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Penny Johnson *

On 20 January heads of universities in the occupied territories were summoned by the military authorities to Nablus to meet an “important person.” They arrived to find Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin, principal architect of the current Israeli policy towards the universities. Rabin, flanked by Coordinator for the Occupied Territories Shlomo Goren and Civil Administration head Ephraim Sneh, told university administrators they must prevent political demonstrations on campus and warned, according to Council of Higher Education head Dr. Anton Sarsour, that “if there was a need to close down the universities, he would.” Rabin’s tough talk was repeated to the assembled Israeli media, who apparently knew in advance the identity of the “important person” and the time of the meeting.

Perhaps the best summary of the hour-long meeting was given by Dr. Gabi Baramki, vice president (and acting president) of Birzeit University. When asked if there were veiled threats to close the universities, Baramki succinctly replied, “there were no veils.” Rabin’s threat of closure of the universities and permanent closure “if necessary,” according to participants in the meeting, has been heard before, both from Rabin and other Israeli policymakers.

Rabin stressed two themes. The first, as reported by the *Jerusalem Post* of 21 January, is that “in the last four or five months, the universities have

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again become the center of unrest in the area, more than any other institutions in the West Bank.” (Given the Israeli dissolution of most other national institutions, such as the municipalities, the universities remain as the primary locus for expressions of Palestinian nationalism.) A corollary is that the military authorities are now determined to prevent “political demonstrations.” For Rabin these include peaceful on-campus political rallies, which, in his words, “raise tension in the area.”

Preventive Closures

Al-Najah University found itself in the peculiar position of being punished for something that did not happen. The university was closed in early January to “prevent” a possible student rally. Due to reopen after a week of closure on 11 January, al-Najah was served with a new one-week closure order. On 17 January students and faculty attempted to return to campus only to find army checkpoints barring the entrance and another closure order at military headquarters—a last-minute move that created as much disruption and “tension” (to use Rabin’s terms) as possible. The order was finally revoked by Rabin on the eve of his 20 January meeting with university officials.

The successive closure orders were apparently intended to prevent al-Najah students from marking the anniversary of the launching of the Palestinian revolution (1 January) at the university. While the army has, especially in the past year, set up checkpoints when it believed students were planning a political event, previous official closure orders have been issued only following an incident—whether a demonstration, cultural event (Palestine Week), or even an army raid on campus. “Preventive closures” mark a new stage in policy toward the universities. Already, al-Najah’s 4,500 students have lost about 35 days of classes since the 1986–87 academic year commenced in mid-October, due both to army checkpoints erected in November and December and to the January closures. The damage not only to academic scheduling, but to general academic life, should not be underestimated.

The events at al-Najah passed without a great deal of international or local attention, in contrast to the reaction to the events of 4 December at Birzeit. The recent spotlight on Birzeit University prevented the army from interfering with a peaceful, though large and militant, campus demonstration on 8 January to mark the 1 January anniversary. The army massed nearby but did not intervene. The rally, however, enraged Jewish settlers who met with Rabin on 12 January to protest army inaction. Rabin

reportedly pledged that demonstrations with “open support for the PLO” and with “flags” or “pictures of Yasir Arafat” would no longer be allowed at West Bank universities, taking a stance similar to that of his 20 January meeting with university heads.

The rally remains a sore point, both with army officials and with the Israeli right. One Likud parliamentarian, Mikhail Eitan, took matters into his own hands and, accompanied by soldiers and media, arrived in a three-car convoy at the gate of Birzeit’s new campus to distribute a leaflet threatening Birzeit University with “prison or the graveyard” if students continued their support for the PLO. Eitan, who termed his visit an attempt at “dialogue,” finally left the campus but promised to return.

Students Under Fire

Birzeit University has experienced more than mere threats. Two senior science students, Jawwad Abu Salmiyyah and Sa’ib Dhahab, were shot and killed by army gunfire near Birzeit’s old campus. Birzeit’s Public Relations Office has issued a special report, *Students Under Fire: A Report of Army Actions at Birzeit University on December 4, 1986* that draws on faculty and student eyewitness accounts of the events of 4 December.

In the early morning of 4 December, soldiers erected a checkpoint on the Birzeit-Ramallah road, the fourth such checkpoint set up in the past week. Three days before, on 1 December, Birzeit University had issued a press release after three successive days of army checkpoints and warned that “the policy of ‘closure by checkpoint’ is escalating and poses a serious threat to the university’s ability to function. . . .” (Israeli journalist Yehuda Litani later quoted this release as evidence of the background to the events of 4 December.)

A number of students and faculty abandoned their buses and cars and walked to the checkpoint. When denied entry to the university, some sat peacefully in the road—a spontaneous non-violent form of civil disobedience that is unusual in the occupied territories. One faculty member, Dr. Salih ‘Abd al-Jawwad, who was later detained by the army, told the presiding officer that “These students, like the Jewish students at Hebrew University, deserve to be educated.” The protest continued peacefully, allowing an army vehicle to pass. Students were urged not even to sing, to show clearly that “this was not a demonstration.” Army reinforcements arrived, and an officer pulled out a tear gas grenade, tossed it a few times in the air, and hurled it at the crowd—according to faculty eyewitness Dr. ‘Ali Jarbawi—with no more than a twenty-second warning. As students and

faculty moved away, soldiers detained Dr. 'Abd al-Jawwad, beat and kicked him.

The Old Campus

When students heard the news of the checkpoint incident and the detention of 'Abd al-Jawwad, a spontaneous rally began on the old campus. Assistant Dean of Arts Dr. Ahmad Harb reported students were saying "This is humiliating us. We're not animals." Students' emotions were already heightened as a result of Jewish attacks on Arabs in the Old City of Jerusalem in the previous weeks and by the siege of Palestinian camps in Lebanon by Amal militiamen.

Only about 150 students left the gates of the old campus at about 11:00 a.m. to rally in the surrounding streets—a relatively small demonstration. Yet, after firing a few initial tear gas canisters, soldiers that had massed down the road at the Birzeit post office opened fire with live ammunition. The first student fell, wounded in the chest, to be followed by nine others. In the end, after about one-half hour of army firing, Jawwad Abu Salmiyyah and Sa'ib Dhahab were fatally wounded, shot near the back gate of the old campus, after many students had retreated inside and after soldiers were in control of the situation. Dr. Ahmad Harb reported: "I had convinced the students to move back within the campus. I was standing by the gate when Jawwad was shot. He had turned towards the campus and was hurrying back when a soldier shot him in the back."

Birzeit faculty members attempting to transport the two critically-injured students to the hospital were not allowed to drive their cars to the site and were stopped by soldiers demanding the students' ID cards as they carried the students by foot along the road. Faculty member Walid Sharif's reply was to the point, when he told the soldier demanding the wounded Jawwad's ID that "he'll soon be dead and you can read about his name in the newspaper."

In fact, faculty members on the old campus had summoned ambulances immediately upon receiving news of the first wounded students; but the ambulance from Ramallah Hospital, the closest to Birzeit, was delayed at an army checkpoint and reached the old campus only after most injured students had been taken in private cars. A similar delay of ambulances on 21 November 1984 (documented in a Birzeit report entitled *No Mercy: A Report on Army Actions at Birzeit on November 21, 1984*) contributed to the death of Birzeit student Sharaf al-Tibi. On 4 December Israeli army

spokesmen announced that students had stoned ambulances, a statement refuted by eyewitnesses.

At the Ramallah hospital a crowd—including students—had gathered to hear news of the injured and to donate blood. At about 1:00 p.m., an army jeep arrived and, after shouting at students to disperse, soldiers opened fire with rubber bullets, wounding one student.

Whether the 4 December pattern of army behavior of repeated provocation followed by excessive, brutal force was explicit policy is difficult to assess. All evidence suggests that soldiers who shot Salmiyyah and Dhahab had the time to take aim and carefully fire at the two. A career army officer who lives in Shiloh, a settlement near Ramallah, later admitted to shooting Salmiyyah, although he claimed, contrary to evidence gathered by the university, that he was “caught in an impossible situation.” The officer has since been sent back to his post in Ramallah, and the standard internal army investigation into the killings has been completed with no apparent punitive measures taken. It is clear, both in the immediate aftermath of 4 December, and in the statements of the army itself, that no changes are contemplated in the army’s handling of students and youth in the occupied territories.

Aftermath

The incidents at Birzeit were followed by widespread demonstrations, commercial strikes, and protests throughout the West Bank and Gaza at a level unprecedented since the mass demonstrations of the spring of 1982 in response to the dismissal of the mayors. The army reacted harshly, and two more young men were killed, one by the army and one by an armed settler. Although occupied territories residents compared the December protests to the “uprising” in 1982, the two differed substantially. Most striking was the lack of any national leadership in 1987 to voice the protests and aspirations of the demonstrators. Even more than 1982, the 1987 protest was centered among young people and students, although commercial strikes were successful for the first time in several years.

The events did trigger significant response in Israeli circles, on both the left and the right. A faculty-student rally at Hebrew University on 7 December was dispersed by police tear gas after right-wing students attacked it. Demonstrations occurred in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Beersheba; and the Solidarity Committee for Birzeit University was revived and found its old constituency of leftist peace forces more than ready to act. In Nazareth, 10,000 marched in solidarity with Birzeit and against the occupation.

Unity and the Student Movement

On 9 December a silent march of over 1,000 Birzeit faculty and students, led by Vice President Baramki and university deans, wound from the Birzeit new campus to the closed old campus several miles away and back again. The army massed on a nearby hill but did not interfere, influenced—it is assumed—by international and local condemnation of its actions, including a mildly worded UN Security Council resolution. The march was a solemn occasion, and one marked by a spirit of unity, both within the student movement (including all nationalist factions and the Islamic Bloc) and by joint action among students, faculty, and administration.

Over the past several months, student factions at various universities and institutes have worked on developing unified alliances, with varying degrees of success. On 22 January, the Maghdushah Martyr's List, a coalition of the mainstream student bloc with two leftist student groups, won the Birzeit student elections. (Maghdushah is a town in South Lebanon taken over by Palestinian fighters from several groups—from both the mainstream and National Salvation Front.) The theme of Palestinian unity in the camps war in Lebanon was reflected in several of the unity blocs, including the War of the Camps Martyrs' Blocs that won in December in the Teachers Training Institute in Ramallah and in Hebron Polytechnic.

At Birzeit the "National Unity" Bloc won with less than half (41.5 percent) of the vote. The Work Front Bloc, which ran separately as the Ghassan Kanafani Bloc, won a surprising 24.5 percent of the vote, while the Islamic Bloc secured 34 percent, an increase over last year's election results. The strong showing of Birzeit's Islamic Bloc may be due in part to a defection by conservative students from their traditional mainstream voting patterns because of the Unity Bloc's alliance with leftist groups. Alternatively it may indicate real gains for the Islamic Bloc, which campaigned effectively and claimed both students killed on 4 December as its own. Speaking after the 9 December march, an Islamic Bloc representative stressed the same demands as other speakers—no to occupation, yes to Arab Palestine, no to the Amal attacks on Palestinians in Lebanon. The only difference was the Islamic framework.

The Islamic Bloc won the elections at Hebron University in December, after losing in a close race to a nationalist mainstream list the year before. Add to that Islamic fundamentalism's solid (although not hegemonic) base in Gaza Islamic University, and the overall picture emerging from this year's

student elections is one of an increase in the influence of Islamic groups on campuses. Indeed, there are some signs that this development is paralleled by the growth of Islamic activity in the occupied territories as a whole.

The Case of Dr. Muhammad Shadid

A public opinion poll conducted by Dr. Muhammad Shadid has led the military authorities, in a meeting on 9 November, to bar Shadid from continuing his work as a senior political science professor at al-Najah University. In meetings on 26 October and 4 November, Israeli officers in Nablus had expressed strong disapproval of the poll's results, which showed overwhelming support among the population of the occupied territories for the PLO, as well as widespread support for armed struggle. The poll was conducted for the U.S. daily newspaper *Newsday*, the Australian Broadcasting System, and *al-Fajr* newspaper in Jerusalem, and the results were widely publicized. Shadid reported in a November press conference that the officers told him Jordanian intelligence also disapproved of the poll. The officers then suggested that Shadid retract the poll's results in the pages of the pro-Jordanian daily newspaper *al-Nahar*. When Shadid refused as a "matter of principle and conscience" he was barred from work.

Although born and raised in the West Bank, Shadid lost his residency in 1967: he was a student in the U.S. at the time of the occupation. He returned to the West Bank in 1979 as a naturalized U.S. citizen and all his attempts to regain his residency under the family reunion scheme have failed. He thus has no "right" under prevailing Israeli military legislation either to work or live in the West Bank, and is now depending on international pressure to allow him at least to remain in Nablus, where he is married and has three children.

Open Season on Students

Between 20 December and 20 January, soldiers rounded up twenty-four Birzeit students. The majority of the detainees were former, present, or future Student Council members: two candidates for the 22 January elections were detained and elected in prison. Some of the detentions were clearly "punishment" for the 8 January rally at Birzeit University. Most students were released after spending from a week to eighteen days in prison. One 1986 Student Council member, Sabri Tmezi, was detained and charged with possessing "illegal literature" (a poster of the two students killed on 4 December and a copy of *'Abir*, a Jerusalem women's magazine)

and placed under town arrest. On 8 and 9 January, eight al-Najah students were detained, most former or current Student Council members. Four were served with administrative detention orders under which they will serve six months in prison without trial or being charged.

Generation of Occupation

As the twentieth anniversary of the occupation approaches, media attention has become focused on the “generation of occupation,” on the attitudes, politics, and experiences of youth who have lived their entire lives under Israeli military occupation. A 12 January article by *New York Times* correspondent Tom Friedman, for example, perhaps accurately describes the anger and frustration of young people, but characterizes it wrongly as a “politics of revenge” and “blind rage,” and presents as the primary image of this generation “young Palestinians using kitchen knives or sharpened screwdrivers to attack Israeli soldiers or civilians in broad daylight.”

Friedman’s portrait is not only unidimensional but skewed, discussing neither the practical politics of students nor the apparatus of occupation which plays a dominant role in young peoples’ lives. His feature does, however, underline the fact that the generation of occupation is at center stage, and not only for the media. It is their views, politics, and life experiences that will shape the future of the occupied territories. Palestinian universities in the occupied territories, then, which have a central role in educating the “generation of occupation,” have a critical and increasingly difficult mandate.