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Palestinian Universities Under Occupation, November 1986

Penny Johnson *

On 29 October, as the new academic year commenced, Bethlehem University, normally one of the more trouble-free universities in the occupied territories, was ordered closed for one week by military order; the order was extended for a further week on 4 November. Coupled with army raids and checkpoints against other Palestinian universities during the same period, these measures indicated a marked escalation in such military actions, and led to speculation that the new Shamir government might not only continue Defense Minister Rabin's hard-line policy against individual community leaders, but might intensify the policy against institutions.

West Bank observers stress continuity—especially of the “iron fist” policy—rather than change in discussing the Israeli unity government's change in leadership from Labor to Likud in October. A recently released Birzeit University report on the status of academic freedom during the last academic year notes that 1985–86, under Labor Prime Minister Peres' government, was the worst on record in terms of violations of student and faculty human rights.

The universities' ability to respond to increased military pressure will be conditioned by both their internal political and economic situations. Despite the resolution of the 85-day long Birzeit University faculty and employees strike, financial problems continue to plague Birzeit and other

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universities and have created a climate of economic instability shadowed by political uncertainty.

Army on Campus

On 29 October, students gathered at Bethlehem University to celebrate the results of student council elections, which had succeeded in forging a degree of national unity among the student blocs (see below), and to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the Kafr Qasim massacre. Soldiers took up positions surrounding the campus and, just after noon, began to fire live ammunition and tear gas cannisters into the campus courtyard. Some students responded by throwing stones; twenty-year-old Yusif Najjar was wounded in the leg.

Negotiations between the military governor and Bethlehem University began, but, despite the governor's promise, a number of students were arrested as they left the campus. Bethlehem University was ordered closed for one week. Day-long checkpoints at al-Najah on 1 November, at Birzeit on 31 October and 3 November, and at Abu Dis College of Science and Technology on 3 November barred students and faculty from entering these institutions. It was assumed that the checkpoints were set up to block any commemoration of the 2 November anniversary of Balfour Day, although at Birzeit University the issue was the holding of an annual student cultural festival, Palestine Week.

At 1:30 p.m. on 3 November, twenty military vehicles arrived at Birzeit's old campus, accompanied by the Deputy Civil Administrator and Acting President Dr. Baramki, who had been summoned to military headquarters. Soldiers entered the campus and dismantled book and cultural exhibits and carted away posters, books, cultural artifacts and other materials from the exhibit, which had been set up by students. One student was assaulted by a soldier, and six had their IDs confiscated.

Army patrols continued to harass Birzeit students throughout the next week. On 4 November, hundreds of soldiers patrolled the environs of the old campus. On 5 November, an army patrol between Birzeit's old and new campuses forced five students in a private car to get out and then beat them, claiming the students had been "laughing." That night, soldiers, accompanied by intelligence service members, searched several students's residences in Birzeit village and recorded students' names.

Checkpoints

This "week of the army" was preceded by a number of "closures by checkpoint" in September; al-Najah, Bethlehem and Birzeit universities

were closed by army checkpoint on or around 17 September, the anniversary of the Sabra and Shatila massacre.

The year 1985–86 witnessed the imposition of checkpoints as substitutes for official military-ordered closure, whether dictated by public relations or other policy considerations. Birzeit University reported thirty-six checkpoints during the last academic year; al-Najah's total was even higher, with the Public Relations office reporting that checkpoints either at the gate of the university (which often closed the institution completely for a day or more) or the roads into Nablus from Tulkarm and Janin, were so commonplace as to be difficult to count.

1985–86 Academic Year: A Low for Human Rights

In reviewing the past academic year, an interesting and significant pattern emerges. While institutional harassments are present—particularly checkpoints, the two-week closure of Hebron Polytechnic and two army break-ins at al-Najah campus—the year was generally “quiet” in this respect. Indeed, it witnessed the granting of long-awaited building permits at al-Najah and Birzeit universities and a program permit for the Faculty of Agriculture at Hebron University.

But the other side of the picture is bleak. The reintroduction of administrative detention and an escalation in the imposition of restriction orders (fourteen at Birzeit University alone) coupled with an overall increase in student detentions, placed a heavy burden on individual students and the student movement. In Birzeit University's survey, “Academic Freedom at Birzeit University, 1985–86,” the authors note that 115 students were detained during the year, an absolute increase over 91 detentions in the 1984–85 academic year, and 73 the previous year. The significance of the numbers increases when one notes that of the 91 last year, 42 came in a mass arrest on a single evening, whereas the 115 were all individual cases.

Of these, 62 percent were detentions without charge, arbitrary arrest where the student is held in prison, interrogated and then released without charge, a practice highlighted in another recent Birzeit publication, *Arbitrary Arrest: The Case of Birzeit University Students*. Another ten of the detentions were administrative; the university notes that 1171 days were spent by students under administrative detention in prison.

After a lull of some months, the authorities resumed serving administrative orders on Palestinians in the occupied territories in September, and a number of students were targeted, including three al-Najah students,

Ahmad Salhud, 'Abd al-Majid Suwayt and Student Council President Hamdan Sufyan. On 28 October, Birzeit Student Council President Jamal Idris Salqun was also detained and served a six-month administrative detention order.

Three female Birzeit students received restriction orders (“town arrest”) in September; Fatma Sharaf and Marlin Rabadiyyah were restricted to their hometown of Jerusalem for six months, and 'Abir 'Isa was banned from Birzeit for the same period. Three al-Najah students were placed under restriction orders in September and October and Bethlehem Student Council President Ahmad Jaradat was also served a restriction order.

Finances and the Future

The changeable fall weather at Birzeit University's tenth graduation ceremony on October 18 accurately reflected the “weather” at the university in the wake of the resolution of an eighty-day faculty strike and given the prospects for the new academic year: clouds swept across the sky, alternately obscuring and revealing the autumn sun. A measure of stability has returned to the university, but could turn to stagnation or disintegration unless substantial progress is made, not only in fundraising—a primary task—but in creating new internal dynamics—academic, administrative, and communal—in the university itself.

Birzeit University began the new academic year on 20 October, and faculty and employees at the same time signed their new contracts, which included a “donation” to the University ranging from 15–20 percent of their salary, depending on the salary scale of the individual. With a freeze on hiring, on library acquisitions, and on most major purchases, the university is still in a state of crisis, and faculty and employees are visibly worried about the future. Some small grants have been received—\$10,000 from the United Holy Land Fund for student scholarships, for example—but major fundraising is still on the agenda.

The new academic year witnessed student strikes at Hebron and Birzeit universities over increases in student tuition, demonstrating that the issue of how to manage scarce financial resources will continue to divide the university community.

Palestine National Fund Pledges

In an October meeting in Kuwait, the Palestine National Fund pledged to launch a new campaign to develop the education, health, and social

sectors in the occupied territories. Statements by PNF head Jawid Ghusayn made it clear, however, that, as is the case with the West Bank universities, major fundraising lies ahead if any of the plans are to be realized. Kuwait, itself, donated a substantial sum to the Council for Higher Education in the occupied territories, in an annual subsidy to the universities.

The financial crisis of the universities, once in doubt, is more widely acknowledged within the occupied territories. An October editorial in *al-Quds* newspaper, for example, noted that the financial crisis affected all West Bank universities, and cited “reductions in financial resources and poor planning” as the two causes.

Coincidentally, Israeli universities, in particular Hebrew University, suffered financial reverses in September; Hebrew University announced a \$10 million deficit, dismissed a number of employees, and instituted paycuts among faculty. A report prepared by Professor Albeck, an Israeli academic, urged increased state subsidies, noting that the Arabs were catching up in the higher education race.

In October, the EEC pledged \$3 million European Currency Units (about 3 million dollars) to development projects in the occupied territories, and noted that they wished to cooperate with educational institutions. However, the receipt of these funds by the universities will depend on the EEC’s policies on channeling the funds, specifically if the funds are seen to constitute a component of the highly controversial Jordanian development plan.

Jordanian Development Plan

A number of university officials and academics participated in a 12 September conference at the Arab Thought Forum in Jerusalem to institute guidelines for West Bank institutions receiving outside funds. The conference was spurred by King Hussein’s announcement of the \$3.2 billion Jordanian five-year development plan for the occupied territories, and a transfer to Jordan of \$4.5 million from the U.S., presumably to launch the plan’s development projects. An unofficial statement issued after the conference cited several resolutions, including that funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development was rejected and that outside funders must not contradict the goals of the Palestinian people or seek Israeli supervision of their projects. The enforcement of these resolutions is, of course, voluntary, and will pose dilemmas for institutions like the universities. One negative side-effect already visible in the universities is

that “development” has become a suspicious word, and even programs with no Jordanian or U.S. money are moving more cautiously.

Al-Najah and Jordanization

The surprise September resignations of al-Najah University President Dr. Munthir Salah and Director of Public Relations, Dr. Sa'ib 'Iriqat, raised speculation—perhaps well-informed—that the two men had been forced to resign as part of a pro-Jordanian “coup” at the university. The recent (Jordanian-approved) Israeli appointments of Arab mayors in al-Birah, Ramallah, Hebron, and 'Anabta are the primary examples of Jordanian attempts to increase influence in West Bank institutions.

Salah submitted his resignation while visiting 'Amman on 22 September; he was forbidden entry to the West Bank by the Israeli authorities the next day (Salah does not have residency in the occupied territories), raising the question of possible Jordanian-Israeli cooperation.

It appears that the resignations were requested, in Dr. 'Iriqat's case, by Hikmat al-Masri, Head of the Board of Trustees. 'Iriqat has been outspoken in his opposition to current Jordanian strategy, both at al-Najah and as an editorial writer for *al-Quds* newspaper, which has taken a firm anti-Jordanian position in recent months, despite its past history. He wrote in *al-Fajr* that a “majority” of the reasons for his resignation were “outside his will.” When queried if the resignations were part of a pro-Jordanian push he answered only that “neither Jordan nor anyone else can succeed in changing the direction of a people who aspire to obtain their legitimate rights.”

Students at al-Najah have issued several statements asking for the reinstatement of the two men, but to date no substantive protest has occurred. Acting President Bahjat Sabri is a respected historian and not politically outspoken. Academically, the consolidation of a number of administrative positions into the hands of a few can only cause more bureaucratic delay and poor administration in an institution which can ill afford either.

The al-Najah Newsletter

Dr. Iriqat's troubles were compounded by the military authorities, who detained him on 10 August, along with Najah political science professor 'Abd al-Sattar Qasim on charges of possessing “illegal literature,” stemming in Iriqat's case from literature seized in the Public Relations office during a

June 1986 army raid on campus. Qasim is charged for a book he authored on the prison experiences of al-Najah students. In a military court on 10 September, the authorities charged Dr. 'Iriqat with three counts of "incitement" and "printing an illegal publication," citing both statements against administrative detention and mistreatment of students, and the al-Najah *Newsletter* in English. Dr. 'Iriqat noted that the newsletter has been published eighteen times without incident, and that the Public Relations office has a responsibility to collect all statements by students and faculty on issues that affect the university. The outcome of the case is important both for universities and other institutions that publish in-house newsletters and statements.

On Permits and Plans

After a delay of almost two years, Birzeit University finally received building permits from the military authorities for its Faculty of Commerce and Student Union buildings. At the same time, a permit was finally granted for the Fine Arts building, after a two and one-half year delay. The delays were costly in both financial and academic terms, and the university was forced to institute a number of legal actions against the military-administered Planning Department. Construction for the Student Union building is expected to commence in the near future, and will provide much-needed facilities for student recreation, study rooms, dining, and other facilities.

At the same time, Bethlehem University gave up waiting for permission to begin its Tourist Guide Program. In mid-October, the School of Hotel Management announced that it had launched its Tourist Guide Program, despite the fact that official permission, sought for over five years, has never been forthcoming from the military authorities. "We have wasted years in waiting," affirmed Walid Dajani, head of the Hotel Management College to *al-Fajr* English newspaper. Indeed, only one Palestinian tourist guide from the occupied territories has been licensed by Israel since 1967.

Growth of the Islamic University

The largest new freshman class in the occupied territories is that at the Islamic University in Gaza, which admitted 1070 new students, making it a rival with al-Najah for the largest university in the occupied territories. Despite this growth, the Registrar's office often feels compelled to defend itself against charges that it is not admitting enough students. In the

September issue of "Voice of the Islamic University," the Registrar's office explained that it admitted the 1070 new students from only 1300 applications. This de facto policy of open admissions, without perhaps the ideology or infrastructure to support it, must pose serious problems of academic standards for the university, which teaches courses in Arts and Sciences, as well as religious law and Islam.

The growth of this institution and other Islamic colleges is not going unwatched. The *Jerusalem Post* published an article on 8 October entitled "Finger Pointed at Islamic Schools," which said that security sources had pinpointed Islamic schools in Gaza as "potential breeding grounds" for "terrorism."

Election Season

Student and union elections are due to be held in the next two months at Birzeit University, and student elections at Hebron University should also be held in the near future. In Bethlehem University, students from the student blocs of *al-Shabibah* (sympathetic to Fateh) and *Jabhat al-'Amal* (sympathetic to the PFLP) agreed to rotate the head of the Student Council for the coming year. This unusual coordination between two rival groups came, in the words of a student spokesman to *al-Fajr English*, as a result "of the difficult time that the Palestinian cause and Palestinian universities are experiencing." Another sign of increased unity among the student blocs came in a 4 November statement signed by all the nationalist student groups condemning the Israeli appointments of Arab mayors, supporting the elected councils and new elections, opposing the iron fist policy, and calling for preparations for national unity.

A more diffuse, but powerful, symbol of the underlying unity that is sometimes obscured by the current political factionalism was the graduation procession of 256 students at Birzeit University. The young graduates, led by two young men wearing kafiyahs to hide their identities, and waving two Palestinian flags, brought the crowd to its feet for a long ovation.