebron University. A number of academics also participated in a 15 November conference on mental health in the occupied territories, the first of its kind, hosted by the Center for Non-Violence.

In January, during the uprising, al-Haq/Law in the Service of Man, the West Bank affiliate of the International Commission of Jurists, managed to hold an international conference on "The Administration of Occupied Territories," which brought together international legal experts, West Bank lawyers, and academics for three days of intensive discussion. Birzeit

University is still planning to hold its international conference on “Two Decades of Occupation” in late March.

In a 16 November press conference held by the Council of Higher Education, Bethlehem University administrators listed, among other effects of their three-month closure, the serious disruption of a new academic exchange agreement between Bethlehem and University College, Dublin, partially funded by the EEC. Such international contacts are particularly necessary for the isolated universities under occupation, but extremely difficult to sustain given the closures.

Israeli Academics

On 5 February a petition signed by over 400 Israeli academics was published in the press. Under the banner of “Lecturers against Rule by Imposition in the West Bank and Gaza” and “The Interuniversity Movement for a Political Settlement,” the faculty members stated: “There can be no solution to the problem in which Israel finds herself so long as force is exercised by Israel over the Arab populations of the occupied territories.” They added: “We call upon the government of Israel to take immediate steps toward political negotiation before the rapidly changing situation gets completely out of hand.”

The petition did not clearly call for an end to occupation and was thus weaker than a statement by mental health professionals released two weeks before. The organizers had perhaps sacrificed clarity for compromise formulations that would attract a large number of signatures. The petition did announce, however, that public forums would be held at Israeli universities during the next month.